

# JONAH



## GRACE AND MERCY

(4 BIBLE STUDIES)

**EXAMINATION APPLICATION**

**BIBLE STUDIES**



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## THE SMALL PRINT

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### **Your Commitment**

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

### **Your Contribution**

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

### **Your Preparation**

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don't help you, simply don't use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to the book. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started with these studies!

### **Your Leadership**

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure  
Spring 2019*

## INTRODUCING JONAH

The prophecy of Jonah contains no precise indication of when it was written but we can still follow the clues to work out an approximate date! The prophecy begins (1:1) by identifying the author as Jonah son of Amittai who is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. Here Jonah is said to have come from Gath Helper in Zebulun (see Joshua 19:10-13). The context of this passage is the reign of Jeroboam II who was King of Israel from 782 to 753BC. It was a peaceful and prosperous time during which Jeroboam restored Israel's borders. Israel became the Northern Kingdom (Judah the Southern Kingdom) when the nation was divided under the reign of King Rehoboam. On the whole the Kings of Israel don't fare well and by the time of Jeroboam II, things have got so bad that Northern Israel has even attacked southern Judah and ransacked the temple (2 Kings 14v11-14). This was unbelievable wickedness! God eventually has enough of Northern Israel's wickedness and sends the Assyrians to overthrow them in 722bc. However Jonah is prophesying before that calamitous event.

At that time of Jonah the Assyrians were becoming the dominant superpower. Their capital city was Nineveh. The Assyrians were renowned for their astonishing cruelty in conquests. If cities refused to surrender then when Assyria was victorious they would skin the people and hang the skin on the walls of the defeated city to show what happens to people that defied them. Often cities that they tried to attack would have mass suicides to avoid the impending barbarity that the Assyrians would inflict. Understanding the context is vital to understanding Jonah's motivations and attitudes displayed in this book which are otherwise somewhat confusing. We need to put ourselves into the Israelite shoes: they could not imagine a scarier, fearful and more loathe-some enemy than the Assyrians. The Jews were "God's chosen people" and so Jonah would have seen the Assyrians as "the enemies of God". Yet these were the people God wanted Jonah to go and preach to!

The main theme of the prophecy of Jonah is that God is sovereign and will achieve his mission purposes with our cooperation or without it. Its main applications are that (1) God loves even the wickedest of people, (2) if God's heart is for mission, is ours? and (3) it is folly to rebel against the Sovereign God. The prophecy of Jonah is all about a reluctant prophet and the God of astonishing grace. God's big questions to us are how gracious do we think God really is? How gracious do you really want God to be? What we'll discover is that God's grace goes far further beyond what we want it to go! And that then asks us - will we share God's heart of compassion for the lost?

Jonah is one of those books we think we all know well. We tend to regard it as simple being about the prophet who gets swallowed by the fish and then there's the big revival in Nineveh. However do we really believe that Jonah was swallowed by the fish? Why or why not? What does our answer say about our own assumptions? As we get deeper into the book there are some more disturbing questions and it becomes a much more subtle and complex book that often baffles more than it enlightens. Jonah includes lots of questions. 14 in all and 11 of those are addressed to Jonah. Clearly God wants us to think about how do we respond to these questions as well. Also each episode in the story leaves us with plenty more questions also. Why does Jonah get angry with God after massive revival comes? Surely that should delight him? What's all this about the plant growing up then shrivelling in chapter 4? Vocalising our attitude to such questions is vital before we read it!

*Steve McClure  
Spring 2019*

**STUDY 1 – JONAH 1:1-16 – RUNNING FROM GOD’S GRACE**

**INTRODUCTION:** The first 3 verses tell us that God sends Jonah to the great city of Nineveh to preach against it. Jonah isn't up for the challenge and disobeys God: he heads for Tarshish instead. God however was not done with him and sets in motion a series of events to help Jonah change course.

**SETTING THE SCENE:** When have you found yourself running in the opposite direction when your parents (or authority figure) asked you to do something? What were the factors that motivated you to take such action? When have you run from God when He has asked you to do something for Him?

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**RUNNING SCARED (v1-3):** How big a deal was it to go preach against Nineveh (see Introduction) and its wickedness (v1)? Why do you think Jonah ran away and fled from the LORD (heading in the opposite direction)? Why might running from God seem attractive even though theologically ridiculous? What do you think Jonah would've been feeling as he travelled towards Tarshish (traditionally Spain)?

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**CALL TO PRAYER (v4-6):** Why do you think that Jonah's response (going to sleep) is so much at odds with that of the sailors? What can we learn from the fact that these sailors cry out to their gods (v5) and encourage Jonah (who was sleeping) to do the same (v6)? What is your experience of the underlying faith of those who live/work around you (seen especially when life is tough for them)?

