THE BOOK OF JONAH

The King Who Loves His Enemies

Jonah, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Loves His Enemies: The Book of Jonah, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You probably know the story. A man gets swallowed by a big fish, prays, and gets spit out on the beach. Maybe you saw it on a felt board in Sunday school, or in a cartoon with a smiling whale. It's a cute story for kids. Except it isn't.

Jonah is one of the sharpest, most uncomfortable books in the Bible. It's about a prophet who ran away from God, not because he was scared, but because he knew God was kind. God wanted to give a second chance to Nineveh, the capital of the most brutal empire of its day, and Jonah would rather die than see his enemies forgiven.

The fish isn't the main character. Neither is Jonah. The main character is God, who chases down a runaway prophet, rescues pagan sailors, forgives a violent city, and then gently argues with a pouting prophet about why mercy matters. And the book ends with a question that's left for you to answer.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Jonah in four chapters, one for each chapter of the Bible book: running the wrong way (Jonah 1), prayer from rock bottom (Jonah 2), a five-word sermon and a citywide revival (Jonah 3), and mad at God's mercy (Jonah 4).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Jonah was, why Nineveh was so feared, and the different ways Christians read the book. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as whether Jonah is a historical account or a parable, I'll try to be fair and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Jonah in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the thirty-second book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Jonah is often treated as a children's story, but this book presents it as a sharp mirror: a prophet angry that God loves his enemies. It explains the background of Assyria and Nineveh, notes that Jonah is read in synagogues on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and presents fairly the view that Jonah is a historical account and the view that it is a God-inspired parable or teaching story, while noting that Jesus referred to Jonah in Matthew 12:39-41.

Real Talk boxes address running from God, honesty with God in prayer, second chances, prejudice and hatred of enemies, and anger. In Jonah 4, the prophet says it would be better for him to die. A brief, compassionate box explains that God responded to Jonah with gentle care, and encourages any teen who has thoughts like that to talk with a trusted adult right away or call or text 988.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows Jesus as someone greater than Jonah, who spent three days in the tomb and willingly died to rescue His enemies instead of running from them. Wherever

Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

My prayer is that every reader will stop running, receive God's mercy, and learn to share it, even with their enemies.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Who Was Jonah?

Jonah son of Amittai is mentioned outside his book in 2 Kings 14:25. There, he is a prophet from Gath Hepher, a town in Galilee, who predicted that King Jeroboam II would restore Israel's borders. That places him in the northern kingdom of Israel around 780-760 BC, about the same time as Amos and Hosea. Jonah was a prophet with good news for his own nation. He liked it when God blessed Israel. What he didn't like was God blessing Israel's enemies.

Nineveh: Enemy Number One

Nineveh was one of the great cities of Assyria, on the Tigris River in what is now northern Iraq, across from the modern city of Mosul. Assyria was the superpower of the ancient Middle East, and it was famous for terror. Assyrian kings bragged in their own inscriptions about burning cities, skinning captives, and stacking the heads of their enemies in piles. Their palace walls were carved with scenes of conquered people being tortured. The prophet Nahum later called Nineveh the bloody city. About forty years after Jonah's time, Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and carried its people away. To Jonah, Nineveh wasn't just a foreign city. It was the enemy.

Not Just a Fish Story

The book of Jonah is only four chapters long, and only five words of it are Jonah's actual sermon to Nineveh in Hebrew. Most of the book

is about Jonah's heart. The story is carefully built, full of wordplay and repeated phrases like great and went down. It ends with a question, not an answer. It's a mirror. Readers who start by laughing at Jonah slowly realize they may be more like him than they want to admit.

History or Parable?

Christians read Jonah in two main ways. Many believe it is a historical account of real events, pointing out that Jonah was a real prophet named in 2 Kings, that the book is written like a narrative, and that Jesus spoke of Jonah and the Ninevites as real people who will rise at the judgment. Others believe Jonah is a God-inspired parable or teaching story, like the parables Jesus told, pointing to its symbolic style, its humor, and its focus on a lesson. Both groups agree that the book is Scripture and that its message is true. Jesus said, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Whichever view you hold, Jesus treated Jonah's story as a sign pointing to Himself.

Read on the Day of Atonement

Every year, Jewish communities read the whole book of Jonah in synagogues on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. On that day, people fast, confess their sins, and ask God for forgiveness. Jonah fits perfectly. It shows that no one can run from God, that repentance is real, and that God's mercy reaches even the people we'd least expect.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Jonah 1): Running the wrong way.

