

Introduction to Jonah

Leader's reflection

Jonah is a strange and short book. It doesn't take the form of many of the other Minor Prophets that we find at the end of the Old Testament, where they describe portents and signs as to what is and will happen to the people of God. Instead, Jonah takes the form of a narrative. There are a couple of different ways to interpret the book of Jonah. One is that it is a story about an unfaithful prophet that actually took place. Another is that this is a parable in which Jonah represents the Jewish people and their faithlessness to God. The people of Israel are meant to be a light to the nations, showing them the way of God through their actions and attitudes, but instead they turn their backs on Him, before turning back to Him after an act of grace on God's part. Even in their faithfulness, however, they don't understand God's purpose for them, and lash out at what they see as unfairness on the part of God. Both ways of looking at the story offer lessons and truths for our lives. In some ways it is unimportant which view one chooses to believe, it is, however, worth knowing that there are multiple ways to interpret this book and hear what God has to reveal to us through it.

Jonah is given his instructions, and runs
Reading: Jonah 1

Leader's reflection

The book of Jonah is one that is often used to teach children about what it means to be faithful to God, and to highlight God's forgiveness. These are great lessons to take from it, but there is something else going on in the book of Jonah that can challenge us on how we relate to the people around us, and how we think God relates to those people as well.

We start, as many of the books of the minor prophets do, with the word of the Lord coming to Jonah with instructions. These words of God seem very clear, go to Nineveh and tell them they are doing wrong and must turn from their evil. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire at the time, an empire known and famed throughout the world at the time for the cruelty of its armies. This is not just biblical propaganda to highlight how bad the enemies of the Israelites were; Greek writers such as Herodotus and Aristotle record the evil of the city and the excesses of its kings. Not only that, the Assyrian empire had laid siege to Jerusalem, and so were active enemies of the Israelites.

It is important that we bear all this in mind when we think of what God was asking Jonah to do. However, Jonah shows his lack of faithfulness to God, by immediately running for a ship to Tarshish. This may not refer to an actual place, but may be instead a way of referring to somewhere a long way away. Either way, the point is that Jonah is going as far away from Nineveh as he can, and by doing so trying to flee from God.

This goes about as well as can be expected, and the boat is caught in a storm and the crew are scared for their lives. By contrast, in the midst of the storm Jonah is fast asleep. This detail may seem small, but indicates to us that Jonah is at peace with what he has chosen to do. There is no internal conflict over his decision to run away from what God has called him to, and no guilt over the fate of Nineveh if they do not



receive the warning that Jonah has been sent with. Indeed, it is significant that Jonah shows no sign of remorse until he is outed by the casting of lots by the crew, searching for the reason for what has befallen them. There is a resignation to Jonah in offering to be thrown over the side of the boat, but the men don't want to call further ill fate on themselves by having the blood of a prophet on their hands as well. In the end though, they feel they have no choice but to throw Jonah overboard, and as soon as they do, the storm stops. This highlights to them the power of God, rather than the faithlessness of Jonah, and they immediately offer sacrifices to God and make vows.

Meanwhile Jonah is saved from death by a fish. This may not be what he wanted, as at least when he was going to die he no longer had to go to Nineveh.

There are lessons in Jonah 1 beyond the obvious, 'be faithful to God'. God can work through the disobedience of his followers; the sailors come to some sort of faith in God, and recognise His power over the forces of nature, and indeed are depicted as more faithful than Jonah. They are reticent to kill a man by throwing him overboard, while Jonah is at peace with the destruction of a city. They offer sacrifices to God while Jonah turns his back on Him.

This shouldn't be looked at in a vacuum though, and we need to explore the rest of Jonah to see what this story has to teach us about God and our relationship with Him.

Aim	To see how God shows His love for the world through us, even if we try to hide from Him.
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jonah is happy to leave Nineveh to its fate and run away to his own safety. 2. Jonah thinks he can run away from God. 3. Jonah's actions are used by God to show the sailors His love despite what Jonah intended.
Focus On	God's love for the world even though the world doesn't deserve it.



