

TEACHING GUIDE

JONAH

Grace for All

Sample

OUTREACH

SERIES OUTLINE

Jonah: Grace For All

Write Up: As Christians, we're called to share the Good News of Jesus with everyone. But what about *those* people? You know, the ones you think don't deserve it—people who don't think like you, act like you, look like you, or live like you. Besides, what if it's difficult or dangerous? Join us as we go deep into the book of Jonah to discover the God with enough grace for all.

Week 1: A Ticket To Tarshish

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-16

Write Up: God chose Jonah to be His bearer of grace to a people that most believed they did not deserve it. Jonah looked for every reason to go in the opposite direction. He went to Joppa and bought a ticket to Tarshish. But before we are too hard on Jonah's reluctance, we need to look at our own reluctance to share the love of God with people we see as dangerous or deserving of judgment. Are we too quick to find our own "ticket to Tarshish?" Where Jonah was unwilling, God was willing. Oftentimes, we confuse the God we want with the God who is. We want God to bless the good people and curse the bad people; but are any of us deserving of blessing? Transformation takes place in our lives when we begin to see a God that loves the world. When God calls us to do His work, it often is not easy but it is worth it.

Think: Am I willing to extend the grace of God to every person because God loves them?

Feel: God's grace is sufficient for me, and I can be a conduit of blessing to people around me.

Do: Pay close attention to the opportunities I have to love and serve people around me, even when it is hard. Take every chance I get.

Week 2: We Are All In The Same Boat

Scripture: Jonah 1:17-3:3

Write Up: The irony of this part of the story is that, when Jonah was thrown overboard, the pagan men on the ship placed their faith in Yahweh. It was an unintended consequence from Jonah's disobedience. Jonah found himself in need of salvation as he was in the perils of the ocean. God, in His mercy, sent a huge fish to swallow him and keep him safe within its belly for three days and three nights. It was inside of the fish that Jonah recognized God was his only means of rescue. Without God, Jonah was doomed. Ironically, Jonah did not see the need for people (other than Jews) to have a salvation experience with Yahweh. Though he understood that God had rescued him, it did not translate to a sense of sorrow or remorse on his part, only gratitude for his personal fortune. Eventually, the fish spit Jonah onto dry land, which gave him a chance to respond correctly to God's initial command. God is a God of second, third, and fourth chances—not just for Jonah and the Israelites. The same opportunity for repentance and redirection is available to everyone.

Think: God is always willing to give me another chance to live in obedience to Him.

Feel: I need God's grace every single day. Without God's willingness to offer it, we would be without hope.

Do: Ask God for His forgiveness for the ways in which I have been disobedient.

Week 3: An Unexpected Response

Scripture: Jonah 3:4-3:10

Write Up: As Jonah marched into Nineveh to proclaim the message given to him, it was clear he was doing it reluctantly. But even in our reluctant faith, God can accomplish His will. He can and will work through anything in order to reach those who are far from Him. The Ninevites repented when they heard Jonah's message. The response that took place was shocking. It was the kind of response that most prophets would long for—a quick and speedy turning. It demonstrated that, whether we willingly or reluctantly share the good news of Jesus, it can result in salvation. It is not for us to pick and choose who should be offered forgiveness. It is our job to scatter the seed, and it is up to God to produce the crop. When it comes to sharing our faith, we must learn to expect the unexpected.

Think: We should not pick and choose who is deserving of God's grace. We might be surprised by who would turn their lives toward Jesus.

Feel: We can have hope that there is no one who is too far from God to receive His love.

Do: Take a simple step of faith by sharing God's love with someone by serving them or blessing them in some way.

Week 4: A Bitter Prophet

Scripture: Jonah 4:1-10

Write Up: Jonah was mad that God would be so gracious to such awful people. If Jonah had his way, they would have gotten what they deserved. It's easy to develop an us versus them mentality. As a culture, we are quick to draw lines in the sand and strictly define who is the in-crowd and who is not. God demonstrated time and time again that the only thing that puts you in the right crowd is a right relationship with Him—not the color of your skin, your socio-economic status, your family of origin, or your good deeds. We find ourselves in real spiritual danger when God's grace makes us angry.

Think: Am I able to celebrate the good fortune and blessings of others?

Feel: I should be filled with joy whenever someone responds to the love of God. There is plenty to go around.

Do: Take time to rejoice in God's love and grace for the entire world.

