

STUDY GUIDE



CHURCH NAME

RESCUED

RESCUED FROM OURSELVES

JONAH 4:1-11

05/21/2017

MAIN POINT

Grasping the effects of sin in the human soul helps us grow in the compassion that reflects the compassionate heart of God in rescuing us from ourselves!

INTRODUCE

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What percentage of what you did last week do you think will matter for eternity? Why?

Most of us devote our time and resources to what we consider important. But how much of ourselves and our resources do we invest in matters of eternal significance and what does this say about the condition of our hearts?

How do you typically react when you don't get your way?

It was a miracle: The People of Nineveh expectantly repented! But Jonah clearly showed the true priorities of his heart when he became angry at the salvation of the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-4). Jonah had seen their moral bankruptcy, which led him to harshness and condemnation. He despised the evil people of Nineveh and felt that they deserved destruction. He identified them as sinners, but viewing himself, he did not see himself as a sinner. Jonah's angry reaction to the salvation of the Ninevites showed that he actually had little regard for God and too much regard for himself. Sounds like us right?

There were people like Jonah in Jesus' day too (Matthew 23; John 9:41). An improper understanding of the doctrine of sin will always erode compassion. God sees evil more comprehensively than we do, and he has pity on all kinds of people (1 Tim. 2:1-4). "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us!" (Rom. 5:8). Grasping the effects of sin in the human soul helps us grow in the compassion that reflects the compassionate heart of God in rescuing us from ourselves!

READ AND REFLECT

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 4:1-3.

What emotions does verse 1 say Jonah experienced? Why do you think he felt that way? (See commentary.)

In what ways do sinful attitudes keep us from joining God in His mission?

Is it possible for us to be obedient to God and have a bad attitude at the same time? Why or why not?

One of the themes in the Bible is that God's people are to be imitators of Him, to demonstrate the qualities mentioned in verse 2. Unlike Jonah, we need to imitate God's character.

Which of the aspects of God's character in verse 2 is reflected most in your life?

Nineveh's being spared had created such frustration and stress in Jonah that death looked better than life (v. 3). Jonah could not deal with a world that no longer made sense to him. Nineveh had received God's grace, while Israel was destined to suffer at the Assyrians' hands because of the Israelites' rebellion. Jonah is proof that a person can dot every theological "i" and cross every theological "t" but still not know God's heart. Jonah wanted God only for himself and his people. Yet God is too big and has too much love to confine Himself to one type of people! Are we allowing God to be that big?

Have a volunteer read Jonah 4:4-9.

The Lord responded to Jonah's angry outburst with a question in verse 4. The question is another example of God's compassion and grace. Instead of rebuking Jonah or breaking off the conversation, God reached out to him and encouraged him to think. God tried to help Jonah see that he should have compassion for all people, even people he may not like. Jonah pitied himself. God pities sinners. Seeing Nineveh destroyed would have made Jonah happy. Seeing Nineveh spared made God happy. The contrast between Jonah's heart and God's heart could not be clearer.

God wanted to teach Jonah a lesson. Jonah's comfort from the vine was short-lived, for at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered (v. 7). The vine was present one day and gone the next.

What lesson did God teach Jonah through the vine?

In what way do the comforts of life that we enjoy prevent us from being what God wants us to be and doing what God wants us to do?

Unfortunately, many believers become more concerned with their own comfort than they do with lost persons. These believers devote their time and their resources to what they consider to be important to them. They give little thought and devote little—if any—of their time, energy, and resources to things that will matter for eternity.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 4:10-11.

The plant was not the issue. The issue was Nineveh. In verse 11 God addressed the heart of the matter. Jonah was concerned about a plant. God was concerned about people. Jonah neither had created nor nurtured the plant. Yet God had created and nurtured the Ninevites. Should He not care for them?

How would you answer God's question in verse 11?

The obvious answer to the question is that God's concern for Nineveh was consistent with His character. Since God cared for the Ninevites, so should Jonah.

Would you prefer that the Book of Jonah have a different ending? Why or why not?

The Book of Jonah ends abruptly. Jonah was confronted with a question that we also face: Will I have a heart for lost people as God does, or will I have a heart for lost people as Jonah did? That Jonah even relayed or recorded the events of this book, which were humiliating and embarrassing to him, suggests that he was brought to conviction and repentance by God's word. Jonah's silence at the end of the book implies his quiet acceptance.

APPLY

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Did you ever try to make a deal with God in exchange for your obedience? What's the problem with that? What do you need to remember in order to avoid that temptation?

How do your concerns and priorities reflect the heart of God?

What steps do you need to take to come around to God's way of loving?

What is something our group can do together to reflect God's heart of compassion for the lost?

PRAY

Lead your group in prayer that God would cleanse our hearts of whatever it is that keeps us from letting Him use us to show His compassion to the world around us.

COMMENTARY

JONAH 4

1:1. Jonah's message to the Ninevites was from God, but his attitude was not. God's graciousness on the Ninevites made Jonah angry. The prophet did not share God's love for the Ninevites and did not want to see them spared.

He became upset when he realized that the people of Nineveh had repented. He considered the Ninevite revival a great calamity. Rather than being pleased that the Ninevites had turned to God, Jonah burned with anger.

Some Bible scholars suggest Jonah was racially prejudiced against the Ninevites. Extreme nationalism and ethnic prejudice are still common today and hinder people from becoming involved in mission activities. Others propose that Jonah knew the Assyrians would eventually defeat the people of Israel. By helping the Assyrians escape God's judgment, Jonah was indirectly helping his own people's downfall. Still others suggest that Jonah might have worried about his reputation as a prophet. He had predicted Nineveh's destruction in 40 days, but no destruction came.

1:2. Jonah prayed to the Lord. We do not know how often Jonah prayed. At least we know that Jonah prayed during crises, when he needed God's help or when he was upset with God.

The prophet addressed God as Lord, the Hebrew word that can be transliterated or written in English as Yahweh. God revealed the significance of this name to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:15).

Jonah recalled the time when he was running from God before he went to Nineveh. He told the Lord that he realized then the compassionate nature of the Lord. This awareness of God's character had prompted the prophet's attempt to run from God. Jonah knew that God was so good that He would probably relent from sending disaster on the Ninevites. In 4:2 Jonah was saying, in effect, "I told you so." Jonah evidently viewed his preaching to the Ninevites as a waste of his time since the Lord would probably let them off the hook anyway. Furthermore, he no doubt felt it made him look bad as a prophet for his prophecy of judgment to go unfulfilled.

Jonah identified five key aspects of God's character. First, God is merciful or "gracious." The term communicates the Lord's attitude toward those who are undeserving. Second, God is compassionate; God understands our suffering and our needs. The Hebrew word translated compassionate is closely related to the word for "womb," thus expressing the kind of love a mother would show to her child. Third, God is slow to become angry. God is patient and forbearing with sinners. He gives us second chances just as He did with the rebellious Jonah. Fourth, God has faithful love. The Hebrew word refers to God's loyal, steadfast love in His covenant relationship with His people. Fifth, God relents from sending disaster. Ironically, Jonah did not use this description in praise of God but in anger against Him.

Jonah's description of God's character is similar to several other Old Testament summaries of God's nature. God described Himself with these five characteristics in dialogue with Moses (Ex. 34:6). Similar descriptions appear elsewhere (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13).

1:3. Jonah was so upset with the turn of events in Nineveh that he wanted to die. Jonah could see no reason to keep on living. He felt he would be better off dead than alive. Some other biblical figures expressed similar thoughts. For example, Elijah felt desperate when Jezebel threatened to take his life. He had defended God against the pagan prophets at Mount Carmel but afterward he became a fugitive. He wanted to die (1 Kings 19:4).

1:4. The Lord responded to Jonah's outburst with a question. Throughout this story God had dealt patiently with His rebellious prophet. God did not scold him here; rather, He asked Jonah if it was right for him to be angry. Rather than telling Jonah directly that he was selfish or disobedient, God asked a probing question. Asking questions can be a less threatening way to help people reflect on their attitudes and reach some conclusions about them.

1:5. We do not know if Jonah answered God's question. No answer is recorded. Jonah went outside Nineveh to see what would happen to the city. Jonah knew revival had broken out in the pagan city. Perhaps he wondered if God might still punish the Ninevites. Although Jonah knew how loving and compassionate God is, maybe he still hoped that his message of judgment would come to pass.

Jonah built a shelter, probably a temporary hut or booth, to provide shade. The prophet's main concern was to find some relief from the sun's heat. Creature comforts, as we would call them, are not inherently wrong, but Jonah's actions in this part of the story reflect a preoccupation with physical comforts. He cared much more about relief from the heat than about the eternal destiny of an entire city. We do not know how long Jonah intended to watch the city. We do know that he did not intend to be uncomfortable while he waited.

1:6. God graciously appointed a plant to give Jonah more shade. The word appointed appears at several key points in Jonah's story. God had "appointed" a large fish to swallow Jonah (1:17). Eventually God would appoint a worm to attack this plant and a hot wind to afflict Jonah (4:7-8). God is sovereign over nature and He can use it to discipline His people.

The designation for God in verse 6 is Lord God, a composite of two of the most common Hebrew words for God. The word Lord is the name Yahweh, used in 4:2-4. The word translated God is Elohim, a general term for deity.

1:7. Before Jonah could enjoy his shelter and the plant too long, God appointed a worm that destroyed the plant. God was trying to teach Jonah a lesson with this plant and its short life. God can do the unusual and spectacular, but He often uses ordinary objects and events to communicate with us. For example, the Lord spoke to Jeremiah through an almond branch and a boiling pot (see Jer. 1:11-14).

1:8. Jonah had been concerned about the bright sun and the heat. God, however, next appointed a scorching east wind to add to Jonah's discomfort. Again Jonah wanted to die. Previously the prophet had expressed a desire to die because Nineveh was escaping divine judgment. At this point Jonah wanted to die because of the physical discomfort he was experiencing.

1:9. Again God responded to Jonah's concern with a question. Rather than telling Jonah directly that he was selfish, God probed his motivation with a question. Was Jonah right to be so upset about the dying plant? Jonah's quick response was a resounding, "Yes."

1:10. After Jonah's angry outburst, God responded to him with a direct statement and another question. God noted that Jonah had cared about the plant. Jonah had done nothing to bring the plant into existence yet he wanted the shade it provided. Jonah apparently had no concern for the city of Nineveh. The prophet had reluctantly obeyed God's command to preach in Nineveh but had no real concern for the Ninevites' spiritual well-being. Jonah's concern was focused on his physical condition.

1:11. The Book of Jonah ends with a question from God. The question is both for Jonah and for us. Depending on how we answer this question, we have caught the message of the book or we have missed it.

God questioned Jonah about His concern for the great city of Nineveh. The obvious answer is that God does care about the Ninevites. God created all people and He loves all people. He chose the Hebrews to be His covenant community but He still cares for all people groups and individuals. God told Abram that all nations could be blessed through his descendants (Gen. 12:3). God later told His people that they should be a light for the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6). They should share the good news about God with all peoples. Jesus commanded His followers to go to all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). God's concern for Nineveh is a case study, a small sample, of His concern for all people.

God mentioned that more than 120,000 people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left were in Nineveh. This phrase has intrigued Bible scholars. Many believe that the 120,000 were infants and young children. These were not yet able to understand right and wrong. Others suggest the number refers to the entire population of Nineveh. Not being able to tell the difference between left and right might refer to moral immaturity, though not to

moral innocence. Until Jonah brought God's message, the Ninevites had limited knowledge of God, morality, and spiritual truth. The obvious answer to God's question is that His concern for Nineveh is consistent with His character. Since God cared for the Ninevites, so should Jonah. God also wants you and me to answer His question correctly. Since God is still concerned about the spiritual well-being of all people, we should be actively involved in God's redemptive plan.