

# 08

## SESSION EIGHT

# Jonah and the Ninevites

### SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how God goes to great lengths to pursue people even when they have no interest in being found. God pursues sinners of all kinds in order to bring them to Himself. Jonah was a prophet who rejected God's call and ran away from his enemies. Unlike Jonah, Jesus heard God's call and ran toward His enemies. While we were still sinners, He died for us, and now He commissions us as His people to pursue others with the good news of His love.

### SCRIPTURE

Jonah 1:1-5,15-17; 2:7-3:5; 4:1-4

# THE POINT

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**God's saving grace extends to those whom we may consider as enemies.**

## INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

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### Option 1

Have you ever tried to run away from home? There is no more famous story of running away than that of Jonah. Here was a prophet, convinced his own opinion was the correct one, and so opposed to God's direction that he sought to run as far away from the will and reach of God as possible. But this story is less about a man running from God than it is about a God willing to pursue humanity in our disobedience.

While we tend to focus on the prophet when we tell the story of Jonah, the main character in the Book of Jonah is God Himself. While Jonah was vindictive, God was merciful. While Jonah ran away, God pursued. While Jonah was angry, God was forgiving. God was pursuing the wicked Ninevites, and He also pursued the disobedient prophet.

- **Consider a time when you thought about running away from something. Maybe it was a certain situation, a specific person, or maybe you even wanted to run away from home. What made you want to run away? What happened as a result of your decision to stay or run?**
- **What about running from God? Have you ever felt like you were running from God's plan and purposes? Why might we do that? What could we do to embrace God's plan and purposes instead?**

### Option 2

Students most likely wake up early in the morning for school or church, and they probably use an alarm to do so. Ask them what they use for an alarm. Does someone else wake them? Do they set multiple alarms? Does the alarm play a song they love or a sound they find annoying? How many times do they press the snooze button?

Alarms tell us when it's time to go—time to move from sleep to our daily activities, move out of a building if there's a fire, or move toward transportation to get to an appointment on time.

- **What is your general attitude toward alarms? Why?**
- **Have you ever missed an alarm? What happened?**

In the same way, when God speaks, we should move. We should not wait to obey His commands; we should act on His words immediately. As with the alarms, we should get up and move toward the destination He has appointed for us.

# HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

## THE POINT

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**God's saving grace extends to those whom we may consider as enemies.**

## CHARACTERS

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- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Jonah** - prophet to the Ninevites; spent three days inside a fish

## PLOT

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The story of Jonah is perhaps one of those most well-known and often told stories of the Bible. However, it is probably one of the most misunderstood stories since people often identify Jonah as the main character and focus exclusively on the events surrounding his encounter with the big fish. While Jonah plays a vital role in his own story, the main character of the story is God and His unwavering pursuit of both Jonah and the Ninevites whom Jonah despises.

## TIMELINE

### JONAH

*God goes to great lengths for people to hear the good news of salvation.*

### JOEL

*A prophet who warns God's people about the Day of the Lord.*

### JEREMIAH

*God's calling and presence overcomes obstacles in the mission.*

## GOD PURSUES A DISOBEDIENT PROPHET

Why would someone think they could run from God? God is not like a man—His reach is boundless and His eyes move throughout the earth. Yet Jonah, despite being a prophet, decided that the call of God was so distasteful that he could get away from it if he ran far enough.

Jonah, like Adam and Eve before him, ran and hid. But God was not content to let the issue pass.

**Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. (Jonah 1:1-5)**

This was not the first time Jonah had heard the word of the Lord. God had used Jonah to declare to the northern kingdom of Israel God's grace and coming blessing (2 Kings 14:25). But this message was different. God was not sending Jonah to the Israelites; He was sending Jonah to their foreign enemies, the Ninevites. And He was not sending Jonah to declare a message of prosperity, but a message of impending judgment.

You would think Jonah would be excited about an assignment like this; after all, everyone in the world knew about the Assyrians' cruelty. They were the "bullies" of the day. They were known to be brutal in their attacks and extremely oppressive when they conquered other peoples. Nineveh was described as a "great" city in verse 2, and it certainly was. A leading city of the Assyrian Empire, Nineveh was surrounded by a wall almost eight miles in length and was large enough to house 120,000 people (Jonah 3:2).

