



Session Two

Introduction

As we move to the second half of Jonah, the lovely symmetry and literary parallelism of the book reveals itself. Both chapters one and three detail Jonah's interactions with people who weren't part of the Israelite nation. Each of these chapters provides an ironic contrast between Jonah's egotism and the humble and repentant behavior of foreigners. Chapters two and four stand out for their speeches of the prophet to God. In each, the prophet describes experiences of abysmal and deathful agony of soul. Both halves of Jonah's book are populated with stereotypical figures and even anthropomorphic ships and animals. Most of these figures, strangely, act exactly opposite to how the reader might expect.

As chapter 3 begins, the biblical account states that God dispatched Jonah to Nineveh to preach against the city's wicked ways and caution its inhabitants of impending judgment. Jonah's warning immediately hits home with Nineveh's king, making Jonah perhaps the most successful of God's prophets ever. With a citywide proclamation, the king orders all residents to observe a day of fasting and sackcloth as a symbol of sorrow and repentance. The monarch himself takes part in this act of submission to God by sitting on the ground in ashes as a sign of humility and repentance.

Demonstrating the magnitude of God's mercy, God changes God's mind about punishing the people of Nineveh and spares them from the devastation that Jonah thought (wrongly!) he had prophesied. Jonah's reaction to the success of his mission is the opposite of what we might have expected. Finding himself back in the depths of the abyss, he expresses suicidal ideation and threats to God. Using natural phenomena, as in the book's first half, God attempts to work with Jonah and change his perspective.

Reflect

When God spoke a second time to Jonah, he obeyed without question. Jonah then quickly convinced Nineveh's residents and even the king to repent. They didn't even question him. No one had any doubt they had wronged God. What does repentance mean to you?

Study CHAPTER 3

1. Read Jonah 3. What did Jonah do when he arrived at Nineveh, and how did the people react?
2. When the people and the king heard Jonah's warning, what did they do?

NOTE: After receiving Jonah’s warning of impending doom, the king of Nineveh wears sackcloth and sits in ashes as an act of repentance. The monarch has recognized the seriousness of the situation and is taking steps to repent of his evil ways and seek forgiveness. Fasting and sackcloth, both associated with self-denial, discomfort, and empathy with the dead and dying, were normal ways of expressing both sorrow and repentance in the ancient Middle East (see 2 Kgs 21:27; Joel 1:13–14; for an image, click [HERE](#)). The mother of the Babylonian king Nabonidus once said: “In order to appease the heart of my god and my goddess, I did not put on a garment of excellent wool, silver, gold, a fresh garment; I did not allow perfumes (or) fresh oil to touch my body. I was clothed in a torn garment. My fabric was sackcloth.” For a detail-view of the ancient Sarcophagus of Ahiemrah depicting mourning women wearing sackcloth, click [HERE](#). Ashes, for their part, represent human mortality and identification with the dead and dying and, by extension, the humbling submission to God, who judges all human wickedness and fallenness. Ashes are traditionally placed on people’s foreheads on Ash Wednesday in the Episcopal Church. Why?

3. Have you ever fasted? If so, for how long and why? What was it like?

4. It only took five words to get the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4), the citizens, and even the cows to break down in tears and to repent. Jonah’s five-word sermon does not mention God and leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Yet, as in chapter 2, the pagan foreigners show themselves more spiritually open and receptive than the prophet of God. Even the Assyrian cows are far more virtuous than Jonah.

Do you see humor, satire, and irony here? If so, what is this literary artistry communicating to the reader? The author’s literary devices lighten the mood of the letter. Do you think they are helpful? (NOTE: For more playfulness, see the final words of the book in which God makes sure that we keep all the creatures of Nineveh, great and small, in mind.)