Activity ideas

What do we know about Jonah? This is a story that many young people, both from Christian and non-Christian backgrounds know something about. Have a series of true/false questions about the story to ask the young people and see how many of them they get right. At the end, ask the young people to describe Jonah's character in three words. Explain that you will go back to these at the end of the session to see if they still agree with those ideas.

Leaders note: The young people may want to focus on the fish in this story. Mention that you will talk about this next time, but don't want to spend too much time focusing on it today.

What is Jonah really like? Put the young people into three groups. Give one group Jonah 1:1-6, another Jonah 1:6-13, and the third Jonah 1:14-17. Ask each group to read through their verses and discuss what each of those sections shows about who Jonah is. Once they have done this, ask each group think of one word that sums up what they have decided and have each group explain their answer to the other groups. See if there is agreement between the groups as to what Jonah is really like.

How are we like Jonah? Explain to the young people that the key thing about Jonah in this story is the way that he hears clearly what God has asked him to do, and immediately decides to do the opposite. He doesn't trust that God knows best, He doesn't believe God will protect him, He doesn't believe that anyone should hear about God's love. He simply wants to do his own thing and run away. We can be very harsh when we think about Jonah, or we can be more sympathetic and ask how are we like Jonah. Ask the young people if they sometimes ignore what they think God wants them to do so they won't be noticed, or so they can just do what they want. It would be great to illustrate this with a story from your own life where you have ignored God and realised that it wasn't a good thing to do. Most importantly, remind the young people that God still loves them, He will still listen to them, and He will always be ready for them to come back to Him. To help the young people pray about this, light a candle and have some extra candles around for them to use. Say a prayer, asking for God to help us listen to His voice, and to follow His ways, and then list the candle. Invite the young people to light take a candle and light it if they want to make the prayer their own.

Jonah is saved and finally does what he is asked
Reading: Jonah 2:10-3:10

Leader's reflection

In chapter 3 Jonah finally does as he was asked, though as we will see in chapter 4, not with the heart that he is meant to. The word of God comes to him a second time, reminding him of his calling, and so he sets off to Nineveh. The city is described in gigantic terms, it would take three days to walk across it. This is hyperbole, meant to impress on the reader the huge size of the city. For a long time it was the largest city in the world, with a population of around 120,000. While this seems relatively small to us now, we need to remember that the largest city populations of the time were in the tens of thousands, with most people living in towns and villages. Therefore the experience of visiting a place like Nineveh would have given a sense of grandeur and scale, and it is this sense that is being evoked in the story.

It is implied in the story that Jonah doesn't make a huge amount of effort to declare his message to the city, he goes one day into the city and proclaims the message he has been sent with, although he doesn't mention God or any way for the people to avoid the destruction of the city. Nevertheless, those who hear his message take him seriously, so seriously that they immediately declare a fast and cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes, a traditional sign of mourning and repentance.

The message is taken so seriously that before long it reaches the king of Nineveh. Again, note Jonah's absence from this part of the story, word reaches the king in some way, but it is not delivered by Jonah. Like his people, he takes the message seriously, removes himself from his throne, and dresses in sackcloth and ashes. In the decree he issues to his people, there is no certainty that what they are doing will avert the disaster they are headed towards, but a hope that by turning from their ways they will be made safe with God.



God's actions here speak of the grace he wants to offer all people. He sees the actions of the people - specifically that they have turned from their evil ways - and relents. He will no longer destroy the city, but will allow it to continue. The emphasis on action is important here; throughout the Bible, outward words and actions are seen as an overflow of the heart of a person or nation. It is not the religiosity of the people that impresses God, but their willingness to turn their backs on their actions and repent.

What we see in this story is again how God can use the disobedience, or half-hearted obedience, of His people to do His will. This doesn't mean we should aim for half-hearted following of God's will for our lives, but it reminds us that God is Lord of all, and that he can use all things for good.

Aim

To see that God's love is for all people, even if we sometimes think they don't they deserve to hear about it.

