



## **ALL AT SEA - JONAH**

Sept 26	A Rebel in the storm of grace	<i>Chapter 1</i>
Oct 3	A Penitent in the school of God	<i>Chapter 2</i>
Oct 17	A Preacher in the service of God	<i>Chapter 3</i>
Oct 24	A Learner in the shadow of God	<i>Chapter 4</i>

## Introduction

The book of Jonah as the song goes is a 'whale of a tale', from which we can learn many things about the holiness of God; the extent of God's love and compassion; that no-one is beyond redemption; the nature of calling; the nature of prayer; the practice of confession and that we all have a vital role in God's ongoing work of transformation, of bringing heaven to earth in and through us.

Jonah was one of 12 prophets outlined in the Old Testament and is described as a minor prophet. This book differs from the other prophetic books in that it concentrates on the behaviour of the prophet instead of his prophecies. In fact only one verse (Chapter 3:4) in the whole book summarises his message to the people of Nineveh: where it is written that on the day Jonah entered the city he shouted to the crowds *"Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed"*.

As we consider Jonah's actions over the next four weeks, we will find that what we learn, as always, is as relevant today as it was back in ancient times and throughout history.

It is thought that the book was written approximately 785-760BC. At that time Israel was prosperous and successful nation and under the authority of the kings. Jonah, son of Amittai, had prophesied success to King Jeroboam II who had regained a large proportion of Israel's land back from their enemies. (2 Kings 14:23-25)

Although we are not told, the Israelites probably regarded Jonah as a popular prophet because he had brought good news. In contrast, many prophets had brought messages that were critical of the behaviour of the Israelite people. So, I wonder: did Jonah go along with how the king and leaders governed the people of Israel? Was he complacent in a nice easy life in Israel?

We are not told, but it is apparent from the book of Amos who prophesied to Northern Israel and Joel (a prophet of Judah in the south), both contemporaries of Jonah, that things were far from good in Israel. In fact, the Israelites had turned away from God and were worshipping other gods and treating people very badly at this time.

The book opens when Jonah receives an instruction from God: *"Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are"*.

Nineveh was the prosperous capital city of the powerful Assyrian Empire. It was an influential and wicked city that riddled with witchcraft and prostitution. The wealthy nation, a superpower in its time, maintained a large standing army whose reputation for might and cruelty induced fear into people throughout the world at the time.

So you can understand Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh!

## Session 1: A Rebel in the storm of grace

**Read:** Jonah 1

### Introduction

The chapter opens with God instructing Jonah to go east to Nineveh to prophesy their downfall if they the people do not repent. God gives Jonah a personal command. Yet we read that Jonah chose to disobey. He attempts to go as far west in the opposite direction as he can. To run away from God's call.

For a devout Jew, Nineveh was a very frightening place to be. It was also about 600 miles away from Israel. The journey would be long, costly and dangerous. How ironic!

### Questions & Application

1. Why do you think Jonah disobeyed?
2. How does Jonah compare to us?

I wonder, how many of us feel that we do not or cannot obey God even in the little things in our life? We all have things that we may allow to stand between us and our obedience to God: Our life style, anger, pain, ignorance, belief that we are not worthy or able to accept the Lord's call.

These are only a few examples but whatever holds you back from answering God's call, you are not alone; we all share in this human reality because we are human with doubts; fears and free will.

God only calls us to do what he knows we are able to do, however, to grow deeper and closer to God we have to be prepared to step outside our own self imposed boundaries. To co-operate with the Holy Spirit and grow into the fullness of the person that God desires us to be and in so doing serve Him.

3. Consider and discuss how can we help ourselves and each other to be increasingly obedient to God? And in so doing to realise our God given potential and grow to flourish in the riches of His love for us.
4. This chapter is full of opposites. As a group can you identify them? (see answers at the end of the notes)
5. Read verse 10. What does this verse suggest to us about the nature, character and purpose of God?

*PTO..*

## **Worship**

*“The church is the church, only when it exists for others”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray to God *“Your will be done.”* These are words that are easily said but do we really act them out; do we really seek to do the will of God?

Jesus was the ultimate prophet, who came to the world for the sake of others. He was totally obedient to God even unto death. In the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prayed to his Father in his distress and even though he knew he would soon be killed he said *“Not my will but yours”*.

Let us pray for each other to have faith in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may be strong and confident to do those things we feel God is asking us to do, to be like Jesus, to exist only to grow closer to God and to serve Him through serving others.

