

Small Group Leaders Notes

Introduction to Jonah

These notes are designed as a brief introduction to the book of Jonah that we will be studying in small groups through June. If you are looking for a good commentary on Jonah then I would recommend the commentary by Baker, Alexander and Waltke on Obadiah, Jonah and Micah in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series. (Available here <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Obadiah-Jonah-Tyndale-Testament-Commentaries/dp/1844743608>)

Context

- **Historical - 2 Kings 14:25**

- 2 Kings tells us that Jonah was a prophet who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 782-753BC.) This places Jonah in the 8th century BC at a time when Assyria (with Nineveh as its capitol) was increasingly a threat to Israel.
- Straight away we start to see why Jonah was so opposed to God showing mercy to Israel's enemy (1:2, 4:2.)

- **Jesus - Matthew 12:39-40 and Luke 11:30**

- Jesus says that his death and resurrection is a fulfilment of Jonah's experience of being swallowed by the fish. Just as Jonah spending 3 days and nights in the fish was a sign to the people of Nineveh so Jesus' death and resurrection is a sign to Jesus' generation. Jesus contrasts the people of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah with the people of his own day who refuse to listen to the preaching of "someone greater than Jonah."

- **God's Mission - Genesis 12:1-3, Psalm 93-100, Acts 2:5-12 and Revelation 7:9**

- The whole Bible is about God's mission of bringing the blessings of salvation to the nations. We often think that world mission only begins at Pentecost but books like Jonah remind us that it is an important theme throughout the entire Bible.
- With this in mind we can see how Jonah is a partial fulfilment of God's promise to Abram that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3.) Jonah shows us that the gospel is for all nations and anticipates both Pentecost (Acts 2:5-12) and the New Creation (Revelation 7:9.)
- Having just read and studied Psalm 93-100 we can see how they both emphasise that the LORD is the one true God and creator of all who deserves the worship of everyone everywhere.

Structure

- The book of Jonah naturally falls into two sections (chs1-2 and chs3-4.) Both of these sections begin with the word of the LORD coming to Jonah and telling him to go and preach to Nineveh. In chs1-2 we see what happens when Jonah doesn't obey and then in chs3-4 we see what happens when he does obey.
- These two sections can each be broken down again into the four separate chapters. Chapter 1 contains the narrative of Jonah refusal to obey the call of the LORD. Chapter 2 contains his prayer to the LORD from the fish. Chapter 3 gives us the narrative of Jonah obeying the second call of the LORD. Finally chapter 4 gives us the dialogue between God and Jonah concerning God's mercy.

Genre

- Jonah is a relatively short book and yet it contains a variety of genres of literature. It contains narrative in chapters 1 and 3 as well as poetry in ch2 and dialogue in ch4.
- Running through the book there is a good deal of satire as the folly of Jonah is exposed.
- As we study the different chapters of the book we need to be aware of the different genres of literature that we are dealing with and the different literary tools such as irony and satire that the author is using to convey his message to us.

Big Themes

The book of Jonah is an enjoyable and entertaining narrative for us to enjoy but we must not forget that it is here to reveal something of God and his character to us. Here are a few key themes that emerge through the book that are worth focusing and meditating on...

- **Salvation comes from the LORD (2:9)** - Right from the beginning lets make one thing crystal clear - God is the hero of this book not Jonah!!! As Bob Fyall says, "This is not the story of 'Jonah and the Whale'; this is the story of God reaching out to the pagan world with the gift of his salvation." Just look at how many times it's God that acts or speaks in this short book. God sends Jonah to Ninevah (1:1 and 3:1), he sends the storm (1:4), he sends the fish (1:17), he commands the fish to vomit Jonah (2:10), he causes the people to repent (ch3), he sends the vine (4:6) he sends the worm (4:7) and the climax of the book comes as the LORD (rather than Jonah) speaks (4:10-11.) Throughout the book we clearly see both **God's Sovereignty** over his world and **God's Missionary Concern** for his world.
- **God as Creator (ch1)** - Repeatedly God is presented as the sovereign creator who claims universal allegiance (see 1:4, 9, 17.) As the creator he is in control of all things from great storms to the roll of the dice and so all are to turn to him in repentance and worship.
- **God's Providence (ch2)** - God provides the fish to saves Jonah from a watery death by sending the fish (1:17) but also saves Jonah from the fish (2:1, and 2:10.)
- **God's Judgment (ch3)** - Throughout the book but particularly in ch3 we are shown the judgment and holiness of God which means that he cannot tolerate wickedness and evil wherever it might be found. This seems to be the message that Jonah preaches to Nineveh (3:4) that produces their profound and genuine repentance.
- **God's Mercy (ch4)** - Alongside the judgment of God we cannot ignore the incredibly mercy of God. He is merciful not only to Nineveh but also to the sailors and to Jonah. Here is a God whose judgment and holiness is matched by his mercy!

Big Applications

- **Will God's People share God's Missionary Concern for the Lost?**
 - The key question in the book is "What is God really like?" (Stuart.) This is reflected in the key themes we identified above and should shape how we apply this book. Our applications need to come from what we learn of God rather than from focusing too quickly on the human characters.
 - The big thing that we see in the book is God's missionary concern (4:11) and so the obvious application question for us is "Will we share his concern?" That is the question posed to us as the book finishes on a cliff hanger. We are not told how Jonah responded to God's question in 4:10-11 and as this question is left hanging it

draws us in; “Will we be concerned for those around us who, like Nineveh, don’t know their right hand from their left?” God has shown us his concern for the nations and he calls us to proclaim the gospel to the nations (Matthew 28) but will share his concern and go?

- In many ways the simple application of the book is - “Don’t be like Jonah.” Some commentators see Jonah’s attitude to Nineveh as a picture of Israel’s attitude to the nations. As a result the book is a rebuke to Israel for their lack of concern for the salvation of the nations. Similarly the book of Jonah could be a rebuke to us for our lack of concern for those who are under God’s judgment.
- Put positively the key application is to motivate and encourage us to share God’s merciful heart of concern for the lost and obey his call to go and proclaim the gospel to them.