An Optional Reflection / Visual Interpretation of Jonah: “Aggression II” by Mikalojus Povilas Vilutis (1979), Click [HERE](#). Jonah’s cryptic message to Nineveh feels passive-aggressive, much like the mindset of the screaming figure in this painting who flings aggression in all directions. At the same time, there is humor and irony in the response of Nineveh just as the painting has funny aspects and reveals an irony to self-absorbed aggression. How might humor and irony combat suicidal ideation by offering broadened perspectives?

Word Study: The last word in Jonah’s prophetic announcement (3:4), the word “overturned,” in Hebrew can mean either a complete destruction (as when God overturned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah) or a complete transformation of something into its opposite. Given the poetic ambiguity of his message to Nineveh, Jonah actually did utter a true prophecy, which was indeed fulfilled. As Jonah’s foes turn to God in repentance, Nineveh is certainly *overturned*, just not in the way that Jonah expected.

5. Why do you think God changed his mind so quickly? Why might God have been so quick to change his mind about Nineveh but so harsh to Jonah when he ran away?

6. The people of Nineveh's anxiety led to a right action, whereas Jonah's anxiety caused him to flee from God. In 3:10, God seemed slow to anger and quick to be merciful. God was also observant and could change his mind. God seems rational and thoughtful. Does this description of God mesh with your personal conception of God? Explain.

Study CHAPTER 4

7. Read chapter 4. Right away, Jonah became displeased and angry with God. His response seems irrational. Many people were saved from God's wrath because of his action. What might be the causes of Jonah's anger? What do you think of Jonah's reaction? What does it say about his mental and emotional state?

8. Have you or someone you know been displeased at their own success? What was that like?

NOTE: Jonah is so angry that he quotes God's own description of the core divine character from Exodus 34:6 and throws it back in God's face as proof that God is defective. He claims without evidence that he always feared that the God of mercy would find a way to forgive the Ninevites despite their heinous character. Jonah's speech reeks of contempt. No longer interested in talking, Jonah begs God to immediately end his life. He'd sooner die than interact with a God who forgives monstrous cruelty.

9. When Jonah spoke to God (4:2), he recalled a conversation that did not happen. He never talked to God at the start of the book but instead fled to Tarshish. Jonah is irrational and misremembering. Why would the author undermine Jonah by highlighting an account that did not happen?

10. In 4:3, Jonah demands that God take away his life. Why does Jonah want to die? What does his response say about his mental condition?

11. When can God be too merciful, and why would that matter to someone in a compromised mental state?

12. Jonah left the city, made a booth to the east, and watched to see what would happen to Nineveh when the forty days were up (see Jonah 3:4). He could have gone home but didn't. What do his actions say about his thinking and mental state?

NOTE: The "booth" that Jonah made is a "Sukkah" (Jonah 4:5), the kind of temporary booth the Israelites used after the Exodus at Mount Sinai, where God appeared in fiery flames atop Mount Sinai (for an image, click [HERE](#)). Is he unconsciously readying himself to accept God's character as it is revealed in Exodus 34:6 (see Jonah 4:2)?

13. In 4:6-8, God's attention is on Jonah. While he sat in his booth, God caused a bean or gourd plant to sprout and gave Jonah shade (for an image, click [HERE](#)). When the plant gave Jonah shade, he became outrageously pleased, "Jonah rejoiced a great rejoicing." This is quite a pendulum swing from his mood in 4:1, where "it pained Jonah a great pain and he burned angry." Is Jonah's emotional state overly "reactive," overly dependent on forces outside of mindfulness and spiritual composure?

NOTE: Jonah's gratitude quickly fades when God sends a worm that destroys the plant (4:7) and a suffocating east wind (4:8). He once again he finds himself in a suicidal crisis. "He prayed to die: 'I'm better off dead!'" (v. 8 Msg). He wants his life to end for the second time in just six verses (see 4:3). Jonah is right next to a large city and could seek relief there, but his thinking is limited and confused. Jonah wishes to die instead. He is unwilling to take care of himself and seems emotionally stuck.

