

Jonah - 2

The Adventures of Jonah



BACKGROUND FROM THE AUTHOR

In this first look at Jonah make sure the group understands that the discussion of whether Jonah is literally true is not the central question of this study. For that reason, the exploration and discussion will not focus there. The group members are free, of course, to believe whatever they will. But the premise of this study is that Jonah is a story with a most specific purpose, and although the story presents Jonah as a prophet, the actual prophet is the author. This study focuses our whole attention on looking at the book from this point of view. Any question or discussion that attempts to draw the discussion back to the “literal versus story” issue is off topic and detracts from the study's purpose.

Help the group look for God's presence throughout this book; God is everywhere – no, really, everywhere. Jonah has face-to-face discussions with God in the same way that Job has discussions with God. Notice that Jonah does not seem at all in awe of God, but as with everything else, Jonah is irritated by God. He ignores God at will, essentially telling him, “You may not have noticed God, but I'm not listening.” Jonah does not argue with God; he simply leaves. His lack of awe and respect for God is apparently the way the author of Jonah views the Israelites and their leaders. For throughout this short story, Jonah is a stand-in for Israel and its leaders, most likely after their return from exile. The disrespectful things Jonah says and does are astounding, yet God is patient with him—very patient.

There are a number of things about God that Jonah dislikes. In Session 4 Jonah will tell God exactly what those things are. One of God's "flaws" is his mercy, which Jonah sees as a weakness. It will soon become only too clear that of all the people in the story, Jonah is the one most in need of mercy. Yet Jonah would prefer a god of vengeance and retribution.

Spend some time with the concept of water as chaos, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. Water represents chaos to the Israelites. The human inability to control it and its unstoppable power are its major sources of terror. Begin, perhaps, with a discussion of Genesis 1:1-3 and/or Job 38:8-11. God's control of chaos, therefore, is the prime event in God's work of creating humanity as well as all creation. When the opening words of Genesis are read, "When God began to create," it would appear that "the deep," "the waters," are preexistent. Then God did not create the world out of nothing. In the words of Professor Theodore Hiebert, "Creation is thus understood as ordering, as imposing a design on formlessness and chaos."¹ All God's creating is a banishing of chaos. This reading is still being argued by biblical theologians.

The Mesopotamian creation stories, including Babylon's, predate Genesis. They concern Tiamat, the monstrous chaos god of the ocean and her husband Apu, god of freshwater. At one point Tiamat is killed and her body is split to make the sky and the earth. Tiamat is also known as Rahab. This is the name that appears in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Isaiah 51:9:

Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the LORD!
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
who pierced the dragon?

Jonah spends a lot of time in and near the water. It is not only that he's having a rough time with the elements however. We might conclude that Jonah's life is in chaos. He appears to be angry and frustrated and out of sync with his neighbors, some of whom he would like to see dead, and with his God, whom he thinks is not doing the job properly, and with himself, for he refuses to stand back to look at himself as God sees him. Jonah seems to see his beliefs as infallible.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). Theodore Hiebert, "Excursus: Creation: Ordering Chaos," 5.

Help the learners see that the book of Jonah is more than a story about a runaway prophet. This book is challenging us to look inside ourselves and our communities to find the chaos—the unresolved anger, fear, confusion, and the desire for revenge—that is there.

Right from the start, this book draws a contrast between the people Jonah sees as pagans and Jonah himself. Remember, Jonah is a stand-in for the Israelite people and their isolationist leaders. Because Jonah is the only Israelite in the story, the post-exile readers were left with no one else with whom to identify. They were stuck with seeing themselves as Jonah in the story. Readers today might consider how their faith communities are stand-ins for Jonah.

In every encounter Jonah has with non-Israelites, beginning with the sailors, their actions prove to be more ethical, more pious than Jonah's. This raises a new topic for consideration. Does our own faith community see the worship and practices of non-Christians as being valuable and important? More than a few people believe that if you are not "Christian" God has no use for you. Does God accept the worship that is offered by non-Christian people? In Jonah these people show by their actions the state of their hearts. Yet even after the sailors have done everything they could to save Jonah, he prays from the belly of the fish, "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you" (Jonah 2:8–9). His smugness in 1:9 as he tells the sailors what a mighty God he serves contradicts his actions, for he is on board precisely because he does not intend to serve God! It is the "pagan" sailors who fear and worship Jonah's God.

In all of this, do not neglect the humor. This is a ridiculous story. It begins in 1:3 when God tells Jonah to go one way, and without a single word, Jonah heads in the opposite direction. He's going to leave God's jurisdiction. Even at this point, the readers would be shocked, then perhaps amused that Jonah thinks he can "leave town" and be safe from God. Things will only become crazier as the captain of the ship orders the Israelite prophet to pray. Instead of simply plucking Jonah from the waves, God has a fish swallow him and then vomit him back to the same place he started. Face it, travel by fish vomiting is not dignified. Neither God nor Jonah mentions the fish after Jonah lands. God simply repeats what he said the first time. Jonah does what he did the first time—he leaves without a word to God. But this time he goes to Nineveh. One fish-vomit arrival is apparently one too many.

