

SHOULD
GOD
FORGIVE?

A SERIES ON JONAH



INTRODUCTION

Should God Forgive?

At first glance, most of us attending church regularly would answer that question with a resounding “Yes!”. We are thankful that God forgives us and that He sent Jesus to pay the penalty for our wrongdoings. We rejoice that as far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us!

At second glance, we might start asking questions about what is meant by “should” and who in particular is being forgiven. Rejoicing in our own forgiveness is one thing, but what about rejoicing when someone who has hurt us terribly is forgiven by God? Perhaps if we’re honest, we’ll discover people we hold in our hearts whom we hope God never forgives. To that, we start to form a picture of the bigger question the book of Jonah is asking of us.

It’s only four chapters long but the story of Jonah (occurring somewhere between 800 to 746 BC) has captured at least the imagination of many throughout history and found its way into pop-culture references, artwork, literature and even scientific enquiry! The tale of a man running from God and finding his way into the belly of a great fish in the depths of the sea has all the necessary elements for a Hollywood summer flick.

However, it’s the overarching message of Jonah, often missed in the excitement and familiarity of the story, that calls for deeper consideration. That message is of a God who is more loving and merciful than we can fathom and the challenge that presents to human beings who love to receive mercy so much more than give it.

In Jonah, we find an echo of the greatest tale of mercy and forgiveness - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This too is both a relief and a challenge, for Christ himself expects those who are shown mercy to be merciful. We hope then that as you study the book of Jonah, you will be drawn to consider Christ and His great mercy towards the ungodly. If you count yourself as one of them, we pray that you will grow to be more like your Saviour Jesus - longing to see the worst of sinners repent no matter who they are and what they’ve done to you.

STUDY ONE

“LEAVING PARADISE”

JONAH 1: 1-3

Some people experience a sense of dread at the thought that God might want them to become a missionary. If that's you, Jonah understands.

Jonah was called to leave his homeland and go to a foreign people to share God's message with them, and they were not a group of people he was particularly fond of. In fact, they were a group of people who had a history of killing people like him.

Jonah's decision to flee then is not a difficult thing to relate to. Doesn't it parallel even the small decisions we make every day to avoid obeying the voice of God to preserve ourselves instead? Fear and hatred influence our decisions too, and hopefully we can discover the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that make us similar to this runaway prophet.

Context

1. Not a lot of background is given about Jonah in this book, but 2 Kings 14: 23-29 offers some more information. What other details do we learn about Jonah in this passage?

2. Assyria was one of Israel's greatest enemies around 750-612 BC (2 Kings 18: 9-12), yet one of Israel's prophets was sent to them. The Ninevites were a violent and wicked people and were a direct threat to the kingdom of Israel and Judah.

Jonah going to Nineveh with a message of repentance and mercy was akin to a Jew going to Nazi Germany during WWII to preach repentance and forgiveness. What light does this shed on the potential purpose this book had for the nation of Israel?

Observation

3. Tarshish was known to be a distant non-Jewish city (though historians have struggled to locate it). What significance does fleeing to this city hold for Jonah, who was a Jewish prophet of Israel?
4. Fleeing God's presence is futile and Jonah would have understood this on some level. What might 'fleeing the presence of the Lord' mean in the context of Jonah being a prophet?

Meaning

5. What could be the motivations Jonah had for avoiding going to Nineveh?

Application

6. Many people fear the thought of God calling them to be missionaries, to share the Gospel with others or to work in a difficult area. What's one thing that you hope God doesn't ask of you?
7. What are ways that people avoid God today?
8. Are there specific things that you know Jesus has asked of you that you are consciously ignoring?

STUDY TWO

“RESPONDING TO STORM”

JONAH 1: 4-16

Have you ever felt reluctant to do something asked of you? Was it due to a sense of inadequacy, disagreement or dislike? To what lengths did you go to avoid performing the task?

Jonah went to great lengths to avoid delivering the Lord's message to Nineveh. In this passage, we see Jonah getting on a boat to leave the country in an attempt to flee from God's presence. How does one hide away from God, especially a prophet!

Context

1. How did Jonah's disobedience affect the people around him?
2. How did Jonah respond to the sailors? What does it reveal about the Lord (Genesis 1: 10, 21; Exodus 14: 21; Mark 4: 41)?

Observation

3. What can we observe about the sailors before and after they threw Jonah overboard?

Meaning

4. While we do not know why Jonah was running away from God at this stage of the story, what can we learn about the impact Jonah's disobedience had on the sailors?

5. God is able to both bring and calm the storm. What does this reveal about the power of God and the identity of Christ (Mark 4: 35-41)?