As we go out this week whatever we are doing, whoever we are with or whatever situation we face, even when we do not fully understand, let us meditate on the words *“Not my will but yours”* and know God is in control.

## **Answers**

### Opposites:

*God calls Jonah east and he travels west.*

*Jonah tries to hide from God, yet he knows he cannot hide from God.*

*When God sends the storm the pagan sailors shout to their gods for help, where as Jonah is asleep and even when wakened does not bring his needs to God.*

*Jonah, a prophet and a man of God, did not say anything to the crew until they cast lots and demanded to know who he was.*

*The crew tried their hardest to save Jonah’s life even though he had brought a great trial upon them. Jonah did not have the same thoughts for the people of Nineveh.*

## Session 2: A Penitent in the school of God

**Read:** Jonah 1:15 – 2; Matthew 12:39-41 & Matthew 16:4

### Introduction

This chapter is about Jonah's prayer to God (or psalm of thanksgiving). He is in the belly of a large fish where he has been for three days having been saved by God from drowning. Jesus refers to this miracle in Matthew 12:39-41 and 16:4 when the Pharisees demanded a miracle from him. (Please read).

Jonah was in a deep, dark place. The medieval Christian writer St John of the Cross (1542-1591) describes such times in the life of a believer as being 'The Dark Night of the Soul.' Such times are characterised by vulnerability and a heartfelt openness to God. Such times are times when profound spiritual development can take place.

### Questions & Application

1. Can you recall any significant times that have affected your walk with God? Looking back to these times, how do you sense that faith was affected through this(ese) experience(s)? Consider sharing with the person next to you.
2. The bible tells us that Jesus committed everything to prayer and taught His followers to do the same. In this chapter, we read although though he is in a deep dark place, Jonah offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God. He knows that God will hear him. Even though Jonah had disobeyed God's instruction, he was able to approach God secure in his knowledge that God would listen and respond in His love. As examine Jonah's prayer we see that in it he weaves

different parts of the many psalms that he must have known. (See answers at the end of this study.)

When Terry Waite, John McCarthy and Brian Keenan were captured and held in Iran, they would say prayers and recall things they learnt when younger. Jonathan Aiken when in prison studied the Psalms. In times of despair, how many people recall the Lord's Prayer maybe for the first time in years? Or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm? Or little snippets relating to God that people comfort themselves with?

Have you had a similar experience?

Can you share pieces of scripture that have spoken to you about Gods love and mercy?

### **Application**

We can pray to God in any place at any time and in any situation. We can pray alone or together. But God does not want us to just call on him in times of need. As part of our ongoing spiritual growth, we must pray at all times and as taught by Jesus, make God central to our lives. To infuse every aspect of our daily lives.

One way to help as we pray is to practice the **Lectio Divina** (*pronounced "Lec-tsee-oh Di-vee-nah"*). This is Latin for *divine reading*, spiritual reading, or "holy reading".

This is a traditional Christian practice of prayer and scriptural reading that promotes communion with God and increases our knowledge of God's word. It is a way of praying with Scripture that calls a person to study, ponder, listen and pray. It can take as long as you wish.

The component elements are:

*Lectio (or Study)*: The first moment consists in reading a scriptural passage slowly and attentively several times. Many people write down words in the scripture that speak to them or grasp their attention during this moment.

*Meditatio (or ponder)*: If a word or a phrase does seem to jump out at you, stop reading and ask God to give you insight. Roll the word(s) around in your mind. Think about the text in the presence of God. Throughout the day or for as long as you wish, recall it as you go about your business. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you greater spiritual understanding of these words/verses and see how it helps you to deepen your understanding of God.

*Oratio (or Listen)*: As you ponder on the scripture, listen to what God has to say to you. This is a loving conversation where God invites us in *lectio divina*, into His presence and His embrace, offering parts of ourselves that maybe we have not previously believed that God wanted. An opportunity to hold up our most difficult and pain-filled experiences to Him. And to gently recite over them the healing word or phrase He has given to us during this prayer time and so allowing our real selves to be touched and changed by the Word.

*End with, Contemplatio (pray)*: A time of simple, loving focus on God without words, contemplating and just resting in His presence.

## **Worship**

Conclude by participating in this act of worship together.

Spend a few moments relaxing by slowly breathing in and out. Consider lighting a candle or listening to a suitable piece of quiet music. Bring yourself into the presence of God and asking the Holy Spirit to open up the scripture to you.

Then read either one of the two texts overleaf, silently a number of times. As you read, ask yourself:

Is there a phrase or word in either reading that strikes you? If so stop and just recite it over in your mind.

