



**T**he stories of the great heroes and heroines of the Bible inspire and instruct us in our own lives. Each one has a “who knows?” moment when God’s story seems to break into regular, everyday life—a critical moment offering a sense of calling or purpose. It’s as true for us as it was in ancient days. Who knows? Maybe God has plans to use you for His glory. Who knows? Maybe God put you where you are, with the influence you have, for a reason. Who knows? Maybe the things you suffer today will make sense in time. When God shows up, a sense of mysterious discovery enters our lives. Who knows what God has planned?

## WHO KNOWS? • JONAH 3:1-10 • John Goodale • April 29, 2018

When our children were little, our family vacationed for a week in Utah, and I thought it would be a great idea to take them fishing. I hadn't done this activity since my own growing up 30 years earlier. When I begin thinking about my experience, I remembered standing for hours not catching anything, hooks caught on rocks, and weather that didn't always cooperate—and I began to wonder if this was really such a good idea!

After arriving in Utah, I did some research—and ended up driving our children to a nearby trout farm! Yes, they still had to wait for a fish to bite after dropping their line in the water—for about five or 10 seconds! Everyone was happy that day: our kids caught fish, and I got to check the box “Took the kids fishing.”

My only real regret didn't occur until this week, when I realized we hadn't taken any pictures of the kids with their fish. I was particularly disappointed because I'd hoped to Photoshop their fish to a size as big as the kids. After all, fish stories can grow with time!

When the book of Jonah comes up, our thoughts often go to the large fish that swallowed him. But this isn't a story about a fish. Though it's an incredible part of Jonah's story, it's referred to in only 3 of the 48 verses in this book. Pastor Lloyd Ogilvy once noted that this great fish actually pales in comparison to God's top three actions in the New Testament: Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sins on the cross, His resurrection, and Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given.

This also isn't a story primarily about Jonah, even though he's center stage throughout much of the book. This is ultimately a story about God; in it, we're given a glimpse of what He values and how He acts. Indirectly, this is also our story, as we consider how we'll respond to those moments when God calls us to something. And we're encouraged by the good we see God bring forth, even when we're not fully on the same page as Him.

To fully appreciate today's passage, we need to understand the back story: Jonah was given an assignment he didn't want. Other Old Testament prophets spoke primarily to their own people and nation; Jonah was sent to one of Israel's greatest enemies. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which had invaded Israel again and again. In fact, their attacks in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. were directly responsible for the end of the Northern Kingdom. Jonah's solution was to run away from the Lord, so he boarded a ship sailing 1800 miles in the opposite direction. This was not one of the more effective

moves in the Bible! Jonah was thrown overboard, swallowed by a fish and vomited by the fish onto dry land. After all that, he ended up right where God had first told him to go!

This brings us to today's portion of the story. Let's look at it again: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I gave you’” (Jonah 3:1-2).

These words reveal the relentlessness of God's love and purpose: Jonah runs, God pursues; Jonah is thrown into the sea, God saves; Jonah makes a mess of things, God returns to him a second time and entrusts him with the same task. What an encouragement this is for our own story! Earlier in worship, we acknowledged in our time of confession that we have some of Jonah in us: we resist, we fall short, and we sometimes make a mess of things. There's nowhere we can go and nothing we can do that God's redemptive love won't follow. Again and again, He returns to us as well, even when we feel undeserving of God's relentless pursuit.

In the next portion we read: “Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go all through it. Jonah started into the city, going a day's journey, and he proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed’” (Jonah 3:3-4).

If anyone was considered a lost cause, it would have been the Ninevites. The city was referred to as the “city of blood” because of the violence of its population. One of its rulers, Ashur-Dan III was known for inventing new methods of torture. And they had other practices that aren't appropriate to mention in a family-friendly sermon!

Into this city of 120,000 came one lone person with a message from God. Though the book of Jonah is one of the 12 smaller Old Testament books on prophecy referred to as the Minor Prophets, it actually only contains eight words of prophecy. It wasn't even a very inviting message: Jonah simply announced God's judgment and offered no hope of any saving grace. Given what we've already learned of Jonah, we have to wonder if his heart was even in the message. And then something happened every bit as amazing as the great fish; it's so incredible, we need to read it in its entirety.

“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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. 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. 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. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.' 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" (Jonah 3:5-10).

This violent enemy was receptive to Jonah's message! In fact, nowhere else does the Bible record so massive a revival. All the people responded with incredible humbleness, for fasting and sackcloth were signs of great repentance. Even the king responded, leaving his throne, removing his symbols of authority, and sitting in ashes. He called his people known for evil and violence to give it up, saying "Who knows if God may have compassion upon us."

God did have compassion. The people were saved. And Jonah was ticked! In the final chapter we find him reverting to form: angry, pouting, even wishing he could die because the Ninevites had received God's grace. We're left with a contrast between the humble responsiveness of an evil nation, and the hard heartedness and hard headedness of one of God's own servants.

In his book *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby encourages us to "find out where God is at work and join him there." One of the great tensions of this book is that Jonah wants nothing to do with where God is at work. He had his own understanding of what should happen and how God should treat Israel's enemy. He also knew God well enough to know His compassion could turn things around—and that's not something he wanted to see.