Application

6. What is our first reaction in times of strife and calamity? How differently would it be to the sailors'?
7. We are called to speak of Christ (Matthew 28: 16-20). How does our silence affect those around us?
8. How then are we to speak of Christ? What should our attitude be like towards those we despise (1 Peter 3: 15; 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31)?
9. What role does fear have in leading us to repentance? The sailors feared the storm and were ultimately led to worship the true God. Should we fear God today?

STUDY THREE

“THE PRAYER OF DESPERATION”

JONAH 1: 17 – 2: 10

Jonah was a real prophet - not a legend, myth or story. He served in Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II from about 800 to 750 BC (2 Kings 14: 25).

In this passage, we have the psalm of Jonah when he prayed to God after he was thrown overboard reluctantly by the sailors in the boat. God saved Jonah by a great fish, which after three days landed him on dry land. God used the storm to confront Jonah.

This is, however, not a typical psalm or prayer. It is more Jonah-centric, than it is centred on God. Until we are brought to the point of realising our own desperate need for God's sovereignty over our lives, we continue to trust in ourselves. Jonah's focus was on his physical deliverance from drowning - not on God's character and His ability to save.

In His sovereign will, God saved Jonah, who remained the unrepentant prophet. He was still reluctant to do what God wanted him to do. Nonetheless, God saved Jonah despite his disobedience. God sent Jonah to the Ninevites, also despite their disobedience, for their salvation.

Context

1. Is it humanly possible for a person to survive living in the belly of a great fish for three days (Jonah 1: 17)? What is the significance of the answer to this question?
2. In what ways is Jonah's experience (being in the belly of a great fish for three days and nights) similar to Jesus' death and resurrection (Matthew 12: 39-41)? How is Jesus greater than Jonah?

Observation

3. Did Jonah repent of his disobedience towards God in his prayer while in the sea (Jonah 2: 2-9)? What is the significance of this?

4. What do you think Jonah's vow to God was about (Jonah 2: 9; Psalm 66: 13-15)? Why do you think God had to repeat His word to Jonah to go to Nineveh for a second time (Jonah 3: 1-2)?

Meaning

5. Why did God save Jonah from death by a great fish when Jonah's attitude towards the Ninevites had not changed (Jonah 2: 1-10)?
6. How is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18: 11-14) similar to the story of Jonah and the Ninevites? What are the parallels?

Application

7. Jonah ran away from God and took a ship heading for Tarshish - the opposite direction to where God asked him to go (Jonah 1: 3). What should have been in Jonah's prayer (Jonah 2: 2-9) as true repentance? What should be your response to God in this kind of situation?
8. If you were saved from the sea by being in the belly of a great fish for three days and rescued onto dry land, how would you respond to God? What would you say to Him? What changes would you make in your life?

STUDY FOUR

“GOD GIVES SECOND CHANCES”

JONAH 3: 1-10

Context

1. After the events of the previous chapter, Jonah realised the consequences of disobeying God and vowed to do what God told him to do (Jonah 2: 9). How would have Jonah felt when the word of the Lord came to him again (verses 1-2)? What does this show about God's attitude towards Jonah?
2. At that time, Assyria was one of the most powerful nations. Its capital Nineveh was recorded as a “great city” (verse 3). How would you expect them to react to Jonah's message that Nineveh would be overthrown (verse 4)?

Observation

3. What did the Ninevites do when they heard Jonah's prophecy? How much of Nineveh's population responded to Jonah's prophecy?
4. What are the signs of repentance that we can learn from Jonah (verse 3) and the Ninevites (verses 5-8)?

Meaning

5. Look through the Ninevites' actions to repent of their former wrongdoings. What is the symbolic meaning of these actions?
 - a. Dressing in sackcloth and sitting in ashes (verses 6, 8)
 - b. Making a national proclamation (verse 7)

- c. Fasting from food and water (verse 7)
 - d. Calling out to God (verse 7)
 - e. Turning away from evil and violence (verse 8)
6. How did God respond to the sincere repentance of Nineveh? What does that say about His priorities between judgement and mercy (2 Peter 3: 7-9; John 3: 16-18)?

Application

7. How do you know when someone who has wronged you is truly sorry for their actions? What would they have to do for you to forgive them? How can we show sincere repentance if we have wronged somebody or God?
8. God was willing to trust Jonah with the same task of carrying His message, even though he had refused and run away. How does Jonah's story reflect your own journey with God? How does God's willingness to continue trusting Jonah despite his failure comfort or challenge you?