Small Group Leaders Notes

Jonah 1:1-16

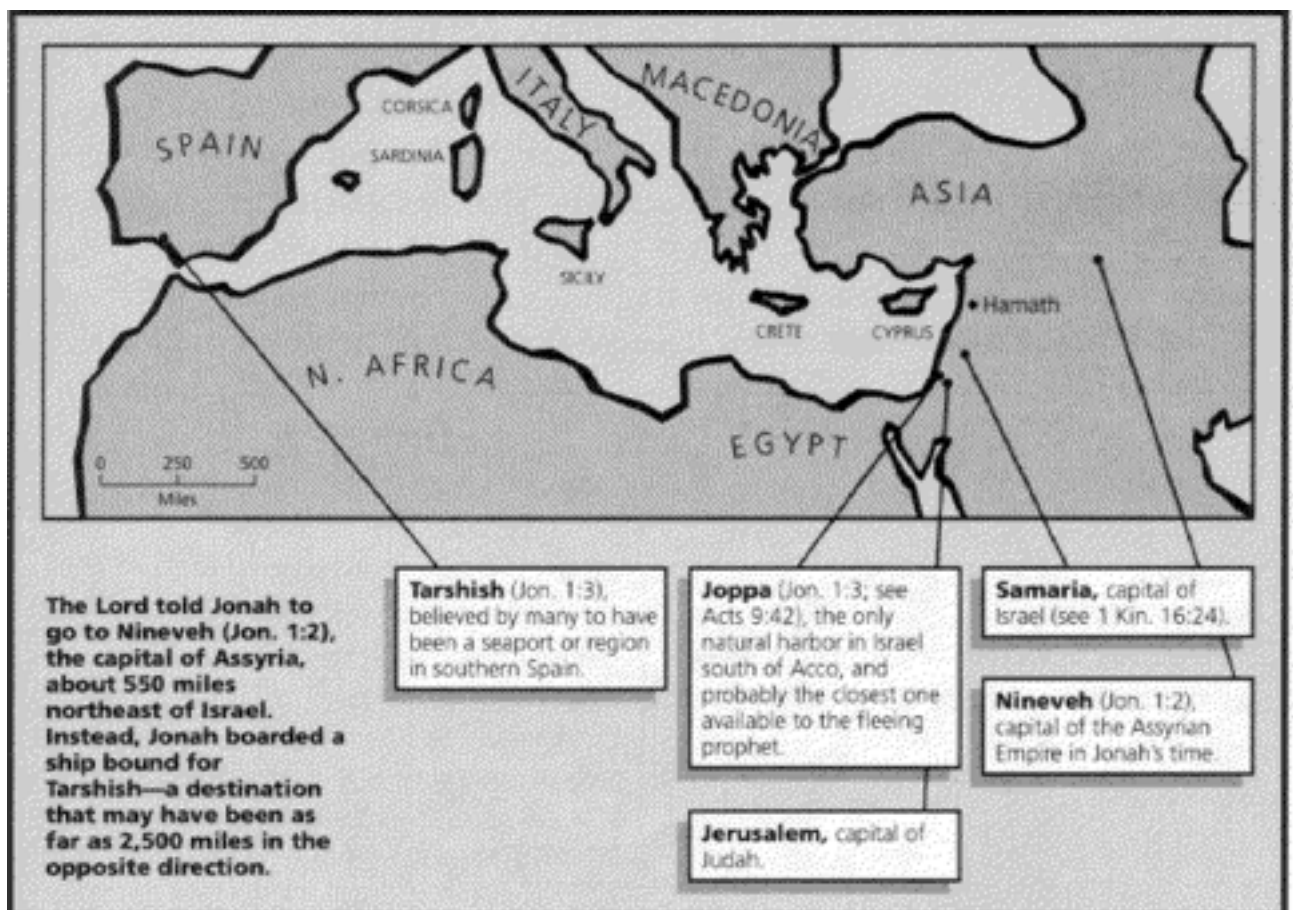
Context

• Historical

- We have very little background information on Jonah and his ministry. The only other reference to Jonah comes in 2 Kings 14:25 which tells us that he was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II. This places Jonah's ministry between 782-753BC. This was a time when God blessed Israel expanding Israel's territory. At the same time Assyria was the main superpower and through the 8th and 7th centuries Assyria became increasingly threatening to Israel.

• Geographical

- The map below gives us a sense of the geographical setting of the book. The LORD is commanding Jonah to go east to Nineveh but instead Jonah goes West to Tarshish via Joppa. The precise location of Tarshish is uncertain but most commentators believe that it was located at the far west of the Mediterranean in southern Spain. If this is true then Jonah was attempting to flee to the very western edge of the known world. He is attempting to get as far away from Nineveh as he possibly could.



(Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996. Nelson's complete book of Bible maps & charts: Old and New Testaments Rev. and updated ed., Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.)

- **Book of Jonah**

- When Jonah runs away from the LORD in 1:3 we are not told why. It is not until 4:2 that Jonah tells us why he did what he did. In 3:10 when God sees Nineveh's repentance *"he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."* In response Jonah reveals his motive for running away by praying;

"Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

- In praying like this Jonah tells us he ran away because he knew what the LORD is like. He knew that the LORD is the sort of God who shows mercy to those who repent and the implication is that Jonah didn't want Nineveh to have the chance to repent. Jonah seems to have reckoned that if he didn't go to Nineveh then they wouldn't be warned and so they would have no chance to repent. In this way Jonah's logic is a negative version of Paul's logic in Romans 10:14-15.
 - As a patriotic Jew Jonah cannot bear to imagine the LORD having mercy on wicked foreign nations and particularly Assyria. Twice in the book would prefer to die rather than see God be merciful to Nineveh (1:12 and 4:3.)
 - As Stuart says, "He actually disobeyed God's word, so deep was his hatred for a nation whom God loved, and his resentment that God would do something good for a people who had done so much that was bad."
- **New Testament**
 - As we move through the book of Jonah we must always remember the link that Jesus draws between himself and Jonah (see Matthew 12:39-40 and Luke 11:30.) Jesus draws a link between Jonah spending three days in the belly of the fish and Jesus spending three days in the heart of the earth/grave.
 - In ch1 Jonah points forward to Christ in that for the gentile sailors to be saved, Jonah must be sacrificed and seemingly go to his death, just as Christ had to be sacrificed and go to his death so that gentiles from all nations might be saved.

Structure and Commentary

- **Structure** - This chapter of narrative falls into two major scenes (v1-3 and v4-16) and yet v1-16 still function as a whole.
- **The LORD and his Reluctant Prophet (v1-3)**
 - **"Go... and preach against it..."** - The sense here is that Jonah is to warn Nineveh that God sees their wickedness and will bring judgment upon them (see 3:4.) Jonah's preaching of a warning is not just to be a cold announcement of unavoidable judgment but rather a gracious warning that invites repentance.
 - **"But Jonah ran away from the LORD..."** - Jonah later acknowledges that the LORD is the God of heaven so he clearly knew that he couldn't actually run away to a place where God didn't rule. When he runs away he is running away from what God wants him to do. God has told him to go east to Nineveh, so Jonah goes west to Tarshish.

- **The LORD and his Sovereign Power to Save (v4-16)**
 - **God's Sovereignty in v4-16**
 - Although the narrative focuses on Jonah and the sailors it is God who is in control of events. It is the LORD who sends the storm (v4), it's the LORD who controls the fall of the lots (v7 and Proverbs 16:33), and it is the LORD who calms the storm (v15) and next week we will see that it is the LORD who provides the fish (v17.) The events of the chapter show the truth of Jonah's words in v9, the LORD is indeed "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry."
 - At the start of the chapter God wanted Jonah to go and to preach to a group of Gentiles so that they would repent and turn back to him. God in his sovereignty uses Jonah's rebellion to achieve his purpose. God sovereignly ordains that by running away Jonah will end up on a boat in a storm with a bunch of gentile sailors who will repent and turn to the LORD because of Jonah's message (v9.) God is so sovereign that even the rebellion of his prophet cannot stop him from achieving his salvation purposes.
- **The Sailors conversion in v4-16**
 - We see their conversion from pagan gentiles to worshippers of the LORD by seeing how what they fear and who they cry out to changes through the chapter.
 - Initially when the storms arose they feared the storm (v5) and yet as a result of Jonah's testimony/preaching (v9) they come to fear the LORD (v10 and v16.)
 - Similarly they begin by crying out to their gods (v5) but again because of Jonah's testimony they end up crying out to the LORD (v14.) Whether Jonah likes it or not, the LORD has used him to save gentiles!
- **Irony in v4-16**
 - There is a degree of irony running through the narrative.
 - As already mentioned there is a certain irony in Jonah running away because he doesn't want to preach to gentiles in Nineveh and yet God uses his rebellion to bring him to preach to another group of gentiles.
 - There's also irony in the captain's words in v6 "Get up and call on your god!" That's ironic because the very reason that the storm has come is that Jonah is running away from the call of the LORD.
 - There's also irony in Jonah's words in v9. He claims to fear the LORD, the God of heaven who made the seas and the dry land and yet he's attempting to run away from this God. Whether Jonah was aware of the irony of his words or not is hard to tell.

Tricky Bits

- **Doesn't v2 suggest that God has only just noticed Nineveh's wickedness?**
 - When tackling these sorts of questions it is always best to start with what we know about God. We know that God is omniscient (all knowing) so this verse cannot mean that God did not know about their wickedness until this point. It is better to understand the verse as saying that now was the time when God had sovereignly decided to act with regard to their wickedness by sending Jonah.
- **Does Jonah really fear/worship the LORD (v9)?**
 - Jonah's words do seem hollow don't they? He claims to worship the LORD and yet when God spoke directly to him, Jonah disobeyed. If Jonah really worships the LORD then what is he doing in the middle of the Mediterranean when God told him to go to Nineveh?

