Community Group Discussion Guide

September 21, 2025
Jonah 3:1-10; 4:1-11 | Repentance

MOTIVATE

⇒ *Starter Question: When have you experienced a situation that seemed unfair at the time?*

DISCUSS

Jonah, a contemporary of Amos and Hosea, was a prophet of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who did evil in God's eyes. Yet God spoke graciously to Israel through Jonah in order to help them (2 Kings 14:25-27). God also commanded Jonah to go and proclaim judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. But Jonah fled in the opposite direction. Through a series of circumstances orchestrated by God, Jonah found himself in the belly of a large fish and then back on dry land. God gave Jonah a second chance, and this time Jonah obeyed, going to Nineveh to preach the message God gave to him. In Jonah 3:1-10; 4:1-11, God relented in His judgment and spared the city because the Ninevites fasted and repented.

⇒ *Discuss this statement: God is merciful to forgive when people repent, and He desires His people to be merciful as well.*

1. God relents from administering judgment when He sees repentance.

Jonah 3:1-2: ***1*** *Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,* ***2*** *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."*

Jonah had experienced a lot by this point in chapter 3. In Jonah 1, the prophet had received God's call to go preach to Nineveh because of its wickedness. The city was part of the ancient empire of Assyria, whose people were noted as the most vicious and cruel butchers of people in the ancient world. Proud of their military exploits, the Assyrians recorded in graphic detail how they treated their conquered enemies, often stacking their enemies' corpses and skulls in celebration to warn the next enemy to submit or to suffer the same fate.[1] They were well-deserving of God's judgment

⇒ *Nineveh was the center of anti-Israel fervor. The Assyrians and Israelites hated one another. How might this affect Jonah's willingness to go to Ninevah?*

Rather than obeying God, Jonah fled on a boat in the opposite direction, heading toward Tarshish in the western part of the Mediterranean Sea. God caused a storm that threatened to sink the ship, and the pagan sailors tried their best to save the ship by crying out to their various gods for mercy. They cast lots to determine who was at fault to cause the storm, and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah stated that he was a Hebrew who worshiped "the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).

Instead of repenting before the Lord, Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard and the storm would stop. The men tried to row harder, not wanting to be punished by the Lord for killing one of His prophets, but they quickly decided they had no choice if they wanted to survive. As soon as they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, the storm stopped immediately.

Rather than letting Jonah drown, however, God appointed "a great fish" to swallow him. In Jonah 2, God got His prophet's attention, and Jonah prayed for three days and nights from the belly of the fish. Jonah promised to worship God faithfully and to fulfill all of his commitments to the Lord. God then gave Jonah a second chance to be obedient to his call to preach to Nineveh.

⇒ *Why was Jonah's second chance a tremendous act of God's grace?*
⇒ *What does this reveal about God?*

Jonah 3:3-5: ***3*** *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.* ***4*** *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* ***5*** *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 went into Nineveh armed only with God's message of impending doom. The word Jonah delivered was one of complete destruction, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!" It would seem the Lord left no recourse for the Ninevites, except for two facts:

- The Lord sent Jonah to communicate this message of judgment.
- The Lord included a forty day countdown.

Jonah may have hoped that his message was a prediction of God's certain judgment, but a merciful God meant it as a warning. This passage stresses how seriously God takes sin. He recognizes and condemns what is unholy and unjust. This passage also stresses the certainty of God's judgment for sin, but it also portrays beautifully God's concern for those who are outside of His will and His plan.

⇒ *What role does the announcement of judgment for sin play in the sharing of the gospel?*
⇒ *Discuss this statement: The outward signs can vary based on culture, but the inward reality of a heart convicted regarding sin reveals the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a sinner (John 16:7-11).*

God's message brought an immediate response. As soon as Jonah started preaching, the people started responding, and revival broke out. The people "believed God," that is, they believed the message Jonah brought from God was true. The God of Jonah would be true to His word, bringing destruction upon them for their sinful behavior. The Assyrians were a polytheistic people, believing in many gods. How much they knew of the God of Israel, we do not know. But we do know that their belief and resulting actions were sufficient to stay God's judgment, at least for the time being. They understood that they deserved God's judgment for their sins, so they took steps of repentance, fasting and putting on sackcloth, the clothing of mourning and grief. They grieved over their sinful actions and over God's promised judgment.

