

MeadowBrook Church | December–February 2019

lifeGROUP

Life together for the Kingdom of God



JONAH

An underwater photograph of a whale swimming from left to right. The whale is positioned behind the word "JONAH", which is written in large, dark blue, serif capital letters. The water is a deep teal color with sunlight filtering down from the surface, creating a shimmering effect.



life group

*Life together for the
Kingdom of God*

MeadowBrook seeks to CONNECT people to Christ and His church, GROW them as disciples to be disciplers, and equip them to SERVE through missions, ministry, and worship, all to GLORIFY God.

Christ Centered | Community Driven | Kingdom Focused

JONAH

Jonah is one of the most exciting stories in the Bible. Even non-Christians who have never read the Bible are often familiar with its story. However, in spite of all the excitement about the fish, the historical account of how God's prophet, Jonah, rebelled against God has much to teach us about God's grace and compassion, our mission as image bearers, our shortcomings as followers of God, and the person Jesus Christ, who declared himself to be the greater Jonah in Matthew 12. My hope is that this study would challenge and encourage you as you seek to live out God's will and be conformed into his glorious image.



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Life Group Minister

Special thanks to Heather Clough, Amelia Day, and Chip Tucker for contributing to this curriculum in their editing. If you are interested in writing or editing in the future, email hunter@mbchurch.com today.

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MeadowBrook
CHURCH

Get Up and Go

Jonah 1:1-16

CONNECT

What is the biggest storm you have ever been in?

GROW

Read Jonah 1:1-16 and then highlight what stands out to you, explain what the author is saying in context, and then apply it to your life.

God's redemptive purposes extend to all peoples—he will accomplish them.

Jonah, a Hebrew, knew God to be compassionate and merciful. However, when he perceives that God desires to use him to show compassion to the Ninevites, Jonah flees. The Ninevites worshipped false gods and committed atrocities towards others. (See Nahum 3 to get an idea) Jonah does not want God to redeem them. So, instead of going up to Nineveh, he goes down to Joppa, looking for a boat to take him as far away as possible. Ironically, Jonah's desire to withhold God's compassion leads to the redemption of the sailors—also pagans—on his getaway ship.

Jonah sought to escape the presence of the LORD, yet the Creator of the seas and the dry lands overtook him. God's sovereign purposes of grace overcame Jonah's sin.

Jesus: The Greater Jonah

Jonah was the son of Amittai, whose name means faithful. The son of "faithful" ended up not being that faithful of a son. However, Jesus, the greater Jonah according to Matthew 12, is the perfectly faithful Son. Never once did he stray from the word of God. Jesus remained faithful to the end. He accomplished the task God set before him by enduring the cross and disregarding its shame. Now he is exalted at the right hand of the Father, having resurrected from the grave and ascended into heaven, awaiting his day of manifestation to all peoples.

H: Highlight

E: Explain the Text

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about ourselves?

What is the good news of this text?

A: Apply the Text

R: Respond to the Text

Additional Passages:

Matthew 28:18-20

Proverbs 3:5-6

Jeremiah 2:17-19

Jonah ended up in the same predicament as the Ninevites. Judgement was at hand—a mighty storm hurled down upon them—and Jonah needed God to relent from his judgment. So the men hurled Jonah into the sea, and God showed Jonah and the sailors compassion. Even still, God was preparing Jonah to carry out his purpose, a purpose that cannot be thwarted. He will redeem people from every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth. Today, despite the fear, laziness, and racism embraced by some in churches, the gospel goes forth, leaping over cultural barriers and charting new paths into foreign lands.

Is the gospel going forth through you?

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses... to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8 ESV) Through the Scriptures, the word of the LORD has come to those who are in Christ. God's purpose is clear. ***Will we get up and go, or will we get up and flee?***

What was Jonah's problem? *He strayed from the LORD.*

He rebelled against the Word. The word of God was clear, and Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Even though we are new creations in Christ, our sinful flesh still desires to rebel against the word of God, resulting in a war between our spirit and our flesh.

He refused to call upon the LORD. The pagans were calling out to their dead gods, while the prophet of the living God chose to sleep. Refusing to acknowledge the root behind our problems and call out to the LORD indicates we have strayed far from his will.

He misplaced his confidence. Disregarding the sailors' inquiry, Jonah emphasizes his Hebrew heritage—even above his fear of God. (This is even more clear in the original Hebrew). Jonah relied on his cultural, religious identity instead of the LORD.

He gave mere lip service. He knew the words. He believed them, but he forgot what it meant to live them. Israel was a wicked place during Jonah's lifetime. Not one king led the people to worship God. Jonah, though a prophet of the living God, spoke like the faithful, but at this point in his life, he lived like the faithless.