- A more positive interpretation of v9 would be to say that this verse shows that Jonah is repentant. Previously when he had been running away he had not been worshipping the LORD but now he is repentant and has turned back to worship the LORD. If this is the case then his instructions in v12 are a genuinely selfless attempt to save the sailors rather than a final selfish attempt to avoid going to Nineveh.
- In all of this don't lose sight of how God uses Jonah's confession (whether it's genuine or not) to save the sailors. Jonah's confession is the turning point for them (see above) so that as the scene closes in v16 we find these previously pagan sailors, worshipping the LORD.
- ***In what sense was Jonah innocent (v14)?***
 - You would have to say that it is Jonah's fault that this storm has come upon them so in that sense he is hardly innocent. I think their talk of innocence doesn't mean that Jonah was guiltless but rather it just means that they are asking God not to punish them for killing him. Whilst Jonah is not innocent towards God, he is innocent towards the sailors.

Big Idea

- **The Sovereign God saves people despite his rebellious prophet**

Suggested Applications

- **God's Sovereignty over everything** - As you study this chapter you can't help but marvel at the sovereignty of God. In this chapter he shows his sovereignty over everything from great powerful storms to the casting of lots. As we are confronted with his power and control we are also confronted with the foolishness of trying to oppose or run away from such a God. God is teaching both Jonah and us that he is in control and so he is to be served.
- **God's Sovereignty in saving sinners** - It is not just that God is sovereign. In this chapter we see that he uses his sovereignty for the purpose of showing mercy to repentant sinners. The chapter begins with God sending Jonah to preach to gentiles who needed to repent and even when Jonah runs away, God brings him into contact with gentiles who needed to repent so that the chapter ends with God having used Jonah to achieve his purpose of bringing gentiles to repentance. We therefore see not only God's power but his heart. He is the God who is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love, a God who relents from sending calamity..." He is a God who has great concern for the lost and the perishing. Throughout the book Jonah along with all of God's people are being challenged - "Do we have God's heart and concern for those who cannot tell their right hand from their left.?" God will achieve his salvation purposes, so will we get on board or not?

Suggested Bible Study

Suggested Starter Questions

1. You could use one or both of the following questions;
 - A. When you hear the name Jonah what's the first thing that comes into your head?**
 - *This should just be a nice, fun starter that gets lots of people involved. Most of us would immediately think of a big fish, or a worm or a vine when we think of Jonah.*

These are obviously all parts of the story and yet the book revolves around God, he's the star of the story. As Bob Fyall says "This is not the story of Jonah and the whale; this is the story of God reaching out to the pagan world with the gift of his salvation."

B. What would be some of the big reason why we shy away from speaking about Jesus with non-Christians?

- *This question would introduce the key theme of evangelism which runs throughout the book. Jonah is the reluctant messenger and in that sense, whether we like it or not, we might see something of ourselves in Jonah as we study this book. As we have said previously in the notes, the book of Jonah is showing us God's heart for the lost and challenging his people to have that same heart and concern (4:10-11.)*

Digging into v1-3

2. What does God tell Jonah to do?

- *Hopefully this is not too simple an observation question. Hopefully everyone can answer this question simply by reading v2 - God sent Jonah to Nineveh to preach against it. You might want to discuss what exactly is meant by "preach against it." 3:4 should help you with this.*

3. Why does God want Jonah to go and do that?

- *In v2 God says that Nineveh's wickedness "has come up before me." The picture that is painted for us is that Nineveh is a sinful city, living without God. When we look at passages like 4:10-11 we see that God is concerned for Nineveh and so Jonah is sent to preach so that Nineveh will repent, turn back to God and not be destroyed.*

4. How does Jonah respond?

- *Again this is fairly straight forward as v3 repeatedly tells us that Jonah ran away from God and fled. The group might want to think about what Jonah was trying to achieve by running away and whether he really thought he could get away from God. Hopefully the earlier notes might help you at this point.*

5. Using 4:1-3, why does Jonah run away?

- *These are shocking verses where Jonah reveals his own heart. Whereas God's heart is to have mercy on people, Jonah doesn't want God to be merciful to the people of Nineveh. The historical context will help to explain why he might have felt like this. This is probably not what we'd expect from a prophet of God.*

Applying v1-3

6. Are there people who deep down we don't want to be forgiven? Are there people who we refuse to go and share the gospel with?

- *It could be very easy to be shocked and appalled by what we see of Jonah and sit in judgment and condemnation of him. Yet scripture holds up Jonah as a mirror to us. As we see Jonah's heart towards this people it should make us examine our own hearts. If there's one positive thing you can say about Jonah it's that at least he is honest. If we are being honest are there individuals or groups of people who we refuse to share the gospel with? Why is that? Similarly are there people who we do not want God to forgive? Again why is that? Jonah shows us our hearts and we might not like what we see.*

Digging into v4-16

7. When we are first introduced to the sailors (v4-8), what do they fear and who do they cry to?

- *They are afraid of the storm (v5) and they cry out to all their different gods. This suggests that they are Gentiles not Israelites. In that respect they are just like the people of Nineveh who Jonah was running away from.*

8. In v10-16 how have the sailors changed? Who do they fear and cry to now?

- *Now they fear the LORD (v10 and v16) and they cry out to the LORD (v14.) The Psalm ends with this group of Gentiles have been transformed. Instead of sinfully worshipping false gods and sitting under God's judgment they now worship and fear and cry to the LORD.*

9. Who and what does God use to transform the sailors?

- *At first it might not be obvious that it is God who has brought this change about. Get the group to look closely to the details of v4-16 and you quickly see that God has been sovereignly work controlling things in such a way as to bring them to repentance and worshipping him.*
- *Notice how it's God who speaks to Jonah in v1 and it's God's message to Jonah that causes him to run away from the Gentiles of Nineveh and unwittingly towards these Gentile sailors in v3. Then notice how it's God in v4 who sends the storm which causes the sailors to panic and cry out to their gods which doesn't work. Then when they cast lots it's God who controls the lot so it falls on Jonah (v7) and as a result Jonah gets to declare to them (whether he likes it or not) who he is and who the LORD is (v9.) Jonah's testimony in v9 is the turning point in the chapter for these gentile sailors. It is because of what Jonah says that they cry to the LORD in v14 and it's again the LORD who stops the storm as soon as Jonah is thrown overboard (v15.) Throughout the whole chapter God has been at work to bring Jonah and the sailors together and to place them in such a position where Jonah will tell them about the LORD and they will repent and be saved from destruction.*
- *What an incredibly display not only of God's sovereignty but also his love and concern for sinners!*

Applying the whole passage

10. What big things have you learnt/been reminded about God from this passage?

1. His Power?

- *He truly is the all-powerful one. As Jonah says he really is the God of heaven who made the seas and the dry land. He is in complete control of all things. Even Jonah running away is actually part of God's plan not only to save the Gentiles of Nineveh but also these Gentile sailors.*

2. His Heart/Concern?

- *Alongside God's sovereignty we also see God's heart and love for sinners. He really does want people to be saved and he will go to seemingly great lengths to achieve this.*

11. How should we respond to this God?

- *There is a sharp contrast between how Jonah responds to the LORD and how the Gentile sailors respond to the LORD. Jonah tries to run away from the LORD and refuses to obey the LORD's call to evangelism. As the chapter unfolds we see how foolish that is.*

- *In contrast the Gentile sailors worship the LORD and fear him because of his power. That is a right response for us having studied this passage and we should give some time to praying and praising the LORD for his power.*
- *We also cannot see God's heart and concern for the lost without asking ourselves whether we have a similar heart and concern for the lost. As God calls us to go and speak to non-Christians about Jesus will we share his heart and go obediently trusting that God is at work to save people? Or will we stubbornly and foolishly rebel like Jonah.*
- *Why not finish by talking about those whom God may be calling you to speak to. Who are they? How do you feel about going? In what ways do you feel like Jonah? What has encouraged or challenged you from this passage tonight?*

Small Group Leaders Notes

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Context

- **Psalms and Poetry**
 - This passage begins and ends with narrative and yet the majority of the passage is poetry. Parallelism is a key tool in Hebrew poetry and is used several times in this poetic prayer (e.g. v2 where the themes of Jonah calling and the LORD responding are repeated.)
 - Jonah's poetic poem uses several phrases and images used in the Psalms. For example the phrase "all your waves and breakers swept over me" in v3 is taken from Psalm 42:7. This reflects the fact that Jonah, as a Jew, was steeped in the Psalms. The Psalms were Israel's hymn book and so it is not surprising that Jonah's prayers adopted the language of the Psalms just as our prayers often adopt the language of our favourite hymns or worship songs.
- **The Book of Jonah**
 - This poetic passage is vital for understanding the apparent change in Jonah between chapter 1 and chapter 3. Without this passage we would be left baffled as to why the rebellious prophet of chapter 1 is now so compliant when the same call comes from the LORD in chapter 3.
- **Christ - Matthew 12:39-40 and Luke 11:30**
 - Jesus sees great significance in the fact that Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and nights. Jesus sees Jonah's 3 days and nights in the fish as a foreshadowing of Christ's 3 days in the grave. Jesus sees the "resurrection" of Jonah as a sign to the Ninevites that lead to their accepting Jonah's message and repenting. In contrast the people of Jesus' day will stand condemned because they refuse to repent when one greater than Jonah has come to preach to them.

Structure and Commentary

- **Structure** - This passage forms a narrative poetry sandwich with the poetry filling surrounded by two thin slices of narrative bread which hold it all together;
 - **1:17-2:1 - Narrative - Jonah is Swallowed by the Fish at the LORD's Command**
 - **2:2:7 - Poetry - Jonah is in mortal danger but the LORD heard his cry and rescued him**
 - **2:8-9 - Poetry - Jonah's response to the LORD and his salvation**
 - **2:10 - Narrative - Jonah is Vomited by the Fish at the LORD's Command**
- **The Narrative - 1:17-2:1 & 2:10 - More examples of God's Sovereignty**
 - **"The LORD provided a huge fish..."** The fish does not swallow or vomit Jonah by chance. The LORD provided (literally "appointed") the fish. This phrase echoes the sovereign power of God that we repeatedly saw in ch1 (e.g. 1:4 and 1:15.) The same word also occurs again in 4:6-8 when God provides both a leafy plant, a worm and a scorching east wind. From first to last we are being reminded that God is absolutely and completely sovereign over all things.
 - **"From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God..."** There is often debate as to whether being swallowed by the fish was God's judgment on Jonah or God's salvation of Jonah. When notice where Jonah prays from (inside the fish) and

how he prays (thanking God for his salvation) we quickly realise that the fish was God's means of saving Jonah from a watery grave. As Stuart says, "The fish swallowed Jonah not to eat him, but to shelter him." For Jonah being swallowed was salvation rather than being vomited.

- **The Poetry (1) - 2:2:-7**

- ***Bookends of v2 & v7 - Danger and Answered Prayer*** - These verses are held together by the repeated themes of the danger that Jonah was in as well as the way the LORD graciously answered his prayer. Notice the similarities and parallels between v2 and v7. These are the big themes of these verses that will be expanded and explored in different ways in v3-6.
- ***"From deep in the realm of the dead I called..." (v2)*** Jonah tells us that he started praying to the LORD as he was in the water. The "realm of the dead" is sometimes translated Sheol which is an image and phrase throughout the Psalter to speak of the place of the dead. By referring to the realm of the dead Jonah is claiming that he was actually dead but he is saying that he was as good as dead. We can see that he wasn't actually dead from the references to his life ebbing away in v6. As always we need to remember what genre of literature we are dealing with and read it appropriately. This is poetry and so Jonah is allowed some poetic license.
- ***"You hurled..." (v3)*** God sovereignty is clear again. Jonah does not mention the sailors, he knows that he was in the sea because of the LORD. Notice too how he says that "all **your** waves and breakers swept over me." Again, Jonah is acknowledging God's sovereignty just as the sailors had acknowledged in 1:14.
- ***"Yet I will look again towards your holy temple" (v4)***
 - The sense here is that Jonah is speaking from the belly of the fish rather than as he descended in the sea. If this was narrative then that such a jump might be problematic but as this is poetry a strict chronological order is not necessary.
 - The temple that Jonah is referring to could literally be the temple in Jerusalem but it is more likely that he is speaking figuratively of God's heavenly dwelling place. There are several reasons for this. Firstly in Jonah's day people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel such as Jonah didn't go to the temple at Jerusalem but instead went to the alternative sanctuary that had been set up in Samaria. Secondly it seems unlikely that Jonah is talking about the earthly temple when he refers to his prayer rising to your holy temple in v7.
 - Regardless of which temple Jonah has in mind what is clear is that he is repentant. As we read his prayer we are seeing the rebellious prophet returning to the LORD.
- ***"Seaweed wrapped around my head..." (v5-6a)*** Jonah dramatically captures his how he helplessly sank down into the depths of the Mediterranean. As you read his language you get a sense of how helpless and afraid he would have been.
- ***"But you..." (v6-7)*** Jonah would be dead if it were not for God's dramatic intervention. Just when he was losing consciousness God intervened to rescue Jonah by sending the fish to swallow him.

- **The Poetry (2) - 2:8-9**

- ***"Those who cling to worthless idols..." (v8)*** This verse forms a contrast with v9 because v9 begins "But..." Jonah is saying that in times of great danger idolators will realise how useless their idols are. Whether he is thinking of the sailors or Nineveh or

idolators in general is not clear. It doesn't really matter but it is worth noticing that 2:8 describes the state and experience of both the sailors and Nineveh before Jonah goes to preach to them.

- ***“But I... will sacrifice... what I have vowed I will make good...” (v9)*** Jonah is going to do exactly what the sailors did. Notice how they offered sacrifices and made vows to the LORD just as Jonah now says he will.

Tricky Bits

- ***How could Jonah have survived being swallowed by a fish?***
 - Some commentators really struggle with this detail of the story. As a result many modern commentators suggest that the whole book of Jonah is a fictitious parable.
 - Others try to get around this detail by suggesting that Jonah recovered from his near death experience by spending three days and nights in an inn called “The Fish.”!?!?!?!?
 - Other more conservative commentators go to great lengths trying to find other examples of how people have survived inside large fish.
 - At the end of the day the issue is whether you believe in miracles or not! If you believe that there is a God who can control everything from a storm to the casting of lots then there is no problem believe that Jonah miraculously survived in the belly of a fish for three days.
 - As a result don't get bogged down discussing exactly what sort of fish it was! The Hebrew is very vague and just says “big fish”. The greek translation of this text uses the word for whale. At the end of the day the fish is actually plays a very minor part in the book. It is only mentioned briefly in 1:17, 2:1 and 2:10 and in both 1:17 and 2:10 it is merely a tool that the LORD is using. The focus of this passage as with the whole book is on the LORD not the fish. Jonah thanks the LORD not the fish for saving him!
- ***Was Jonah really repentant?***
 - That is a good and fair question. At this stage and in chapter 3 you would have to say that he certainly does seem repentant and yet in chapter 4 Jonah's anger and bitterness has returned. In this respect Jonah is a reminder to us that we do not know people's hearts. Jonah professes repentance and does then obey the LORD's call. Is Jonah perfectly sanctified because of his three days and nights in the fish? No, clearly not, but then none of us are fully sanctified this side of heaven.
 - In a sense then the real question is not whether Jonah was truly repentant at the end of chapter 2 but whether he will repent again at the end of chapter 4? We are not told which leaves us with something of a cliff hanger ending.

Big Idea - God Alone is our Soul Saviour

Suggested Applications

- **God is Sovereign even in tough times** - We might be uncomfortable with with the idea that God is sovereign over suffering but Jonah is not. He is quick to say that God “hurled me into the depths” and that the waves and breakers belonged to the LORD. God is not just sovereign over our lives and circumstances when things are going well. He is also sovereign in the dark times and the tragedies. While that might make us uncomfortable

it also gives us hope. If God is the one who put Jonah in the pit, then God is the only one who can get Jonah out of the pit!