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**WHO IS RESPONSIBLE (v7-12):** Why do you think the sailors believed that someone must be responsible? What do you think of their method of identifying the culprit? What does the fact the lot fell on Jonah tell us about what God was doing in all of this (v7)?

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At what stage do you think Jonah realised that the trouble was all because of him? How do you respond to his suggestion that they throw him in the sea? Was that really the only option (v10-12); why didn't Jonah cry out to his God?

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**DESPERATE MEASURES (v13-16):** Why at first do the sailors seem unwilling to throw Jonah overboard; what changes their minds? How do we see God's hand at work in the lives of these pagan Sailors lives? Do you think their crying out to God (v14) was genuine or just desperation? Why do you think that they respond to God calming the sea with such reverence and sacrifice?

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**GOD'S HAND AT WORK:** How do we see God's hand at work in Jonah's life throughout this passage? Why do you think that God goes to such extraordinary lengths to cause Jonah to obey him? When have we experienced God's direct intervention in our lives to cause us to obey?

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*"God varies his strategies too, and continually extends mercy to us in new ways, even though we neither understand nor deserve it." Timothy J. Keller, The Prodigal Prophet*

**DRAWING IT TOGETHER:** How are the themes of rebellion and grace entwined throughout this chapter? In what ways can we identify with Jonah; are there any similarities between our friends and the people of Nineveh? How does God use this calamity to shows his grace and mercy?

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**IDEAS FOR PRAYER:** Share together about the one thing that has really encouraged you and the one thing that has really challenged you from the study. Pray that each of you would hear God clearly and be willing to follow His leading even when it makes you uncomfortable.

**MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 139:7-8**

*"When Christian believers care more for their own interests and security than for the good and salvation of other races and ethnicities, they are sinning like Jonah. If they value the economic and military flourishing of their country over the good of the human race and the furtherance of God's work in the world, they are sinning like Jonah. Their identity is more rooted in their race and nationality than in being saved sinners and children of God." Timothy J. Keller, The Prodigal Prophet*

**STUDY 2 – JONAH 1:17-2:10 – EXPERIENCING GOD’S GRACE THROUGH PRAYER**

**INTRODUCTION:** Astonishingly, in this second study we find Jonah in the belly of a huge fish. It is there that Jonah reaches rock bottom and begins to pray. Through prayer Jonah begins to understand the grace and unfailing love of the God who made Him. This section is quite different in style, content and tone than the previous chapter as we begin to see how God was revealing His grace.

**SETTING THE SCENE:** What kind of things does it take to cause you and/or your friends to pray? When life has been tough how has God transformed the situation for you through your prayers? To what extent do you believe that prayer really can change everything?

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**TALE OF THE BIG FISH (1:17, 2:10):** Many would cite stories like this as evidence that the Bible was made up: how do you respond to the description of what happened to Jonah in these verses (see Appendix 1)? What is the significance of him being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (see Matthew 12:39-41)?

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**JONAH’S PRAYER (2:1-9):** How would you summarise Jonah’s prayer to the LORD? How does he acknowledge God’s sovereignty in all that had happened to him? Why is that so important for him?

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**LANGUAGE OF PRAYER:** What do you make of the language that Jonah uses to describe God’s dealing with him; e.g. *deep in the realm of the dead* (v2), *hurled into the depths* (v3), *banished from your sight* (v4), *engulfing waters threatened me* (v5), *the deep surrounded me* (v5), *down in the pit* (v6), *life was ebbing away* (v7)? NB: See Psalm 65:7 where chaotic seas are a picture of judgement.

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**GROWING THROUGH PRAYER:** How far has Jonah come in his faith, based on what he says in this chapter; e.g. v2, 6 & 9? In this regard why are the two ‘buts’ in v6 & v9 so significant?

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*“Salvation belongs to God alone, to no one else. If someone is saved, it is wholly God’s doing. It is not a matter of God saves you partly and you save yourself partly. No. God saves us. We do not and cannot save ourselves. That’s the gospel.” Tim Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, pg. 80*

**SALVATION COMES FROM THE LORD:** What does Jonah mean by this phrase and how had he seen it to be true? Why do we find it so hard to accept the grace of God? At the end of this section where do you think Jonah is at?

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What do you think caused Jonah to pray these things? How can we learn from the way that Jonah acknowledges and responds to God here? In what sense can you (or can’t you) identify with Jonah?

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**DRAWING IT TOGETHER:** In what ways is this chapter a picture of God’s gracious salvation to each of us? To what extent do you think we need the grace of God? How do we respond to God’s grace; is it with grateful praise or with indifference?

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**IDEAS FOR PRAYER:** Share your own experiences of Prayer in terms of how it helps you to understand the Grace of God. Pray that God would give each of you a deep desire to pray and be changed in the process.