Reflection

Has there ever been a time where you strayed from the LORD?

How did God turn you back?

Are you currently straying from the LORD? If so, why?

And are you willing to take the first step to return?

Narrative Features of Chapter 1

Directional language: God told Jonah to arise, but Jonah continually goes down. (Note how many times Jonah goes down). This language of physical movement depicts Jonah's spiritual descent, which hits rock bottom in Chapter 2.

Irony: The author (maybe Jonah himself) often uses irony to highlight the ridiculousness of Jonah's actions. Irony helps us to condemn practices in others that we ourselves commit. Then gently (or not so gently), irony turns the mirror toward us.

Consider these examples:

- It's ironic Jonah knew God created the seas and the dry land but thought he could escape God's presence. *Do you think you could outsmart or outrun God?*
- It's ironic that the Captain's first word to Jonah is God's first word to Jonah. *Do you need incessant reminders to do what you are supposed to do?*
- It's ironic that while pagan sailors are calling out to their dead gods, Jonah sleeps instead of calling out in prayer to the Living God. *Are you inactive in prayer while your world is falling apart because of your sin?*
- It's ironic that Jonah says he fears the LORD, while it is the sailors who demonstrate the fear of LORD. *Do you see people in the world living out Christian virtues better than you?*

The peace of God flees those who disregard the word of God.

Jonah, like many who have come after him, thought rebelling against God would be a better alternative to obeying him. However, when he fled from the will of God the peace of God fled from him. His rebellion threw his life and the lives of others into chaos.

Sin never leads to peace. It always disrupts. Many have destroyed careers and families because they were enticed by the alluring promises of sin—promises never to be fulfilled.

¹ *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,* ² *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”* ³ *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3a ESV)*

SERVE

AT MEADOWBROOK

MeadowBrook has taken seriously the call to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. One of the ways you can participate is by going on a trip with us overseas. Tentatively, in 2020, we will take a few trips to Uganda, a trip to Cuba, a couple trips to Argentina, a trip to the Middle East, a trip to Japan, and potentially more.

Interested in taking the gospel to the nations?
Email mike@mbchurch.com.

IN MINISTRY

Jonah may have missed his opportunity to minister to the pagan sailors he set sail with, but God certainly did not. Oftentimes, God causes us to cross paths with seemingly unlikely recipients of his grace and compassion. We do not need to sleep on the job as Jonah did, but have eyes to see people who are anguishing over their idols' failure to provide satisfaction and deliverance.

Who has God put in your life to hear the gospel?
Are your eyes open and looking for opportunity?

AT HOME

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”
(Hebrews 12:6 ESV)

The LORD disciplined his child, Jonah. For our God is a good Father who understands the destructiveness of the continuation of sin. He loved Jonah, so he disciplined him. Dads (and Moms), should reflect this aspect of God's nature toward their children. Discipline seems painful at the time, but produces great fruit down the road. To not discipline your child is to listen to the world over God, to not love your child, to be selfish, and to be short-sighted. Discipline looks different for many families, but however it looks, it must be present.

AT WORK

The mariners in the story worked hard to save Jonah. They ditched the cargo and the profits to be gained from it. They feared the LORD when they learned what was happening. They did not understand the fullness of God's purposes, but they sought to save the man's life. I think there is a lesson to be learned from these sailors in our daily work: Work hard for the good of others—even if it cost you.

At the end of the day, God will not evaluate your business on its profit margins but in the way that it furthered the kingdom God, demonstrated Christ-like love, and executed justice in this world.

RESPOND

Father,

You are the God of the nations. You know and care for them all. Help me to demonstrate the same compassion toward those who do not know you as I once did not. Keep me tethered to your word. Lord, I confess my own rebellion toward your word to make disciples of all nations. Forgive my many transgressions and sins. Lord, create in me your compassionate heart that in all my life I may be a reflection of your most holy Son.

*For it is in his name I pray,
Amen.*

God and the Belly of Sheol

Jonah 1:17-2:10

CONNECT

Has there ever been a low-point in your life—one that was your fault? How did God reveal his faithfulness and compassion to you during that time?

GROW

Read Jonah 1:17-2:10 and then highlight what stands out to you, explain what the author is saying in context, and then apply it to your life.

God shows compassion toward us, even at our lowest points. (1:17 – 2:6a)

Gasping for air, struggling to stay afloat as the waters closed in to take his life, Jonah called out to LORD... and the LORD answered. The LORD appointed a massive fish to swallow Jonah and save his life — an unlikely salvation, but salvation nonetheless. The LORD showed compassion to his wayward prophet. This compassion invoked the prayer of deliverance Jonah uttered in the belly of the great fish.