- **God Sovereignly works all things for the good of his people** - Why did God hurl Jonah into the depths? So that Jonah the rebellious prophet might return to the LORD convinced that salvation really does come from the LORD. The Bible is clear that God sovereignly works all things, even near death experiences like Jonah's, for the good of his people. That doesn't mean that he works them for our comfort, instead it means that he works them for our spiritual good and sanctification. Jonah could testify to this. Jonah also shows us that we cannot always see God's good purposes in the midst of the suffering. It was only later as Jonah sat in the belly of the fish and reflected, that he could see the good purposes of God in having Jonah thrown into the sea.
- **God's Salvation demands a response** - Jonah recognises that what God has done for him demands a response - v9. It would be completely unacceptable for Jonah to remain as he was. God's salvation demands a response of vows and sacrifice from us because of what he has done for us. Our vows and sacrifices will be different to Jonah's because we are not Old Testament prophets called to go to Nineveh. In a New Testament context passages like Romans 12:1-3 speak of Christians offering ourselves as living sacrifices in response to God's mercy. What will it look like for you personally to respond appropriately to the mercy God has shown to you?
- **Call on the LORD in times of trouble** - It might seem simple but Jonah reminds us that the LORD is the one to cry out to in times of trouble regardless of how we've treated him before. The LORD is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love so we, like Jonah, can call on him in our distress. The LORD is our ever-present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46) so cry to him in times of trouble. Are you or people in your group in a time of trouble at the moment - call out to the LORD! David Powlison talks of his experience of extreme fatigue and says of those days "The essential dynamic of my moments and days became, 'Lord, this is trouble. Help!' And he helped." Cry out to the sovereign LORD because he is an ever-present help in times of trouble for those who call on him.
- **Don't just call on the LORD in times of trouble** - Whilst we can call on the LORD in times of trouble that doesn't mean that we should only pray to him when we are in trouble. Do we only pray when we're in trouble? Do we stop praying when life is going well? We need to remember that the LORD is not just a life vest, he is life itself!

Suggested Bible Study

Suggested Starter Question - How would non-Christians that you know react to the idea that God is sovereign over our suffering?

I know this is quite a deep and serious way to start a study but at the heart of this passage is the issue of God's sovereignty over evil and suffering. Jonah unashamedly says to the LORD "You hurled me into the depths." How would people who aren't Christians react to that? How do we react to that? Are we comfortable with that or not? This passage will help us to explore some of these big and no doubt personal questions.

Digging into the Passage

1. How does Jonah describe the situation he was in?

Jonah gives us a very graphic description of how he was drowning. As we read his description we get a sense of how helpless and afraid he was. He's also adamant that it is God who is doing this to him. This might prompt a discussion of how God is sovereign over our suffering and you may want to take some time to help the group to think about this difficult and potentially painful subject.

2. How did God rescue him?

Jonah is adamant that it is God who has rescued him. God has lifted his life up from the pit. Jonah was at death's door but God has answered Jonah's prayer and rescued him. The LORD saved Jonah by sending the fish. That is the salvation that Jonah is singing of!

3. How is Jonah going to respond?

Jonah will praise the LORD, offer sacrifices to the LORD and honour his vow by declaring the LORD's salvation. Get the group to think about what it would look like for us to respond to God's salvation? What would it look like for us to offer sacrifices to the LORD? How can we praise the LORD for his salvation? What vows have we made as Christians that we need to honour?

4. How would you describe the tone of Jonah's prayer?

Overall the tone of the prayer is one of thanks and praise. There's a contrast between v2-6a and v6b-9. In the first part of the prayer the mood reflects the desperation of Jonah as he sank down into the sea. Then the second half of the prayer reflects the joy and delight of how the LORD intervened to save him.

5. How is God portrayed in this passage?

He's absolutely sovereign not just in salvation but in suffering. Again this is a big issue so give the group time and space to wrestle with this for themselves. Think of other parts of scripture such as Romans 8 that might help you to lead people through this potential minefield. We need to see that God uses this near death experience for Jonah's good. If Jonah hadn't been hurled into the sea then he wouldn't have cried to the LORD and returned to the LORD with the words of v9. We also need to recognise how the LORD is the sole source of salvation according to this Psalm. People who trust in idols have got no hope according to Jonah, only the LORD saves. You might want to discuss how this sort of message will go down in our pluralistic society? How can we proclaim this message in our context today?

Applying the Passage

6. How might you use this passage to encourage someone who is going through a difficult time?

Try to keep the application from being academic. Encourage the group to think of specific people they know who are having a tough time. What has this passage got to say to those people? To make people more comfortable you might want to do this in smaller groups. Think about how God's sovereignty is actually a comfort in suffering?

7. How does this passage challenge our thinking and behaviour?

This passage is not just for those of us who are suffering. It challenges those of us for whom life is great to ask ourselves whether our prayer life has actually dropped off because life is going well? For those of us who have been Christians for a long time are we still as joyful about God's salvation as Jonah is here? Are we still offering ourselves and our lives to God in sacrifice and service of him?

Small Group Leaders Notes

Jonah 3

Context

- **The book of Jonah (chapters 1-2)**
 - Reading the beginning of chapter 3 can bring a sense of déjà vu as it feels like chapter 1 is repeating itself over again. Compare 1:1-2 with 3:1-2 and notice how similar they are. The word of the LORD comes to Jonah, it tells him to go to Nineveh and to preach/proclaim the message God will give to Jonah. Whereas Jonah disobediently ran away in 1:3, this time, perhaps to our surprise, he obediently goes to Nineveh (3:3.) The reason for this change in Jonah is understood when we remember what has happened to Jonah in between these two callings. Through the events of chapters 1-2 *“God had accomplished his will in Jonah’s life even after Jonah’s attempted rebellion. He had taught Jonah both that God’s will cannot be ignored and, as well, that he was a God of compassion whose will included forgiveness and rescue.”* (Stuart.)
- **The sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38-41)**
 - We must always read our passage in the context of the whole Bible and not just the book in which it is found. As a result we need to keep coming to Jesus and how he speaks of Jonah as a foreshadowing of Christ’s own mission and ministry. Jesus tells us that Jonah spending three days and three nights in the belly of the fish was a sign that authenticated his message to Nineveh which in turn brought them to repentance. Jesus says that in a similar way his death and resurrection will be a greater sign to the people of his day and yet they will not believe. Indeed the people of Nineveh will condemn Jesus’ generation because *“they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.”*
- **The city of Nineveh**
 - In our familiarity with the story of Jonah we might be in danger of forgetting what Nineveh was really like. This was not a pious God-fearing city. These people were not seeking the LORD. They were not the sort of people who take themselves along to church without being invited. This was a large, powerful, pagan city, steeped in idolatry, sin and wickedness. In fact the language used to describe Nineveh in v4 and v8 echoes the language used of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:25. Nineveh is being put in the same category of city as Sodom and Gomorrah... and yet the entire city repents and calls urgently on God is sackcloth! That’s astounding isn’t it? The borough of Doncaster has 300,000 people in it but the town itself has 127,000 (according to Wikipedia.) So imagine if next Sunday every single person in Doncaster turned up at church, not for a laugh, but in heartfelt repentance... that’s the sort of mind-blowing transformation that happened in Nineveh! Amazing!

Structure and Commentary

- ***“The word of the LORD came to Jonah... When God saw...”*** - It is striking how reference to God tops and tails this chapter. God initiates the events by speaking to Jonah in v1, the Ninevites believe God in v5 and then in v10 we are told that *“when God saw what they did... he relented.”* God is driving events, he is sovereignly in control, he’s the hero, he’s calling the shots. This chapter and indeed this whole book are about how *“Salvation comes from the LORD”* (2:9.)

