

DISCUSS

When we imagine the book of Jonah, most of us think immediately of his run-in with the large fish. But since Jonah’s time in the fish’s belly takes up so little of the story, David warned that if we fixate too much on it, we could miss a lot from the book that’s important. **How would you rate your familiarity with the book of Jonah? Have you ever read the entire book? If so, what aspects of the story stuck with you?**

Note: For a reading exercise covering the book of Jonah, see Go Deeper Section 1 at the end of this study.

David insisted that Jonah is a book that is startlingly relevant to our lives and the world around us. Jonah is a man just like us in a world similar to ours. **What are you hoping to take away from your study of the book of Jonah? What could you do to prepare your heart to receive what God will teach you through this study?**

Read Jonah 1:1–3.

The first words of the book of Jonah are startling. The passage gives no indication that Jonah was looking or listening for God. Nevertheless, “The word of the Lord came” to him. God, of his own volition, spoke directly to Jonah. And though we aren’t prophets in the same way as Jonah, God continues to speak to his people, most often through his written Word—the Bible. **What does it say about God that he chose to speak to Jonah? Do you ever wonder if God cares to speak to you? In what ways does it encourage you to know that God initiates conversation with his people?**

Verse 1 names Jonah as “Jonah the son of Amittai.” God wasn’t speaking blindly to whoever was in the vicinity to hear his voice. He had a specific message at a specific time for a specific person. While it might seem foreign to us today, God still speaks specific messages to us today. But how? **Can we hear God just like Jonah did? Are there other ways to hear a message from God? If so, how?**

In verse 2, we read that God was sending Jonah to Nineveh to “cry against it” (NASB) because the city’s wickedness had “come up before” him. Normally, God sent prophets to his own people. In this case, in a

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As David pointed out, Tarshish wasn't just far from Nineveh, it was a place where the people hadn't heard about or seen the glory of God. In today's language, we would call the people of Tarshish an unreached people group, or a community with no access to God's Word. Jonah was running from God to a godless place. **When have you been tempted to run from God to a godless place?**

In this session, David helped us see how similar we can be to Jonah. We disobey God's commands, step outside of his will, and even try to hide ourselves from him altogether. Acknowledging how like Jonah we are, David posed a handful of questions he encouraged us to ask ourselves. Discuss David's questions among your group: **Why do we disobey God? Do we not trust God? Do we think we know better than him? Do we simply prefer our own way to his? Are we afraid? Discuss the themes that emerge in your group's conversation.**

David explored our reluctance to share God's Word with others. Those of us who have received the gospel have been given the mandate to share it with others, especially those who've never heard it. But we often find talking about God difficult. **Have you ever stayed silent when you had the opportunity to share the gospel with someone else? For what reasons did you hold back? What steps could you take now to help you share God's Word next time?**

Jonah ran from the presence of the Lord, which, as we'll learn in another session, proved more difficult than he probably imagined. Whether in the bowels of a ship in the middle of the sea or in a land as far as Tarshish, God's presence was still there. And that's good news for Jonah, and for us. **In what ways does it encourage you to know that God is with you wherever you go?**

How aware are you of God's presence in everyday life? What can you do to be attuned to his presence during your day?

David closed this session by discussing the staggering number of people in the world who are considered unreached by the gospel—more than three billion! These people have never heard the good news, and they have no hope of hearing it unless Christians go to them and share God's message. And God has commanded us to go. **How familiar are you with the concept of unreached**

GO DEEPER

The Go Deeper section has two potential functions. It can supplement your small group discussion by providing extra discussion material. We've highlighted a place where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide.

But you can also use these sections as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting. Consider reading one section a day to deepen your study of the book of Jonah.

1. Swallow the book of Jonah whole.

One of the most tried-and-true ways to grow more into the likeness of Christ is to familiarize ourselves with his Word. We should read it, meditate on it, memorize it, and do so in large chunks. However, it's easy to get stuck in the habit of reading a verse here or a chapter there, sporadically jumping from one passage to the next.

What do your Bible reading habits currently look like? Do you tend to read large or small chunks of Scripture?

