



MARCH TEACHING SERIES

Welcome to your Growth group studies for March 2024. On Sundays and in Growth groups we will spend 4 weeks looking at the Old Testament book of **Jonah**.

“Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.” - G. Campbell Morgan

(Quoted by Leslie C. Allen in his New International Commentary on the Old Testament - Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah', Eerdmans, 1976, p192)

Many have heard of the prophet Jonah being swallowed by a fish or whale. However, that tends to be as much as many people know about the book of Jonah. Which means they miss out on meeting the God whose actions and character might be best summed up by the phrase 'Sovereign Grace'. The little book of Jonah will force us to grapple with the personal implications of knowing a God who is both sovereign over all & willing to be gracious to all.

Some comments of introduction follow. Terry Bowers

The 4 Studies

The 4 bible studies on Jonah basically follow the chapter divisions (with one little but important exception). It is only in chapter 4 that we gain a full insight into the motivations behind Jonah's decision to flee to Tarshish at 1:3. Following the narrator, I decided to leave that full motivation undisclosed until chapter 4. Those of you who cheat and read ahead with 'who done it?' fiction will need to grapple with temptation.

Week 1 – The Flight of Jonah 1:1-16

Week 2 - The Thanksgiving of Jonah 1:17-2:10

Week 3 – The Mission of Jonah 3:1-10

Week 4 – The Anger of Jonah 4:1-11

Each study contains three types of questions:

O = Observation questions (or exercises) to help group members look closely at the text.

I = Interpretation questions to help the group discuss the implications of the text.

A = Application questions to prompt each member toward applying the truths of the text to church and personal life.

The Structure of Jonah

The book of Jonah appears to merely be a nice little story. In fact, it is highly structured and crafted to produce contrasts that lead us to the main challenge. The parallels of chapters 1&2 vs chapters 3&4 are very significant for advancing the narrator's purpose. Here is how one writer, Tim Keller, laid out the chapters.

Scene 1	Scene 2
Jonah, the pagans and the sea	Jonah, the pagans and the city
1:1 God's word comes to Jonah	3:1 God's word comes to Jonah
1:2 The message to be conveyed	3:2 The message to be conveyed
1:3 The response of Jonah	3:3 The response of Jonah
1:4 The word of warning	3:4 The word of warning
1:5 The response of the pagans	3:5 The response of the pagans
1:6 The response of the pagan leader	3:6 The response of the pagan leader
1:7ff How the pagans' response was better than Jonah's	3:7ff How the pagans' response was better than Jonah's
2:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant

The Historicity of Jonah

Features like a man surviving being swallowed & living for 3 days in a fish, and the wholesale repentance of a notoriously cruel and blood thirsty nation in response to the words of a reluctant man....are aspects of Jonah that have seen many consign the book to fiction. But fiction which teaches a truth in the same way many of Jesus' parables did.

Writers debate whether Jonah is historical narrative or more akin to a type of parable that should be categorised as inspired Wisdom literature, like Job. There are also elements of the style of prophetic literature. However, unlike any other prophet of Israel...when this prophet speaks against a foreign nation he does it on location...rather than prophesying against the nation at home, for Israel's benefit. From an historical viewpoint...we know that the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel.

(Remember that at this time in Israel's history the Kingdom of Solomon had split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah). The sole reference to Jonah in the records of the Kings of Israel and Judah is 2 Kings 14:25:

*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. **He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.** The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. As for the other events of Jeroboam's reign, all he did, and his military achievements, including how he recovered for Israel both Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel? (2 Kings 14:23-28)*

King Jeroboam II was active from 782-753BC. It is interesting that Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom, Israel, during this time. Israel would subsequently be destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. This was part of God's plan. (The southern kingdom, Judah, was saved from the Assyrians through God's intervention.) These dates mean that the events described in the book of Jonah had to occur sometime within a 60 year period in the 8th century BC, and that the repentant Ninevites of Jonah 3 then returned to their evil ways before 722BC.

Tim Keller wrote in support of the book of Jonah's historicity: *Despite the literary sophistication of the text, many modern readers still dismiss the work because the text tells us that Jonah was saved from the storm when swallowed by a 'great fish' (Jonah 1:17). How you respond to this will depend on how you read the rest of the Bible. If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally. (The Prodigal Prophet, Hodder 2018, p4)*

Most persuasive to my approach to the book has been the Lord Jesus:

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."

(Matthew 12:38-41)

Following the lead of Jesus, I trust the historicity of the book of Jonah. But noting how highly structured it is...I read seeking not history but look the main lessons that Jonah should have learnt.

Unanswered Questions

Jonah was confronted by God refusing to fit stay in the box Jonah had for Him. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the gracious mercy of God with His justice. Especially when that justice is extended to a cruel people outside Israel. The book of Jonah ultimately confronts us all with God's willingness to treat all people with grace. Do we have the heart of Jonah or God?

The book of Jonah doesn't attempt to answer the further question, 'How can God be both merciful and just?' We have to wait until the cross of Jesus Christ for that answer. God's mercy meets God's justice, when Christ die to bear our punishment for sin & Christ's people receive undeserved grace:

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:22-26)

Q5. (I) What words can you suggest to describe the appropriate response to a god with the qualities listed in Q4?

See also Psalm 95, Psalm 107:23-32, Luke 8:22-25

Q6. (I) Why do you think Jonah thought he could avoid the Lord's command? When can Christians be just like Jonah?

Q7. (A) Jonah didn't trust the Lord's wisdom and plans. How is our trust connected to our obedience? What might this connection suggest toward growing a more obedient heart? Romans 8:30-32 might help.

Q8. (A) **Share & Pray** about situations where, in future, you can respond better to our powerful, Sovereign Lord God.