What do you sense that Holy Spirit may be saying to you through these word(s) or phrases?

How does this connect with your current situation? In your relationship with God and His church? What do you sense God may be revealing to you?

How can you use this in your situation or for the people you come into contact with?

Conclude with prayer.

### Suggested readings:

*Hebrews 4:14-16*

*“So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. <sup>15</sup> This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.”*

Revelation 5:8

*“And when he took the scroll the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.”*

Through the week take time to practice this type of praying and see how the scriptures open up.

## **Answers**

References to the Psalms in Jonah’s prayer:

**Jonah verse 1-2: “Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish. <sup>2</sup> He said, “I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and LORD, you heard me! “**

*Psalm 18:6.* “But in my distress I cried out to the LORD; yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry to him reached his ears.”

*Psalm 69:1* “Save me O God for the floodwaters are up to my neck.”

**Jonah verse 3: “you threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me; I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves.”**

*Psalm 42:7* “I hear the tumult of the raging seas as your waves and surging tides sweep over me.  
“

**Jonah verse 4: “Then I said, ‘O LORD, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.’**

*Psalm 5:7* Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house; I will worship at your Temple with deepest awe.

**Jonah verse 5: “I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head.**

*Psalm 18:4-5* “The ropes of death entangled me; floods of destruction swept over me. <sup>5</sup> The grave wrapped its ropes around me; death laid a trap in my path.”

**Jonah verse 6: “I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O LORD my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!”**

*Psalm 16:10* “For you will not leave my soul among the dead<sup>1</sup> or allow your holy one<sup>1</sup> to rot in the grave. “

**Jonah verse 7: “As my life was slipping away, I remembered the LORD. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple.”**

*Psalm 18:6* “But in my distress I cried out to the LORD; yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry to him reached his ears.”

*Psalm 77:10-11* “ And I said, “This is my fate; the Most High has turned his hand against me.” <sup>11</sup> But then I recall all you have done, O LORD; I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago. “

**Jonah verse 9: “But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the LORD alone.”**

*Psalm 3:8* “Victory comes from you, O LORD. May you bless your people.”

Psalm 50:14 “Make thankfulness your sacrifice to God, and keep the vows you made to the Most High.”

---

### **Session 3: A Preacher in the service of God**

**Read:** Jonah 4

#### **Introduction**

Have you ever wondered and thought “Is it fair God?” Have you ever wondered why God is allowing something and for what purpose? Jonah did.

In this chapter, we gain an understanding to help us to answer these questions as God teaches Jonah more about His purpose, compassion and repentance. In this chapter we find two examples of repentance.

The first is by Jonah after God again calls to him and instructs him to go to Nineveh, so giving him a second chance. Jonah seizes this opportunity. He obeys and when he arrives in Nineveh ,

obediently communicates God's message. Jonah then experiences and witnesses the blessings of repentance.

The second example of repentance is revealed in the people of the city of Nineveh. The people accept God's message and earnestly seek forgiveness (see 3: 5-7). The King's decree (and we assume the subsequent new behaviour of the nation) demonstrates that repentance can always be seen in a way of changed living that honours God. Their repentance placates God's righteous judgement for their sins (3:10)

### Questions & Application

When Christians approach God (who is Holy and just), we prepare ourselves to come into His presence by confessing our sins and asking for forgiveness. But there is the danger that the time of confession can sometime becomes so familiar that it can be devalued? Perhaps to the extent that our confession is not heartfelt. It becomes routine and we may fail to then truly engage in this part of our discipleship.

When I confess in church (or in private), do I really examine my own behaviour? Do I really want, with the help of God, to change my character and living so that I increasingly become the person that God wants me to be? In short, am I serious about wanting and allowing myself to be moulded and transformed by God?

1. Prayerfully consider your response to this observation. What is it that may hold us back from co-operating with the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to grow and mature as a beloved son/daughter of God. (Recall our previous sermon series "The Call".)
2. In chapter 1 verse 9, when Jonah was confronted on the ship by the captain and the crew, Jonah chose to describe himself *"I am a Hebrew and worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land"*.

Discuss as a group, if you think Jonah's subsequent actions confirmed what he was saying? If not, how?

3. At the beginning of this chapter, Jonah repents and obeys God and goes to Nineveh. What were the results?
4. In the light of this, what is "heartfelt" repentance? Is it just to ask forgiveness because we are sorry or is it something more?