Chapter 2 (Jonah 2): Prayer from rock bottom.

Chapter 3 (Jonah 3): A five-word sermon and a citywide revival.

Chapter 4 (Jonah 4): Mad at God's mercy.

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CHAPTER 1

Running the Wrong Way

Jonah 1

The book starts with a command. “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”

God wanted Jonah to go east, about five hundred miles overland, to the capital of Assyria. It was the last place any Israelite would want to go. Imagine being told to walk into the headquarters of the most violent group in the world and tell them God has noticed their evil.

So Jonah got up. And went the opposite direction.

“But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.” He went down to Joppa, the seaport, found a ship going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Was Tarshish?**

Tarshish was a distant port, probably in southern Spain, near the Atlantic Ocean, though some scholars suggest other locations around the Mediterranean. To an Israelite, it was the edge of the known world, about two thousand miles west. Nineveh was east. Jonah wasn’t just avoiding his assignment. He was trying to get as far away as humanly possible, in exactly the wrong direction. It’s like being told to go to New York and buying a ticket to Hawaii.

Notice something about the language. Jonah went down to Joppa. He went down into the ship. Later, he'll go down into the hold of the ship, and then down into the sea. Running from God is always a downward journey.

Notice also the phrase from the presence of the LORD. It appears twice in one verse. Jonah knew better than anyone that God is everywhere. Psalm 139 asks, "Where could I flee from your presence?" The answer is nowhere. Jonah wasn't really trying to escape God's presence. He was trying to escape God's call.

> **REAL TALK** **Running from God**
>
> You don't need a ship to run from God. People run in all kinds of ways. You can stay so busy you never have time to think. You can keep your earbuds in all day so you never have silence. You can avoid church, avoid Christian friends, or avoid reading the Bible because you know it might say something you don't want to hear. Sometimes we run because we're scared. Sometimes, like Jonah, we run because we don't like what God is asking. But running never takes us anywhere good. And God doesn't give up on runaways.

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea. The storm was so violent that the ship was about to break apart. The sailors were terrified. Every man cried out to his own god. They threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

And Jonah? He was below deck, fast asleep.

The captain found him and woke him up. "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God! Maybe your God will notice us, so that we won't perish."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sailors**
>
> The sailors on Jonah's ship were probably Phoenicians, the great seafaring people of the ancient world, from cities like Tyre and Sidon. They would have worshiped many gods, including gods of the sea and storms. Ancient sailors

were famously superstitious, and they believed storms could be caused by angry gods punishing someone on board. That's why they cast lots, a bit like drawing straws, to find out who was responsible.

There's a sad irony here. The pagan captain was begging the prophet to pray. The man who knew the true God was the only one on the ship not praying.

The sailors cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. They fired questions at him. Who are you? What do you do? Where are you from? What people are you from?

Jonah's answer sounds impressive. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who has made the sea and the dry land."

But think about what he just said. He worships the God who made the sea, and he's trying to escape that God by sea. The sailors immediately saw the problem. "What have you done?"

REAL TALK **Saying One Thing, Doing Another**

Jonah's theology was perfect. He said all the right words about God. But his actions told a different story. It's possible to know all the right answers and still be running from God. You might know the Bible stories, the Sunday school songs, and the right things to say in youth group, while your life is heading toward Tarshish. Faith isn't just what you say about God. It's what you do when He calls.

The storm kept getting worse. The sailors asked Jonah what they should do. He said, "Take me up, and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will be calm for you; for I know that because of me this great storm is on you."

Some people see this as Jonah finally being brave and taking responsibility. Others notice that he still didn't pray or repent. He

would rather die than go to Nineveh. Either way, the sailors didn't want to do it.

So they rowed hard, trying to get back to land. They didn't want to throw a man overboard. But the sea only grew wilder. Finally, they prayed, not to their own gods, but to the LORD. "We beg you, LORD, we beg you, don't let us die for this man's life, and don't lay on us innocent blood."

> **REAL TALK** **When Outsiders Act Better**
>
> In Jonah 1, the pagan sailors come off better than the prophet. They work hard to save his life. They pray. They care about innocent blood. Jonah sleeps through the crisis and doesn't seem to care whether they live or die. That's a humbling picture. Sometimes people who don't know God show more kindness, honesty, and compassion than people who say they do. Instead of looking down on people outside the church, we can learn from them, and let their kindness challenge us to live up to what we believe.