- **v1-3a - Jonah obeys the word of the LORD**
 - **“Jonah Obeyed...”** - As already mentioned the main thing to notice in these first verses is the similarity between 1:1-2 and 3:1-2 but then the difference in Jonah’s response (compare 1:3 with 3:3.) 1:4-2:10 show us the reason for such a dramatic change in Jonah.
 - **“Proclaim to it...”** - The theme of proclamation runs throughout this chapter. The word of the LORD comes to Jonah and he obeys it (1:1, 1:3), Jonah proclaims God’s word to Nineveh (1:2, 1:4, 1:6), and in response the King of Nineveh issues a proclamation (1:5, 1:7.)
- **v3b-10 - Jonah proclaims the word of the LORD to Nineveh**
 - **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown”** - The word overthrown/overturned is used to describe destruction as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25.) It can also be translated “to turn around” or “transform” (e.g. 1 Kings 22:34 and Jeremiah 13:23.) This double meaning is significant in the case of Nineveh. Nineveh was not overturned in judgment as Jonah had hoped but it was turned around in repentance as God desired. Consequently we can say that Jonah’s prophecy of v4 was fulfilled but not in the sense that Jonah expected.
 - **“The Ninevites believed God”** - It is striking that although it was Jonah preaching and warning (see 3:4 and 3:6), the Ninevites believed God. They realised that Jonah was not just proclaiming the word of man to them, he was actually bringing the word of God to them. Jonah was merely the messenger/ambassador, Nineveh recognised this and engaged with God and not just his prophet.
 - **Sackcloth** - Fasting and putting on sackcloth *“was a common means in the ancient world of expressing grief, humility and penitence—the hallmarks of true repentance.”*(Baker, Alexander and Waltke.) See Tricky bits for more on fasting.
 - **“Let everyone call on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence”** - Nineveh’s new found faith in God was seen in their actions. Not only did they fast and put on sackcloth to show their grief, they also changed their behaviour. They called on God just as the sailors called on God (1:14.) They also sought to appropriately change their behaviour which has echoes of the appropriate change in behaviour of the sailors (compare 1:6 with 1:16.) Here we see that that real belief in God is not just about a profession of faith but with heartfelt and active repentance.
 - **“God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish”** - The King of Nineveh does not take God’s mercy for granted. He recognises that their repentance does not mean that God is compelled to relent. Their response to God does not earn his grace. God would still be perfectly righteous to bring judgment on Nineveh for their sin. Even though they have repented they are still dependent on God’s compassion and they cannot presume upon it. Perhaps this is a warning to those of us who are familiar with God. Perhaps we can be in danger of assuming that our repentance in some way earns God’s forgiveness? Perhaps we think that because we’ve said sorry God is somehow compelled to forgive us? The words of the King of Nineveh remind us that there is nothing we can do to earn our forgiveness, we are entirely dependent upon God to be compassionate to us. We should not presume upon his mercy.

Tricky Bits

- ***What is meant by the fact that Nineveh was a very large city and that it took 3 days to go through it?***
 - The phrase in v3 “Nineveh was a very large city” literally means “important to God.” Translators have struggled to translate the meaning of the phrase. It could simply be a way of describing how the city was physically very large and this would then make sense of the explanation that it took “three days to go through it.”
 - Alternatively the phrase could be used to “indicate significance rather than size” (Stuart.) See for example Joshua 10:2. This interpretation would fit with what the LORD says about Nineveh in 1:2, 3:2 and 4:11. The sense would then be that this city was important to God, he cared about the inhabitants of the city who spiritually speaking “cannot tell their right hand from their left.”
 - If 3:3 is talking about the significance rather than the size of Nineveh then how do we understand the comment that “it took three days to go through it”? Wiseman suggests that this refers to “the ancient oriental practice of hospitality whereby the first day is for arrival, the second for the primary purpose of the visit and the third for return” If this is the case then there are parallels to state visits today. When someone arrives in Britain on an official state visit there is a certain way that things happen. Wiseman is suggesting that Jonah was received in Nineveh as if he was an official foreign ambassador.
 - However you take this verse I wouldn’t get too bogged down in the detail. Whether it refers to Nineveh’s size or significance does not change the general message of the chapter.
- ***Why were the animals included in the fast?***
 - Let’s be clear, it is not because the animals were guilty of evil and violence like the human inhabitants of the city. Instead the animals are included in the fast as a way of showing the severity and urgency of Nineveh’s situation. The King and the people are attempting to express to God how genuine their cry for mercy really is.
- ***What is the place of fasting today?***
 - By denying themselves the usual comforts of food and replacing their normal comfortable clothes with sackcloth people were attempting to express their grief and penitence towards God. In the Old Covenant Jews were required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. There is no such stipulation that Christians must fast in a similar prescriptive sort of way today but that does not mean that fasting is inappropriate for believers today. Jesus assumed that his followers would fast but instructed them to do so for God rather than people (Matthew 6:16-18.) In the book of Acts fasting occurs when church leaders are choosing missionaries (13:2-3) and elders (14:23.)
 - Much more could be said about fasting but from this brief survey of scripture we can see that there is a place for fasting in the context of seeking God in a period of extended prayer over a particular situation or decision that we face.
- ***God is meant to be unchanging so how come he changed his mind?***
 - God is perfect and eternal and therefore he is unchanging. God himself says, “I the LORD do not change” (Malachi 3:6.) So how do we understand the idea that 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”?
 - Initially it could sound as has changed his mind just like we do. In which case that would be worrying because if God’s mind can be changed then how do we be

certain about his forgiveness? If God changes his mind then just because he said he'd forgive us yesterday doesn't mean we can be certain that he will forgive us today? Yet we know from scripture that Jesus Christ is the same "yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8) so how do we understand God relenting in Jonah 3.

- The key passage is Jeremiah 18:7-8 which shows that;
"prophetic pronouncements of judgment were not absolute, but conditional: 'If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.' The fact that God changes his mind here does not represent a divine failing, but rather reveals his earnest desire to be true to his own immutable nature." (Stuart.)
- The other thing that we need to bear in mind when we consider the idea of God "relenting" is that the word is used analogically. This means that throughout the Bible much of what is said about God is said as an analogy. God uses human terms and concepts to help us understand something of his character. For example when the Bible says that "God is a rock" it does not mean that he literally is a rock. Nor does it mean that everything that is true of a rock is also true of God. Analogical language is used to help convey something of the infinite God to finite creatures.
- This means that when we are told that God relented;
"something about God's real desires and passion is being communicated to us; but in the strict sense of the word, God is not actually changing - we are experiencing his reality in differing circumstances." (Sanlon.)
- In Jonah 3 this means that has not changed from being wrathful to compassionate. "Both before and after the people stopped sinning, he was perfectly holy, sovereign and loving." (Sanlon.) It is the people of Nineveh who have changed, not God, and so they are now experiencing the perfectly holy, sovereign and loving God in a different way.

Big Idea

- **God compassionately turns his anger away from sinners who repent**

Suggested Application

- **The reality and imminence of judgment and the need to warn people**
 - God's righteous, pure anger is directed at sinners. We cannot read this chapter without being confronted by the reality and imminence of judgment. As Frank Retief so starkly puts it, "People without Christ go to hell!" God sent Jonah to one city but now in these last days he sends his church to the whole world. Like Jonah, God has told us to go and proclaim the message he has given us. With tears in our eyes we must tell people that judgment is coming and one day this world will be overthrown. We must proclaim the bad news of God's judgment if they are to receive the good news of his mercy and compassion in the Lord Jesus.
 - On a personal note we need to stop and recognise how seriously God takes our sin. Your sin is not some small trivial matter, it is serious and it provokes God's righteous anger!
- **The need for genuine repentance**
 - Here is the goal of our evangelism. We long to see people not just profess faith in God but demonstrate it with changed lives as the people of Nineveh did. Real

repentance is active, it involves calling out to the LORD for mercy and turning away from sin and walking in God's ways.