One way to push back against the tendency to read in small bits is to take whole books of the Bible and read them in one sitting. Since Jonah is a relatively short book, it's a great place to start. In the next few weeks, as you complete this study, set aside at least thirty minutes each week to read the book of Jonah in its entirety.

Reading books of the Bible in their entirety is beneficial in many ways. It helps us follow the author's argument more closely, notice important patterns in the story, and even retain what we're reading more completely. Reading whole books of the Bible is also similar to how the original readers would have interacted with the text. **What are some other benefits of reading whole books of the Bible? Have you ever read an entire book of the Bible in one sitting? If so, which one(s)? What was your experience like?**

Read Jonah 1–4 two times this week, and use the instructions and questions below to guide you.

In your first reading, read at your normal pace. Once you've completed your first pass, work to recall the story.

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What stood out to you the most about the story? How would you summarize the book of Jonah? What are the two or three main points you would emphasize in your retelling of the story?

As you read the story a second time, proceed at a slower pace. Move slowly from word to word, picking up the author’s cadence. Pay attention to punctuation, word tenses, and literary devices like metaphors, imagery, and motifs that stand out (Ex. Jonah went *down* to Joppa; he went *down* into the ship). **How did this second, slower reading add to your understanding of the story? What stood out in the second pass that you may have overlooked in the first? Would you summarize the book in a different way after your second reading? If so, what changes would you make?**

The Bible is a book rich with meaning, and we should savor it. One way to do that is to read it often and in big chunks. The habit of reading whole books at a time will help us not only savor the Word but be transformed by it.

How can you make the practice of reading whole books of the Bible a part of your regular reading routine?

2. *Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire*

In the book of Jonah, we learn that God is sending Jonah to a city called Nineveh. As modern readers, we may not be familiar with many ancient cities and empires we find throughout the Bible. But it can be an important addition to our Bible reading to learn about cities and civilizations like these when we encounter them in the text. Here is some basic information about the Assyrian Empire and Nineveh, its capital city.

Assyrian Empire: Facts and Figures

Era: Assyria’s history dates back at least to the fourteenth century BC, if not before. The events recorded in the book of Jonah, however, are believed to have taken place during the eighth century BC, when the Assyrian Empire was experiencing a period of strength and expansion.

Location: Assyria was located in northern Mesopotamia in the area that is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. The city of Nineveh (modern-day Mosul, Iraq) sat

the circumstances that led you to want to flee from God?

David responds to his own questions, and he does it in a way that answers them definitively.

First, he says in verse 8 that he cannot ascend high enough (“If I go up to heaven”) or descend low enough (“if I make my bed in Sheol”) to escape the presence of God (“you are there”). It’s not hard to believe that God is in heaven. But even in Sheol—a word that can mean the grave, hell, or the place of exile—God is there. **Does it encourage you to know that God is present even in circumstances that feel hellish? Have you ever experienced a situation that felt Sheol-like? To what degree did you sense God’s presence?**

David goes on. Not only can neither height nor depth separate us from God, but we can’t run far enough to the east or, like Jonah tried, far enough west to escape God. David’s language grows more intimate in verse 10: “Even there your hand will lead me; your right hand will hold on to me.” So, whether we’re running like Jonah or just feel distant from God, he is not only with us but he is leading us and holding us firmly in his grasp. **Are there moments in your life that you can look back to and see that God was leading you and protecting you, even though it didn’t feel like it at the time? How can remembering those moments encourage you to keep going when he seems distant?**

Finally, no amount of darkness can hide us from the presence of God. Whether we intentionally try to hide ourselves from God or it just seems like darkness is shrouding his view of us (and our view of him), God sees us—and he loves us. **What are the ways we attempt to block God’s view of us? Why do you think we’re so prone to hide from him?**

Sometimes we intentionally run from God like Jonah. We try to flee from his presence. Other times, we wonder if his presence can even be found. In either case, we can take heart and know that—whether height or depth, east or west, dark or light—nothing can separate us from his loving presence. Spend some time reflecting on the good news that God is with you and will never leave you. Consider what difference it makes in your life when you believe by faith that God is always close by.

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