

## Family Worship Booklet

An underwater photograph of a whale, likely a humpback whale, swimming in deep blue water. The whale's head and back are visible, and its tail is seen in the lower right. The water is clear with some ripples on the surface.

# Jonah

*God's astonishing Grace*

God tells us that Ezra read from the book of the Law,  
day after day, and that the people of God  
were filled with joy!

### **Friday – Jonah 3:1-5 – Jonah’s preaching.**

Jonah did what God told him to, nothing more, nothing less. He preached the message God gave him. He took God at His word, and he took God’s Word, and he proclaimed it. There was no accommodating of the message for the audience. No trying to avoid what he might have considered the difficult parts, and let’s face it, what part of the message of judgement on this large foreign city, whose inhabitants were known for their brutality, was not difficult. No obscuring of the word ‘overthrown’, no watering it down to ‘you might experience a little challenge on the city outskirts’. No preaching it in empty parking lots in the middle of the night. He went into the city and declared the message God gave him to declare on the first day he was there. And what a message it was. The Hebrew word for ‘overturn’ is the word that is used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25, Lamentations 4:6, Amos 4:11). But it can also mean to turn around (1 Kings 22:34 ‘to turn around a chariot’) or transform (Jeremiah 13:23 ‘to transform one’s appearance). So, it’s a word that can be used in two different ways, which is important given what God does.

The reality of imminent divine judgement within 40 days hit the Ninevites hard. And if I may digress for a moment, the number ‘40’ is no arbitrary figure; in the Bible, it is often associated with periods of special religious significance; for example, and these are only a few, Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights receiving the Law (Exodus 24:18, 34:1-28), he sent spies into the promised land for 40 days (Numbers 13:25, 14:34), the prophet Ezekiel lay on his side for 40 days to symbolize Judah’s sin (Ezekiel 4:6), Elijah went for 40 days without food and water (1 Kings 19:8), Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2), Jesus appeared for 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God following his resurrection (Acts 1:3). Then there are the 40 years of wilderness wandering for the Israelites for their refusal to go into the promised land, and so it could go on.

It wasn’t long into the 40 days of judgment preaching in Nineveh before something began to happen. There was an immediate response. It was as though the words had barely left the lips of Jonah before the beautiful response of confession and repentance began, for they believed not just what was being said, but began to believe in the God whose words they were.

Q1. What did Jonah do?

Q2. How significant is the number 40 in the Bible?

Q3. What impact did the preaching of God’s Word have?

## Thursday – Jonah 3:1-6 – Nineveh and Jonah.

We're in the eighth century BC here. By this stage, Nineveh was a major city in Assyria in what was the golden age of Mesopotamian history. However, it was also a period of internal strife in the empire, as provincial rulers would battle with the federal government and the King over issues and the boundaries of self-determination. Sometimes this strife would erupt in violence, and the surrounding nations would often be subjected to significant brutality from Assyria.

I know we have looked at it before but, just as a reminder as we think again of the daunting task before Jonah, Nineveh, is a huge bustling city in terms of its size. You could take the 'three days journey in breadth' to mean three literal days walk across or around the city's circumference. Archeology, though, points to the fact that Nineveh and its surrounding satellite towns covered an area three miles in the distance. Interestingly, the phrase 'great city' in chapter three, verse two, is the same one in Genesis 10:11-12, which speaks of Nimrod and his building of Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah and Resen, all cities around Nineveh.

Before moving on from the size of Nineveh, the words "an exceedingly great city" literally mean 'a great city to God'. Many commentators focus on its size, cultural significance, etc., and of course, that is true, but God doesn't tell us that it was a great city to Him without there being some reason for doing so. You could take that phrase to mean that this great city is standing before God as He is about to judge it, or that it is great because of what He is about to do in it.

With a sense of conviction arising because of the grace of God in his life, Jonah goes into the city, and heralds and proclaims the message God has given him, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" It's breathtaking in its simplicity and clarity, assuming that was all he declared, but there is no reason to think it's not. If he did expand on the messages by citing reasons and arguments, it's clear that if he did so, he didn't obscure the message. Its simplicity and directness left no one in any doubt as to what was meant.

Simplicity and clarity are the marks of faithful biblical preaching, and they come from two things. First, a Christ-given authority to the preacher, the 'sent one', and second, an unshakeable conviction on the preacher's part that what he is heralding as the ambassador of Christ is the truth of God to man. Such gospel preaching bears eternal fruit.

Q1. What sort of a city was Nineveh?

Q2. What size was the city?

Q3. What did Jonah do when he went into Nineveh?

## Monday – Jonah 2:1-10 – The great fish vomits Jonah up.

Jonah had received a life-saving physical deliverance from death through God's providential provision of the great fish. But there was more; he'd also experienced a spiritual reawakening when in the belly of the fish. There have been numerous stories of people pleading with God to save their lives in moments of peril, with the promise to commit their lives to Him if they live. Not every such promise is kept. Jonah, though, will get his opportunity to do so because God speaks to this great fish and tells it to vomit Jonah, and it does. It swims, we can assume, back to the promised land coast and spits out the content of its stomach onto the shore.

