

Life Group Discussion Guide

Jonah: A Tale of Two Hearts

Week 3: Turning to God • Jonah 3:1-10

In the short book of Jonah, Nineveh is called a great city four times, which begs the question, "What made Nineveh so great?"

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a powerful empire known for its ruthless violence. Pastor Jon summed it up this way: "The Assyrians were cruel and merciless, full of blood and full of plunder. They burned cities to the ground and tortured, enslaved, and paraded their prisoners of war."

All of this makes Jonah 3:3, which is literally translated "Now Nineveh was a great city to God," seem a bit confusing. Why would a city of idolaters, rapists, terrorists, and torturers be great to God?

The answer is found in God's response to Jonah at the conclusion of the book: "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?" (4:11).

In other words, Nineveh had lots of people. And God loves people.

"Nineveh is important to God. It belongs to God, simply because God is the Maker of heaven and earth, and all the nations belong to Him. And God's message to every person and nation of the world is the same: Turn from your evil ways. Turn to Me."

- Do you find it hard to understand why God would extend a hand of grace to the Ninevites?
- Whom are you tempted to view as undeserving or "too far gone" for God's forgiveness and mercy?
- What does God's pursuit of Nineveh tell you about His character?

God's heart loved Nineveh, but Jonah's didn't. When we compare the heart of Jonah to our own, we might see something that makes us uncomfortable. You see, some 800 years after God had given Jonah his assignment, Jesus extended the same mandate to us when He commanded, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

As we get a glimpse into the heart of Jonah, we see that this reluctant prophet represents those of us who know much about God but don't desire to share our faith with the many people who are far from Him.

- Do you believe followers of Jesus have a God-given responsibility to spread the Gospel?
- Does your life match up with what you say you believe? Why or why not?
- If not, what do you think is keeping you from living in obedience to Jesus' command?

If we're honest with ourselves, like Jonah, we all have someone we don't see as "great to God" and worthy of Jesus dying to save them. God's heart is full of hesed even for His enemies, whereas our heart is void of compassion for those we've deemed unworthy or unreachable. So, what can we do?

"If we have the Spirit of God, we will beg God to change our hearts so that we will go, not just to the people we love, but to the people He loves—both in our cities and across the world."

- Do you desire to have God's heart for the nations, from your own neighborhood to the ends of the earth? Take time now to pray for the Spirit of God to give you His heart for all people.

On the other side of our obedience, we experience God-sized results. When Jonah (finally) proclaimed God's message, "the Ninevites believed God," humbled themselves, and repented of their ways (2:5). What could cause such a dramatic turnaround? The Word of the one true God.

There's nothing too powerful to withstand God's Word. At His Word, even the depraved, murderous, power-hungry Ninevites turned from their sin. And in response, God turned from His righteous wrath against them. In Pastor Jon's words, "God did not overthrow them physically, because his Word overthrew them in spirit. He did not crush them, because His Word did the crushing."

Like the Ninevites, we ourselves should be attuned to and transformed by God's Word. Every time we hear God's word, we should change. If we don't, it means we don't actually believe it.

- Consider a sin, an area of disobedience, in your own life. How does this sin point to an unbelief of God and His Word?
- What has been the fruit of this unbelief/disobedience in your life?
- What about God and His Word will you hold fast to as the antidote to your unbelief and sin?
- What do you believe will change when you do?

Only when we believe the power of God's Word will we deliver it to others. So often, like Jonah in chapter 1, we don't go to our Nineveh. We just get into our boats headed for Tarshish and take a nap—and the Word of God never gets to Nineveh. But here's the problem: People can only believe the Gospel when we deliver it.

- Who's your Nineveh? In other words, who is God asking you to deliver His Word to?
- Empowered by the very Spirit of God (as we prayed a few minutes ago), what will you do to deliver His message?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks to a group of people who are not moved by His words and who ask for a sign to prove His power. Here's how He responds:

"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up

at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:39–41)

Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish, but Jesus would spend three days in the heart of the earth—facing the judgment of God—so humanity could be spared. He faced the destruction we deserved, so we might enjoy the love of God forever.

- Have you, like the Ninevites, believed God and turned from your sinful ways?
- If you have believed the power of the Gospel for your salvation, are there still areas of sin that you’ve yet to repent—to turn—from?
- What changes in our lives when we turn from following our own heart to pursuing God’s?

“We know we’ve truly turned to Jesus if our heart for the Ninevites of our lives resembles the merciful heart of God.”