Optional Reflection / Visual Interpretation of Jonah:

“Statue of Pazuzu,” Neo-Assyrian Period, 934-610 BCE, click [HERE](#). Ancient readers of Jonah would be familiar with the hot desert wind that could sweep in from the east and fry vegetation. In Mesopotamia, it was imagined as a winged demon. Reflect on this alternative imagery for suicidal ideation, giving us a different symbolism than the imagery of watery abyss in Jonah 2.

14. In 4: 9-10, God directly speaks to Jonah and questions Jonah's anger, asking him a reasonable question. This time instead of leaving and not answering God, Jonah responds to God: "Yes, angry enough to die." It was a mindless response. He was irate with God. How does God help Jonah at this moment? What does this interaction show us about God and how he is willing to help those in a mental health crisis?

NOTE: In contrast to Jonah's “Bent-in-Ness” or “Dys-Connection” with other souls, God’s sweaty work as Creator and Lord of all souls is outward-turned. Jonah loved the gourd for selfish reasons, but God loves God’s “plantings” (the world’s peoples, see Isa 19:24–25) for their intrinsic value and for the relationship with them in which God has invested. For an optional reflection: “Adam and Eve at Work,” German Engraving by Heinrich Aldegrever (ca. 1550), click [HERE](#).

15. What does the encounter teach us about mental health crises, and what can we do to help others? God didn’t ignore Jonah. He engaged with him even in his irrationality. God didn’t diminish Jonah. Instead, he allowed Jonah to see the greater good. God helped Jonah regain his perspective about the bush and the city of Nineveh with its people and creatures. This book tells us a lot about human nature and suicidal crises, divine nature, divine agency, and what to do when people are hurting in their brains.

Optional Reflection / Visual Interpretation of Jonah:

“Satire of Romantic Suicide” by Leonardo Alenza (1839), click [HERE](#). The painting presents a surprising satire. Like the self-absorbed romantic, Jonah needs to take himself far less seriously. God again returns to satire and humor in v. 11 to push Jonah to shift perspective. It is as if God says, “These Ninevites are utterly lost, Jonah. They don’t even know that cows can’t really understand repentance. Why are you even worried, Jonah, about your standing with them?” {Jonah was likely upset that God’s forgiveness of Nineveh made him look like a false prophet!}



Mental Health Key Points

Repentance is a powerful tool that can lead to healing and evoke God’s mercy.

God can bring us his message of conviction and healing in any way he wants, even through strangers.

Fasting is more than weight loss but can be a means of spiritual connection with God and right action.

Anxiety can lead to various kinds of reactions. We can't assume our anxiousness is the same as another person's.

In a mental health crisis, one can become angry with God.

During a suicidal crisis, one's thinking is impaired. A person might not be capable of seeing apparent solutions to problems.

Sometimes God's actions can seem like a punishment, and God's mercy can seem cruel.

God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit can be present to us when we're in distress and the divine presence can be most patient and gentle, even if we're cold to it.

God doesn't diminish our agency or personhood and can help us see the greater good, which can heal our souls.

Pray

Gracious and merciful God, sometimes my life seems cruel and harsh and makes no sense. I feel all alone, so touch me with your life-giving presence. Hear my prayers and cries; see my tears; and know my anguished thoughts. Be present with me now as my soul languishes, cast adrift in loneliness and hopelessness. Come near quickly, for my spirit is ebbing, and I sense myself fading. In you is every hope, and I cast my hope on you and you alone. Amen.

Most Holy One, I pray for those who see no way forward. Watch over those in distress, sadness, or riven with despair. Be patient with those angry with you and comfort any in a suicidal crisis. Darkness is not dark but light to you, and so, dear Lord, peer into the souls of rebellion, defilement, and ones flirting with evil. Stir in them a repentant spirit using your gentle fingers of love to bring them back from the edge of sorrow and gloom. Shine a light of hope and love on their hearts, minds, and souls. Amen.