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small group material



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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE 2 • Jonah

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Jonah

The previous study introduced us to the plot of Scripture which was:

The expansion of the kingdom of God in this world and the proclamation of its king (Jesus) over and against the powers of evil that oppose the purposes, plans and reign of God.

The first study traced this cosmic struggle in the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 12, however, God unveils a new battle plan. He is going to create a godly nation from which, and through which, all nations of the world will be blessed.

Israel was to be a “light on a hill” shining God’s glory to the world, drawing the nations to Him. At least in theory. Israel failed on this account, producing no more light to the nations than a triple A battery. The book of Jonah shows us why.

Jonah Chapter 1

(Remember that Jonah reflects the attitude and disobedience of Israel as a whole.)

The story begins with God’s command to Jonah to “go” to Nineveh as His ambassador to warn them that if they don’t repent, judgment will follow. This same command to “go” is used in the Great Commission text of Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus tells His disciples to “go” and make disciples of all nations. (This connection brings out the clear missionary nature of Jonah’s visit to Nineveh.)

Some of the poetic crafting of Jonah 1:1-3 is lost in translation from Hebrew to English. Here are a couple things you miss if you’re not fluent in Semitic languages: In verse 1, God tells Jonah to “arise and go” but instead Jonah “arose and went to run away” (vs. 3). The words make the disobedience emphatic.

Also in the opening verses, the word “down” appears three times in the Hebrew, alluding to Jonah’s spiritual nose-dive. He goes “down” to Joppa, he “went down” into the ship and, when the storm comes, he “went down” inside the ship.

As these emphatic words paint a picture of Jonah, the words ascribed to the storm are animated with allusions to God’s anger and judgement.

Why Jonah Ran Away

Okay, so here’s the question critical to the Book of Jonah: Why does Jonah run away? At first it might seem like fear, but Jonah 4:2 shows a different reason altogether. Jonah was actually afraid that the Ninevites would repent and God would spare them. Jonah, like Israel, had lost sight of blessing the nations.

How did this happen? Israel presumed that their favored status as a nation

What’s the Big Idea?

God desired to use Israel as a missionary to the nations. He blessed them so that they might be a blessing to other nations. The Book of Jonah is a window into why Israel failed in this missionary endeavor. Prejudice, legalism and hardness of heart destroyed their compassion for those outside of Israel. They wanted God to judge, not save, the unbelieving Gentiles. As a result Israel, became an obstacle to God’s global plan of redemption, not the vehicle of it.

What’s the Problem?

Prejudice, pride and legalism erode our compassion for the lost.





was because of their righteousness. It wasn't. God blessed Israel out of sheer grace and for the purpose of blessing other nations. Instead, an "us-versus-them" mindset fueled national pride, and prejudice smoldered as they waited for an air strike from heaven – kill 'em, kill 'em all. Israel wanted God to destroy Nineveh, not save it.

Chapter 1 is filled with irony. It's the Gentile sailors who truly fear God, not Jonah. It's also the sailors who repent and come to salvation. This seems to foreshadow the New Testament in that Israel rejects Jesus, but the gospel finds an eager audience among the Gentiles. Also ironic: Jonah tells the sailors that he worships the God "who made the sea and the land." Clearly Jonah believes that God is the God of the nations, but he lives as if God was only the God of the Jews.

Jonah Chapter 2

In chapter 2, Jonah is swallowed by a whale. When he repents and cries out to the Lord the whale "spews" him out on dry land. This event is prophetic in two ways:

1. In a century or so, God will discipline Israel. They will be taken into captivity in Babylon (swallowed by the whale) until God causes Babylon to "spew" them out: "I will punish Babylon and make him spew out what he has swallowed" (Jer. 51:44).
2. Jonah's plunge into the abyss foreshadows the death and resurrection of Christ: "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" (Matt. 12:40).

Jonah Chapter 3

Having repented, Jonah goes to Nineveh and miracle-of-miracles, the Ninevites repent. And again, more irony. While Jonah had apparently repented, his heart clearly is unchanged; the Ninevites, however, really do repent: sackcloth, ashes – the whole nine yards.

Jonah Chapter 4

Most children's Bibles skip chapter 4, as it is neither a neat nor happy ending. The story leaves Jonah in much the same hardened condition we found him in Ch. 1.

God teaches Jonah a lesson using a vine – the vine representing Israel. Among the messages: Israel is without compassion; Israel thinks only of Israel; Israel did not merit God's favor; as recipients of grace, Israel should have shown grace to others.

Israel ceased to be a channel of God's grace by becoming a roadblock to the mission and a spoiler of the plot. Not a good idea.

I Need a Hero

But where Israel failed in her role as a mediator in God's plan of redemption, Christ was victorious. Israel's failure to expand and proclaim God's kingdom to the world necessitates and points to the coming of Christ – the ultimate mediator between God and a lost world. He is the ultimate missionary who came to "seek and save the lost."

Along this line of thought, notice God's compassion displayed in Jonah 4:11: "But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left." See, that's the kind of mediator we need – someone with the compassion of God, and whaddya know, here comes Jesus, and "when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt 9:36). Clearly Jonah 4:11 points us to the one we're looking for, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the ultimate evangelist, the ultimate missionary and the source of our compassion for the lost. Ministry is not just being obedient to proclaim the gospel, but allowing Christ's heart and compassion to bleed through us.