This was a chance for Jonah to get in the face of the enemies of God's people, an opportunity for him to declare judgment—no doubt a message more than one of the Israelites hoped and even prayed for in their day. Jonah did indeed go like God told him to, but instead of heading straight for Nineveh, he bought a ticket on a ship headed the other direction.

So why did Jonah run? Answer: Jonah knew God well enough to know God was gracious, compassionate, and full of mercy. Furthermore, he knew God was giving the Ninevites forty days of warning, inviting them to repent. Jonah could

see how this was playing out—he would go to Nineveh, he would speak the word of the Lord, the people would repent, and God would forgive them. No judgment. No destruction. And his hatred for the Ninevites bound him to hold back the message of God from them.

Just as God was unwilling to give up on the Ninevites, so He also was unwilling to let Jonah go his own way. God pursued Jonah even as he ran, and the means of that pursuit was a mighty storm. The storm God “hurled” into the sea was so terrible that the hardened sailors suddenly turned very religious. There are no atheists in foxholes—or on ships in a God-sized storm!

Eventually, the crew knew what Jonah knew—the storm was no accident, but was brought on by Jonah’s disobedience. Jonah could have simply acknowledged his disobedience and asked the crew to turn around and row for shore. He had resolved to stop running from God and take on the assignment given to him. Even then, Jonah was too full of pride and hatred to bend his will to that of God. He would rather die.

**So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:15-17)**

- Has God ever called you to go somewhere or do something you found difficult to obey? What did He ask of you? How did you respond? (p. 54, PSG)
- After reading about Jonah’s response, what do you think you can do to avoid making the same mistake in your own life? How can you commit to obey God immediately, no matter what He asks? (p. 54, PSG)

## GOD FORGIVES JONAH AND THE NINEVITES

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Apparently, the belly of a great fish is a fine place to reevaluate your priorities. It served as that kind of environment for Jonah. Part of trusting in God’s perfect fatherhood is recognizing, as a perfect Father, God exercises the right discipline at the right time. Such discipline in our lives is not evidence of His lack of care, but the proof of His love.

Ironically, Jonah found himself in the exact same position as the Ninevites. He was disobedient, living in the middle of God’s discipline, and he needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. He had to, in a sense, preach the message to himself that God had given him for the Ninevites. And when he applied the message to himself, he was thankful for the same character of God that had driven him to such rage days earlier. Jonah 2:7 recorded part of Jonah’s prayer from inside the fish.

**When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice**

**of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation belongs to the LORD!" And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it  
vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. (Jonah 2:7-10)**

After Jonah's repentance, it is as if the story starts over again. Jonah was again given the same command to go and preach to Nineveh, but this time God was more explicit in the message. Jonah didn't have any improvisational freedom in his sermon, he had to say exactly what God told him to say.

**Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,  
“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the  
message that I tell you.” So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh,  
according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly  
great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the  
city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and  
Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed  
God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of  
them to the least of them. (Jonah 3:1-5)**

There were no flourishes, no clever illustrations. Unlike some of his contemporary prophets, Jonah wasn't required to illustrate his message through physical actions. Instead, it was a simple pronouncement of God's judgment.

Miraculously, the message was incredibly effective. Though the text tells that it was a three day walk, which probably meant that it would take Jonah three days to walk from one end of the city to the other preaching his message, it only took one day. At the end of that one day, every citizen in Nineveh had been cut to the core by the proclamation of their destruction and turned back to God. As evidence of their repentance, the king declared a state of extreme fasting. The city turned to God with all their might, even including their animals in their fast.

- **Do you think it was difficult for Jonah to find himself in need of the same repentance God sought from the Ninevites? Why or why not? (p. 55, PSG)**
- **Why do you think Jonah's message penetrated the Ninevites hearts so quickly? (p. 55, PSG)**

## GOD EXPOSES THE SOURCE OF JONAH'S ANGER

It seems that Jonah's repentance didn't fully take hold. He was in the fish, he expressed his repentance, he faithfully preached the message, and what he thought would happen indeed happened.

You've got to give it to Jonah—he was confident in the power of God's Word and God's gracious character. But you have to wonder, as the scores of Ninevites were repenting and crying out to God, if Jonah simply stood by with his arms crossed, rolling his eyes because he couldn't overcome his personal hatred and bias.