As he began to pray, Jonah reflected on how the Lord heard his cry and rescued him from certain death. Jonah did not deserve the compassion of the Lord — he was a dissenter — yet when he cried out with a contrite heart, the Lord did not disregard his call. He heard his prayer, he saw his situation, and he rescued Jonah.

Are you in need of the Lord's compassion?

Sin brings us to low places and distressful situations. Sin seeks to take our life from us — to destroy the very things we hold dear. Sin entangles us like the weeds wrapped around Jonah's head, slowly suffocating us and dragging us down. Sin is not your friend.

Figurative Language in Chapter 2

Did Jonah die? This question comes from the fact that Jonah descended into the belly of Sheol — the realm of the dead. In short, no, Jonah did not die. Poetry often uses language figuratively to communicate emotions with word pictures. To take verse 2 as a woodenly literal statement is to practice bad Bible reading. When reading a passage, one must take into account the genre of the text in order to arrive at the proper meaning.

H: Highlight

E: Explain the Text

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about ourselves?

What is the good news of this text?

A: Apply the Text

R: Respond to the Text

Additional Passages:

Ephesians 2:1-10

Hebrews 12:3-11

Luke 7:36-50

Because of that, God causes us to experience the consequences of our sin, disciplining us as a father disciplines his son. This discipline is designed to stretch us—to bring us to a point of brokenness over our sin. Only from this humble position can we call upon the Lord and experience his compassion. In this moment, we feel our distance, yet we are confident he will restore us to a place of close fellowship (v.4).

Discussion: *How does the discipline of the Lord and the compassion of the Lord come together in the life of a disciple? What does the discipline of the Lord look like?*

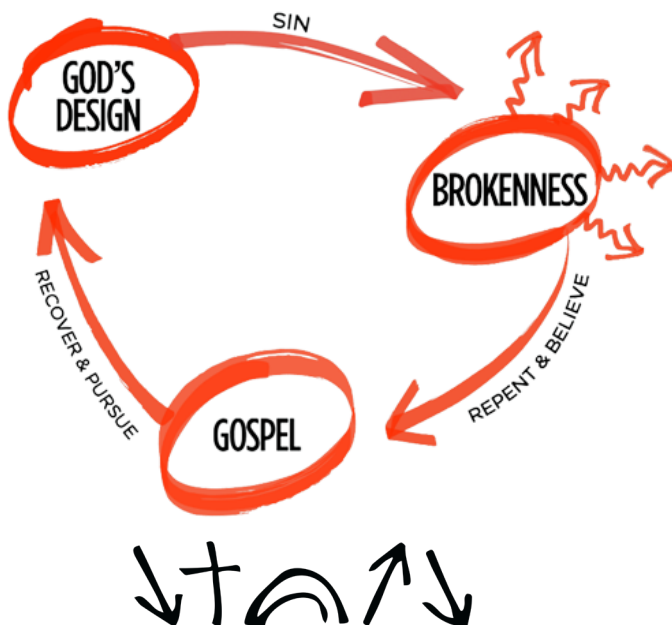
God saves us and transforms our future.

“Yet you brought my life from the pit, O Lord my God.” What amazing grace! What significance this phrase has in the Scriptures! Jonah went down into the belly of Sheol (literally the realm of the dead (used figuratively to describe the severity of his situation) for three days and three nights. He was brought back to life, so to speak, as a result of God’s doing. This anticipates the greater Jonah: Jesus Christ.

Jesus: The Greater Jonah

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (Matthew 12:40 ESV) This part of Jonah’s story anticipates a greater deliverance—the resurrection of Christ. Jonah merely thought he was going to die. Jesus actually died and then rose again. He is now the firstfruits of the future resurrection of all believers in Christ at his return.

Those who continue loving the world and its pursuits will not experience salvation—regardless of their religious pedigree. Only the fury of God’s wrath awaits such people. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. Salvation belongs to the Lord and no one else. Those who turn to the Lord experience his salvation and are raised to walk in newness of life, serving the Lord in his kingdom rather than living enslaved to their sin.