God is not being mocked in this story. God retains all of God's dignity. It is the people of God who take a beating. In the person of Jonah, they are forced to look into a mirror to see how foolish they have become.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to accomplish the following:

1. To read a book of the Bible as more than literal fact.
2. Consider some of the many ways the concept of "chaos" describes people's lives.
3. Explore ways in which all people try to hide from or ignore God.
4. Consider God's relationship with those who do not share our religious beliefs.

Resources You May Need

- Copies of Worksheets 2A and 2B
- Cartoons that show us ourselves or show God and humans interacting

Leadership Strategy

Setting the Stage

▣ Have slide #20, the title slide for this session projected as group members enter.

1. Welcome the group. Thank the munchy provider.

Ask people to share their joys and concerns if they wish, then ▣ project slides #21–24 with Psalm 25:1–7 or provide copies and say it as a responsive prayer. You may ask for a volunteer to read the part of the leader, or you may read it yourself.

Leader: To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

All: **O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.**

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

**Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.**

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

**Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.**

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
**according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD! Amen**

OR

You or a prepared group member may offer a spontaneous prayer.

2. ■ Project slide #25 of “Jonah and the Whale” by Pieter Lastman, and ask the following questions. In small groups, have each member answer the question of their choice from these below that you have posted on the board or newsprint:

If you have never read much in the Bible, was the experience of reading it in preparation for this session what you expected? Why or why not?

In what ways does the book of Jonah differ from other Scripture you have previously read?

Give each person about two minutes to answer. People may always pass. No one has to speak.

Bring the group together to share some of their thoughts and insights. List their answers (just with one or two reminder words, not their whole sentences). If literalism has been an issue in your group, ask a couple of questions to see if they are finding new ideas in this reading experience.

AND/OR

3. Gather cartoons that show us as ourselves, or show God and humans interacting. One source is the series of cartoon books by Doug Marlette including *Preacher*, *Just a Simple Country Preacher*, and *There's No Business Like Soul Business*. These are cartoons about Rev. Will B Dunn.² Choose cartoons that satirize our faults and flaws. Hand them out to the small groups. Have each group read all of their cartoons and pick one that they feel strikes 'close to home'. Discuss the serious problem that is being highlighted.

Exploring the Scripture

1. ■ Project slide #26 of Jonah being tossed overboard. As a group, discuss chapter 1 of the book of Jonah (Session 2). Incorporate some of these questions and ideas:

How many had never read Jonah before? (show of hands)

What information did you glean from this reading? What new ideas?

How would you classify the book of Jonah—what kind of literature is it?

What did you think about the book?

Where did you see Jonah in need of mercy and/or forgiveness? Where in this chapter did you see Jonah receiving mercy—even if he didn't know it?

What are some examples of unrecognized mercy and forgiveness we receive individually or as a community?

These are only suggestions. If the group is having a valuable discussion, simply guide it. If necessary, slow down the person who is contributing too much.

2. Hand out Worksheet 2A, "Chaos Quotes." Let people work on this individually. After 7–10 minutes, call time. Bring group together. Share answers. If no one mentions it, comment on Jonah's faith in the chaos of the death and disorder that he wishes on his enemies as blocking trust in the only one capable of bringing order out of chaos.

AND

² Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee, published *Preacher* and *Just a Simple Country Preacher*, 1984 and 1985 respectively. *There's No Business Like Soul Business* was published by Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 494 Amour Circle NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 1987. The Rev. Will B. Dunn was also a character in the comic strip "Kudzu," also written by Doug Marlette.

3. In pairs or threes, have people make a list of how folks try to ignore or hide from God. Which ways are they familiar with? Combine their lists on a piece of newsprint or poster board. Put it up for everyone to see as they leave.
4. Hand out copies Worksheet 2B, "Does God Care About Them?" In groups of 4 or more, the group works together on Part A. Then in Part B one half of each small group should work on Matthew 25:31–42, the other half on Isaiah 2:2–4. When finished, each half should share their text and conversation with the other half of the group.

Call time and bring the groups back together for discussion.

Was there any one question that concerned them more than the others? If so, which one? The purpose of this exercise is not to come to definite conclusions, but to perhaps break open resistance to contemplating this kind of question.

OR

If time is short, answer the questions as one group, asking which two or three questions they would most like to discuss.