STUDY FIVE

“WHEN DEATH SEEMS BETTER THAN FORGIVENESS”

JONAH 4: 1-4

Context

In this last chapter, Jonah argued with the Lord. He prayed to the Lord with bitterness and anger. He even provided a supposed theological justification and quoted scripture to God for his initial disobedience of going to Tarshish.

1. Can you recall a time when you reacted inappropriately in anger and then justified yourself 'righteously'?
2. Jonah's dislike of the Ninevites led to his disobedience to God (verse 1). In fact, Jonah would rather die than see Nineveh spared. Why did he feel this way? Remember what we learned about Assyria's relationship to Israel.
3. Imagine that Jonah preached in Nineveh, but they didn't repent and it was destroyed. What would be the Israelites and/or Jonah's response?
4. Imagine if you were a Syrian refugee who had experienced the horrors of war - only to find out that the ISIS regime had repented and received forgiveness from the Lord. How would you respond?

Observation

Jonah claimed to understand God's character, but he did not know how to share His compassion for lost people.

5. Superficially, Jonah's motivation for running was fear. This chapter shows that it was something else. What was Jonah's main motivation for running away from Nineveh?

6. Read 1 Kings 19: 1-18, where Elijah made a similar prayer. Compare Elijah's prayer of "wishing for death" to the Lord and Jonah's.
 - a. Are their prayers godly or righteous?
 - b. What would have been the better response from Jonah and Elijah (Matthew 26: 36-44)?

Meaning

The book of Jonah could have concluded in three chapters and ended as a perfect story. Jonah obeyed the Lord; Nineveh repented. God's mercy was displayed; He was glorified. The fourth chapter, however, shows that Jonah did not see himself as requiring mercy in general. It may also reveal the fundamental and deeper problems of our sinful nature.

7. What is the quintessential problem of Jonah's response to the sparing of Nineveh (Matthew 6: 14-15; Colossians 3: 13; Exodus 34: 6-7)?

8. Can you think of an example of how this "double-standard mercy" is occurring in today's Christianity? How should we respond?

Application

We have learned the challenge of managing our anger and prejudices by remembering God's forgiveness to us and extending God's mercy to other sinners.

9. Who do we consider to be "evil" and deserving of God's divine judgement? How are they different from us (Luke 5: 32)?

10. How can we fight our prejudices and develop a heart of God's compassion towards the lost?

STUDY SIX

“WHEN WE DON'T WANT FORGIVENESS”

JONAH 4: 5-11

Context

At the climax of the book, Jonah and God (mainly Jonah) were having a heated conversation. Jonah was furious that Nineveh had been spared God's judgement. He sat outside the city - sulking and waiting (possibly for 40 days) to see if God really was going to stick to His decision.

During this time, Jonah was an emotional wreck. He was initially happy (for the very first time in the book), then became angry, sulked and talked back to God (again).

God, on the other hand, was as consistent as He had been from the beginning. He was patient, kind, and steadfast in love and mercy to Jonah (and the Ninevites).

1. Can you recall a time when you were too caught up in anger or prejudice and failed to see the bigger picture?

Observation

God was trying to teach an important lesson in hypocrisy and the importance of true mercy to Jonah.

2. List the things that Jonah and God agreed and disagreed with throughout the book.
3. List all the individuals and things (animals etc.) who obeyed God throughout the book.
4. List all the individuals and things who disobeyed God throughout the book.

Meaning

God reached out to Jonah's heart with truth and grace (verses 9-11). He asked Jonah three questions:

- "Do you do well to be angry?" (verse 4)
- "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" (verse 9)
- "And should I not pity Nineveh that great city...?" (verse 11)

Like a father disciplines his child, God gently prompted Jonah to consider his behaviour and motivation.

5. What does "who do not know their right hand from left" mean (verse 11)?
6. In the New Testament, Jesus used an expression with a similar meaning. Can you recall where?

Ironically, our main character Jonah was a counterexample in this book. He was everything that a prophet (or a Christian) should not be. The book of Jonah points to Jesus as the perfect example.

7. What are the similarities and differences between Jonah and Jesus' story?

Application

We may not have the purest reasons or attitude to do good initially. Nevertheless, God can do so much more through us than we can ever imagine.

8. What is hindering you or your life group from fulfilling God's calling?

Conclusion

- As the Creator of all things, God holds the ultimate authority. As such, God's love and mercy transcends to everyone and everything.
- God can use people with wrong reasons to do right things.
- Our sinfulness (hypocrisy, anger, prejudice, etc.) may hinder us from doing right things. However, that does not stop God from doing good.
- If we do not believe we need God's mercy and forgiveness, we will struggle to show mercy to other people (Matthew 18: 21-35).