It's tempting for us to second guess God at times, believing that our own mental storyline of how things should be is best. In our own limited perspective, we forget that the story God is writing has a much larger narrative in mind. God is writing something more beautiful and purposeful than any of us could ever come up with on our own. Jonah reminds us that in the long run, we're a lot better off coming around to God's story than insisting He come around to ours.

For many centuries, people believed the earth was the center of the universe. After the influence of Copernicus, we came to understand that it actually revolves around the sun. I think of that image

when it comes to my own life; much of the time my sin nature wants to keep me at the center. Whatever the details of the small story I'm writing, I want that to be the way things go; and I suspect I'm not alone. Every day I'm faced with a choice: will my actions revolve around my agenda and desires, or around God's? And guess what: you get to make that same daily choice!

God invites each of us to join Him in the story of redemption that He's writing in our lives and in our world. This particular story of Jonah helps us better understand the author of our larger story. Let's note three glimpses we're given of God, and consider questions that can help keep our story aligned with God's.

First, we see a loving God, whose love extends to those who are tremendously undeserving of it. The author almost ridicules every step by Jonah; by the end of the book, we're wondering why God chose this man?! Jonah provides as much of a window into God's patient, pursuing love as the Ninevites. Someone we might easily give up on or throw up our hands about is still loved by God.

The longer we're on our faith journey, the easier it can be to eventually take God's love for us for granted, because we're so used to it. Jonah reminds us that we're loved not because of anything we bring, but because God's capacity to love is deeper than we deserve. So our first question is, How is my life different today as a result of God's love? Can we say it's different? If so, how? If not, why?

Second, we see a sending God. Our Lord has a deep desire to include more within His Kingdom than are already there. This desire led to an unusual call to Jonah to be God's messenger to the Ninevites, because He was aware of their spiritual receptivity. At a later time, God sent Jesus from heaven to our world, so that you and I could be included among His people. If you have a personal relationship with God—and I hope you do—it was probably influenced by someone God sent into your life.

Today, God sends us—and if we're honest, there may be times when we're as unenthusiastic about this as Jonah was. We know how strongly others around us already believe what they do. We're also not sure what to say, or how to approach the conversation. But in the same way God used a half-hearted messenger to touch the hearts of the violent Ninevites, He can use us. I loved the way our Lead Pastor, Tim, put it in this week's eblast: "Every time someone makes a turn to Christ, it comes as a surprise on some level. Something new happens—something different and unexpected." Our next question: Where outside the

church walls is God sending me to be a messenger of His love? Who is God calling each of us to have a faithful presence with?

Finally, we see a forgiving God. The Ninevites were a ruthless, violent people who revealed God's ability and desire to forgive. Even Jonah, who defied God, ran away from Him and questioned Him wasn't beyond His grace. That's because God's forgiveness isn't linked to whether we clean up well; it's all about His nature and character. Author Dan Schmidt makes the following observation: "Not only does Jonah announce the offer of grace to people who in no way deserve it, but the prophet goes on to prove that he himself is not even worthy of it."

Which is exactly the point: One does not earn grace. One simply stands under it like rain, allowing its cool refreshment to fill the dry cracks. And then one picks up a bucket and dumps it on someone else.

Our salvation is the central plot of God's great story: Jesus came to restore our relationship with Him. God longs for us to experience His love and grace on such a deep level that we're compelled to want to pass it along to others. So our final question: Where in my life do I need God's forgiving grace? Can we believe that no sin in our lives is bigger than God's ability to forgive?

The book of Jonah ends more abruptly than most, without even a sentence or two that neatly wraps everything up. Instead, it ends with a closing question from God to Jonah. Who knows if Jonah eventually got his act together and became more willingly aligned with God? Who knows what change was brought about in the lives of Ninevites who repented? What we do know is that God's story found in Jonah has continued down through the years, and we're part of it today. God loves each of us more deeply than we'll ever know. He sends others to us as messengers of this love, and does the same for others through us. God longs for us to ask for His forgiveness, so when we receive it we'll remain in relationship with Him forever.

Each day we have a choice: will we live out our own story, or the larger narrative God is writing? My hope and prayer is that we'll choose the latter. And when that's the case, who knows what God might do with that?

## STUDY GUIDE

### WHO KNOWS? • JONAH 3:1-10

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Jonah 3:1-10. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful. Read it one more time together. Pray for your study of God's Word.

- What stood out to you in our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- What brought Jonah to the point of obedience?
- Read Jonah's message to the Ninevites in verse 4. What is the content of Jonah's message? What do you think was the attitude of Jonah as he preached in Nineveh?
- What is our attitude when God reaches through us to those we think undeserving or ungrateful? Where does this attitude originate?
- God's story breaks into ours. It's a story of grace. Re-read verses 8 and 9. In your own words, what is the king of Nineveh saying? How does the king's behavior contrast with that of Jonah's?

Going Deeper: What word, phrase or thought from today's passage or from your time together is God lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

God's grace flows through us to others. We are blessed to be a blessing. Who are the Ninevites in our world? How does God want us to connect with them?

Spend some time praying for those who are far from God. Ask God for a heart like His.

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Jonah is a wonderful example of God's unending, untiring grace even when we resist that grace. Briefly describe how you have seen God's grace bring a "turn-around" in your life.