

REPENTANCE

CORE PASSAGE: JONAH 3:4-10; 4:1-2,6-11

CONTEXT

Jonah, a contemporary of Amos and Hosea, was a prophet of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who did evil in the Lord's eyes. Yet the Lord spoke graciously to Israel through Jonah in order to help them (2 Kings 14:25-27). God also commanded Jonah to go and proclaim judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. But Jonah fled in the opposite direction. Through a series of circumstances orchestrated by God, Jonah found himself in the belly of a large fish and then back on dry land. God gave Jonah a second chance, and this time Jonah obeyed, going to Nineveh to preach the message the Lord gave to him.

KEY CONCEPT

God is merciful to forgive when people repent, and He desires His people to be merciful as well.

As you examine Jonah 3:4-10; 4:1-2,6-11:

- Recognize that because the Ninevites fasted and repented, God relented in His judgment and spared the city.
- Contemplate Jonah's reason for fleeing from the Lord's mission—he knew the Lord is gracious and compassionate.



TIMELINE

Elijah Performs Miracles and Prophecies to Israel (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2)

SESSION STUDY:
Jonah Prophecies to Israel and Nineveh (2 Kings 14; Jonah 1–4)

Assyria Besieges and Conquers Israel, Deporting the People (2 Kings 17)

Elisha Performs Miracles and Prophecies to Israel (2 Kings 2–13)

Israel's Kings Persist in Doing Evil in the Lord's Sight (2 Kings 14–17)

Daily Readings

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Jonah 1–2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Amos 3–6 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Jonah 3–4 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Amos 7–9 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Amos 1–2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 85 |



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

**Bonus Content**

Scan this QR code to see the timeline of the Assyrian Empire and its biblical connections.

GOD RELENTS FROM ADMINISTERING JUDGMENT WHEN HE SEES REPENTANCE (JONAH 3:4-10).

Circle every action (verb) the Ninevites and the king of Nineveh took in response to God's message.

4 Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!" **5** Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. **6** When word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. **7** Then he issued a decree in Nineveh: By order of the king and his nobles: No person or animal, herd or flock, is to taste anything at all. They must not eat or drink water. **8** Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing. **9** Who knows? God may turn and relent; he may turn from his burning anger so that we will not perish. **10** God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

The city of Nineveh was an evil place. As the capital and most prominent city of Assyria, Nineveh was the center of anti-Israel fervor. The Assyrians were sworn enemies of God's people, and they historically dominated the entire Near East. After conquering a people, they often would stack their enemies' corpses and skulls in celebration. The Assyrians and Israelites hated one another.

Nineveh deserved God's judgment for their wicked ways. Having been given a second chance to obey God's call, Jonah walked around and throughout the densely populated city, taking three days to saturate the people with God's message. He declared, "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!" (v. 4). God had planned a disaster in judgment of the wicked people.

LEADER NOTE: Jonah's message to Nineveh, which he received from the Lord, spoke simply of judgment: "Nineveh will be demolished" (v. 4). It would seem the Lord left no recourse for the Ninevites, except for two facts: (1) the Lord sent Jonah to communicate this message of judgment, and (2) the Lord included a countdown—"forty days." Given these two facts, the Ninevites took some measure of hope that their prospects might be changed by their response.

What role might the announcement of judgment for sin play in the sharing of the gospel?

The Assyrians were a polytheistic people, believing in many gods, but when they heard Jonah's preaching on the first day of his walk in the city, they believed Jonah's God. They understood that they deserved God's judgment for their sins, so they took steps of repentance. Even the king declared a city-wide fast from food and water and that all the people and animals should be covered in sackcloth. These outward signs were to accompany the people's inward repentance from evil. And finally, they were to call out earnestly to God in hopes that He would relent from His anger and judgment.

The Ninevites heard God's message and responded with repentance. God saw their repentance and relented from administering His judgment. God's merciful forgiveness is not constrained to one particular nation or ethnicity. He is compassionate to all who respond to Him in repentance.

LEADER NOTE: We could compare the Ninevites' repentant response to Jonah to King Ahab's response to Elijah (1 Kings 21:27-29) and find many similarities. The outward signs such as fasting and sackcloth revealed a genuine change in the disposition of these people's hearts. Similarly, our repentance in response to the preaching and sharing of God's Word will involve a change of heart, though perhaps not fasting or wearing sackcloth. The outward signs can vary based on culture, but the inward reality of a heart convicted regarding sin reveals the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a sinner (John 16:7-11).