Then they threw Jonah into the sea. Immediately, the sea stopped raging.

The sailors were stunned. "Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." The sailors who started the chapter praying to many gods ended it worshiping the one true God. Even while Jonah was running, God was using him to reach people.

> **REAL TALK** **God Uses Imperfect People**
>
> Jonah was the worst missionary ever in chapter 1. He ran away, slept through a storm, and didn't pray. And yet a whole ship full of sailors ended up worshiping the LORD. That doesn't mean disobedience is okay. But it does show that God's plans are bigger than our failures. If you've made a mess of things, God is not finished with you. He can still use your story, even the parts you're ashamed of.

And then comes the most famous verse in the book. "The LORD prepared a huge fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Great Fish**

Fun fact: the Bible never says Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The Hebrew just says a huge fish, and the Greek word used in Matthew 12 can mean any large sea creature. People have long debated what kind it might have been. Sperm whales can swallow giant squid whole, and whale sharks and great white sharks are enormous. There are also old sailors' stories of people swallowed and surviving, but those stories are hard to confirm and many have been shown to be legends. Those who read Jonah as history say the point is that God prepared the fish, which makes it a miracle, not a biology project. Those who read it as a parable say the fish is part of the story's message. Either way, the fish isn't a punishment. It's a rescue. Jonah was drowning, and God sent a ride.

Notice the word prepared. It shows up four times in Jonah: God prepared a fish, a vine, a worm, and a wind. God was in control of every detail, even of a runaway's journey.

KEY VERSE

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid its fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 1:3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Jonah ran in the opposite direction instead of just staying home?
2. What are some ways people run from God today?
3. Why do you think the sailors acted more kindly than Jonah?
4. Is there anything God has been asking you to do that you've been avoiding?

TRY THIS *Take ten minutes of silence this week, with no phone, music, or screens. Ask God, Is there anywhere I'm running from You? Write down whatever comes to mind.*

CHAPTER 2

Prayer from Rock Bottom

Jonah 2

Chapter 2 opens in the strangest prayer room in history. “Then Jonah prayed to the LORD, his God, out of the fish’s belly.”

It’s dark. It’s wet. It smells terrible. And for the first time in the book, Jonah prays.

It’s interesting that it took this. When God called him, Jonah ran. When the storm hit, he slept. When the sailors begged him to pray, he didn’t. Only when he hit rock bottom, literally at the bottom of the sea, did he cry out to God.

> **REAL TALK** **Rock Bottom**
>
> Sometimes it takes hitting rock bottom to look up. Maybe you’ve been there: after getting caught in a lie, after a relationship fell apart, after failing something important, or after a choice that went really wrong. Rock bottom is painful. But it can also be the place where you finally stop running and turn to God. The good news is that God can hear you from anywhere, even from the belly of a fish. And if you’re in a hard place right now, you don’t have to stay there alone. Talk to God, and talk to a trusted adult who can help.

Jonah’s prayer is actually a psalm, a poem of thanksgiving. He describes what happened. “I called because of my affliction to the LORD. He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried. You heard my voice.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sheol**

Sheol is the Hebrew word for the place of the dead, the grave, or the underworld. In the Old Testament, it often describes being as close to death as a person can get. When Jonah says he cried out from the belly of Sheol, he means he was as good as dead. He was sinking toward the bottom of the sea, beyond any human help. That makes his rescue even more amazing.

Then he describes sinking. "For you threw me into the depths, in the heart of the seas. The flood was all around me. All your waves and your billows passed over me."

Notice that Jonah says you threw me. The sailors had thrown him overboard, but Jonah knew God was behind it. He wasn't blaming God. He was recognizing that God was in control, even of his discipline.

He felt cut off from God. "I said, I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple."

That word yet is huge. Jonah felt banished. But even then, he chose to look toward God.

Then comes some of the most vivid poetry in the Bible. The waters were up to his neck. The deep was all around him. Seaweed wrapped around his head. He sank to the roots of the mountains. The earth's gates were locked behind him. And then, "yet you have brought my life up from the pit, LORD my God."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Praying Scripture**

Jonah's prayer is packed with phrases from the Psalms. Compare it with Psalm 120:1, "In my distress, I cried to the LORD. He answered me." Or Psalm 42:7, "All your waves and your billows have swept over me." Or Psalm 31:22, "I said in my haste, I am cut off from before your eyes." Or Psalm 3:8, "Salvation belongs to the LORD." Jonah had memorized the songs of his people. When he

was drowning, those words came back to him. He prayed Scripture from the belly of the fish.