## TIMELINE

**THE NEW COVENANT**  
*God promises to indwell His people.*

**THE FALL OF JERUSALEM**  
*The hardness of heart and the fall of God's people.*

**EZEKIEL'S VISION**  
*God is capable of raising the dead.*

**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:1-4)**

Despite all that occurred in the last few days of Jonah's life, he was still unwilling to confront his own heart issues. Like the Ninevites who were clinging to idols, Jonah was clinging to the idol of his own hatred. He simply couldn't let it go, and his refusal to do so revealed that though He intellectually recognized the magnitude of God's gracious compassion, he could not embrace the practice of godly compassion for himself.

## CHRIST CONNECTION

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Let's zoom out for a minute here and remind ourselves what we have in the story of Jonah. We have the enemies of God. We have God's chosen messenger to deliver a message of repentance and forgiveness. Unwilling to bend to God's will, that messenger runs from the call, only to be swallowed up for three days and three nights. That's Jonah's story.

But it's not our story. Our story is that we were the enemies of God. He appointed another Messenger, Someone better than Jonah, to come and declare His message of repentance and forgiveness. This Messenger bent Himself fully to the will of God, though it cost Him His life. He was also swallowed up for three days and three nights, not by a fish, but by the grave.

Then He emerged victorious. Jesus is the second and better Jonah, and we are the enemies who have been granted forgiveness because of Him.

## 99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

### God is Merciful

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*Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning that there is nothing humanity can do to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.*

# YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

## GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How has God used discipline in your life to bring you in line with His will?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Imagine you were in Jonah's place. How would your perspective change after having been inside the great fish?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think Jonah was so reluctant to speak the Word of the Lord to the Ninevites? When have you felt like Jonah—uneasy about what God was calling you to do?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Do you typically see yourself as Jonah in this story, or as the Ninevites? Why is it important for us to learn from both?** *Answers will vary.*

**HIS STORY**  
God's Story of  
Redemption,  
through His Son,  
Jesus Christ.

**YOUR STORY**  
Where your story  
meets His.

# YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES

## HEAD

The truth is Jonah was right. The Ninevites deserved to be punished for their wickedness. No doubt there are people in your life and in our culture that deserve the righteous judgment of God—just as we do. Jonah, too, deserved to be punished for his disobedience. The sailors even deserved to be swallowed up by the sea for their idolatry. But, as Jonah feared, God is gracious and compassionate. Why do we rejoice in the troubles of others? We love the grace of God as long as it applies to us, but we become disgruntled with a God who loves our enemies.

- **Think about your own life. Who do you know that God wants to reach? Are you running away from or running toward that person? Answers will vary.**
- **What are some ways you think God wants to use you to influence that person for Him? Answers will vary.**

## HEART

Like Jonah, we must confront the long-held prejudice and hatred in our hearts that might cause us to withhold forgiveness and compassion from others. When we bear ill will toward others, we show that we have not truly understood and experienced the fullness of God's grace given to us.

- **What did God want Jonah to realize with His question about Jonah's anger (Jonah 4:4)?**  
*In essence, God used this to prompt Jonah to examine the racial bias in his heart. God was not merely the God of the Israelites, but the God and Savior of the entire world.*
- **Have you ever felt angry because of something God did, allowed, or asked you to do? How would you respond if the Lord asked you why you were angry with Him? Answers will vary.**

## HANDS

When we are called to speak the Word of God, we might feel inadequate, afraid, or vulnerable as we do it. But the bowing of the mighty city of Nineveh reminds us that God's Word is living, active, and able to cut through to the soul and spirit of mankind. We can speak the Word of God confidently, not because we are great orators, but because of the inherent power present in the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

- **Does it surprise you that Jonah's simple message was so effective? Why or why not?**  
*Answers will vary.*
- **What does this show us about the power of God's Word? It shows us, as Paul later said, faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).**

## ► ADDITIONAL INFO

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### LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #8, which contains an artistic poster pertaining to this session.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to [lifeway.com/TGPFA16Chron](http://lifeway.com/TGPFA16Chron))**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at  
**GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources**

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit  
**MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject**