

Session 3: Jonah 1:17–2:10

Session Goals

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

Main Idea: God pursues and shows mercy even to the most rebellious sinners so we can turn to him in faith.

Head Change: To know that God is constantly pursuing his people and inviting them into a deeper relationship with him.

Heart Change: To feel gratitude to God for his unrelenting mercy.

Life Change: To turn from sin continually and pursue closer intimacy with God.

Open

Have you ever been fishing? If so, describe your experience. Did you enjoy it? What's the largest fish you have ever caught? If fishing isn't your thing, what about it doesn't appeal to you?

Not all of us enjoy fishing—it's not for everyone. Whether we like to fish or not, or even know much about it, most of us are aware that fishermen are widely known for one thing in particular: exaggerating the size of the fish they've caught. Humorously, as the story of a catch is retold, the fish seems to grow. And grow. And grow.

As Jonah's narrative continues, we come to an event in the story that, if we're honest, can seem like an exaggeration. Did Jonah *really* sit in the belly of a fish for three days? Is this just an old fisherman's tale? However, what's most amazing is not that a large fish came fishing for Jonah (though that's true), but what God did *for* and *in* Jonah during those three days. In this session, David will help us see the mercy of God toward Jonah and toward us.

Read

Read Jonah 1:17–2:10.

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.

At what point did Jonah pray for the first time?

In Jonah's prayer, does he ever confess his sin to God or express a desire to repent?

Who takes the initiative in our relationship with God: God or us?

Show Session 3: *Jonah 1:17–2:10* (12 minutes).

Discuss

As we continue in the book of Jonah, we come to the most well-known portion of the story: Jonah is about to be swallowed by a great fish. Before we proceed, though, it's important to review the story up to this point.

In one sentence, how would you summarize what has happened in the book of Jonah thus far? What are the two or three major points that should be emphasized from chapter one? How has God used what you've learned from chapter one in your life over the last two weeks?

Read Jonah 1:17.

In verse 17, we learn that God told a fish to swallow Jonah. And the fish obeyed, keeping Jonah in its belly for three days and three nights.

What does this scene reveal about God's power and rule? Do you have any personal experiences you can point to when it seemed God "appointed" something to happen? If so, will you describe one of those experiences to the group? What did you learn about God from that experience?

Jonah's trip into the fish's belly is abnormal, to say the least. It's something none of us have experienced ourselves. Nevertheless, we probably have experienced some version of the despair Jonah encountered during those three days and nights.

Have you had moments or seasons of despair? What was it like for you to experience despair? In what ways did you respond?

David mentioned that the book's author uses words and images in this verse that are freighted with meaning, words like "swallow" and the imagery of "three days and three nights." These words indicate that Jonah is undergoing a kind of judgment that leads to salvation—plunging to his death and returning to life. It's an Old Testament passage that New Testament authors reference in the Gospels.

What event in the New Testament is described with similar language and imagery? How does connecting the language in Jonah to the New Testament enrich your reading of Jonah?

Read Jonah 2:1–9.

Jonah responded to his despair by praying—his first time praying in this story.

What does it communicate about Jonah that this is his first recorded prayer? What does it say about his relationship with God?

In what ways can you identify with Jonah's reluctance to pray? Why do you think it often takes a run-in with despair before we cry out to God?

In the opening lines of Jonah's prayer in verse 2, he describes his interaction with God. What stood out to Jonah was that God "heard [his] voice" and "answered [him]." Despite Jonah's running and rebellion, God still hears him and answers his cries.

Does God's response to Jonah surprise you? What does God's response tell us about his character? In what ways does it encourage you to know that God sees you, listens to you, and responds to you even when you've run as far away from him as you can?

In verses 3–6, Jonah poetically recounts his descent beneath the water. He sank down, he says, "into the depths" where "the earth's gates shut behind [him] forever"—he presumed himself as good as dead. But then God raised his life from the pit.

What words would you use to describe the kindness God shows Jonah in raising him from the pit? Are these the words you normally use to describe God and his posture toward you? Why, or why not?

Many of us have found ourselves in a pit—or low point—of our own. Maybe we're there now.

When has God helped bring you out of a low point in your life? If you're there now, do you believe he can deliver you again? Why, or why not? If any group members are currently in a pit, what words of encouragement can you share?

As we mentioned, Jonah prayed to God in his distress. But as David observed, there wasn't much remorse in Jonah's prayer. He cried out to God, which is a good response, but he didn't confess his sin or repent. You could even argue that his prayer was selfish (he refers to himself much more frequently than to God).

When you think back on your experiences with distress, what kinds of prayers did you pray? Would you change the way you prayed in those moments? If so, why?

Near the end of his prayer, Jonah turns to the topic of idols. While we may not think of idols and idolatry as being relevant to us today, they certainly are. They've just emerged in different forms. Whereas an idol in Jonah's day may have been a small wooden implement, today they often look more like an iPhone, a flashy car, or even something abstract like professional success. An idol is anything we prize more highly than God.

How can we know what our idols are? Is there anything in your life that you idolize? If so, what?

Whatever form they take, as David said, “Idols in this world are empty.” They promise much and deliver little.

How have your idols let you down? What did it take for you to realize that you were idolizing something? How have you sought to rid yourself of idols?

In his prayer, Jonah suggests that we can turn from our idols by turning toward God in gratitude. We can take time to remember who God is, what he says about us, and what he’s done, and give thanks.

When you think about who God is, what are you thankful for? What has God done for you that sparks gratitude in your heart? At what intervals of your day could you insert a habit of expressing gratitude to God?

Jonah’s prayer closes in verse 9 with five words that David said are the theme of the entire book: “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” In these words, and in Jonah’s story, we learn that “God’s mercy is relentless for rebellious sinners,” as David noted.

In what ways has God been relentlessly merciful toward you?

As he did with Jonah, God pursues us. Regardless of what we’ve done (or are currently doing), “God’s capacity to forgive is greater than our capacity to sin against him,” David said. And it’s not as if God pursues us only to the point when we place belief in him—he is still pursuing us, inviting us into a deeper relationship with him. Part of that invitation involves a continual turning from sin, knowing that God will continually forgive us.

In what ways does turning from our sin develop a deeper relationship with God? To what degree does it encourage you to know that God’s capacity to forgive exceeds your capacity to sin?

Read Jonah 2:10.

Chapter 2 ends with the fish spitting Jonah onto dry land at the Lord’s command. God had done his work in Jonah’s heart during those three days and nights, and now he was sending him back on mission.

Have you had any moments of waiting like Jonah when God was preparing you for what was next? Did you find that waiting period difficult? In what ways? What was God preparing you for?

In many ways, Jonah is an example for us of what not to do. Running from God is a sin, and it’s a sin that we all have the capacity for. David encouraged us to help each other fight against this sin. Now that you’ve confessed the ways you’re prone to run from God, spend some time praying for one another.

What could you do to remind yourself to pray for your group members throughout the week? How can you become quicker to confess and repent every time you choose to run from God and help others do the same?

Last Word

Jonah’s story up to this point shows us a clear picture of what it looks like to disobey God. It also shows us the consequences of doing so—ultimately, our sin leads to judgment and death. But Jonah’s story also shows us that God is overwhelmingly merciful to us. For followers of God, our sin and rebellion—no matter how egregious—are met with God’s grace. He never stops pursuing us and never stops inviting us to return to him. While we have a great capacity to sin, God’s capacity to forgive is even greater. Make it your ambition every day to run toward God and his purposes, and not away from him.