REAL TALK **Words for When You Have No Words**

There will be times in your life when you don't know how to pray. You're too sad, too scared, or too overwhelmed to find words. That's when it helps to have Scripture stored up in your heart. The Psalms are full of honest prayers for every emotion: joy, grief, fear, anger, and hope. Try memorizing a few short verses now, so they're ready when you need them. Even praying one line, like Psalm 120:1, can be a lifeline in a storm.

Jonah remembered God at his lowest point. "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD. My prayer came in to you, into your holy temple."

Then he makes a sharp statement. "Those who regard vain idols forsake their own mercy." People who cling to worthless idols give up the mercy that could have been theirs. Ironically, Jonah himself had been trying to run from God's mercy, and he would soon be angry when God gave mercy to others.

REAL TALK **Modern Idols**

An idol is anything we trust, love, or depend on more than God. In Jonah's day, it was statues of gods. Today, idols are usually less obvious. They can be popularity, success, money, a relationship, a sport, a phone, or even our own plans. Idols always promise more than they can give. Jonah says that clinging to them means walking away from the mercy God offers. What are you tempted to hold onto more tightly than God?

Then Jonah ends with a promise and a shout of praise. "But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the LORD."

That last line is the heart of the whole book. Salvation belongs to the LORD. Not to Jonah. Not to Israel. Not to anyone who thinks they

deserve it. God is the one who saves, and He gets to decide whom He saves. Jonah was happy about that truth when it applied to him. In chapter 4, he'll be furious when it applies to Nineveh.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Thanksgiving Before the Rescue**

Notice when Jonah gave thanks. He was still inside the fish. He hadn't reached dry land yet. But he was already thanking God for saving him. Many scholars point out that the fish itself was the rescue, saving him from drowning. Jonah understood that God was already at work, even before his situation changed. That's a powerful kind of faith: thanking God in the middle of the storm, not just after it's over.

Then, one of the funniest lines in the Bible. "Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land."

The fish obeyed God immediately. Jonah hadn't. Even the sea creature was more obedient than the prophet. And the way it obeyed, by throwing up, is not exactly a glamorous ending. Jonah was back on dry land, alive, and probably smelling awful. But he was ready for a second chance.

REAL TALK **Honest Prayer**

Jonah's prayer was real. He didn't pretend everything was fine. He talked about drowning, feeling banished, and being trapped. God doesn't need us to pretend. You can tell Him exactly how you feel, even when you're scared, angry, or ashamed. The Psalms show us that honest prayer isn't a lack of faith. It's what faith looks like when life is hard. And like Jonah, you can end an honest prayer with hope, because salvation belongs to the LORD.

KEY VERSE

But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the LORD.

Jonah 2:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think it took hitting rock bottom for Jonah to pray?
2. How did knowing the Psalms help Jonah pray?
3. What does Salvation belongs to the LORD mean to you?
4. Have you ever thanked God before a hard situation was over? What happened?

TRY THIS *Memorize Jonah 2:9 or Psalm 120:1 this week. Write it on a card and keep it somewhere you'll see it every day.*

CHAPTER 3

Five-Word Sermon, Citywide Revival

Jonah 3

Chapter 3 starts almost exactly like chapter 1. "The LORD's word came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I give you."

The second time. Those three words are full of grace. God didn't fire Jonah. He didn't find a better prophet. He gave the same assignment again.

> **REAL TALK** **Second Chances**
>
> Maybe you've blown it. Maybe you ran from something God asked you to do, broke a promise, or made a choice you regret. Jonah 3:1 is for you. God is the God of second chances, and third chances, and more. Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus restored him and gave him a job to do. Second chances don't mean what you did wasn't serious. They mean God's grace is bigger than your failure. If you've been running, it's not too late to turn around.

This time, Jonah obeyed. "So Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word."

The book says Nineveh was "an exceedingly great city, three days' journey across." Scholars debate what that means. It could mean it

took three days to walk across the city and its surrounding district, or three days to visit every part of it. Either way, Nineveh was huge.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The City of Nineveh**
>
> Archaeologists have excavated the ruins of Nineveh near modern Mosul in Iraq. At its height, its walls stretched about seven and a half miles around, with fifteen gates. Later Assyrian kings built enormous palaces there, decorated with carved stone panels showing military victories. One king, Ashurbanipal, collected a library of tens of thousands of clay tablets, including the famous Epic of Gilgamesh. The greater Nineveh region included surrounding towns and farmland. It was one of the largest and most impressive cities in the world.