- On a personal note we need to ask ourselves how heartfelt and active is our repentance? Do you really repent of your sin? Or are you just sorry for it? Nineveh did not just grieve their sin by putting on sackcloth and they didn't just call out to God for mercy, they also stopped the sinful things that they were doing. Is your repentance as genuine, heartfelt and active?
- **God's grace and compassion**
 - Not only does God show compassion to Nineveh, he also shows compassion to Jonah. Stop and dwell on the fact that God gives his rebellious prophet a second chance. How encouraging is that? Jonah shows us that failure is never final with God, there is mercy, forgiveness and the chance to start again if we will receive it. Here is great comfort for the Christian who has blown it. There will be people in your group (maybe yourself) who are burdened with guilt and feel that past sin disqualifies them from God's service. To such people God's grace to Jonah should be a great encouragement. Let us draw near to God, confessing our sin, seeking his forgiveness and embracing the fresh chance to serve him.

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

- 1. How would you feel about walking around Doncaster town centre telling people that God's judgment is coming if they don't repent?**

Hopefully this question should help the group to get a sense of what Jonah was being told to do. He was to go into the centre of a hostile city and proclaim a message of judgment. For most of us that would probably be our worst nightmare. We instinctively recoil from that sort of a message and we can often feel uncomfortable when we see or hear street preachers shouting out that "the end is nigh." You might like to explore why it is that we feel uncomfortable with the message of judgment? What do we fear? Are we concerned with what people will think of us?

Digging into v1-3

- 2. What does God tell Jonah to do? How does Jonah respond differently to before?**

In a repeat of chapter 1 God tells Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh. In contrast to chapter 1 Jonah obeys.

- 3. Do you think Jonah would have been surprised when the word of the LORD came to him again?**

Hopefully this should open up the discussion and get the group talking to one another. We aren't told whether Jonah was surprised or not but considering how he'd responded to God the first time you could imagine him being pleasantly surprised that God should give him a second chance.

Applying v1-3

- 4. All Christians fail or let God down at one time or another. How does God's dealing with Jonah offer help and encouragement to us when we fail God?**

Try to get the group to discuss this personally rather than abstractly because we all sin and fail God so this is relevant to all of us. Help the group to think about how encouraging it is that even someone like Jonah is offered a second chance to serve the LORD.

Digging into v4-10

5. What is Jonah's message?

It's a warning and a message of judgment. Implicit in this message is a call for repentance.

6. How do you think Jonah felt delivering such a message?

Again we are not told how Jonah felt. From what he says in 4:1-3 it seems that he was keen for God to bring judgment on Nineveh and so we could imagine him to have been keen to have preached this message of judgment. Equally, 4:1-3 suggests that he might have been wary of warning Nineveh in case they repented and God relented in sending judgment. As we consider how Jonah would have felt it also encourages us to think about how we would feel being sent to proclaim a message of judgment to people.

7. How do the people of Nineveh respond to Jonah's message?

Try and pick out all the details. They believed God (v5), they fasted and put on sackcloth (v5-7), they turned from their evil and wickedness (v8) and they called out to God (v8.) In summary they didn't just believe God's word, they grieved their sin and they demonstrated their repentance with action not just words.

Applying v4-10

8. What do these verses teach us about the LORD?

These verses demonstrate God's incredible compassion and mercy to sinners such as Jonah and Nineveh. It is worth just spending some time reflecting on this and enjoying this. As a group it is worth thinking about what God's compassion should mean for us as his people? If this is how God treats his enemies then what should this mean for us as his church?

9. What do these verses teach us about repentance?

It shows us that repentance needs to be genuine and active. Repentance is not just about being sorry for our sin, it is about doing something about it. It is not just about talking about change, it is actually changing. How does our repentance compare to this? Make sure you apply this to yourself and your group before you start applying this to other people.

10. What do these verses teach us about evangelism?

They show us that our message must include judgment. Part of our proclamation needs to be a warning to people. The good news of the gospel only makes sense against the backdrop of sin and judgment. These verses also challenge our expectations in evangelism. An entire city of people turn from their evil and violent ways and call on God in sackcloth and ashes! Before we dismiss this and say that it would never happen today we need to remember that "Salvation comes from the LORD" and he is the same today as he was then. Jonah's God is our God and so this should give us great confidence as we proclaim his warning and gospel to our town of people who do not know their right hand from their left.

Small Group Leaders Notes

Jonah 4

Context

- **Jonah 1 - Jonah's reason for running**
 - It is only as Jonah prays to God in 4:2 that we learn why he attempted to run away from the LORD in 1:3. He ran away because he knew God's character. He knew that the LORD was the sort of God who is gracious and compassionate to repentant sinners and Jonah did not want God to show such mercy to Jonah's enemies. Jonah's description of God's character echoes the famous creed of Israel found in Exodus 34:6-7 which says; "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."

- **Jonah 2 - Jonah's repentance**
 - When we contrast Jonah's prayer in chapter 4 with his prayer in chapter 2 we cannot help but be shocked by the contrasting tone. Whereas in chapter 2 he rejoiced in God's salvation of Jonah, now in chapter 4 he is angry with God's salvation of Nineveh. Jonah's words in chapter 4 may cause us to question the sincerity of Jonah's repentance in chapters 2 and 3.

- **Jonah 3 - God's anger and Jonah's anger**
 - Whereas God turned from his fierce anger in 3:9 Jonah turns towards his anger in chapter 4 (see 4:1, 4:4, 4:9, 4:10.)

- **The Whole Book of Jonah**
 - Running throughout the book of Jonah is God's concern for all people not just Israel. He has repeatedly sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh because of the LORD's great concern for that city. What is more he used the rebellion of Jonah to bring salvation to a group of pagan sailors, such is the LORD's concern for the nations.
 - Also running through the book is the theme of God's provision that is picked up particularly in chapter 4. Notice how God has repeatedly "provided" for Jonah. He provided a big fish in 1:17, then he provided a leafy plant in 4:6 and then in 4:7 he provided a worm to eat the plant. Similarly God "provided" a prophet to proclaim God's message to the sailors and the city of Nineveh. Salvation really does come from the LORD. In chapter 4 we see that he is free to choose who he gives salvation to. Human beings cannot compel him to act in one way or another. God is God and he can choose to deliver or destroy according to his will.

- **Historical Context**
 - We need to remember that Jonah is an Israelite prophet. According to 2 Kings 14:25 Jonah had prophesied that God would restore the borders of Israel. Jonah's ministry, therefore was about God blessing Israel which may explain why he finds it so abhorrent that God should now bless Israel's enemies. Indeed in blessing Israel's enemies God was blessing the very nation that would come and destroy the nation of Israel that Jonah loved so much.

Structure and Commentary

- **4:1-4 - The Bitterness of Jonah's Anger**

- ***Jonah's anger at God's deliverance*** - When you consider how gracious God has been to Jonah it is amazing that Jonah should be so angry at God showing mercy to Nineveh. Stuart is worth quoting at length;

Jonah "found it loathsome that Yahweh could have let the forty days go by without doing anything. Nothing had happened. The city had gone back to its business. Obviously Yahweh had decided not to overthrow hated Nineveh. He had accepted the prayers of these oppressors, these international outlaws! In the same way he had once spared the Israelites, his own covenant people (Exod 32), he now had spared Assyrians, the very enemies of his own people. How could Yahweh do such a thing?"

- ***Jonah's suicidal desire*** - To put it bluntly, Jonah would prefer death to serving such a patient and forgiving God who blesses Jonah's enemies! Jonah had thought that his life would end when the sailors threw him into the sea in 1:15. Indeed his request in 1:12 may have been motivated out of a selfish desire to die rather than a selfless desire to save the sailors. As Stuart helpfully puts it;

"The ardent nationalist could not abide the fact that Yahweh had mercifully rescued Nineveh. Rescue was all right for Jonah, but not for that important enemy city. A world in which God forgives even Israel's enemies is a world Jonah does not wish to live in."

- **4:5-11 - The Absurdity of Jonah's Anger**

- ***"God provided..." (v6, 7, 8)*** - God provides deliverance in the form of a shady plant in one verse and then in the very next verse he provides destruction in the form of the worm. The rapid repetition of "provided" demonstrates that God is free to deliver and destroy as he so wills. However much this may anger Jonah (and us) we need to remember what we have been taught throughout this book - God is God and we are not! He is sovereign and we are merely creatures. He has the right to do what he wants whether it offends us or not.