What could Jonah have learnt from this experience? Here are a few things that could have crossed his mind:

- You can try and flee from the presence of God, but you can't outrun God's sovereign purposes for your life. You can expend time and money trying to escape God's plan, and yes, it may prove successful for a while; a few weeks, months, or even years, but in the end the will of God will be done in your life. So, the choice is either to face the difficulty the first time around; and God can ask us to face difficult things at times; or go on the run, whatever form that takes; and then through the means of a trial and chastisement be brought back by God to face the difficult situation the second time around.
- That despairing of usefulness is not only pointless but must be faced and countered. The temptation to allow a 'pick me up and throw me into the sea' attitude must be seen for what it is - as a dart from the devil -and be met head-on by the shield of faith.
- The reality of the sheer power of God's grace. First experienced on the ship when he listened to the sailors call out to their various gods, and then, by God's grace, he heard them pray to God for mercy. Then his experience of being brought up from the pit and saved by God's provision of the great fish.
- The blessing of knowing the Psalms and framing one's prayers using God's words, essentially reciting back to God what God had given to us in these songs.
- Ownership of a fresh desire to fulfil his vows to God and a renewed understanding that 'Salvation does belong to the Lord'.

Q1. Whom does God speak with?

Q2. What does the great fish do?

Q3. What are some of the things that Jonah might have thought of as he found himself on dry land again?

## Tuesday – Jonah 3:1-3 - What does God say to Jonah and why?

We're not told Jonah what does after the great fish has vomited him up. Did he go home? We can't say. What we can say, though, is that Jonah doesn't get an opportunity to settle into anything new. He has unfinished business to do, and God reminds him of that by reiterating His command. The book opened in chapter verse 1 with the words, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying..."; now in chapter 3, verse 1, we read, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time saying,...." But why, if the command still stood, and the situation in Nineveh hadn't changed, did God need to come to Jonah a second time? Why did God need to express the almost identical, clear, concise, authoritative command again? There can be no other reason than that it was necessary for Jonah's sake. Yes, he may have had a fresh desire to fulfil his vows, but the idea of fulfilling his previous commission to Nineveh immediately may not have been uppermost in his mind. So, God's coming to Jonah a second time is a call on his heart. Like Jesus coming to Peter with the question "Do you love me?" following Peter's denial of him three times before the cock had crowed once, so God is coming here to Jonah and asking him 'do you love me, and will you go with a humble heart and obey me?'

Isn't it beautiful that God comes to us not just once but a second time, a third time, a fourth time, multiple times and asks us 'do you love me, and will you serve me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?' Isn't it wonderful that God runs to us like the Father of the prodigal son, and even though we have a long list of preprepared explanations for our failures, He opens His arms, gives us a long tender hug and re-engages us in His service? How can we not love our Father in heaven?

Although the ESV doesn't convey it, there is a slight change in what God tells Jonah to do when he gets to Nineveh. In the first occasion, chapter 1, verse 2, Jonah is told to 'cry out against Nineveh'; here, he is commanded to 'cry to Nineveh'. Most commentators say it's not worth noting, but maybe the slight change does point to something. Especially as the word 'message', which follows in the sentence, is a unique word and means 'to proclaim'. So, I think Jonah is being prepared for the fact that God will not destroy Nineveh, but rather redeem it. Yes, the city's evil is still prevalent, and the crying out against it will still take place, but now there will be a 'proclaiming' of what God tells him when he gets there. In the preaching of God's Law, there must always be a proclamation of God's grace.

Q1. What does God tell Jonah to do?

Q2. Why does he do so?

Q3. What difference is there in God's second command?

## Wednesday – Jonah 3:1-3 – Jonah's response to God's command.

Jonah has received a fresh commission from God; the question is, how will he respond this time? Verse 3 of chapter 3 tells us, "Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord." Jonah is ready this time. Given what he has been through, that is probably no surprise. But who is this Jonah who now sets off for Nineveh? Well, he is a changed Jonah. Yes, his name is still Jonah, and he is still the son of Amittai from Gath-Hepher, but he is a changed person. He has been reshaped. Gone is the rebellion, replaced with a wholehearted commitment. Gone is the desire to run in the opposite direction from Nineveh, replaced by a desire to arise and go where God is sending him. Gone is the heartless attitude to the Ninevites, replaced with some form of compassion. This is a renewed Jonah, a Jonah with a heart in the right place, feet travelling in the right direction, and a mind focused on receiving and sharing God's message when he gets there.

How has this come about? That's a very important question. We don't go through many such comprehensive changes in our lives. When someone does, it's good to ask 'why?' One could say that it's because of his experience in the sea and then the belly of the great fish, and that's true, but it's what lay behind that experience that brought about the change, not the experience itself. Many people go through harsh experiences, but it doesn't change them; it doesn't lead to a change in their attitude or their heart. Such changes can only be, and are solely, the fruit of God's work of grace in his life. God had allowed this man to run, but for a reason. It was to bring Jonah back to Himself with a broken and contrite heart, so that he could be renewed with a superabundance of grace. As Paul writes in Romans chapter 5 verse 20, "where sin increases, grace abounds all the more". (Not, as Paul makes clear in chapter 6 verse 1, that we are to sin grotesquely so that grace will abound all the more.)

Surely, we should desire to be in such a place of communion with God that the superabundance of His grace would be our constant experience. Is it not the man, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 126, who, conscious of his sinful inability, goes out weeping with the precious seed, only to return rejoicing at the harvest he is allowed to gather in? But how can we get to that place without running from God's presence? It is simple but not easy; we must ask God to show us our sin, then confess it with a genuinely broken and contrite heart.

Q1. How does Jonah respond to God's command this time?

Q2. What made him go this time?

Q3. What do you and I have to do to experience God's grace?