Jonah walked a day's journey into the city and preached. His entire recorded sermon was this: "In forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Five-Word Sermon**
>
> In Hebrew, Jonah's sermon is only five words long. It's probably the shortest sermon in the Bible. There's no mention of God's name, no explanation, no call to repent, and no promise of mercy. It's just a warning. And yet, it worked. Some scholars also notice that the Hebrew word for overthrown can also mean turned over or changed. Nineveh would be overturned, one way or another. In the end, it was overturned, not by destruction, but by repentance.

What happened next is astonishing. "The people of Nineveh believed God; and they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from their greatest even to their least."

The whole city responded. Rich and poor, powerful and ordinary. They believed God, stopped eating, and put on sackcloth, a rough, scratchy fabric worn as a sign of grief and repentance.

Then the news reached the king. He got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. The most powerful man in the city took the lowest seat.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sackcloth and Ashes**
>
> Sackcloth was coarse cloth made from goat or camel hair, the kind used for grain sacks. Wearing it was uncomfortable, and that was the point. People wore it when they were mourning a death, facing disaster, or repenting of sin. Sitting in ashes or putting dust on your head was another way of showing grief and humility. It was like saying, I am nothing before God. For a king to do this was a dramatic act of humility.

Then the king made a decree. No one was to eat or drink, not even the animals. "But let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and animal, and let them cry mightily to God."

Yes, the cows were wearing sackcloth too. Picture sheep, goats, oxen, and donkeys draped in scratchy sacks, mooing and bleating with hunger. It sounds almost funny. But it shows how serious the city was. Everyone and everything was turning to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Animals in Mourning**
>
> Ancient writers sometimes describe animals taking part in mourning rituals. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote about Persians shaving their horses' manes during a time of national grief. Some scholars think the Ninevites' decree reflects similar customs. In Jonah, it also sets up the book's final verse, where God mentions His concern for the many animals in Nineveh. God cares about His whole creation, and the whole creation was joining the city's cry for mercy.

The king's decree also went deeper than outward signs. "Yes, let them turn everyone from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." Nineveh was known for violence. The king called them to stop.

Then he said, "Who knows whether God will not turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we might not perish?" He didn't know whether God would forgive them. Jonah hadn't told them that God was merciful. But the king hoped anyway.

REAL TALK **Real Repentance**

Repentance isn't just saying sorry. It's turning around. The people of Nineveh didn't just feel bad. They changed their behavior. They stopped the violence. Real repentance means admitting what you did was wrong, telling God the truth, and, with His help, actually changing direction. Sometimes it means apologizing to people you've hurt or making things right. It isn't about earning forgiveness. It's about responding to a God who is ready to forgive.

And here's how the chapter ends. "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster which he said he would do to them, and he didn't do it."

The most violent city in the world repented, and God forgave them. It may have been the greatest revival in history, and it came from the shortest sermon, preached by the most reluctant preacher.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did It Last?**

The book of Jonah doesn't record whether Nineveh's repentance lasted. Assyrian records from Jonah's general era mention times of plague, revolts, and a solar eclipse in 763 BC, which some scholars suggest might have made people especially open to a prophet's warning, though this is uncertain. What we do know is that later generations of Assyrians returned to brutal violence. About a century and a half after Jonah, the prophet Nahum announced Nineveh's final judgment, and the city was destroyed in 612 BC. God's mercy is real, but each generation must respond to Him for itself.

REAL TALK **Nobody Is Too Far Gone**

Is there someone you think is too far gone for God to save? A bully, an abuser, a celebrity, a politician, or someone who has hurt you deeply? Nineveh was

the most violent city in the world, and God still offered mercy. That doesn't mean what they did was okay, or that you should trust someone who has hurt you. Forgiveness and safety are different things. But it does mean no one is beyond God's reach. Peter says God is not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

KEY VERSE

God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster which he said he would do to them, and he didn't do it.

Jonah 3:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does it mean to you that God's word came to Jonah a second time?
2. Why do you think such a short sermon had such a huge effect?
3. What's the difference between saying sorry and repenting?
4. Is there someone you've written off as too far gone for God?