Study 2 - Jonah 1:17-2:10 The Thanksgiving of Jonah

Recap last time: By 1:16, why did Jonah end up getting wet?

Read Jonah 1:17-2:10

Q1. (O/I) Consider 1:17 & 2:10. Notice the word 'provided' in v17 and 'commanded' in v10. Is the big fish an instrument of the Lord's salvation or of the Lord's punishment?

Q2. (O) Jonah prays from inside the fish. His prayer (vv2-9) has 3 parts and he looks back and forward as he prays. Identify each aspect as you complete this table (note vv2-4 & vv5-7 repeat & overlap ideas)...

	Looking back to drowning	Jonah's desperate actions in crisis	Looking forward
vv2-4			
vv5-7			
vv8-9			

Q3. (I) Describe Jonah's tone and attitude toward the Lord in chapter 2. How do you explain the change from chapter 1?

Q4. (I) Read Luke 15:1, 10-24. In what ways does Jonah remind you of the prodigal son?

Q5. (I) ‘...deliverance creates the obligation of worship’ (L. C. Allen)
What does Jonah plan in response to God’s grace? What quality absent in chapter 1 will Jonah need to couple with his promised temple activity?

Q6. (A) How does the salvation you find in Jesus, impact your life?
Cf. Titus 2:11-14.

Q7. (A) Compose your own psalm of praise for your salvation (you don’t have to sing it...just pray it). Maybe some group members can share what they have written for everyone’s encouragement.

Study 3 - Jonah 3:1-10 The Mission of Jonah

Recap: By the end of chapter 2, how is the Jonah who gets deposited on the beach different to the Jonah who ran off to sea?

Q1. (O) Compare Jonah chapters 1 & 3 by completing this table.

	Chapter 1	Chapter 3
v1		
v2		
v3		
v4		
v5 (people)		
v6 (leader)		
	vv7-16	vv7-9

Q2. (I) What reasons can you suggest for Jonah's better response to God's command in 3:1-3?

Q3. (I) What does it mean to 'repent'? How do the Ninevites model that to us?

Q4. (A) After we become Christians, what role should repentance continue to play in our lives? See Acts 26:19-20, 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10, Luke 8:18-25 (notice 'daily').

Q5. (I) God's action (or inactivity) at 3:10 has been described as 'divine repentance'. How is this consistent with God's character toward both Israelites & non Israelites? See Exodus 32:11-14, Jeremiah 18:5-10, Ezekiel 33:10-11 & 14-16, Matthew 11:20-24, Acts 2:36-39, Acts 5:29-32, Acts 11:1-2&15-18, 2 Peter 3:8-9

Q6. (A) Read Luke 11:27-32. What comparison does Jesus make between himself and Jonah? Following Jesus' lead, what application of Jonah 3 might we make to ourselves?

Q7. (A) Be encouraged by 1 John 1:8-9 & create a prayer list together by listing areas in which Christians find they need to repent and seek God's mercy. Use this list & Pray generally for each other and your fellow St James/BHAC members.

Bonus Question for Groups with Time

Compare the proclamation in Jonah 3:7-9 with Joel 2:11-14. The prophet Joel was addressing Israel. How might the adaptation of Joel 2:14, by the Ninevites at 3:9, be challenging to Israelite prejudices?

Study 4 - Jonah 4:1-11 The Anger of Jonah

Recap: Jonah's mission to Nineveh was an outstanding success. Jonah must be the most successful prophet in Israel's history. God responded to the wholesale repentance of the population (even the 4 legged ones!) with grace, and judgement was averted.

Read 4:1-3

Q1. (O) Chapter 4 opens with an angry prophet. What to Jonah was so 'very wrong'? So very wrong, that he would rather die than live (v3).

Q2. (O) In v2 we learn the exact reason that Jonah sought to flee to Tarshish (1:3). What is it about God's character that Jonah feared? See also Exodus 34:5-7.

Q3. (I) Writing 100 years after the book of Jonah is set, in around 650-620BC, the Old Testament prophet Nahum specifically prophesied against Nineveh. His prophecy was fulfilled when Nineveh was conquered by the Babylonians in 612BC. The Ninevites had a reputation for ruthless cruelty long before Nahum wrote, however. Based on Nahum 1:7-8, 3:1-5, 3:18-19 (for example), what general attitude toward Ninevites do you imagine Jonah & other Israelites would have?

In chapter 2, Jonah loved God's grace directed at himself. He feels different about the Ninevites also receiving grace. Why?

Q4. (I) Consider Luke 15:11-32 - especially the older brother's complaint. Bear in mind from Luke 15:1-2 who the brothers each represent. What do you think Jesus would have said to Jonah?

Read 4:4-11

4:4-11 seems to be a flashback. After Jonah completed his preaching commission (3:4), he had settled outside the City to watch and see God's judgement on it (4:5). When it becomes apparent that God is showing mercy to the Ninevites, he becomes angry.

Q5. (I) What point about the depth of Jonah's concern or attachment to the short lived plant does God make in v10? What should this teach Jonah about God's concern for the Ninevites (v11)?

Q6. (I) What is the impact of abruptly ending the book with a question? Who is forced to answer it?

Q7. (A) The apostle Paul reminded Timothy about 'God our Saviour who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:3). Whom are the people or types of people, we might think don't deserve to be beneficiaries of God's grace?

What do you think the God we are reminded of in Jonah would say about this kind of thinking?

Q8. (A) Think of someone you would act or think differently toward if you had God's character of grace and compassion? Without naming the person, state some concrete ways in which your present behaviour towards this person would have to change. Pray for each other – asking God to bring about these changes.