**MEMORY VERSE: JONAH 2:9**

*“If Jonah was to begin finally to ascend, both in the water and in faith, he had to be brought to the very end of himself. The way up was, first of all, down. The usual place to learn the greatest secrets of God’s grace is at the bottom. But it is not simply being at the bottom that begins to change Jonah but prayer at the bottom.....Jonah begins to pray, and at the climax of the prayer, he speaks of chesdh (2:9). It is a key biblical word often translated as “steadfast love” or “grace”. It refers to the covenant love of God. It takes the whole prayer for Jonah to get there-to a declaration about God’s grace-but when he does, he is released back into the land of the living.”*

**Timothy J. Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, pg. 73**

## STUDY 3 – JONAH 3 – RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE

**INTRODUCTION:** God again calls Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach. It was a very large city but responds to God in repentance. The chapter largely focuses on Jonah’s obedience and the Ninevites response to his message. Once more the grace and mercy of God are at the forefront of everything.

**SETTING THE SCENE:** Think of a time when things have turned out very differently to what you expected: how did you respond? Turning the question towards God think of a time when He has really surprised you by His grace and mercy: what was good (and not so good) about your response?

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**OBEDIENCE (v1-3a):** What do you think caused Jonah to obey God (v3a) this time round? To what extent do you think Jonah embraced God’s command fully rather than half-heartedly (e.g. preaching only on the side-lines)? How hard do you think it would have been for Jonah to obey God fully here (see comments on the Assyrians in the Introduction)?

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**A GREAT CITY (3b):** What made Nineveh such a great city (v2-3 & 4:11)? Why is it so extraordinary that God was so interested in this city? Do you think that God is interested in places like Mecca, London or even our own city? Who do you subconsciously write people off as beyond God’s grace?

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**RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE (v4-5):** How do you respond to the way that Nineveh (and in particular it’s King) responds to the message (probably not its entirety) that Jonah brings? What indication do we get here of the sincerity of their response?

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**THE KINGS DECREE (v6-7):** Why is it so important for us to understand our need of grace (just how messed up we really are) if we are going to understand the wonder of God’s grace? What is the Kings

intention and motivation in making his decree? Why do you think he goes the extra mile and orders that even the animals do not eat or drink anything?

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**GOD RELENTED (v9-10):** What do you think it means when it says that God 'relented': to what extent do you think God changed His mind (if so does this contradict Numbers 23:19)? How do the Ninevites experience God's grace; what could Jonah learn from them?

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**JONAH AND THE GRACE OF GOD:** How do you imagine Jonah might have been feeling during these events (see also Tim Keller Quote overleaf)? What things might help us to respond better when things happen completely out of kilter with our own expectations?

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**DRAWING IT TOGETHER:** What does God's unfolding plan to rescue this wicked city tell us about the wonder of His grace? Who are the specific people (or groups of people) we need to avoid writing off as beyond God's grace? Is there something that we need to obey God with this week even if we don't like the consequences of that decision?

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**IDEAS FOR PRAYER:** Thank God for the wonder of God's astounding Grace: thank Him for the grace of God in each of your lives and pray that His grace would make a difference in the lives of even the unlikeliest of our friends. Thank God for the price He paid so that He could pour out His grace.

**MEMORY VERSES: JONAH 3:2-3**

*"Even though Jonah let the Ninevites know that forgiveness was possible, that wasn't the main thrust of his preaching. The summary that the text gives us of his sermons was not "In forty days, Nineveh might be overthrown" but "In forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That was what Jonah enthusiastically wanted and predicted. He enjoyed preaching wrath. He did it with glee, not tears, because he couldn't wait for God hammer to fall on them. But God responded with mercy...At this Jonah is plunged back into the depths of is despair and disappointment with God. His response is surprising to the reader, and it sets up the remarkable final chapter of Jonah's encounter with the Lord." Timothy J. Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, pg. 96*

**STUDY 4 – JONAH 4 – WRESTLING WITH GOD’S GRACE**

**INTRODUCTION:** In this final passage we find Jonah, who having seen this massive revival in Nineveh (surely every preacher’s dream) is not happy at all. In fact he is angry and feels that God’s forgiveness is wrong. Given the grace he had received himself for his disobedience this is an astonishing reaction that demonstrates that Jonah had not learned the lessons of chapters 1-2.

**SETTING THE SCENE:** Think of a time when you have reacted really badly to something really good happening: what exactly was going on and why did you respond in that way (e.g. something that has happened for someone with whom you are experiencing some kind of conflict)?

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**ANGRY WITH GOD (v1-3):** Why do you think that Jonah felt so angry and that what had happened was wrong (the ESV says it ‘displeased Jonah exceedingly’)? How do you respond to Jonah’s prayer in v2; esp. his explanation of why he ran away and his understanding of what God is like? To what extent was Jonah’s idea of God both right and also at odds with the nature of the One True God?