⇒ *How does this story demonstrate the great lengths God will go to use His people to bring sinners into salvation?*
⇒ *How does this story demonstrate the power of God's Word?*

Jonah 3:6-10: ***6*** *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.* ***7*** *And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water,* ***8*** *but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the*

*violence that is in his hands. **9** Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." **10** When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*

Jonah's message reached the king, causing him to exchange his royal robe for sackcloth and ashes to mourn along with his people. The king proclaimed a fast of food and water and a time of mourning for both people and animals. Since the entire community was threatened with destruction, including the animals, the animals needed to join in with the appeal to God. By combining the cries of contrition from the people with the bleating of the animals, perhaps God might take more notice of their petitions for salvation.

Their pleas for help were joined with outward acts of repentance. "Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." Yet, the king was not satisfied with only an outward show of repentance. An inward repentance from evil was needed. Their lives should match their prayers. Each person was individually responsible for their own actions and spiritual state, yet the whole community took part corporately. They were to call out earnestly to God in hopes that He would relent from His anger and judgment.

- ⇒ *Why must a change of heart accompany repentance?*
- ⇒ *How might you evaluate your own response of repentance to conviction from God's Word?*

The repentance of the people prompted God—who delights in showing mercy (Micah 7:18-19)—to rescind His pronouncement of judgment. God responded to the earnest sorrow of the Ninevites. God's withholding judgment was an act of free grace and was by no means an automatic or deserved response to Nineveh's repentance. Grace is never deserved; it can only be freely received. Perhaps surprising to Jonah—but not to God, of course—the people of Nineveh repented of their wickedness and God relented of their destruction. This story is proof that God's merciful forgiveness is not constrained to one particular nation or ethnicity.

- ⇒ *Why is it vital we remember that God is compassionate to all who respond to Him in repentance?*
- ⇒ *Is it a challenge for you to freely receive God's undeserved grace? Explain your answer.*

2. God desires that His people show mercy and forgiveness to others.

Jonah 4:1-4: *1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 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. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"*

Jonah, the prophet of God, was out of sync with God's character. God's forgiveness toward Nineveh angered
Jonah, and his anger displayed itself like a child throwing a temper tantrum. In verse 2, Jonah prayed to the Lord. This was Jonah's second prayer recorded in the book (see Jonah 2:1-9). Using the same word for "prayed" as in Jonah 2:1, the writer invites the reader to compare this prayer with Jonah's previous prayer.

- ⇒ *Discuss the difference between Jonah's two recorded prayers: Jonah 2:1-9; Jonah 4:1-4.*

- ⇒ *What are some ways you find yourself at odds with God's character?*
- ⇒ *What are some ways Jonah revealed his hard heart toward God and the Ninevites? How might you struggle to align your heart with God's mercy?*

In his first prayer, Jonah expressed heartfelt thanksgiving for God's salvation toward himself. But in this second prayer, Jonah was intensely self-centered. The English first-person pronouns "I," "me," or "my" occur eight times in two verses. Jonah missed the joy of rejoicing in God's work of salvation for others because he was so self-consumed.

Having praised God's mercy in chapter 2, Jonah now deplored God's same mercy in chapter 4. Jonah knew of God's character as gracious, compassionate, patient, loving, and merciful. This accounting of God's character is important because God can never be less than who He is. He is always true to His character; He is always merciful. Jonah had received mercy yet refused to extend it to others. He couldn't stand the idea that the God who forgave His people when they sinned (including himself) would be the same God who would forgive the sinful Ninevites. But since God is a God of grace and mercy, He desires that His people show His mercy and forgiveness to others. So God would help Jonah understand His heart.

- ⇒ *Have you ever wished that God would suppress His character of showing mercy? Have you ever wished that God would not act like God?*

Jonah 4:5-8: ***5*** *Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.* ***6*** *Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.* ***7*** *But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.* ***8*** *When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."*

Jonah had built a shelter from the sun—to watch and see if the city of Nineveh would burn. The Lord caused a plant to grow up overnight next to Jonah to help provide shade for him, and "Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant." This is the only time in the story that Jonah is happy. He didn't express this kind of emotion over his own deliverance from death or the mass repentance he saw in Nineveh. The plant made him happy because it made him comfortable.