The Discipline of the Lord

“A dad in his sinful meanness might say, “You are such an idiot. You always do that,” and maybe hit them. And his words are contemptuous. They are despising. God never says, “You always do that. You are just an idiot. You never do anything right.” God never loses control like that. If he spansks, if he brings any kind of hardship into our life, it is with measured, careful, wise, loving application of his wisdom and his grace to our situation. And so he is calling for us to have greater faith and greater humility.” – John Piper, Ask Pastor John: How do I know if I am being Disciplined? Desiringgod.org

Jesus died for our sins in our place on what should have been our cross; his body descended into the realm of the dead when he was buried in Joseph’s tomb, bearing the full curse of death on our behalf; his body did not see corruption; he was not abandoned to Sheol. Through the Holy Spirit, the Father empowered Jesus so that he might take his life back up again in glory. Jesus defeated the grave.

Jesus offers this victory to those who hear his message of salvation, grieve their sin, and turn to the Lord in faith—calling upon him for salvation. It is to those people that God grants eternal life, the right to be children of God, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit so they may walk in the good works prepared for them beforehand in Christ.

Reflection

How is God’s compassion revealed through his discipline?

What does it look like to walk in the transformed future Christ won for us at the cross? What idols do you need to forsake?

In which areas of your life do you need to start recovering and pursuing God’s design?

SERVE

AT MEADOWBROOK

MeadowBrook seeks to show the compassion of the Lord to others. We have many opportunities for one to show compassion. You can serve at Open Hands helping those who are in need of clothes and groceries. You can serve at the Etowah Pregnancy Testing Center to counsel those considering abortion, and you can also serve at one of our foster care nights, compassionately serving both the foster care families of the surrounding area and their children.

Email mike@mbchurch.com to connect to these ministries of compassion.

IN MINISTRY

Every member of Christ's church is called to be compassionate. You never know who in your life is at that low point where they are desperate for the compassion of the Lord. So, seek to show his compassion toward others this week. Let it be an outgrowth of the compassionate nature of Christ as the Spirit is working in you.

AT HOME

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.
(Proverbs 13:24 ESV)

Some refrain from disciplining out of a desire to be compassionate, but Scripture teaches that, in fact, the opposite is the case. Lack of discipline is not compassion but hatred. Are you disciplining your children? Are you consistent in it? Do you and your spouse have a plan for discipline?

Here is a good article to help you as you seek to discipline your child according to Scripture:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-principles-disciplining-children/>

AT WORK

How could your work further the compassion of God? I'm not necessarily talking about showing compassion to your co-workers, but how through your profession you demonstrate compassion to those you serve. If you teach, how can you reveal God's compassion as a teacher? If you are a financial advisor, how can you show compassion toward those through advising them financially? And so on. Your business and profession is not merely a way to provide, but a major avenue in your life through which you can extend the Lord's compassion.

RESPOND

Father,

Thank you for decisively defeating death through the resurrection of your Son by the Spirit of life who now, by your gracious faithfulness lives and indwells me. Thank you for extending compassion toward me while I was dead in my trespasses and sin. Thank you for the discipline you bring about in my life that seems unpleasant at the time, but later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Help me as I seek to live out the transformation you have worked in me, forsaking all worthless idols and holding fast to your word. For salvation belongs to you and to you alone, O Lord, my God.

Amen.

Second Chances

Jonah 3:1-10

CONNECT

Describe a time when grace was extended to you. How did this grace cause you to feel? How did you respond?

GROW

Read Jonah 3:1-10 and then highlight what stands out to you, explain what the author is saying in context, and then apply it to your life.

The grace of God provides second chances.

Jonah 3 begins the same way Jonah 1 began—the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time. In light of all that had occurred, God’s purpose for the Ninevites remained unchanged, and he offered his rebellious prophet a second chance. Jonah took the Lord up on it, and, instead of getting up to flee, he got up and went to Nineveh. There he boldly proclaimed God’s message, which confronted the people with their judgment but also extended grace—grace that gave the Ninevites 40 days to respond. “Although the threat sounds unconditional, a condition was implied: if the people repent, God will relent. Jonah knows this condition is included (see Jonah 4:2) and the king of Nineveh will hope that it is (see 3:9).” (ESV Study Bible, s.v. Jonah 3:4).

Jesus: The Greater Jonah

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Ephesians 3:6 ESV) Jonah brought salvation to a handful of sailors and a single city. Jesus made a way that all nations could be partakers of the promises of God through the gospel. He is the son of Abraham, through whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed, and Revelation 7:9 reveals that indeed they will be.

H: Highlight

E: Explain the Text

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about ourselves?

What is the good news of this text?