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**IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU TO BE ANGRY? (v3-5):** How do you understand Jonah’s conviction that it’s better to die than to continue living in the light of the Ninevites repentance? How would you answer God’s question in response; ‘is it right for you to be angry’ (see also Rom 9:18-21, Jeremiah 18:1-10)? What is Jonah waiting for as he sits down at a place east of the city and makes himself a shelter?

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**THE PARABLE OF THE LEAFY PLANT (v6-8):** What do you understand God to be teaching Jonah through this vivid illustration of the leafy plant which God provided to give Jonah shade (v6-8)? What is God saying through his contrast with Jonah’s concern for the plant and he lack of care he gave it (v10)? How does this relate to God’s concern for the 120,000 people in Nineveh?

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Why is the repeated phrase “it would be better for me to die” (v3,8 & 9) and God’s repeated question “is it right for you to be angry” (v4 & 9) so significant? Why do God’s love and holiness not allow Him to enable Him to leave us to remain as we are (see Keller Quote below)?

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*God is both too holy and too loving to either destroy Jonah or to allow Jonah to remain as he is, and God is also too holy and too loving to allow us to remain as we are.*

***Tim Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, pg. 132.***

**AN ABRUPT END:** The story ends fairly abruptly; how do you imagine Jonah might have responded to these things (either positively or negatively)? Looking at the chapter in the context of the prophecy what do we learn about Jonah, what do we learn about God and His purposes with his people?

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**DRAWING IT TOGETHER:** When might we feel like we know better than God and/or angry with what God appears to be doing around us? How can we take steps to increasingly submit to His Sovereignty and will for our lives? What have we learned about right motivations in sharing our faith?

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**IDEAS FOR PRAYER:** Reflect together on the lessons learned and praise God together for them. Ask God to help you to respond positively and with faith to the amazing grace of God.

**MEMORY VERSE: JONAH 4:2**

*“Jonah did not weep over the city, but Jesus, the true prophet, did. . . . Here is a perfect heart—perfect in generous love—not excusing, not harshly condemning. He is the weeping God of Jonah 4 in human form. . . . [And] Jesus did not merely weep for us; he died for us. Jonah went outside the city, hoping to witness its condemnation, but Jesus Christ went outside the city to die on a cross to accomplish its salvation.” Timothy J. Keller, The Prodigal Prophet, pgs. 122, 123 & 124*

## APPENDIX 1: REASONABLE FAITH?

“There are...several documented accounts of people who have been swallowed by whales and large fish, and have lived to tell about it, even after several days. One species of fish, the "Sea Dog" (*Carcharodon carcharias*), is found in all warm seas, and can reach a length of 40 feet. In the year 1758, a sailor fell overboard from a boat in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by a sea dog. The captain of the vessel ordered a cannon on the deck to be fired at the fish, which vomited up the sailor alive and unharmed after it was struck.

Sperm whales can swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter. Entire skeletons of sharks up to sixteen feet in length have been found in them. In February of 1891, James Bartley, a sailor aboard the whaling ship "Star of the East," was swallowed by a whale in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands. He was within the whale for more than forty-eight hours, and after he was found inside the whale, which had been harpooned and brought aboard the whaling ship, it took him two weeks to recover from the ordeal. Sir Francis Fox wrote as follows about this:

Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not from lack of air. He remembers the sensation of being thrown out of the boat into the sea. . . . He was then encompassed by a great darkness and he felt he was slipping along a smooth passage of some sort that seemed to move and carry him forward. The sensation lasted but a short time and then he realized he had more room. He felt about him and his hands came in contact with a yielding slimy substance that seemed to shrink from his touch. It finally dawned upon him that he had been swallowed by the whale . . . he could easily breathe; but the heat was terrible. It was not of a scorching, stifling nature, but it seemed to open the pores of his skin and draw out his vitality. . . . His skin where it was exposed to the action of the gastric juice . . . face, neck and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment . . . (and) never recovered its natural appearance . . . (though otherwise) his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience.”

*The Princeton Theological Review* 25 © 1927, p636-638



# MEMORY VERSES

## **WEEK 1: JONAH 1:1-16 – RUNNING FROM GOD'S GRACE**

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup> If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

**Psalm 139:7-8**

## **WEEK 2: JONAH 1:17-2:10 – EXPERIENCING GOD'S GRACE THROUGH PRAYER**

<sup>9</sup> But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, "Salvation comes from the LORD."

**Jonah 2:9**

## **WEEK 3: JONAH 3 – RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE**

<sup>2</sup> 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' <sup>3</sup> Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through

it. **Jonah 3:2-3**

## **WEEK 4: JONAH 4 – WRESTLING WITH GOD'S GRACE**

<sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD, 'Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

**Jonah 4:2**