

TUG ^{OF} WAR



aligning with mercy

Tug of War: Aligning with Mercy

A study in Jonah

Week 1

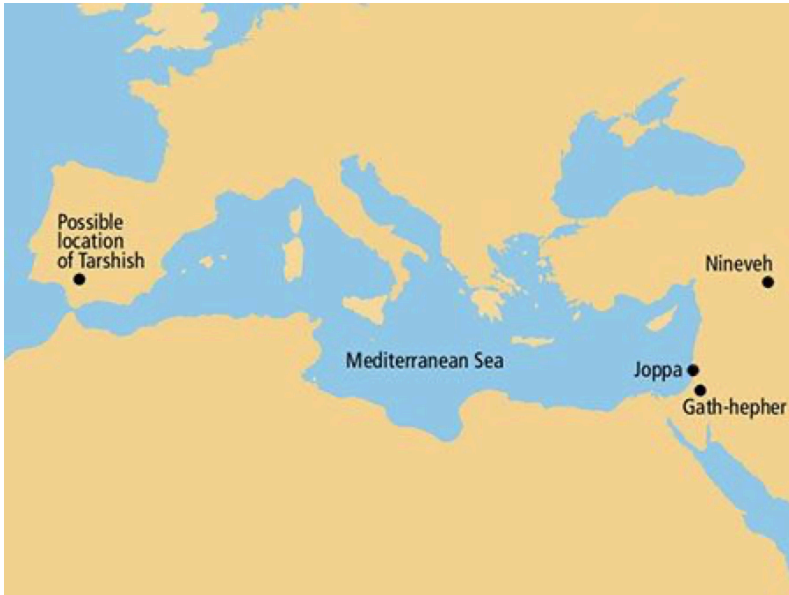
Jonah 1:1-3

1. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: 2. "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." 3. But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord."

Jonah is a story that has been told for years in children's ministry programs around the world. Often the children's version of the story takes away from what is really happening in the story.

Jonah hears from God, quite clearly, telling him what he is supposed to do. How many times have you wished to hear something, anything from God? You wanted God to show you a clear path forward or backward or make clear what decision you should make. Jonah knows exactly what God is asking Him to do yet he runs away.

And not just runs away but literally leaves for a destination as far away from where God asked him to go as was possible at this time period.



In the 8th century B.C., when the book of Jonah was written, Tarshish might have been the end of the earth. It was the last place on the planet to which he could get a ticket. It's a like a runaway that makes their way to the bus station and asks how far away \$53.72 will take them.

There are really two things at play in this part of the story of Jonah.

How do you hear from God? Then, what do you do once you have heard from Him?

Discuss:

1. Talk about a time in your life when you felt like you received a message from God?
2. When did you recognize it as a message from God?
3. How did you know it was God communicating with you?
4. What did you do once you realized it was a message from God? Did you obey or run away?
5. How would you describe responding in obedience to God?
6. What was your motive for responding in obedience to God? Did your obedience come from a heart desiring to obey God because of your love for Him or was it from a heart desiring the blessings God might give you in exchange for your obedience? Were you desiring to give to God a heart of obedience, or were you desiring to receive blessing from God because of your obedience?
7. Have you ever tried to run from God before? How did that go? Read Psalm 139:7-12 out loud, together. Discuss.

Week 2

Jonah 1:4-16

4. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. **5.** All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. **6.** The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

7. Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. **8.** So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

9. He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

10. This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

11. The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

12. “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

13. Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. **14.** Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.” **15.** Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. **16.** At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

Have you ever heard of the term, anxious response? How do you show up when something happening in your life makes you uncomfortable, nervous, or anxious? There are a number of different anxious responses that can happen. You can respond with anger or rage. You can respond by over functioning and try to take over and control everything that’s

happening. You can respond by under functioning and just shut down and not face the world.

Some of the sailors took to over functioning. They started throwing cargo overboard before they thought about what the problem really was. They tried to row back to land under their own power against what God was trying to do. They thought they could battle against the will of God.

It would seem that Jonah responded to the anxious situation by under functioning. He literally went down to the belly of the ship, while the ship was in chaos, and fell asleep.

Another thing to learn from this passage is owning what's ours to own. Jonah finally owns up to the fact that his choices are causing the turmoil they are experiencing. Looking for someone or something else to blame can be a societal epidemic. We are doomed to failure if we blame other people or circumstances for

the choices we make and we don't learn to own our part in the results we are getting. We need this honesty for ourselves and we need it in order to love well those around us.

With Jonah owning his part of the chaos, he gave all those involved another solution to the problem they were facing. Jonah's honesty offered a new freedom

to his cohorts. Hiding this information from them would cause them to continue to struggle and be hurt with no end in sight.