How might you evaluate your own response of repentance to conviction from God's Word?

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

x

x

REPENTANCE: Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

GOD DESIRES THAT HIS PEOPLE SHOW MERCY AND FORGIVENESS TO OTHERS (JONAH 4:1-2,6-11).

Underline Jonah's description of God and reflect on the characteristics he lists.

1 Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious. **2** He prayed to the LORD, "Please, LORD, isn't this what I said while I was still in my own country? That's why I fled toward Tarshish in the first place. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster." . . . **6** Then the LORD God appointed a plant, and it grew over Jonah to provide shade for his head to rescue him from his trouble. Jonah was greatly pleased with the plant. **7** When dawn came the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, and it withered. **8** As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head so much that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, "It's better for me to die than to live." **9** Then God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "Yes, it's right!" he replied. "I'm angry enough to die!" **10** And the LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. **11** So may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?"

God mercifully relented from sending disaster upon the city of Nineveh in response to the people's repentance. But in response to the Lord's mercy, Jonah threw a tantrum. He complained to God about the turn of events and sought to justify his previous disobedience of running away from Nineveh based on God's character. The Lord is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and one who relents from sending disaster" (v. 2). Jonah didn't want Nineveh rescued from God's wrath—he wanted them destroyed—so he initially opted to keep the Lord's message from them to help ensure they never repented. In his anger, Jonah demonstrated the misalignment between his own heart and God's.

LEADER NOTE: Jonah knew of God's character as gracious, compassionate, patient, loving, and merciful because that's how the Lord revealed His glory to Moses way back in Exodus 34:6-7. But this self-description by God wasn't just a jumble of platitudes, it had a specific context—God's response to the debacle of Israel's golden calf, in which they broke the first two of God's Ten Commandments. The Lord proclaimed His judgment and destruction for the people but "relented concerning the disaster" for the sake of His glory and covenant, as Moses interceded for the people (Ex. 32:11-14).

What are some ways you find yourself at odds with God's character?

Notes

Whatever Jonah's reason to be angry at God's mercy, the Lord wanted His prophet to grasp the bigger picture of His heart to save sinners. So every step God took over the next couple of days—addressing Jonah's anger directly, growing the plant, sending the worm to eat the plant, sending the scorching wind—was meant to prompt Jonah to repentance of his sinful anger toward the Ninevites and his resentment toward the Lord.

Jonah had such a wild range of emotions concerning the plant that lived for a day. God used this to patiently point out the hypocrisy of Jonah's love for the plant and his unwillingness to forgive the more than 120,000 people of Nineveh. God compassionately explained His heart of mercy to forgive the Ninevites and challenged Jonah to turn his care for a plant into care for people.

LEADER NOTE: The story of Jonah is a cliffhanger; we don't know how Jonah responded. Did he continue his tantrum or repent of his unforgiveness? Instead of resolution, the cliffhanger prompts the reader to reflect inward. God desires that we show mercy and forgiveness to others just as He does. Jesus taught that forgiving others is a mark of a true believer (Matt. 6:14-15) and that there should be no limit to our forgiveness of others (18:21-35).

How are you showing others God's heart of care, mercy, and forgiveness?

GOSPEL CONNECTION

x

God is compassionate and will forgive when people repent. All who believe in Jesus Christ and repent of their sin will be saved.

x

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As people arrive for the group experience, ask this ice-breaker question: “When have you experienced a situation that seemed unfair at the time?” Invite the group to share their responses.

CONTEXT

REVIEW: Jonah was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel some decades after Ahab’s reign. He prophesied around the same time that Elisha’s ministry ended. He was one of the prophets God sent Israel to convict them of their sin so they could repent. He also received the task of prophesying to Nineveh, a very wicked, violent city of the Assyrians. God commanded Jonah to go Nineveh, but the prophet was reluctant. Instead, he tried to sail away, which resulted in God sending a storm, Jonah getting tossed overboard, and a big fish swallowing him. Given a second chance, Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh to preach. But when he did, he was surprised at the result. The book of Jonah tells a story of the wickedness of man, the stubbornness of a prophet, and the relentless, merciful pursuit of a holy and loving God.

RECAP

ASK: From your personal preparation this week, what are your thoughts about Jonah and his character? Any other thoughts or questions that came up from your study of the Scripture?

SAY: In last week’s study of 2 Kings 4, we saw the Lord’s authority over death and His ability to bring new life. Today we will see God’s mercy and desire for all people to come to know Him as their Savior and King. As we dive into today’s passage of Scripture, it is necessary for us to remember that we are never too far from God to receive His grace, and we are also never too far into our salvation that we don’t need His mercy.