- ***Jonah's anger at God's destruction (v8)*** - Back in v3 Jonah wanted to die because God had saved the great city of Nineveh. Now Jonah wants to die because God has destroyed a plant that had only just sprung up the day before. The absurdity of Jonah's selfishness is being exposed. As we see the absurdity of Jonah's selfishness it is worth pausing to ask ourselves whether we are not also guilty of similar absurdity. Are we more concerned about the small details of our life and comfort than the eternal fate of the millions of people who live life without Christ?

- ***Jonah's inconsistency is exposed (v9-11)*** - God provided the plant, the worm and the wind so as to teach Jonah and show him his inconsistency. This whole chapter is moving towards the climax in 4:10-11 where God speaks to declare his concern for Nineveh and to challenge Jonah and the rest of God's people to have a similar concern. Jonah declares in the strongest possible terms that he loved the plant and that it was precious to him even though it had only just sprung up. Stuart is again very astute when he says;

"Of his own free will Jonah has declared a plant to be eminently worthy to live, a thing of great concern to himself. He has expressed outrage that the plant has been annihilated. It is horribly wrong that the gourd has been struck down!"

10–11 So how can it be right that Nineveh should be struck down? If it was not right for the gourd how can it be right for Nineveh? Jonah could give no good answer to that question, even if he tried.”

- Jonah has great concern for a plant, a relatively small part of God’s creation, and yet he is hard-hearted towards the 120,000 people of Nineveh.
- **God’s grace** - God’s big point is that he is free to save or destroy whoever he likes. In his grace he delivered Jonah from death even though Jonah didn’t deserve it. Similarly God has graciously delivered Nineveh even though they did not deserve it. Jonah, and us, have no right to be angry at God when he graciously chooses to bless undeserving people. Just because they might be our enemies or they may have wronged us or committed horrendous crimes doesn’t mean that God is not allowed to show them mercy if he so desires. God is God and we are not. As the book finishes by emphasising God’s compassion and concern it challenges those of us who claim to be recipients of God’s grace to show the same sort of compassion and care.

Tricky Bits

- ***If Jonah knows that God has relented then why does he wait to see what was going to happen to the city? (v5)***
 - It does seem strange that Jonah goes out of the city and waits to see what will happen even after we’ve been told that he was so angry that God had relented. It seems that even right to the end Jonah hoped that God would actually bring destruction on Nineveh.
- ***How do we square Jonah’s anger in chapter 4 with his apparent repentance in chapters 2 and 3?***
 - Again this is hard. Why does Jonah go to Nineveh in chapter 3 if he knew what sort of God the LORD is? Perhaps Jonah went to Nineveh convinced that Nineveh wouldn’t repent and he is now angry when they do repent and God characteristically shows them mercy.
 - One might feel that Jonah’s rejoicing at God’s salvation in ch2 sounds pretty hollow in the light of chapter 4. At the end of the day it is not our job to judge Jonah’s heart. We should avoid getting into an impossible debate about Jonah’s repentance or salvation.
- ***Why does God mention the animals in Nineveh? (v11)***
 - It does seem a strange way to finish the chapter and the book doesn’t it? It echoes the earlier reference to animals in 3:7-8. Perhaps the mention of God’s concern for the people and animals in Nineveh is meant to be contrasted with Jonah’s concern for 1 plant? God is concerned for the 120,000 people and many animals of Nineveh while Jonah is only selfishly concerned about a short-lived plant. Whatever the reason for the mention of the animals it does not seem to change the big message of the chapter so it is probably not worth devoting much time to.
- ***Do we see something of ourselves in Jonah?***
 - I think the hardest part of teaching this chapter is seeing ourselves in Jonah. Jonah’s anger and racism is such that we instinctively recoil from him and understandably seek to distance ourselves from him. It would be very easy to study this passage in such a way as to condemn Jonah without examining our own hearts.
 - As we study this passage we need to ask ourselves some very hard questions. Who are your Nineveh? Who are the last people you would want God to forgive? Maybe it’s a group in society like pedophiles? Maybe it’s someone who has hurt you personally?

To put it very bluntly who do you want God to send to hell? Similarly as we see Jonah's greater concern for a plant rather than a city we need to consider our own hearts. What are your leafy plants? What things matter more to you than the eternal fate and salvation of the lost people of Doncaster? What personal comforts (for that is what the plant was to Jonah) matter most to us? What passing, temporary things would we be angry to lose? Let's search our hearts before we ask our groups to examine ours.

Big Idea - God is concerned for the lost and has the right to show mercy to whomever he wants even if that offends us!

Suggested Applications

- **How do you view yourself in relation to God?**
 - Jonah's anger is absurd when you stop and think about who he is and who God is. Jonah is but a creature and the LORD is the uncreated creator of all and yet Jonah has clearly forgotten this creator/creature distinction. His anger at God's actions betrays the fact that he thinks that God must in some way consult with Jonah before acting, as if God and Jonah were equals.
 - In a similar way our culture is quick to put God in the dock as if he were answerable to us. Like Jonah we get angry when God doesn't do what we want. Stop for a moment and think about how crazy that is! We are creatures, like the plant we are here one minute and gone the next. What right do we have to be angry when God acts in a certain way?
- **What would we be angry to lose?**
 - Or to put it another way, "What are your leafy plants?" Complete this sentence "If God took away _____ then I would be angry with him? Family, home, income, garden, sky sports? We might laugh at Jonah getting angry about losing a leafy plant but we treasure things that are just as temporary.
- **Who do we not want God to save?**
 - For Jonah it was the people of Nineveh, who is it for us? "If God saved _____ then I'd be angry." Who do we think are undeserving of God's mercy. Who do we want him to punish because of what they've done to others or to us? Let's not pretend that we're all that very different from Jonah.

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

1. Imagine you are Jonah. Over 100,000 people have just repented because of your preaching. How would you feel?

Chapter 3 is amazing isn't it! Imagine how great you'd feel if all those people turned to God as a result of what you'd said? You'd imagine that you'd be feeling pretty great... but not Jonah. For Jonah he can't think of anything worse than 120,000 Ninevites turning to God. Hopefully this question should set up the shock of chapter 4 and help us to begin to explore why Jonah reacted as he did.

Digging into the Passage

2. Why did Jonah run away? (v1-3)

Jonah ran away because he knew what God was like. He knew that God was gracious and compassionate and so he knew that if Jonah went and preached and Nineveh repented then God would not destroy them. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed and so he ran away.

3. Why does he want to die in v3 and then in v8?

He wants to die in v3 because God delivered Nineveh from destruction and then in v8 he wants to die because God destroys "his" plant. There's something inconsistent in Jonah's anger. First he's angry because God doesn't destroy and then he's angry because God does destroy.

4. Why is Jonah's anger so absurd?

Jonah is more concerned about a plant than a city full of 120,000 people. What's more having been shown undeserved mercy by God it's absurd that he would then be angry when God shows mercy to other undeserving people.

Applying the Passage

5. Jonah could not bear to see God forgive Nineveh. Who are the last people you'd want God to forgive?

As with all application questions make sure you have answered this for yourself before you ask your group. It's not an easy question to answer but it is an important question for us to ask ourselves. Be prepared to share your own answer or to suggest some answers. Alternatively you could ask the question in a variety of ways; e.g. "Who do you want God to send to hell?"

6. Jonah could not bear to lose his leafy plant. What things could you not bear to live without?

Again make sure you have answered this yourself before you ask your group. Again you could make some suggestions or share your own answer. Equally think about alternative ways to phrase the questions such as "In what ways can we be more concerned about our own personal comfort than the eternal fate of others?" Or "What matters more to you than the salvation of the people of Doncaster?"

7. What has the book of Jonah taught you about God and yourself?

As we finish our studies in Jonah it is good to stand back and take in the big things that God has been teaching or reminding us. Perhaps you have been struck by God's concern for the nations. Perhaps you have been struck by God's sovereignty and his freedom to do whatever he likes. Perhaps to your share you have seen something of yourself in Jonah's anger or his unwillingness to warn people. Make sure you leave time to pray in what you've learnt.