Discuss:

1. Think about the last thing that happened in your life that caused an anxious response. What was your default response?
2. Jonah shut down when he got anxious. Have you ever chosen that before? To just totally shut down and back away from all of society?
3. The sailors with Jonah on the boat responded to an anxiety producing situation by trying to fix everything on their own. Have you ever chosen that response?
4. When Jonah shared who his God was, the sailors were terrified. What do you think the sailor's fear was based on?
5. How does it make you feel to see that God sent a violent storm to change Jonah's path?
6. When Jonah was thrown into the sea, it instantly became calm. This happened another time in the Bible. This caused the sailors to have great fear. How do you feel about a God who can do that?

Week 3

Jonah 1:17 - 2:10

1:17. Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

2:1. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. **2.** He said: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

3. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

4. I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’

5. The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

6. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God brought my life up from the pit.

7. “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple

8. “Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them.

9. 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.’”

10. And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

The Bible is full of stories that are pretty difficult to believe. A creator God, a virgin birth, and a resurrected Savior. The story of Jonah is known mostly for the friendly fish that swallowed up Jonah once he was thrown into the sea.

That’s hard to believe. But that’s the thing with miracles. They are miracles because they aren’t possible. If the story was that another boat picked up Jonah, that would be unlikely, coincidental, but not necessarily miraculous.

But our God is a God of miracles. This is the type of thing that He does. And it shouldn’t be that surprising. God will do anything it takes to bring His people to himself.

Sometimes we can get stuck in this story on the vehicles God uses with Jonah rather than the purpose behind them. God wasn’t trying to perform a miracle. He was trying to get Jonah back on track.

God wasn't trying to destroy a boat headed for Tarshish. He was trying to get Jonah's attention.

The story of Jonah is one of relentless pursuit of someone who is obviously lost. This is who God is. This is what He always does. He's consistent and unchanging. You can always count on Him to do more than we deserve.

Once God does what He has always done, then how are we going to respond?

God sets up boundaries or guardrails for us in our lives, just like He did for Jonah. How do you respond when you slam into a guardrail that God has set up for you?

In everyday normal life when you slam into a guardrail what do you do? You pull the car off the guardrail and back into the roadway. No one slams into a guardrail and then holds their car into it thinking you may just defeat the guardrail.

But in life we do it all the time. We bump into a boundary God has given us and we believe we know better. Everything will be fine. We know what we really need and we know how this can work for us. So we keep trying to push through the boundary. Despite the results.

So what does it take to get us to try something different? Often it takes a painful or difficult experience to completely get our attention and move us off of our trajectory.

Discuss:

1. What story in the Bible is the most difficult for you to believe?
2. Do you think hard to believe biblical stories are a barrier to believing in Jesus for people who are far from God?
3. Describe a time in your life where you were running into guardrails that God had set up for you.
4. What finally convinced you to change direction? Why did that work for you?
5. Do you think you could have changed without crashing into the guardrails?

Week 4

Jonah 3:1-10

1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: **2.** “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3. 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. **4.** Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” **5.** The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6. When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. **7.** This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. **8.** But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. **9.** Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion

turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

10. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Have you ever heard of a mulligan? A do-over? A second chance?

There’s a song from a few years back that talks about God being a God of second chances. Part of the chorus goes like this, “You’re the God of all the ages; Who are we that you would save us; We’re in awe before you now; and our hearts are crying out.”

This sounds like a song of the Ninevites. They weren’t just far from God, they didn’t even know or care that God exists. They were minding their own business, living a fine pagan life, when this weird, crazy prophet guy shows up. And he shares the world’s shortest sermon.

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

That simple message caused a huge city to totally transform, basically over a long weekend. The response the king of Nineveh asked for was a response of mourning, fasting and repentance.

That's like letting go of a huge rubber band. A huge opposite response than what one would expect. This response in reaction to a simple message from God through Jonah.

That's Nineveh's response, but it was Jonah who got the second chance. God let Jonah basically start over. Chapter 3 talks like chapter 1 and 2 didn't happen. God just asked Jonah to go to Nineveh.

That's such a beautiful picture of who God really is. God didn't shame Jonah, didn't even bring up what happened the last time He asked Jonah to do something. He just moved forward and made the same request. This time Jonah responded differently. He went into the city of Nineveh and shared the word God had given him.

And Nineveh responded to the word of God, time to celebrate!

Discuss:

1. Describe how you feel when you hear the word obedience.
2. Can you describe a time in your life where you were challenged by God to be obedient and you struggled to follow through?

3. In this passage, are you surprised at how simple the message is that God wanted Jonah to share?
4. Why is a fast a good way to lean into a season of repentance?
5. Have you ever fasted before? Why?
6. What would encourage you to fast again?
7. Do you think the fast was an effective tool for the Ninevites? Could it be for you?