TRANSITION: Scripture includes many examples of the Lord calling individuals and groups into a loving relationship with Him while rebuking and teaching the religious elite that His mercy is for all. As we prepare to further examine Jonah’s story, let’s examine some of these accounts found in Scripture.



Listen to session-by-session training every week on

Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, or Spotify

ministrygrid.com/gospelproject • gospelproject.com/leader-training.

Key Concept: God is merciful to forgive when people repent, and He desires His people to be merciful as well.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Direct your group to page 66 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart labeled “Too Far Gone?” Recreate this table on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses as they interact with Scripture.

| Too Far Gone? Read the passages and write down how God showed mercy and how the people responded. | |
|---|--|
| THE NINEVITES' REPENTANCE (JONAH 3:4-10) | DAVID'S REPENTANCE (2 SAMUEL 12:7-20) |
| THE SAMARITAN WOMAN'S MESSAGE (JOHN 4:7-30,39-42) | SAUL'S REPENTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION (ACTS 9:1-20) |

INSTRUCT: Divide the large group into three smaller groups. Assign each group one of the three non-Jonah accounts listed above. Instruct the small groups to read the passage as a group and record notes about the stories. Encourage them to answer questions such as: “Who did the Lord call to repentance in the story? What were the people’s responses?” After a few moments, call for the groups’ conclusions and record these along with the verse number in the table on the board. Encourage participants to record these in their PSG as well.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Jonah 3:4-10.

DISCUSS: Lead the group in answering the previous questions for this account. Then discuss: “What are similarities between these accounts? What opposition, if any, arose against the mercy extended to these people?”

SAY: When we examine each of these passages, we can see that mercy is being spared from what we deserve, the way God relented of His judgment against

Notes

Nineveh because the people repented. We should rejoice to be on the receiving end of God's mercy, but we may not be so quick to rejoice in God's mercy shown to others.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Jonah 4:1-11.

DISCUSS: What are some ways Jonah revealed his hard heart toward God and the Ninevites? (*anger; rebellion against the character of God; a desire to die rather than live as a witness of God's mercy to Nineveh; misplaced priorities*) How might we struggle to align our hearts with God's mercy?

DEBRIEF

Knowing that we do not deserve God's grace and mercy yet He still calls us to Himself, how might this change the way we view our own salvation?

(PSG p. 66) Knowing that God desires for no one to perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), how should this influence the way we interact with those around us?

SUMMARIZE

Lead the group to review the key concept, inviting them to share ways today's group experience helped them better understand the mercy of the Lord. Pass out copies of **Pack Item 8: The Better Jonah** and review it with your group. Say: "May we never forget what the Lord has saved us from and called us to. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, deserving of God's judgment, yet because of God's great love, believers have been made alive in Jesus Christ. This should spur us on to be quick to show mercy to others and to share this good news."

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 67). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: In Christ, we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Through God's merciful gift of salvation, we are transformed to show others mercy. Jesus taught in Luke 6:36, "Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful." Mercy is an essential quality of God, so He desires for His people to be merciful.

What are some potential results of showing mercy to those who don't seem to deserve it?



HEART: There is no end to God's mercy (Lam. 3:22). But like Jonah, we often place limits on our forgiveness and mercy. Shockingly, Jesus said: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). An unforgiving heart marks someone unchanged by the gospel of Jesus, whereas one who has been forgiven by God will forgive others (Matt. 18:21-35).



What are some ways you struggle to reflect God's merciful heart, for which you need to repent?



HANDS: Mercy and forgiveness are commanded of Jesus's followers, both toward those in the church and outside of it (Mark 11:25; Eph. 4:32). God transforms our hearts with His mercy and forgiveness, and He gives us practical ways to demonstrate His mercy to others.

What are three ways you can show mercy or forgiveness to those around you in the coming week?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Reflect on Ephesians 2:11-14, noticing how the Lord's mercy has the power to save and unite all people.
- In your prayer time, confess to God areas of your life where pride is hindering you from a deeper relationship with the Lord and a deeper love of others. Ask God to help you have a merciful and forgiving heart like His.
- Share with a friend the mercy that God has shown you and how your life is different now because you know the Lord Jesus as your Savior.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 67 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 85:1-7. Thank the Lord for His mercy and forgiveness of sins in Christ, and pray for a revival in your hearts to show God's mercy to others so the Lord will be glorified.