What's Our Response?

The group, first, needs to understand how Israel was to function at the center of God's plan of redemption. That's foundational to the Book of Jonah which shows us why Israel failed in her missionary mandate.

You want your group to make connections between Israel and believers today. Do we judge unbelievers? Do we have compassion for the lost? Are we willing to be obedient to God's missionary call?

Jonah's 'running' from God and 'sleeping' provides the opportunity to probe where people, even in small ways, are running from God. Where are we trying to escape His lordship in certain area of our life? Where are we spiritually asleep?

Last, Jesus is the ultimate evangelist and missionary. He is the source of our compassion for the Lost. Where Israel failed in her missionary mandate, Jesus succeeded and continues to succeed in and through us as we allow Him to use us in ministry to others.

What Are the Questions?

Jonah

LAUNCH

Do you think most Christians are characterized by compassion for unbelievers or an “us vs. them” mindset? Where does this “us vs. them” mindset come from?

EXPLORE

1. The first study introduced us to the plot of Scripture. Write down what you remember of the plot.
2. In Genesis 12, God unveils a new plan to expand His kingdom. What is the plan and how was it supposed to work? What was the importance of Abraham to the plan?
3. What were the three promises God made to Abraham?

The book of Jonah allows us to see what went wrong in the life of Israel that made her ineffective and unusable as a witness to the nations. While a real prophet, Jonah is clearly representative of Israel.

Read Jonah Ch. 1.

4. In verse 2, God sends Jonah as an apostle to the Ninevites. The corresponding greek word “go” is used in a similar commissioning of the disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. Read Matthew 28:19-20 and write down what is similar and what is different.
5. Why do you think Jonah refused to go? Do you think Jonah imagined he’d be able to get away from God? Have you ever attempted to run from God in some way?
6. Read 3:10-4:2. What do we find to be the real reason Jonah was afraid to go? Why would he feel this way?
7. Why is Jonah sleeping? When you’re not walking with the Lord, how does it manifest in your habits and behavior?
8. What do you think the storm symbolizes?
9. In 1:9, how is Jonah’s description of God contrary to his heart and actions? In what way could someone think that your actions don’t align with the God you believe in?
10. What words/phrases are used to convey the spiritual responsiveness of the Gentile (non-Jewish) sailors? How does this contrast with words/phrases used to describe Jonah?
11. God uses Jonah in spite of himself to bring the message of salvation to the Gentiles (the sailors). How does this foreshadow Israel in the New Testament?
12. In chapter 2, a whale swallows Jonah. Is this judgment mercy or both? Why do you think Jesus makes a connection to this incident in Matthew 12:40?
13. Read 3:1-4:3. How would you compare the repentance of the Ninevites here with Jonah’s repentance in chapter 2?
14. Many children’s books that tell the story of Jonah exclude chapter 4. Why do you think this is?
15. Read 4:4 – 4:11. Often in the Old Testament, the vine is symbolic of Israel. If that is the case here, what then is God saying to Jonah and Israel in this demonstration?

APPLY

16. If there were one area of your life that spiritually you’d describe yourself as sleeping or even running from God, what would it be?
17. Israel’s concern was in judging the lost, not ministering to them. How have you seen Christians do this?
18. Read Matthew 9:36. What passage in Jonah does this hold allusions to? What might we draw from this?
19. Israel forgot the mission God had called her to. Do you think this could happen or is happening to the church today? In what ways do you find yourself rationalizing evangelism and missions away?

What Are the Answers?

1. The expansion of the kingdom of God in this world and the proclamation of its king (Jesus) over and against the powers of evil that oppose the purposes, plans and reign of God.
2. Starting with Abraham, God created a nation, Israel, to be a witness and light to other nations.
3. He would make Abraham into a great nation. He would make Abraham's name great (God would bless Israel, and give Israel favor, etc). Third, all of the nations in the world would be blessed through Abraham (Israel).
4. The important thing is to see the connection. Both are calls to be missionaries to other nations.
5. See notes under "Why Jonah Ran Away." Discuss.
6. See notes under "Why Jonah Ran Away." Discuss.
7. See notes. The book of Jonah is very poetic and such descriptions reflect his spiritual state.
8. The language of the storm is meant to reflect God's judgement/anger.
9. He describes God as the God of all nations. But he acts as if God is only the God of Israel.
10. Allow the group to discuss.
11. Willing or not, Israel was the vehicle through whom the Messiah came. They would reject their Messiah, and in God's judgment on Israel, the message of salvation would be given to the Gentiles.
12. The most important thing is that they see the connection. In the context that Jesus said it, He could want them to recognize themselves in the actions of Jonah.
13. While Jonah repents, chapter 4 reveals his heart wasn't changed toward Nineveh. The repentance of Nineveh is thorough and sincere.
14. It doesn't have a happy or neat ending.
15. See Notes.
16. Allow the group to discuss.
17. You want them to see that this "us vs. them" mindset also effects Christians and erodes our compassion.
18. See, "I Need a Hero" in the notes.
19. It could easily happen. Christians could, for example, begin to focus on social justice or believe God will ultimately save everyone.

Memorize

Have the group read through Jonah on their own and take note of any other insight into the heart problem of Israel.