A: Apply the Text

R: Respond to the Text

Additional Passages:

Philemon 8-16

2 Timothy 4:11

Acts 2:1-41

Based on past failures, many hold back from obedience to the LORD and ministry toward others. Sure, there are consequences to sin. Sure, there are some sins that disqualify people from certain types of ministry (see 1 Timothy 3). However, no repented sin prohibits people from proclaiming the gospel to the lost, showing compassion to those in need, making disciples, serving the body of Christ, loving their neighbor as themselves, loving their wife, respecting their husband, or training their children up in the way they should go. Your past failures may have led to consequences felt in the present, however they never prohibit the prospects of current and future ministry.

The book of Jonah reveals time and time and time again that God shows pity and compassion on those who do not deserve it. The sailors. The Ninevites. And most of all, Jonah.

When we come to Christ through faith, God shows pity and compassion toward us—pity and compassion we do not deserve. He fills us with his Spirit and empowers us to carry out his will. When we say things like “I do not feel I can share the gospel with others because they know of xyz mistakes in my past,” we are effectively denying the gospel and imaging a works based religion that is based on keeping up appearances rather than on the grace of Christ. Now don’t get this wrong: the grace of God moves us to greater degrees of repentance and righteousness. Actively living in known, unrepentant sin while trying to do ministry is a fool’s errand. But the compassion extended after we grieve and put aside sin should move us toward ministry, not letting the memory of forgiven sin pull us away from it.

Discussion: *Why is it easy for us to let guilt over past, repented, and forgiven sin hold us back from the work God has called us to in the present?*

How does the grace of the gospel enable us and call us to walk in the freedom of forgiveness and at the same time pursue greater levels of righteousness and obedience?

Reflection

Has there ever been a time where you grieved your sin in a way that leads to life?

Do you promote the “easy believism” version of the gospel?

How do the Ninevites challenge us today as we deal with sin?

Did God change his mind?

The Hebrew word translated “relent” in the ESV and “repent” in the KJV is used in a variety of different ways in the Old Testament. In prophetic literature, with God as the one doing the action, the Hebrew word either refers to God’s comfort or God’s execution of judgment on the basis of the people’s response. God is not changing his eternal purposes when the Scripture says he relents or repents of disaster or evil. Rather, the author uses human words and images his audience would understand to describe the incomprehensible way God administers judgment based on the people’s response to his warnings. (He does this because he knows the human, finite mind cannot comprehend the mind of our infinite God.) Either the warning awakens repentance and he relents, or the warning hardens and he does not relent—both according to his purposes.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?
(Numbers 23:19 ESV)

Through faith marked by repentance, the grace of God saves us from sin that ends in disaster.

Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other. To elevate repentance over faith runs the danger of erring into works based religion, while to elevate faith over repentance runs the danger of erring into “easy believism” (grace without transformation)—neither of which lead to salvation. The people of Nineveh believed God, they grieved their sin (the sackcloth and fasting), they called upon the LORD, and they turned from their wicked ways—the underlying cause of the promised disaster. As a result, God saved them.

The Ninevites anticipate the inclusion of the Gentiles into the family of God through Christ. That’s us. We are born children of the devil, lovers of darkness, with the condemnation of God resting upon us. Wrathful fury awaits those who are not in Christ. But God offers salvation in the person of Jesus Christ. On the cross and in his burial, Jesus bore the wrath of God and the curse of death on our behalf. Through the resurrection, he conquered the ancient serpent and the grave and is alive forevermore. The good news is that in Jesus we can be saved from the wrath of God and have eternal life with resurrected bodies patterned after Christ’s. This comes through repentance and faith.

SERVE

AT MEADOWBROOK

Good News Clubs are a ministry at MeadowBrook that brings the gospel to many children in our county through weekly Bible Studies at local schools.

Currently, we are partnered with the following elementary schools:

- Attalla Elementary (Tuesdays, 2:30 – 4:00 pm)
- Eura Brown (Tuesdays, 2:30 – 4:00 pm)
- John Jones (Tuesdays, 2:30 – 4:00 pm)
- Striplin (Tuesdays, 7:00 – 8:00 am)

Email Hope Pearce at c3h2pearce@att.net to connect to this ministry this upcoming semester!

IN MINISTRY

“Evangelism doesn’t spring out of us fully formed and perfect. It’s sensitive communication about deep things, with enormous ramifications for people’s lives. It takes effort, practice, and planning. Even after effort and practice and planning, it’s not perfect. Ninety-nine percent of the time I share my faith, I see things after the fact that were slips, fails, and just plain awkward mistakes.

But awkward is better than silent.”