Sample

SERMONWEEK 1

Jonah – Grace For All

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Sermon: Good morning, Church. We are so glad you are here with us this morning for the first week of our new series called Jonah: A Grace For All. I'm excited about this series because I believe this is a book that many in the room may be familiar with in terms of the main character, JONah. Your mind probably goes directly to the huge fish that shows up within the text. But Jonah is more than a fish story, and I am excited to dive deeply into these chapters to discover the challenging message God has for us. I believe a deeper look at Jonah may move our hearts to offer the same kind of compassion and grace to others that God has offered to us. However, one of the greatest barriers to this being a reality in our lives is fear.

Story: One of the most stressful and challenging times I can remember as a child was the daunting task of having to traverse the space between my bedroom and the bathroom when I would wake up in the middle of the night. I laugh about it now, but when I was five years old, it was a terrifying task. The reason for my overwhelming fear were all the

scary things lurking under my bed. I didn't want to leave the safety of my bed covers. I had a system that helped me cope. I would use two pillows to walk safely to the bathroom—laying the pillows on the ground and walking from one to the next—not letting my feet touch the ground. That was the easy part. The return trip was more difficult. I would take both pillows in hand and, being overconfident that I had safely come this far, I would start walking back in the dark. But my mind would play tricks on me. Before I knew it, my fear would have me in a full sprint through the house until I could dive back under the covers and fall back to sleep.

What I have noticed in my life is the natural response to flee from any kind of fear. More often than not, when I face the unknown, my gut reaction is to turn tail and run as fast as I can. It's self-preservation—a way to escape—and it's easier than facing my fears. It is true whether it's navigating a dark house as a kid or faithfully obeying God as an adult.

Today we begin a four-week series on the book of Jonah. Jonah is known as a prophetic piece of literature. There are multiple books in the Old Testament that fall within this genre. Each one is focused on a prophet who would bring the people of God a message, usually focused on the need for repentance and turning back to God's ways.

Jonah is unique in that he was a prophet who was sent with a message to a non-Jewish audience. Instead of the message coming from God to the Hebrew people, the book of Jonah tells of a message sent to the Assyrian people living in the city of Nineveh. That unique aspect is what caused Jonah to wrestle with fear and gave him a desire to flee.

Read Jonah 1:1-3

God spoke to a prophet named Jonah who was a messenger for God in the northern Kingdom of Israel around 740-745 BC. God spoke to Jonah in the same way many prophets heard from God. He told Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn the people. Other prophet obeyed when told to do something, but not Jonah. Instead of going to Nineveh to tell the Ninevites that their evil ways would result in serious consequences, Jonah decided to flee to Tarshish.

Illustration: *(Consider having people stand on opposite sides of the stage with signs. One sign will say Nineveh and the other Tarshish)* To illustrate Jonah's response to God's command to go, there are two signs on the stage—one to my right and one to my left. This (pointing to Nineveh) is where God wanted Jonah to go. This, however, is where Jonah departed for (pointing to Tarshish)—the complete opposite direction. Nineveh was 500-700 miles east of Israel (in modern day Iraq) while Tarshish was 2,500 miles away (in modern day Spain).

Needless to say, when Jonah was given instructions by God to take a message to Nineveh, Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Jonah had no interest in traveling to the non-Jewish community to deliver a word of warning. Why? When every other prophet

obeyed, why was Jonah so opposed? Simply put, because God was asking him to do something hard.

Point #1 – God Asks Us To Do Hard Things

God asked Jonah to do a hard thing. Jonah was afraid because Nineveh was a city full of violent people prone to war. Assyrian artwork depicts war scenes with executions, beheadings, terrorism, and torture. They would conquer enemies and carry them off with rings in their noses. They were a violent culture. They were longstanding enemies of Israel, and there were numerous conflicts between the two nations. Nineveh was not a place where the Israelite people went for a weekend vacation. It's no wonder Jonah ran in the opposite direction. If I'm honest, I would have too.

To fully understand the reason for Jonah's fear and flight, we have to understand the message he is meant to deliver. Author and pastor, Tim Keller, made it clear in his book *Prodigal Prophet* that the reason God wanted to warn the Ninevites to turn from their evil ways was because, ultimately, God did not want them to suffer destruction. Their impending judgment was not from Yahweh himself but from the trajectory of their violent and sinful ways. The message was a request for change—an opportunity to repent. It was an offer of grace and mercy.

The New Testament speaks to this way of thinking when Paul writes:

Read Romans 2:4

The prophetic warning from Jonah was meant to be a form of God's kindness to lead them to repent. There are probably multiple reasons why Jonah ran, but the main reason was that Jonah did not think the Ninevites deserved a second chance. He thought they deserved destruction. In this story, it becomes obvious to us as readers that Jonah was not a hero. He was not someone we are meant to model our lives after. He is shown to be disobedient, nationalistic, selfish, and fearful. You know what I have found though? We can be a lot like Jonah.

