



Welcome to your Growth group studies for March 2024. On Sundays and in Growth groups we will spend 4 weeks looking at the Old Testament book of **Jonah**.

*"Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God." - G. Campbell Morgan*

*(Quoted by Leslie C. Allen in his New International Commentary on the Old Testament - Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, Eerdmans, 1976, p192)*

Many have heard of the prophet Jonah being swallowed by a fish or whale. However, that tends to be as much as many people know about the book of Jonah. Which means they miss out on meeting the God whose actions and character might be best summed up by the phrase 'Sovereign Grace'. The little book of Jonah will force us to grapple with the personal implications of knowing a God who is both sovereign over all & willing to be gracious to all.

Some comments of introduction follow.

*Terry Bowers*

## The 4 Studies

The 4 bible studies on Jonah basically follow the chapter divisions (with one little but important exception). It is only in chapter 4 that we gain a full insight into the motivations behind Jonah's decision to flee to Tarshish at 1:3. Following the narrator, I decided to leave that full motivation undisclosed until chapter 4. Those of you who cheat and read ahead with 'who done it?' fiction will need to grapple with temptation.

Week 1 – The Flight of Jonah 1:1-16

Week 2 - The Thanksgiving of Jonah 1:17-2:10

Week 3 – The Mission of Jonah 3:1-10

Week 4 – The Anger of Jonah 4:1-11

Each study contains three types of questions:

O = Observation questions (or exercises) to help group members look closely at the text.

I = Interpretation questions to help the group discuss the implications of the text.

A = Application questions to prompt each member toward applying the truths of the text to church and personal life.

## The Structure of Jonah

The book of Jonah appears to merely be a nice little story. In fact, it is highly structured and crafted to produce contrasts that lead us to the main challenge. The parallels of chapters 1&2 vs chapters 3&4 are very significant for advancing the narrator's purpose. Here is how one writer, Tim Keller, laid out the chapters.

<b>Scene 1</b>	<b>Scene 2</b>
Jonah, the pagans and the sea	Jonah, the pagans and the city
1:1 God's word comes to Jonah	3:1 God's word comes to Jonah
1:2 The message to be conveyed	3:2 The message to be conveyed
1:3 The response of Jonah	3:3 The response of Jonah
1:4 The word of warning	3:4 The word of warning
1:5 The response of the pagans	3:5 The response of the pagans
1:6 The response of the pagan leader	3:6 The response of the pagan leader
1:7ff How the pagans' response was better than Jonah's	3:7ff How the pagans' response was better than Jonah's
2:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant

## The Historicity of Jonah

Features like a man surviving being swallowed & living for 3 days in a fish, and the wholesale repentance of a notoriously cruel and blood thirsty nation in response to the words of a reluctant man....are aspects of Jonah that have seen many consign the book to fiction. But fiction which teaches a truth in the same way many of Jesus' parables did.

Writers debate whether Jonah is historical narrative or more akin to a type of parable that should be categorised as inspired Wisdom literature, like Job. There are also elements of the style of prophetic literature. However, unlike any other prophet of Israel...when this prophet speaks against a foreign nation he does it on location...rather than prophesying against the nation at home, for Israel's benefit. From an historical viewpoint...we know that the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel. (Remember that at this time in Israel's history the Kingdom of Solomon had split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah). The sole reference to Jonah in the records of the Kings of Israel and Judah is 2 Kings 14:25:

*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. **He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.** The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. As for the other events of Jeroboam's reign, all he did, and his military achievements, including how he recovered for Israel both Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel? (2 Kings 14:23-28)*

King Jeroboam II was active from 782-753BC. It is interesting that Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom, Israel, during this time. Israel would subsequently be destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. This was part of God's plan. (The southern kingdom, Judah, was saved from the Assyrians through God's intervention.) These dates mean that the events described in the book of Jonah had to occur sometime within a 60 year period in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, and that the repentant Ninevites of Jonah 3 then returned to their evil ways before 722BC.

Tim Keller wrote in support of the book of Jonah's historicity:

*Despite the literary sophistication of the text, many modern readers still dismiss the work because the text tells us that Jonah was saved from the storm when swallowed by a 'great fish' (Jonah 1:17). How you respond to this will depend on how you read the rest of the Bible. If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally. ('The Prodigal Prophet, Hodder 2018, p4)*

Most persuasive to my approach to the book has been the Lord Jesus:

*Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."*

*He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

*The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here."* (Matthew 12:38-41)

Following the lead of Jesus, I trust the historicity of the book of Jonah. But noting how highly structured it is...I read seeking not history but look the main lessons that Jonah should have learnt.

### **Unanswered Questions**

Jonah was confronted by God refusing to fit stay in the box Jonah had for Him. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the gracious mercy of God with His justice. Especially when that justice is extended to a cruel people outside Israel. The book of Jonah ultimately confronts us all with God's willingness to treat all people with grace. Do we have the heart of Jonah or God?

The book of Jonah doesn't attempt to answer the further question, 'How can God be both merciful and just?' We have to wait until the cross of Jesus Christ for that answer. God's mercy meets God's justice, when Christ die to bear our punishment for sin & Christ's people receive undeserved grace:

*This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:22-26)*