

Week 25—A Prophet and A Foreign Nation

June 23-24

Jonah 1-4

Summary and Goal:

The majority of the Old Testament follows God's actions in and among Abraham's descendants, the Israelites. Jonah gives us a glimpse that God offers redemption and repentance to all people, not just the Israelites. God's instruction to Jonah also points forward to Jesus' teaching in the Gospels about loving our enemies. God wants to call all people to Himself, even the people that we dislike.

Main Passages:

Jonah 1-4

Session Outline

1. God Wants to Reach the People That We Dislike
2. Running From God's Call Leads to Pain
3. God is Merciful When We Return to Him

Session in a Sentence:

God places a unique call on each one of our lives to reach people for Him, and we experience contentment and joy when we walk in that calling.

Kingdom Connection:

The Kingdom of God is the place where His will is done on Earth as it is in Heaven. That means that when we are walking in God's purpose and will for our lives, then we are standing right in the middle of His Kingdom. God's Kingdom is upside down compared to the world, and one clear sign for whether we are living in His Kingdom is the way we treat our enemies.

Introduction:

Have you ever seen the culture of fans in European soccer (sorry, ‘futbol’) leagues? They are absolutely insane. European football clubs have fans that are extremely devoted to their teams. They participate in wild synchronized chants and form incredibly tight-knit communities of fans. As you could expect, these groups of fans often clash with the fans of rival teams in different parts of Europe. In the worst of these conflicts, some groups of fans form groups with the sole intention of physically fighting fans from other teams. In Europe, they call this trend ‘hooliganism’, and it is quite dangerous. The brutality of these fan fights was depicted in a 2005 movie called *Greenstreet Hooligans* (I don’t recommend watching the movie). What causes these fights and conflicts? It seems pretty silly to fight over a soccer team, right?

Because we are communal creatures, we have the tendency to divide into groups or clans. We often form our identity based on the groups that we associate with. When we divide into these kinds of groups, we often become defensive of our group and feel threatened by other groups. It’s the reason that people become so attached to and defensive of their schools, companies, countries, etc. Cities, nations, ethnic groups, and religious groups have experienced conflicts of this nature for thousands of years. For this reason, when we encounter people that are from ‘clans’ that don’t hold the same experiences, priorities, and characteristics as our own, it is easy to feel hostile toward them. In our story today, we are going to see God break down the hatred that a Hebrew man felt for a rival ‘clan’ in order to rescue hundreds of thousands of people.

1. God Wants to Reach The People That We Dislike

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me. Jonah 1:1-2 (Chronological Bible, June 20, pg. 725)

⁵ So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. ⁶ And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. ⁷ But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. ⁸ And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah’s head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

⁹ Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

And he said, “It is right for me to be angry, even to death!”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left. Jonah 4:5-10 (Chronological Bible, June 21, pg. 727)

What does it say?

God sent word to a Hebrew man named Jonah. He wanted Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach to them. God said *‘their wickedness has come up before Me.’* With this statement, God was implying that the sin and disobedience of the Ninevites had reached a fever pitch where they would either need to change direction or be judged. In order to understand the full scope of what God was calling Jonah to do, we must first understand some things about the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, and this empire was an enemy of the Israelites. 2 Kings 18 and 19 tell the story of the king of Assyria laying siege to the city Jerusalem around 701 B.C. Later in the Old Testament, the book of Nahum is largely a taunt toward the wicked Assyrian Empire (Nineveh included) after they were destroyed by the Babylonians (612 B.C.).¹

At the end of the story, we come to understand Jonah’s motivations on a deeper level, as well as God’s. After the city of Nineveh repents (spoiler alert), God provides a plant to cover Jonah’s head from the sun. After a day, the plant is destroyed by a worm and a wind, and Jonah becomes angry with God for destroying the plant. God brings home the hammer by asking Jonah why he can’t pity a city with hundreds of thousands of people in the same way that he can pity a plant.

What does it mean?