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/awkward-is-better-than-silent>

AT HOME

Five Principles for Evangelizing Your Children

1. Pray for the salvation regularly both in your private prayer time and with them.
2. Emphasize that Jesus saves us from the sin that leads to disaster, not just the disaster. This helps protect against false conversions, where the child seeks to avoid hell and continue in their sinfulness.
3. Tell your kids the gospel message. Mack Stiles defines evangelism as “preaching or teaching the gospel message with the aim to persuade or convert.” If we are not doing this with our kids, we may be doing a lot of good things, but not evangelism.
4. Don’t let church be an option.
5. Model evangelism in front of your children. Your kids need to hear you tell others about Jesus, not just them.

AT WORK

Your job inevitably places you in contact with people. They could be students, co-workers, advisees, clients, or hotel clerks. Not one of your relationships is without eternal significance. Every one of them has been placed in your life that you might declare the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to those dead in their sins that they may be made alive in Christ.

Who is God putting in your life to evangelize through your work?

RESPOND

Pray for the lost in your life by name and ask God to give you opportunity this month to speak to them the good news of Jesus Christ.



CHRISTMAS AT MEADOWBROOK

Life Group Christmas Lesson

Matthew 1:18-25

“The Gospel According to Christmas”

The Gospel According to Christmas

Matthew 1:18-25

CONNECT

What is your favorite Christmas tradition?

GROW

Read Matthew 1:18-25 and then highlight what stands out to you, explain what the author is saying in context, and then apply it to your life.

Many of the terms and themes discussed during this season are so familiar we take them for granted. Instead of letting them speak powerfully to our hearts, wooing us into the gracious arms of Christ, they lull us to sleep. Perhaps there is sentimental value with the season that hijacks the heart and takes us somewhere other than to the eternal God coming to this earth in order to save the people, you and me, from their sins. Listen to how the ancient Church Father, Augustine of Hippo, described Christmas:

“Man’s maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother’s breast; that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey; that Truth might be accused of false witnesses, the Teacher be beaten with whips, the Foundation be suspended on wood; that Strength might grow weak; that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.”

So, what are the basic truths Christmas urges us to remember each year?

Jesus saves us from our sin.

Jesus’ name means “Yahweh Saves”. Names aren’t as big of deal in our culture today, but at that time they often helped communicate the intended identity of an individual. In the name of Jesus, we see that at the core of the nature of God is a God who saves. Whether you have been in Christ for a long time or you’re wondering, “What in the world do I need to be saved from?”, the Christmas season always provides us an opportunity to hear and apply the central truth of our faith – that God saves us from our sin.

Sin is anything we do, say, think or feel contrary to the will and nature of God. Sin is the way of this world, which is held captive by the great enemy Satan. Sin leads to destruction. Sin torments our soul, holds captive our will, pollutes our minds, destroys peace, corrupts our flesh, and ultimately takes our life—and we were all born card carrying sinners. As a result, we live in this realm of brokenness—with God, ourselves, others, and creation. Nothing we can do can mend that brokenness. Now, we try many things—some good, some bad. Ultimately, however, it all leads back to brokenness, and if that brokenness is not mended, if we keep walking in the broad way of destruction, we will one day be destroyed by the very sin we cherished in this life. God’s wrath will be poured out on all who die in sin for all of eternity.

Christmas tells the story of how Jesus, being fully God, humbled himself and became human so that he could perfectly obey the law of God in our place to the point of death by crucifixion.

H: Highlight

E: Explain the Text

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about ourselves?

What is the good news of this text?

A: Apply the Text

R: Respond to the Text

There, on the cross, God punished him for our sins and resurrected him victoriously on the third day. Christmas is about the hope of salvation, salvation from sin. All who turn from their sins, believe in Jesus' work on their behalf, and follow after him, will be saved.

Typically, we focus on salvation from the penalty, but the gospel is not that God merely saves us from the penalty of sin, but from the very sin that warrants the penalty.

Jesus utterly transforms us, pouring his Spirit upon us, transferring us from the path of sin to the pathway of righteousness where we walk in the good works God has prepared for us beforehand. Those who turn from their sins and believe in Jesus Christ find forgiveness, not wrath; healing, not torment; freedom, not captivity; wisdom, not folly; transformed life, not continued lives of sin and foolishness. Our bodies, hearts, and minds *are* renewed and *continuing to be* renewed, patterned after the image of Christ. We have peace with God and others, and we live with the unshakeable hope of incorruptible flesh and eternal life where God will dwell with us as our God, and we his people.

Thus, Christmas is not simply about the amazing traditions, the movies, and the time with family. Christmas reminds us of the depths of our sinfulness, of our longing to be reconciled with our Creator, and of the great salvation that God provided in the person of Jesus Christ still waiting to be fully revealed.

Jesus is God with us.