Main points to cover

1. Jonah is called again to the city of Nineveh and this time he listens.
2. Jonah is not exactly enthusiastic about how he goes about following God's instructions.
3. Despite Jonah's lack of enthusiasm, the city realise they need to turn to God and do so enthusiastically.

Focus On

God's grace to the people of Nineveh



Activity ideas

The elephant (or fish) in the room... One of the most famous things about this reading is the fish that Jonah spent three days inside. It has become the focus of much of the conversation around whether this really happened or not, and does need to be addressed. However it is only a small part of the whole story, and shouldn't become the focus of what we take away from this story. Start by asking the young people what they make of the fact that Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, how does it make them feel about the rest of the story? Do they think it is possible? Remind them that so far in the story, God has controlled the weather to shepherd Jonah to the right place, and that thinking more widely, God has created all things and has power over them. If God wanted to, he could make it so that the belly of the fish would not kill Jonah. In other stories we have seen Him protect his followers from fire, lions, snakes, and even death. Nothing is beyond his power, so this is possible. To dig deeper into this, if you are reading this story allegorically, you could explore the idea that the fish represents God's protection from those things that seek to harm his followers, until they are ready to follow God's plan for them. Either way, this needs addressing, but the aim of it should be to point to God's goodness and His saving work, rather than focus on what type of fish swallowed Jonah whole.

So that's why that happened...Have a series of stories from today's world that illustrate seemingly bad things happening but which goodness comes out of. Try and avoid things that appear to be solely individual, for example someone missing their flight on 9/11, as they raise more questions than they answer. If you have examples from your own life, even better. Draw these back to Jonah. It is important to remember that while we know the endings of these stories, the participants didn't. In the same way, we can struggle to see what God is doing in our lives in the moment and why we are going through certain things, but in time and with hindsight, things make sense. Ask the young people if they can think of times in their own lives when they struggled to see why something was happening, but were able to see why afterwards. However it is important to balance this with the idea that it is ok not to be ok.

God's grace. This story gains a lot more weight if we understand that in the ancient world the people of Ninevah were famed for their cruelty and for the way they conquered. They were not just bad, they were the worst. Ask the young people who they can think of from history who were famous for being bad or evil. Write these names on the board, and then ask how they would feel if they were asked to go and tell that person to stop what they were doing and ask God for forgiveness, knowing that there God would forgive them if they repented. Explain that this is kind of what Jonah was asked to do, and he didn't really want them to listen to him. In fact, he didn't want them to listen so much that he didn't even go to the most important part of the city to tell them what they needed to do. Explore with the young people the idea that even though Jonah didn't really try, God still used his words to bring the people of Ninevah to Him. God didn't want to punish them, He wanted them to realise how they were doing wrong. In the same way, God wants the people around us to know about His grace and His love for them. Discuss with the young people some of the reasons we might be unwilling to share things about our faith (e.g. we think they don't know enough, or aren't good enough followers). Explore with them the idea that throughout the Bible, God uses people who don't feel they are good enough to do what He wants, but they still do amazing things for Him. Ask everyone to name one person who they want to know about God's love for them, and then either pray for the young people or get the young people to pray for each other, focusing on how they can share God's love with that person.



Jonah doesn't understand
Reading: Jonah 4

Leader's reflection

In the vast majority of resources for children and young people exploring the story of Jonah, chapter 4 seems to not exist. Without chapter 4, Jonah is a simpler story to make sense of. A reluctant prophet is nevertheless faithful to God and God works through Him to bring people to Him. Jonah 4 forces us to reconsider Jonah's character in this story, and challenges us on how open we are to see God's will at work in the world.

Jonah is displeased with God. His words come across as those of a petulant child, and he seems to be scolding God for being true to Himself. Indeed, he shows an awareness and insight of God's character, of His faithful and merciful love for all people, that seems surprising considering his actions in the story. Remember that Nineveh had been at the heart of a war against the Jews, and Jonah's outburst here should remind us that Jonah may be harbouring bitterness and resentment that a people who had caused his people so much hurt and anguish, should be offered a chance of redemption rather than being wiped from the face of the earth.