The book of Jonah doesn’t give many specifics about the behavior of the Ninevites, but later in the book Jonah does tell the Ninevites that each man must *‘turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands’* (3:8). The thing that we can take from the text is the understanding that Nineveh was a wicked and wild city, participating in all kinds of immorality and violence. The language in verse 2 when God tells Jonah to *‘cry out against’* the city because *‘their wickedness has come up before me’* sounds remarkably similar to God’s description of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 when He says *‘the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great’* and describes that their grave sin was brought before Him. God ended up destroying these cities because they were so wicked, and Jonah makes it clear that Nineveh was in a similar moral situation to Sodom and Gomorrah.

So if the city of Nineveh was so wicked, then why did God want to send Jonah to them? The answer is simple: **God wanted to give the city a chance to repent and change direction.** The Bible tells us over and over again that God is slow to anger, slow to judgment, and rich in mercy.

But you, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth. Psalm 86:15

*So rend your heart, and not your garments,
Return to the Lord your God,
For He is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and of great kindness;*

¹ https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/nineveh-as-sin-city#contrib_bolin-thomas

And He relents from doing harm. Joel 2:13

'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:11)

God is a merciful God. He is also a God of justice and He does eventually punish the wicked, but He gives every opportunity for humans to repent and turn back to Him. God's call for Jonah was to be the man to call the Ninevites to repentance. God wanted Jonah to love and serve this lost group of people, but Jonah didn't want to do it because he hated the people of Nineveh. Fortunately for Jonah, God was persistent and continued to call him to this ministry to the Ninevites. God wants people to turn back to Him, and He will use His people to do it, even when we don't love people the same way that God does.

Application:

Do you have any enemies in your life? It could be a person that has harmed you in the past, it could be people who dislike you, or it could be people that are wildly ideologically opposed to you for one reason or another—we all have enemies. In Matthew chapter 5 Jesus tells us that we must love our enemies and bless those who curse us. It is easy to love and serve people that we like, and it is easy to care for those who are similar to us. However, God calls us to love and serve everyone in our sphere of influence, both friends and enemies.

So, what can we do with this command from Jesus? The first thing we can do is to ask God to change our hearts so that we no longer hate our enemies. If we are walking closely with the Lord, we will inevitably come into friction with the world, and we will make enemies. However, the fact that someone is opposed to you does not mean that you have to hate them. Jesus demonstrated this Luke 23:34 when He was taking on all the sins of the world in His crucifixion. He prayed '*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*' Jesus understood that the Jewish leaders who condemned Him, the common people demanding His death, and the Romans executing Him out of fear of the people, all were acting in this evil manner because they were **lost**. God says something similar to Jonah in chapter 4 when He says that the people of Nineveh '*cannot discern between their right hand and their left*'—they were **lost**. Jesus went to the cross because He wanted people to be reconciled to God. He didn't feel hatred toward people, but He took on hatred for our sake.

Where the rubber meets the road for you and I is that we must realize the people who are our enemies are also lost. They are wandering from God, not knowing their left from their right. As Christians, there is no room for us to be harboring hatred or anger toward our enemies because we need to spend all of our energy and effort into calling them back to the God who created them and loves them. You may think to yourself, 'This person is evil! They need to be brought to justice!' But it is not our place to bring existential judgment upon our enemies, that is God's responsibility. And if God desires that our enemies should not perish, then we should do everything in our power to love our enemies, to pray for them, and to call them back to the God who loves them.

I have to be honest, when I see the way that many of my fellow believers talk about their political, social, and ideological opponents, I fear that we are ignoring Jesus' commands, and like Jonah, we are running away from God because of our distaste for groups of people. We cannot allow our hearts to be hardened with hatred towards our enemies, no matter what they say about us or do to us.

2. Running From God's Call Leads to Pain

³ But Jonah arose 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 from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

¹² And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me."

¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

¹⁷ Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:1-17(Chronological Bible, June 20 pg725.)

What does it say?

