

# YOBL

## Year of Biblical Literacy

## Week 20: Prophetic Rewind, Part 4 (Jonah)

### Daily Reading for Week

- Amos 6-9, Psalm 127
- Obadiah, Psalm 128
- **Jonah**, Psalm 129
- Micah 1-4, Psalm 130
- Micah 5-7, Psalm 131
- Nahum, Psalm 132
- Habakkuk, Psalm 133
- Videos: Obadiah, **Jonah**, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk

### Focus of time together

To understand one of the most unique books in the Old Testament and to see what it reveals about our own hearts and God's surprising grace.

### Opening Prayer

### Connecting Exercise

Share in one minute what you remember or know about the book of Jonah and what you may have been taught or assumed its meaning or moral was.

### Intro to Discussion

This week, we have begun reading a number of the minor, pre-exile prophets. These prophets were sent by God to very specific people (often kings) or situations to speak words of warning and comfort and to encourage Israel to covenant faithfulness. During our time, we will focus in on the most unique and strange of the minor prophetic books, Jonah.

Jonah begins like most prophetic books in the Old Testament *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai...* but as you continue reading you notice right away this is less a book of prophecy and more a book about a prophet. This is a narrative story and a very strange one at that. Scholars disagree as to whether this is a story describing actual events or if Jonah is an allegory contrasting Israel's hard-heartedness and God's abundant love. Jonah was certainly an actual historical figure (we met him in 2 Kings

14:25 when he was prophesying a message of land expansion/prosperity to Jeroboam II, one of Israel's most evil kings) but it remains unclear if these events happened to him or if he is being used as a stand-in for Israel here. Regardless, most scholars agree the book of Jonah is written as a parody or satire of prophetic books — albeit one that highlights, as the other prophets do, Israel's (and humanity's) stubborn heart and God's patience, judgement, mercy, and steadfast love.

From the onset, nothing in this story acts as it is supposed to. Think of it like a sketch where the characters and scene are familiar but everything is backwards. Jonah is called by God to preach a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire and the most powerful and brutal empire that the ancient world had known at the time. Instead of obeying and setting off for Nineveh, Jonah, God's chosen prophet, boards a ship going to Tarshish (modern-day Spain), which is the exact opposite direction of where God told him to go. The opening line of Jonah is a punchline: Jonah (whose name means "dove", an Old Testament symbol of purity) son of Amittai (whose name means "faithfulness") within 3 verses proves to be faithless, disobedient, and impure in every way.

As the story progresses, we see the character of Jonah and the character of God unveiled. Jonah, God's chosen prophet, is reluctant, bitter, and literally curses God for God's steadfast love and mercy. God on the other hand is exceedingly patient and merciful with all parties in the story. God calls Jonah to tell the most violent and powerful empire in the world to repent of their violence and evil. Jonah runs away. God pursues. Jonah reluctantly preaches a 5-word sermon with no mention at all of God in the hopes that Nineveh won't repent and be destroyed. Yet the people of Nineveh repent. Jonah throws a temper tantrum because his message actually worked and God patiently reasons with him like a parent with a child.

The book of Jonah reveals the confounding stubbornness of humanity and the equally confounding love of God. It is a satire meant to expose the reader's own hard heart while we laugh (and you are meant to laugh) at Jonah's. It uses exaggeration, surprise, drama and almost comic-book-like imagery (everything is either huge, "great city," "great wind," "great fish," or tiny, "the worm") to create a story where the God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love is put on full display. And in doing so, the book of Jonah anticipates Jesus' command to love even our enemies while confronting us with just how hard it is to actually do that.

## **Whole Group Discussion (45 minutes)**

### **Questions for Basic Understanding**

*These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.*

1. Thinking back to how most prophets in the Old Testament are portrayed, why is Jonah's immediate disobedience in v. 1-3 so surprising?
2. The Assyrians were known for their brutal and shocking violence. They regularly skinned people alive in the cities they conquered and would eventually do the same to Israel. Think of them as the Nazis of the ancient world. Hearing this, why does Jonah refuse to go where God wants him to go?
3. Read Jonah 4:1-2. Is it surprising that this is why Jonah is so angry with God, and not because he is afraid of the Assyrians?

4. How is Jonah's character consistent with the character of Israel and its leaders/people throughout the Old Testament?
5. In the next few weeks we will leave the pre-exile prophets and dive into Old Testament wisdom literature. As you recall reading through the history books and pre-exile prophetic books in the past two months, how does the book of Jonah creatively encapsulate the condition of Israel before its exile to Assyria and Babylon?

## Questions for Listening to Scripture

*These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.*

Again and again in the prophets, we hear of God's desire for Israel to turn from their disobedience and be faithful to him. In Jonah, we see God directly interacting with a character who is actively disobedient, even antagonistic towards God. What surprises you about God's reaction to Jonah?

## Questions for Interacting with Scripture

*These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.*

1. What part of Jonah did you find most surprising? Perplexing?
2. Was there a particular part of Jonah you found funny?

## Questions for Self Examination

*These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware of who we are in the light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.*

It takes being at the lowest of low, quite literally the bottom of the ocean, for Jonah to come to a place where he prays Jonah 2. Read Jonah 2. Can you remember times in your life where you similarly were brought low and prayed a similar prayer? What was God's response to you?

## Small Group Discussion (25 minutes)

### Questions for Self Examination

*These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware of who we are in the light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.*

Jonah's rage at God for being "merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster" is supposed to make us laugh but it should also reveal an uncomfortable truth about our own hearts. Take a few minutes to sit in silent reflection with these questions:

1. Are there any people or people groups I feel do not deserve God's grace, mercy, and love?
  2. Why do I feel they do not deserve it?
  3. On a more macro, cultural level, are there any people or people groups our western society says do not deserve God's grace, mercy, and love whether explicitly or implicitly in the way it treats them?
  4. If I saw God being gracious, merciful, and loving with them, how would I honestly react?
  5. How am I feeling now as I observe these ugly parts of myself and our culture
- Confess your answers with your small group.

## **Closing Prayer**

End your time praying together, confessing the ways your hearts are like Jonah's and asking the Holy Spirit to transform your hearts toward people you find hard to love.