Jesus is also introduced as Immanuel, who was prophesied by Isaiah. This truth is so significant that Matthew begins and ends his gospel account with it. Both here and just before Jesus ascended to be with the Father, he let us all know that he would be with us always. Christmas also celebrates the moment God took on flesh and dwelt among us.

What does it mean for us that Jesus is "God with us"?

- **He gets the struggles of this life. (Isaiah 53:2-3; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 Peter 2:21-24)**

The bible refers to Jesus as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Our God is not far removed from us. He is near to our aches and pains. He experienced the deaths of those close to him. He experienced loneliness and rejection. He experienced false accusations. He experienced temptation in a way that even you and I aren't familiar with, yet was without sin. He experienced the pain of betrayal. He experienced persecution. Jesus understands our struggles because he went through them himself. He is with us.

- **He guides us through them. (Psalm 73:23-29; Psalm 23; John 10:11)**

Jesus is our good shepherd, holding us by the right hand as a father leading his child across the street. He knows we could not make it safely on our own, so he guides us through both the victories and the trials of this life. It is good for us to be near to God. So, by the power of the Holy Spirit, let us press prayerfully into his word that we might receive the wisdom we need for this crazy life.

- **He comforts us in the midst of it. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4; 1 Peter 5:6-7; Matthew 5:4)**

When things don't go the way we thought it would, when we battle loneliness, grief, hopelessness, sickness, pain, despair, Jesus is there to comfort us. He cares for you, and he promises comfort to those who follow him.

- **He will be there at the end of them. (Matthew 28:20; Romans 8:31-39; Revelation 21)**

Once in Christ, nothing could separate you from him. He is with us always. As we seek to make disciples, he is with us, empowering us through His Spirit. When we wake up, we know that he is with us. When we go to bed, we know that he is with us. And when we die, he is with us, shepherding us from this life to his side.

The miracle of the incarnation means many things to the believer today – namely that we still cannot fathom the wonderful depths of God's love, grace, and mercy he demonstrates toward us. The incarnation teaches us that we can trust him without any shade of doubt when his Word says that he is with us through every circumstance.

Should I not Pity Nineveh?

Jonah 4:1-11

CONNECT

Has there been a turn of events that did not go the way you wanted it to go? How did you feel? Were you right for those feelings?

GROW

Read Jonah 4:1-11 and then highlight what stands out to you, explain what the author is saying in context, and then apply it to your life.

God reveals his compassionate character through extending grace to unworthy sinners—like Jonah, like us.

Chapter 4 begins with “but,” which should immediately draw our attention to what has just occurred. This sets the framework for the story moving forward. What follows the conjunction is set in opposition to what precedes it. Looking back to Jonah 3:10 we see that it says “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,” we know the conflict between Jonah and God, which appeared to be resolved, is indeed still very much alive. Jonah was angered by the grace of God, not even realizing he was a chief recipient of that same grace.

Jesus: The Greater Jonah

Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, we see his compassion on display time and time again, to Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans, to the rich and poor, to men and women, to Pharisees, tax-collectors, and prostitutes—to everyone. Jesus was compassionate. He perfectly revealed the nature of his Father. That being so, God did not merely forget their sins or the sins of Ninevites. Punishment had to be carried out. And it was, but not on them, not on us. It was poured out on Jesus. He is the compassionate one through whom God is both just and the justifier of sin.

(See Romans 2:25-26)

H: Highlight

E: Explain the Text

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about ourselves?

What is the good news of this text?

A: Apply the Text

R: Respond to the Text

Additional Passages:

Exodus 34:6-7

James 1:19-26

Titus 3:1-8

The irony is not that Jonah was unaware of God’s gracious and compassionate nature, but that he was aware! His problem was that he felt he deserved God’s grace—or worse that he did not need it. However, those Ninevites were unworthy of God’s grace. This attitude of Jonah’s is foolish, and God rebukes him in three ways:

1. God questions the validity of Jonah’s anger.

Oftentimes, our anger is unjustified. If our anger is against God, it always is. In those moments of anger, having someone love you enough to question the validity of your anger, or having the restraint to be able to question it yourself, can be all you need to redirect your thoughts away from the way of the flesh to the way of Christ.

Discussion: *What makes you angry? Are you angry with God? Do you do well to be angry?*

2. God teaches Jonah an object lesson about his sin.

Jonah left the city in a huff, still hoping against hope that God would destroy it. He gets outside and builds himself a booth for shade. Evidently it does not work out, because in the next verse we see God compassionately providing shade for Jonah. He causes a plant to rise up and be shade for Jonah to save him from his discomfort—the very same word translated disaster in 3:10. In the same way that the Ninevites could not save themselves from disaster, Jonah's rickety booth could not save him from his discomfort.