Examine following description and discuss as a group what you think of the words below:

*"Repentance means to change, to be turned around and transformed through our faith in Jesus and his saving grace. Our thoughts ideas and actions, we do this in order that we may walk closer in the way of the Lord so that we can respond to the challenges which God will give us."*

5. God called Jonah to a particular ministry and in so doing to step outside his comfort zone - to leave Israel and journey to a foreign land far away, to a wicked nation who had done a lot of evil things and to a people whom Jonah despised. And to prophesy God's judgment. A tough calling!

God may not call us to like Jonah. But like Jonah, God may call us to step out of our comfort zones. Can you think of some examples? For example, to connect with different types of people? To step out in faith in a new ministry.

### **Worship**

As Jonah found, when God calls, he equips and journeys with us for His glory.

Share some of the barriers that may discourage us from answering God's call? Write these on a piece of paper. How can we overcome barriers?

To encourage one another, share experiences of how you have stepped out in faith?

Then rip up the pieces of paper as you thank the Lord for his constant love, mercy and help and invite the Holy Spirit to continue to deepen His work of growth in your walk of discipleship.

---

## **Session 4: A Learner in the shadow of God**

**Read:** Chapter 4

### **Introduction**

In the first chapter, we read how Jonah tried to flee from God's presence. Now in the concluding chapter it is as if Jonah is flying in the face of God, as he complains about the people of Nineveh being saved. Given all that has happened we're astonished to read how Jonah expresses more concern for the loss of a bush that God gave to protect him in the heat than for the fate the 120,000 people who lived in Nineveh.

In chapter 3 we read of Jonah's repentance. But in this chapter we are again given a stark example of God's goodness when he forgives the people when they repent. This contrasts with man's badness when Jonah is bitter that the people of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire

(the enemies of Israel) are saved. Jonah appears to believe that only the people of God should be blessed by the benevolence of God.

1. It is true that Jonah obeyed God and prophesied to the people of Nineveh but examine Jonah's character, through his words in verses 2-3.

How would you describe Jonah's heart?

Why was he angry with God?

2. Read verses 4-10. How did God reveal more about himself through His dealings with Jonah? Through His action and words, what does God reveal about his power, mercy and love?

3. We know that God can transform people and so it may seem strange that Jonah, a man of God, could be so upset that a worm had destroyed the plant which he had no part in growing or cultivating, yet he could not understand why God should save the people of Nineveh even though they were created by God.

Yet today when people do wicked things, it can be human nature to hope that awful things may happen to them in return. This is justice – many think! But God does not want us to have a human nature in this sense. God wants us to work at cultivating a divine nature - to see people as He sees them, to love them as He does.

What do you think of the following poem? Does it describe the type of behaviour we exhibit at times?

*Oh look, look in the mirror,  
Oh look, look in your distress.  
God will give you blessings,  
Although, you, cannot bless.*

*Oh stand, stand at the window,  
As tears scald and start,  
God wants you, to love your crooked neighbour.  
With all your crooked heart.*

We cannot do this on our own. We can only others as Christ desires us to in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may be ....

*"We are the sixty-seventh book of the Bible. People read our lives, our actions and our words and believe they know what being a Christian means."*

Bryant L Myers

4. God's mission is to save all people and bring them to himself. He will do this through us or despite us. As we have learnt from Jonah, we are to be prepared and willing to listen, trust and act

on God's call – even though we may have concerns. For we all have a part to play in God's unfolding story.

The bible is full of similar stories. For example, when Saul was converted on his way to Damascus he needed the help of Ananias. If Ananias had disobeyed God we do not know what might have happened. But even though he was very afraid, Ananias trusted God's call and met with Paul and gave him help. Saul became Paul and the rest is history....

What role do you think God has for you at this time?

## **Worship**

We all need to learn and grow nearer to God. Just like Jonah if we are not careful we can try to make God fit into our worldview, to make God into our image instead of allowing ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit by listening and obeying his call upon our daily life.

Listed below are some of the characteristics of God that have been revealed to us through the study of Jonah.

One person can say each one out loud and then as a group spend a short time after each one in silent reflection.

- God has a plan for you, me and His creation
- God is Holy and just
- God is sovereign over creation
- God is interested in individuals and nations
- God listens & answers prayer in His ways and time
- God forgives
- God is at work in all situations to mould us and shape us to become the people that He desires us to be

Close

As we close let us remember Paul's words, *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst"*.

Thank God afresh for His love and mercy.

Pray together that you may always be open and willing to follow God's call on your life and grow into the fullness of His love for you and share His love.