Jonah received God's call to go to Nineveh to cry out against them, but Jonah immediately ran away from God's calling. He tried to flee to Tarshish away from God's presence. He went down to a port city called Joppa trying to sail thousands of miles away. While he was on the boat, a great storm came and scared the sailors senseless. When they found out that Jonah was running from the Lord, they asked him why he would do such a thing. They threw him out of the boat and the storm ceased. Jonah was then swallowed by a great fish that the Lord had prepared for him.

What does it mean?

We covered the reasons that Jonah would not go to Nineveh in our first point: he hated the Ninevites and was probably afraid of them. The more important thing to consider at this point is that God gave Jonah a calling, and Jonah ran away from it. He tried to literally put thousands of miles of distance between himself and God's calling on his life. Nineveh was located near modern-day Mosul, Iraq. Some commentators believe that Tarshish, the place that Jonah was trying to sail to, could be as far away as Spain. Jonah was trying to run to the

other side of the world to get away from God's call. Jonah quickly found out that it is impossible to outrun God, and he faced the consequences of his actions in the form of a storm and a big fish.

Application:

Jonah's story gives us a physical example of a spiritual reality that all of us experience at some point. We all have situations where God calls us to do something, but we run away from that call. This is the essential nature of sin: trying to run away from God's expectations and callings on our lives. Because Jonah ran away from God's calling on his life, he experienced pain and he brought pain upon the other sailors that were on the ship with him. When we run away from God, we also experience pain and we bring difficulty to those around us. God has given you specific giftings, skills, and talents so you can fulfill your calling in His world. If you run away from the calling He has placed on your life, then you will not only make yourself miserable but also those around you who you love the most.

3. God is Merciful When We Return to Him

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. ² And he said:

*"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction,
And He answered me.*

*"Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
And You heard my voice.*

*⁶ I went down to the moorings of the mountains;
The earth with its bars closed behind me forever;
Yet You have brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD, my God.*

¹⁰ So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. ⁴ And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

¹⁰ Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. Jonah 2:1-2; 6; 10 and 3:1-5; 10 (Chronological Bible, June 20, pg.726)

What does it say?

Jonah prayed to the LORD from the belly of the fish, and eventually, the fish vomited him up on shore. Afterward, the LORD called him again to go to Nineveh to preach to the people. This time, Jonah obeyed. He preached to the Ninevites that they must repent or be destroyed

in forty days. The people of Nineveh listened! They believed God, they fasted, they mourned, and they repented. God saw their repentance and decided to withhold the disaster that was going to befall them.

What does it mean?

While inside the belly of the fish, Jonah realized the futility of running away from God. His hatred and fear were not good enough reasons to ignore his calling and the word of the Lord. When God called him again to go to Nineveh, Jonah obeyed and preached in the city. Clearly, the people of Nineveh were ready to hear the message because they listened and heeded Jonah's warnings. Every person, from the king to the humble peasant, believed God and repented. What an amazing turn of events! God was ready to pour out His mercy upon the people of Nineveh, and it only took one reluctantly obedient prophet to bring about this amazing result.

God showed His mercy to the Ninevites, but He also showed His mercy to Jonah. God does not immediately cast us aside when we disobey Him, but He is rich in forgiveness and mercy when we turn back to Him. Do you have an area of your life where you have been running from the Lord's calling? Have you been running from God in your finances? In your relationships? In the way you take care of your body? In your work? Have you stayed in a comfortable place when God is calling you to move somewhere else?

If you have been running from the Lord, then you don't have to keep running. When you turn back to Him, He is rich in mercy and will use you to do incredible things.

Conclusion:

God Speaks by calling Jonah to preach to a group of people that he hates in order that they might be saved.

God Acts by preventing Jonah from running away from his calling, and by offering a chance for repentance to a wicked city.

God Reveals that He desires the repentance and restoration of all people, even those that we might consider enemies.

Resources:

Hosea-Jonah: Word Biblical Commentary volume 31. Douglas Stuart. Word Books, Waco Tx 1987.

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah: Layman's Bible Book Commentary volume 13. Billy K Smith. Broadman Press, Nashville Tn 1982.

https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/nineveh-as-sin-city#contrib_bolin-thomas