Our sin is our biggest problem, and we cannot alleviate it. There are no DIY remedies, no practical steps to free yourself of sin; we are utterly incapable of dealing with our deepest need. We are desperate for the grace of God. Now, as disciples of Christ, we are daily sustained and trained by his grace, unable to do anything apart from it. Even the fullness of God's grace is yet to be experienced by any believer in Christ—dead or alive. One day, however, all who are in Christ will forever rejoice over and be sustained by the immeasurable riches of God's grace toward us in Christ Jesus when our everlasting souls are united with glorified bodies. After reigning with Christ in his kingdom on this earth, we will enter into the New Earth given to us as an inheritance by our Lord and King, Jesus, where we will enjoy his new creation and his presence forever and ever.

It's all grace. From beginning to end, we always need grace. Jonah had forgotten his position. May we not forget ours.

Discussion: *Do we think of grace as something in the past or as a continuous reality? How do we prioritize grace in our lives each day? Share specific, concrete ways.*

3. God teaches Jonah an object lesson about compassion.

God displays his sovereignty over creation yet again, but now to inflict corporal punishment on his child, Jonah. God appoints a worm to destroy the plant, a blazing warm front to blow through, and a cloudless sky so that Jonah would feel the discomfort of the sun beating down upon his head. Angered again, Jonah repeats his will to die. God, then, asks him the same question he had asked earlier, except he adds the phrase “for the plant.” This is important as it is setting up the lesson God is about to teach Jonah and us.

Jonah, of course, answers wrongly, and God confronts him. Jonah cared more about the plant than he did the lives of 120,000 image-bearers of God. He was upset that God let a worm eat a plant, but did not annihilate an entire city of people and animals. Jonah revealed himself to be a great fool. In fact, throughout the book of Jonah, he is never the one to express concern about people perishing. The captain expressed concern for his men and the king for his people, but not Jonah. The only thing Jonah pities in the entire book—other than himself—is a plant. He was out of step with his God. He was not reflecting the compassionate image of God, but the selfish, petty image of his own sin.

We are far too often exactly the same. We show more concern for our cars, our phones, our vacations, our sports equipment, our shade plants of comfort, ease, and convenience than we do for tens of thousands of people in Etowah County who do not know their right hand from their left.

The Power of the Final Question

Jonah ends in a question. “Should not I pity Nineveh?” The answer of course is “yes, and so should Jonah!” But that is not written. It's left hanging. Why? Some people think Jonah did not repent. I don't think that to be the case. I believe he did, and he is trying to help his audience realize that the problem Jonah had is a problem they—and we—share. The question stops the story that is about Jonah and turns to you, the reader, saying, “Well, should he?” This is a story about Jonah, but more than that it's a story about all of humanity who by nature refuses to be conformed to the compassionate image of God. Jonah confronts us—disciples who have experienced God's transforming work in our lives—in our sinfulness. And the question stands, reverberating throughout time: Should God pity Nineveh? He pitied Nineveh, he pities you, will you in turn pity others and point them to Jesus?

SERVE

Setting Goals for 2020 in Response to Jonah

“Goals are the causes and aspirations that direct our choices... When we know our goals, we know where we are going and why... God’s bestowal of spiritual gifts—the capacities and desires for ministry given for regular use in the church and the kingdom—is intended to lead individuals and groups to pursue unique goals.” (Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 110, 147)

Key Questions: How has God uniquely gifted and shaped you? What has he made you passionate about? How can you work to conform _____ to God’s designs? Are there any goals this passage is provoking me to set?

(Examples)

- **Gift of Hospitality:** It is my goal this year to welcome a Muslim student into my home and life for the purpose of introducing him or her to Jesus.
- **Gift of Teaching and/or Shepherding:** It is my goal this year to instruct and influence my Life Group to see all people as God sees them and how we should show compassion to the lost, so that by the end of the year we might start ongoing ministry toward international students.
- **Gift of Mercy:** It is my goal to come alongside refugee non-Christians in Clarkston, Georgia this year and support them as they resettle for the purpose of introducing them to Jesus.
- **Gift of the Evangelist:** It is my goal to evangelize and to equip others to evangelize the Hispanic community in Etowah County.

My Goal in 2020 in Response to the Teaching of Jonah is...

RESPOND

As we prepare to enter into our 40 Days of Renewal campaign, prayerfully consider how the Lord desires for you to intentionally pursue him and his renewal at this time.



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