Reader

The Book of Jonah

Session 1: Jonah 1:1–3

NOTE TO LEADER

We intentionally created this study guide with more than enough material so that you can pick the questions that work best for your group. Before your meeting, watch the video, read the study guide's corresponding session, and decide which questions you'd like to discuss. For more information on using this guide in your group, click the three lines in the menu bar and select How to Use This Guide. Thank you for choosing this study and for faithfully leading your group.

SESSION GOALS

Every session has a point—what each participant should walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: God wants us to obey his Word and spread it to people who have never heard it.

Head Change: To know that there are more than three billion people around the world who have never heard the message of Jesus, and God loves them.

Heart Change: To feel compassion for people who don't have access to God's Word.

Life Change: To obey God by using our time and resources to spread the gospel around the world to people who have never heard it.

OPEN

How do you respond when someone tells you what to do? Are you more prone to obey or disobey? Why?

For many of us, the last thing we want to hear is someone telling us what to do, whether a parent, friend, or boss. In fact, their instruction can inspire us to do the exact opposite, even when what they've asked of us is good and necessary.

In the book of Jonah's first few verses, we see Jonah responding to God's instructions in the exact opposite way he should. Though God was sending him to Nineveh, Jonah refused and headed as far in the opposite direction as he could. Pastor and author David Platt will show us in this first session of *The Book of Jonah* that we're not too different from Jonah—we disobey God's Word just like Jonah did. But God wants us to obey him and help others do the same.

READ

Read Jonah 1:1–3.

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in David Platt's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions.

Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh?

How did Jonah respond to God's command that he go to Nineveh?

Why does the author of Jonah wait until chapter four to share why Jonah ran?

Show Session 1: Jonah 1:1–3 (10 minutes).

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 stunning act of grace, he was sending a prophet to another people. In what ways does Jonah's call to Nineveh reveal God's grace toward the Ninevites? In what ways are God's words of correction an act of grace toward us?

Note: For more information on Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire, see Go Deeper Section 2 at the end of this study.

God was sending Jonah to a nation known for its brutality, and he had a hard message for them. So, it's understandable that Jonah wouldn't want to go. If we're honest, we can closely relate to Jonah—we often don't want to obey God. **Have you ever wanted to disobey God? What instruction did you not want to obey? For what reasons?**

Verse 3 describes Jonah's response to God's instruction: He fled from the presence of the Lord. David said we will learn later in the book why Jonah fled. But until then, we can see him going to great lengths to disobey God's command to visit Nineveh. **Have you ever run from God? What prompted you to run? How long did your attempt to run last? How did it end?**

Note: For an exploration of Psalm 139 and what it says about our attempts to flee from God's presence, see Go Deeper Section 3 at the end of this study.

David noted that "if God didn't love [Nineveh], he wouldn't send his Word to them." Even though the Assyrians in Nineveh exercised great wickedness, God loved them still. God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness, even toward sinful people like the Ninevites. And like us. **If God loves sinful people, how ought we to relate to sinful people? How does God's love for sinful people apply to us?**

Instead of going northeast to Nineveh, Jonah went as far in the opposite direction as he could—to Tarshish. He boarded a ship in Joppa, paid out of pocket for a ride, and sailed west—taking cover in the bowels of the ship. He took great lengths to evade the will of God. Why do you think we often go to such lengths to evade God's will and go our own way? Are there specific commands that you're most prone to disobey? What are they, and why is it difficult for you to follow them?

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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

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people groups? What emotions does it stir in you to know that there are thousands of people groups around the world that are yet to be reached with the gospel? What could you do to participate in bringing God's Word to unreached people?

God gives specific commands to his people. And whether it involves crossing the street or crossing oceans, we are expected to obey his commands. One of God's most emphatic commands is that we are to share his Word with other people, especially those who haven't heard it before. What role can you play in spreading God's message? How can you prepare yourself to say yes to God?

LAST WORD

God spoke to Jonah. But Jonah ran from God's voice and God's presence. God was sending him to a people who needed the news he was meant to deliver. And instead of obeying the word of the Lord, Jonah disobeyed, fled, and hid.

We can be a lot like Jonah, can't we? The temptation to disobey God always knocks at the door, and we can often give in to that temptation. Even though we're instructed by God to share his news with others, we, like Jonah, sometimes run from the task and run from God. But we have a message of hope to share, and there are billions of people who need to hear it. So, what's stopping us?

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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

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 on the eastern bank of the Tigris River—more than five

hundred miles northeast of Israel.

Size: God called Nineveh, Assyria's capital, a "great city." Its footprint was estimated to be at least 1,850 acres and the perimeter of its walls is thought to have spanned about 7.5 miles. Experts estimate that Nineveh's population during Jonah's time would have been around 120,000.

Culture: Nineveh was known as a royal and luxurious city, containing such things as public squares, parks, botanical gardens, a zoo, and even a library.

Reputation: As an empire, Assyria was known as a vile and vicious people. As it expanded and conquered other nations, Assyria would use great brutality, killing and enslaving people without mercy. They were infamously cruel and fearsome.

In what ways does this information about Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire enhance your reading of the book of Jonah? Does it help you understand Jonah's reluctance to travel to Nineveh? If so, how?

What modern-day cities or countries remind you of Nineveh and Assyria? What do you think God could do in those places if we go to them instead of fleeing from them?

3. Where can I flee from your presence?

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, and he responded by running. Jonah took great pains to shield himself from God's view (down to Joppa, down into the ship) and flee from his presence (to Tarshish by way of the sea). At least, he tried.

Despite Jonah's effort—and ours, if we're honest—the Bible speaks plainly about our ability to hide from God. We can't do it. Read Psalm 139:7–12.

After opening Psalm 139 with a brief survey of God's knowledge about him, King David, the author of this psalm, turns in verse 7 and asks two questions: "Where can I go to escape your Spirit?" and "Where can I flee if om your presence?" Have you ever asked these questions (or some version of them)? If so, what were



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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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