Closing

1. ■ Project slide #27 or look at page 13 of their Resource Book. Here is a suggestion of what Nineveh may have looked like immediately after Jonah's "sermon" in next week's reading. Ask for captions for it. Take 3–4 answers. Is there a caption that anyone can come up with that points to the theology behind this part of the story, such as "Our enemies are also God's children and God's concern"? If possible, hang the picture next to last week's.
2. ■ Project slides #28–30. Look at and/or sing or listen to a recording of the first three verses of the Navy hymn:

Eternal Father, Strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty Ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;

O hear us when we cry to thee,
for those in peril on the sea.

O Christ! Whose voice the waters heard
And hushed their raging at Thy word,
Who walked'st on the foaming deep,
and calm amidst its rage didst sleep;
Oh hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea!

Most Holy spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion, peace;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea!³

OR

Close with your own prayer.

Looking Ahead

Invite someone to lead the closing prayer for the next session.

³ Text by William Whiting. <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq53-1.htm>

CHAOS QUOTES

“I accept chaos, I'm not sure whether it accepts me.”

Bob Dylan, “Bringing It All Back Home” (1965)

“Out of chaos God made a world, and out of high passions comes a people.”

Lord Byron (1788–1824)

“Everybody's a mad scientist, and life is their lab. We're all trying to experiment to find a way to live, to solve problems, to fend off madness and chaos.”

David Cronenberg, quoted in *Fresh Print Magazine*, January 2, 2014

“Chaos in the midst of chaos isn't funny, but chaos in the midst of order is.”

Steve Martin, Biography, IMDb.com

“The battlefield is a scene of constant chaos. The winner will be the one who controls that chaos, both his own and the enemies.” **Napoleon Bonaparte** (1769–1821)

“Any change is resisted because bureaucrats have a vested interest in the chaos in which they exist.” **Richard M. Nixon**, US president (1913–1994)

“Art, in itself, is an attempt to bring order out of chaos.”

Stephen Sondheim, quoted in *A Life in the Arts*, Theatrical Intelligence, July 15, 2013

“[Horror fiction] shows us that the control we believe we have is purely illusory, and that every moment we teeter on chaos and oblivion.”

Clive Barker, Introduction to Horror section, *Extreme Canvas*, 2000

“Stop blaming outside circumstances for your inside chaos.”

Steve Maraboli, *Unapologetically You: Reflections on Life and the Human Experience*, 2013

“Chaos is more freedom; in fact, total freedom. But no meaning.”

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, 2014

“The ocean pulsed outside our window. The sound of the waves crashing on the rocks below usually calmed me down, but the fear and chaos that were tangled in my mind made that an impossibility.” **Chelsie Shakespeare**, *The Pull*, 2012

“But when the world is, indeed, in chaos, then an affirmation of cosmos becomes essential.”

Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, 1995

Do any of these quotes say something to you about Jonah's attitude and his situation or about the situation and attitudes of the Israelites, as a community, after the exile? Which one(s), and why?

What do you think might be the source of Jonah's or the Israelites' 'chaos'? Does today's cartoon give you any clues?

Which quote is your favorite? Why?

DOES GOD CARE ABOUT THEM?

Part A

In the book of Jonah, those who are not of Jonah's faith appear to be more kind and more concerned with God than does Jonah. Yet Jonah is supposed to represent the faith of the Israelites, the writers of the Hebrew Bible. All the others are what Jonah would call "pagans," those who worship gods who are not the true God.

What is the relationship between God and those who do not profess our faith? Here are some springboards from the book of Jonah to begin your discussion.

1. Skim Jonah 1:8–16. Does it seem that God is concerned about the lives of the sailors? What in the text backs up your answer? Note that the sailors are converted in 1:16; they "feared the LORD...and offered sacrifice" but not until they had been saved from the sea.
2. Where in the book of Jonah does God show his concern for the people (and animals) of Nineveh? What is it that God wants from them? Why? Does "repent" mean "convert" here, or "change the way you are living"?
3. Read Psalm 145:8–9. To whom does the word "all" apply?

Part B

Read one of the following texts as determined by your small group. Then answer the questions below it.

Matthew 25:31–42

Notes:

- a) The word “nations” (v. 32) translates the Greek word “ethne” — “ethnics” and has the sense here of all those who do not belong to the faith. This is the “judgment” of the rest of the world.
- b) These people are accepted not because they professed faith in God or in any religious or spiritual tenet but because they were doing the works of self-giving love.
- c) The Lord Christ accepts any work of compassion or justice done for someone in need as a work done for him.

How are those who have never heard of Jesus Christ or professed faith in God brought into the kingdom of God?

What does this say about God's care for them?

Isaiah 2:2–4

Notes:

- a) The word “nations” in verse 2 refers to all those who are not part of Isaiah's faith.
- b) The Chosen People were chosen to show all the nations the loving-kindness of God in order that all the nations would come to God.

What is God's will and desire for the nations, for those outside the bounds of Israel's faith?

What does this say about God's care and concern for the “outsiders”?

How is this going to happen according to the Isaiah text?