Throughout the book of Jonah, God "appointed" things. God appointed the great fish to swallow Jonah (Jonah 1
Early the next day, God "appointed" a worm to kill the plant and a hot scorching east wind to add to the sun beating down on Jonah's head. The sun was so oppressive that Jonah wanted to die. This is the third time Jonah wished to die in the narrative (Jonah 1:12; 4:3, 8).

- ⇒ *How can our self-centeredness and love of comfort distract us from God's plans and purposes?*
- ⇒ *Maybe you didn't wish to die, but can you describe a time when you were completely oppressed by life's circumstances? What did God "appoint" to get your attention?*

Jonah 4:9-11: ***9*** *But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."* ***10*** *And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which*

you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ***11*** *And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"*

God had questioned the rightness of Jonah's anger over God's mercy for the Ninevites, and now He questioned the rightness of Jonah's anger over the destruction of the plant. Jonah threw this question back at God in anger, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." The plant was extremely important to Jonah. It brought him great joy, and now that it was dead, Jonah was furious. Interestingly, the only thing in the book that was destroyed was a plant. Jonah was so angry that he would rather die than live in a world where innocent plants die through no fault of their own.

Jonah had such a wild range of emotions concerning the plant that lived for a day. God used this to patiently point out the hypocrisy of Jonah's love for the plant and his unwillingness to forgive the more than 120,000 people of Nineveh. God compassionately explained His heart of mercy to forgive the Ninevites and challenged Jonah to turn his care for a plant into care for people.

God's reply to Jonah compared what Jonah "cared about" and what God "cared about." God said, "You pity the plant," something that Jonah was by no means responsible for in how it came about. It simply came up overnight and died overnight, "while God's deep concern was expressed on behalf of his highest creation, human beings. Jonah apparently had grown completely indifferent to the fate of God's creation beyond the bounds of Israel."[2] In his anger, Jonah demonstrated the misalignment between his own heart and God's.

- ⇒ *Knowing that we do not deserve God's grace and mercy yet He still calls us to Himself, how might this change the way we view our own salvation?*
- ⇒ *Knowing that God desires for no one to perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), how should this influence the way we interact with those around us?*

The story of Jonah is a cliffhanger; we don't know how Jonah responded. Did he continue his tantrum or repent of his unforgiveness? Instead of resolution, the cliffhanger prompts the reader to reflect inward. God desires that we show mercy and forgiveness to others just as He does. Jesus taught that forgiving others is a mark of a true believer (Matthew 6:14-15) and that there should be no limit to our forgiveness of others (Matthew 18:21-35).

- ⇒ *As believers, should we not extend mercy to others as the Lord has extended mercy to us?*
- ⇒ *How are you showing others God's heart of care, mercy, and forgiveness?*

TRANSFORM

Whatever Jonah's reason to be angry at God's mercy, the Lord wanted His prophet to grasp the bigger picture of His heart to save sinners. God's mercy and desire is for all people to come to know Him as their Savior and King. It is necessary for us to remember that we are never too far from God to receive His grace, and we are also never too far into our salvation that we don't need His mercy. May we never forget what the Lord has saved us from and called us to. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, deserving of God's judgment, yet because of God's great love, believers have been made alive in Jesus Christ. This should spur us on to be quick to show mercy to others and to share this good news.

1. HEAD: In Christ, we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Through God's merciful gift of salvation, we are transformed to show others mercy. Jesus taught in Luke 6:36, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Mercy is an essential quality of God, so He desires for His people to be merciful.

⇒ *What are some potential results of showing mercy to those who don't seem to deserve it?*

2. HEART: There is no end to God's mercy (Lamentations 3:22). But like Jonah, we often place limits on our forgiveness and mercy. Jesus said: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). An unforgiving heart marks someone unchanged by the gospel of Jesus, whereas one who has been forgiven by God will forgive others (Matthew 18:21-35).

⇒ *What are some ways you struggle to reflect God's merciful heart, for which you need to repent?*

3. HANDS: Mercy and forgiveness are commanded of Jesus's followers, both toward those in the church and outside of it (Mark 11:25; Ephesians 4:32). God transforms our hearts with His mercy and forgiveness, and He gives us practical ways to demonstrate His mercy to others.

⇒ *What are three ways you can show mercy or forgiveness to those around you in the coming week?*

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[1]Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, vol. 19B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 225.
[2] Smith and Page, 282.