God asks us to do hard things like offering His grace to others. But I have found in my own life that there are people I deem unworthy of the forgiveness of God. If we are honest, some of us can think of individuals we believe deserve what is coming to them because of the terrible atrocities they have committed. Maybe it's because of a religious ideology, a specific lifestyle, the severity of an addiction, or a personal grievance, but we determine that these individuals or groups should not be given the opportunity to repent and experience the grace of God.

Point # 2 – We Can Look A Lot Like Jonah

The truth is, when God invites us to reach out to people who are hard to love, it's easy to find a ticket headed in the opposite direction. We are given opportunities all the time to

express the grace of God to others, but much of the time it is uncomfortable. We may end up in places that are unknown. It might be dangerous. It might be difficult. God may call us to places, people, and positions that challenge us. Sometimes we choose to find a ticket to Tarshish and try to avoid it all together.

While Jonah was sleeping in the bottom of the ship, God sent a great storm on the sea and the ship began to break apart. On the ship with Jonah were sailors who began to cry out to their individual gods for deliverance from the wind and the waves. Those sailors, like the Ninevites, weren't Hebrew. The captain woke Jonah and instructed him to pray to his God to calm the storm.

Read Jonah 1:8-10

Jonah said, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Had it not been for the massive storm, more than likely, Jonah would have kept the fact that he was a Hebrew who worshiped Yahweh to himself. Jonah wanted to keep his faith to himself rather than share it with the Ninevites. Then he wanted to keep his faith to himself on the ship rather than share it with the fearful men. Do we ever withhold the grace and mercy of God because we lack confidence to share? How quickly we forget that we were given the opportunity to repent and believe, and we should be quick to offer it to others as well.

Story: A few years ago I found myself inside of a jail cell in the Dominican Republic along with a group of young adults from my church. I had been to very few places in my life that were as cramped, humid, smelly, and depressing. We walked down the hall to two cells full of men. Each room was so packed that there was barely a place to sit down. The men were there for many reasons, from stealing food for their families to violence and murder. As we stood there, the woman leading us invited us to take hands with some of the men and pray for them. I had been a youth pastor for 12 years at that point. I had organized the trip and had preached about the grace of God more times than I could count, but suddenly, as I was standing among those men responsible for our group from America, I had an overwhelming sense of superiority. I was from America. I had never done anything bad enough to deserve prison. My hands were not covered in filth and disease. I thought they probably deserved to be behind those prison walls. My internal rant was disrupted, and I was reminded that, just as I had been given the opportunity to embrace the grace and mercy of God in my own life, God's heart was for those men as well. We grabbed hands, began to pray, and wept.

May we never become so far removed from our need to be forgiven that we are unwilling to offer grace to others. No strings attached. Just Jesus. Sometimes we are like Jonah, being tempted to evade God's desire for us to be His messenger of grace. Other times, we are like the Ninevites in need of someone to speak into our lives and prompt us to repentance.

Point #3 – A Better Prophet

The sailors on the ship asked Jonah what they should do to calm the storm. What should they do to him who was fleeing the presence of God?

Read Jonah 1:11-15

The irony of this story is that these men were willing to rescue Jonah by rowing to shore in the storm while Jonah had only been concerned with saving himself. We see that, even in Jonah's disobedience, God was intent on making Himself known. The sailors abandoned their old gods who could not calm the storm and made vows to Yahweh. Even though Jonah wanted to keep God to himself, He could not be kept secret. As Jonah was thrown overboard, the sea was calmed.

Within the scriptures, there are two prophets who were sent to non-Jewish cultures. The first was Jonah, who was reluctant, inwardly focused, threatened, and disobedient. The second prophet was a man named Jesus. Jesus was more than willing to come to earth to offer the mercy of God. He was outwardly focused with a desire for all to repent and experience forgiveness. He was not afraid to be rejected, arrested, tortured, and crucified. He was obedient to His father to offer the world grace.

Story: During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Other religions had accounts of people rising from the dead. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked. He heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." (Christianitytoday.com)

Which prophet will you be? When God calls you to do hard things, will you go the other way like Jonah, or will you go in obedience like Jesus?

Pray

Discussion

1. Why is fear such a strong emotion? What is your normal response to fear?
2. What makes sharing a message from God with someone so hard? What things do you find difficult to talk to others about?
3. In what ways have you experienced God's grace in your life?
4. What example does Jesus's life give us for how we should treat people around us?
5. What is one way you can share God's love with someone this week that you might otherwise avoid?