Week 5

Jonah 4:1-4

1. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. **2.** 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. **3.** Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

4. But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

You might have to turn back to verse 10 in chapter 3 to remember what Jonah thinks is wrong.

God asked Jonah to warn the Ninevites. Jonah eventually did it. When he did, they responded to God’s message immediately. That couldn’t have gone any better.

But Jonah is not excited about it. He’s disgusted and frustrated. He says he knew this is what God was going to do the whole time. And then Jonah gets dramatic. He says, “I would rather die than see You relent and not destroy the Ninevites.”

Mercy is such a powerful weapon.

We beg for mercy for ourselves. We celebrate the mercy God gives us. Sometimes we even expect God to give us mercy. When mercy is really difficult to deal with is when it's offered to someone else.

Or even harder, when mercy is offered to our enemies. Our hated rivals. Can God's mercy really extend to them as well? Is that what we signed up for?

Justice is a funny thing in our minds. Most of us have a sense of justice we have developed based on a set of principles we have adopted. The justice we defend makes sense to us and when we are on our own, that works for us.

We have decided which offenses deserve a second chance and which ones don't. We decide who can be rehabilitated and who shouldn't even get the chance.

For certain groups of people we have identified, compassion for them is impossible. It's unjust in our mind to not punish a person because of what they have done. Grace and mercy must be doled out in a way that we decide, according to our internal parameters.

And when that's not how it goes, anger is our response. Maybe a "hissy-fit" is a better description. If only everything just went the way I wanted it, everyone would be better off.

Discuss:

1. Can you describe a time when you think God got it wrong? He let a person off the hook or showed grace or mercy that you think went too far?
2. Have you ever thought that God went too far in the grace and mercy He gave to you? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Jonah had such a visceral response to God's mercy for the Ninevites?
4. Can you think of a group of people you don't believe deserves mercy from God? Is this hard or easy to do?
5. Is there a group that came to mind immediately with the above question but you are afraid to say it? Why?

Week 6

Jonah 4:5-11

5. Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. **6.** Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. **7.** But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. **8.** When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

9. But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

10. But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. **11.** And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Have you learned yet, how you learn? Seems like a silly question but the reality is all of us learn differently. Some of us learn best by reading. Some learn best by listening. Some learn the best by writing information down. Most of us learn all when learn experientially.

How to cook an egg is something that you can read about. You can have someone tell you how to do it. You can take notes on how to cook an egg. But to truly know and be confident that you can cook an egg, you have to cook an egg. You have to try it. You have to experience it.

Sometimes the lessons we need to learn are harder and more corrective in nature, but the concept is eerily similar. Often, the natural consequences of our actions can be wonderful teachers and we get to these wonderful teachers through challenge, boundary testing and defiance. Sound familiar? Here's an example. You get up in the morning, ready to leave the house, and look at the weather. It says "It's 18 degrees and breezy". Someone in your house hears you getting ready to leave and says, "Hey, make sure you wear a coat today, it's going to be cold all day."

You leave the house without a coat because you won't have to be outside much. It will be fine. You drive a few miles when you hear a ding in your car. You are low on gas. You have to get gas. You pick a gas station and pump. You hop out, answer 23 questions at the pump, click on the nozzle and hop back in your car. As soon as the door closes, you hear the nozzle click off. So you get out and set it again. Each time it clicks off. You end up having to stand out in the cold and wind and hold the nozzle as your tank slowly fills. You leave cold.

The cold you feel is a natural consequence to the choice you made.

Whatever it takes for us to learn, God is willing to use to teach us. This example is where God is trying to get to Jonah's sense of justice, his sense of right and wrong.

God tries to show Jonah that it seems pretty silly that he values a plant that grew up out of nowhere more than he values a plant that grew up out of nowhere more than he values humans that had been created in the image of God.

This is such a beautiful example of God's mercy. God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh and to Jonah. Jonah was out of bounds in how he responded to what God did, but God didn't smite

him; He approached him and taught him compassionately.

Thankfully that's how God treats us as well. With much more mercy and compassion than we ever deserve.

Discuss:

1. Where do you find yourself in this part of the story? Are you like the people in the city going through life unaware of what calamity has just been avoided? Are you like Jonah with a sense of righteous injustice for letting some bad people off the hook? Are you like God, full of mercy and compassion? Somewhere else?
2. All people are created in the image of God. All. How does that make you feel? Are you comfortable with really "bad" people having been created in the image of God?
3. Have you ever considered yourself on even ground with really "bad" people? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of a time where you were angry with God?
5. What did you learn about God through that experience?
6. Do you know what kind of a learner you are?

7. What's one thing you want to commit to learning this year?