Jonah settles down outside the city to see what will happen to it, presumably in the hopes that God will decide after all that they deserve smiting. It is hot, and God provides a plant to shelter Jonah as he waits. However, God is trying to teach Jonah something, and so the plant is destroyed by a worm and a hot wind is sent to make Jonah really feel the heat. Jonah's petulance returns, and he sounds more and more like an angry toddler declaring, 'I'm angry enough to die.'

But this is God's lesson for Jonah. Jonah did not labour over the plant, he did not work at cultivating it at all, and yet was furious when it was taken from him. God reminds Jonah that, despite their failings, the people of Nineveh are His children as much as Jonah. Why should Jonah be so set on their destruction? Why do they matter so much less than the people of Jonah's home?



It is significant that we are not given Jonah's response. This story does not resolve itself neatly, but leaves us with questions of our own; Are their people in this world we think who are beyond the love of God? Do we value the lives of some more than others? Are we willing to accept the will of God even when it seems to go against what we think should happen?

These question are not ones that can be easily answered, and indeed if we can answer them easily we may need to think more deeply about them. For many of us there are people in the world who we think are beyond God's forgiveness, but because we think it, it doesn't make it so.

As a character, Jonah can give us an uncomfortable reflection of our own biases and beliefs, and we should be careful about writing off his actions as being clearly wrong, and instead ask where are we in Jonah's story, and how do we move closer to God's will for the people around us and away from ourselves?

Aim

To show that we need to listen to God and have our hearts shaped by Him

Main points to cover

1. Jonah's perspective on what was going on was not shaped by God's perspective.
2. Jonah thought he was better than the people of Ninevah
3. Jonah forgot that he had been forgiven by God for the things he had done wrong

Focus On

Jonah's complete lack of compassion for the people around him.



Activity ideas

What do we take for granted? Before reading or telling the story, get the young people to think about how they would feel going a day without the following things; Wifi, Youtube, Laptop, Phone, television electricity, water. The list becomes less flippant as it goes on. Once you have thought about this with the young people explain that these are things that we quickly take for granted and we expect, even though we didn't really have anything to do with them being designed or provided. Go on to tell the story of Jonah, the tree, and the worm, up to verse 9. Ask the young people how Jonah sounds in this part of the story.

God's forgiveness is for all. There are plenty of divisions in our society, and we can quickly dig in to our position and become antagonistic to anyone who thinks otherwise to us. Have a set of cards ready with different sides of certain debates on them, and have the young people match up which sides go together. For example, Leave and Remain, Liberal and Conservative, Football and Rugby. Try to mix in some flippant ones so it doesn't become too serious. Once the young people have matched up the sides, ask them how much they think labelling someone according to what they think on one issue is helpful. Emphasise that when we do this, we focus on our differences over our similarities, and this causes the division to become greater. There was a piece of research done recently which found that drivers perceived cyclists as less than human when they came across them in their car. This is hugely concerning, but shows what can happen when we get caught up in these divisions; we see others as less human than us, but the Bible tells us again and again that we are all created in the image of God, and He loves each of us.

How does this make a difference? Explain that part of Jonah's problem was that he didn't see the people of Ninevah as God's children. This is fairly clear in verses 10-11. Draw a horizontal line on a flipchart or large piece of paper where the young people can see it. On one end write 'Person' and at the other 'Object'. Explain that in our world there are various ways to see the people around us, and some of them will treat people more like objects and some more like people. See if the young people can think of some examples, and have some ready to put on and see if the young people agree. For older groups, pornography should be included as it is so prevalent in our society. Explain that the longer we spend viewing other people more as objects, the less compassionate we become. Jesus showed us what it was like to see all people as fully people. For prayer, get the young people to reflect where on the line they see themselves, and get them to ask God to help them to see the people around them more and more as created in His image, and less as objects who are there for our convenience.