TRY THIS *Think of one way you need to turn around, like a habit, an attitude, or a relationship. Talk to God about it, and take one concrete step this week to change direction.*

CHAPTER 4

Mad at God's Mercy

Jonah 4

If the book ended with chapter 3, it would be a happy story. A prophet gets a second chance, a city repents, and God shows mercy. But there's a chapter 4. And it's the most important chapter in the book.

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."

Jonah had just seen the greatest revival in history. And he was furious.

Then he finally tells us why he ran away in chapter 1. "Please, LORD, wasn't this what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I hurried to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and you relent of doing harm."

Jonah didn't run because he was afraid of the Assyrians. He ran because he knew God would forgive them. He knew God was kind, and he didn't want God to be kind to his enemies.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Quoting God Against God**
>
> Jonah's description of God comes almost word for word from Exodus 34:6, where God revealed Himself to Moses as "a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth." This was one of Israel's most beloved descriptions of God. The prophet Joel quoted it to call people

to repentance. Jonah quoted it as a complaint. He knew God's character perfectly. He just didn't like it when it applied to people he hated.

REAL TALK **Mercy for Me, Not for You**

It's easy to love God's mercy when it's for us. It's much harder when it's for someone who hurt us, or for people we think don't deserve it. Maybe you've felt that way about a sibling who always seems to get away with things, a classmate who bullied you, or a group of people you've been taught to dislike. Jonah's anger is a mirror. Jesus told a story about an older brother who was angry when his father welcomed home a runaway son. The older brother refused to join the party. Sometimes we're the older brother. God invites us to come in and celebrate.

Then Jonah said something heartbreaking. "Therefore now, LORD, take, I beg you, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Safety: If You Feel Like Jonah**

Jonah was so angry and hopeless that he said it would be better for him to die. Notice how God responded. He didn't yell at Jonah or abandon him. He asked him a gentle question and stayed with him. If you've ever felt like life isn't worth living, please know that God cares about you deeply, and so do the people around you. You don't have to carry those feelings alone. Talk to a trusted adult right away, like a parent, school counselor, teacher, coach, or pastor. You can call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

God answered with a simple question. "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah didn't answer. Instead, he stomped out of the city, went to the east side, built a little shelter, and sat down to watch, hoping God might still destroy Nineveh.

REAL TALK **Is It Right for You to Be Angry?**

Anger isn't always wrong. Jesus was angry when people turned the temple into a marketplace. God is angry at injustice. But anger can also come from pride, jealousy, or a desire for revenge. God's question to Jonah is a good one to ask yourself when you're angry: Is this right? Is my anger about something that's truly wrong, or is it about not getting my way? Talking honestly with God, and with someone you trust, can help you sort it out.

Then God did something tender, and a little bit funny. "The LORD God prepared a vine and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the vine."

For the first time in the whole book, Jonah was happy. Not about the sailors being saved. Not about the city repenting. About a plant that gave him shade.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Vine**

Scholars aren't sure what kind of plant this was. The Hebrew word, qiqayon, may refer to the castor-oil plant, which grows quickly in hot climates and has large leaves that give good shade. Some older translations call it a gourd. Whatever it was, God made it grow fast, overnight, to shade Jonah in the blazing Middle Eastern heat.

But the next morning, God prepared a worm. The worm chewed the vine, and it withered. Then God prepared a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head until he felt faint. And Jonah said again that it would be better for him to die than to live.

Remember the word prepared? God prepared a fish, a vine, a worm, and a wind. Every one of them was part of God's plan to teach Jonah.

God asked again, "Is it right for you to be angry about the vine?" This time, Jonah answered. "I am right to be angry, even to death."

Then God made His point. Jonah cared about a plant that he didn't plant, didn't water, and didn't grow. It came up in a night and died in a night. If Jonah could care that much about a plant, shouldn't God care about a city full of people?

> **REAL TALK** **Caring About the Wrong Things**
>
> Jonah was more upset about losing his shade than about the possibility of a whole city being destroyed. It's easy to laugh at him. But we can be like that too. We can get more upset about a slow phone, a bad haircut, or losing a game than about people who are suffering. God isn't saying small things don't matter. He's asking whether our hearts are big enough to care about what He cares about.

And then the book ends with a question. "Shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who can't discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also many animals?"

The phrase can't discern between their right hand and their left hand probably means they were morally lost or confused, or possibly refers to young children. Either way, God saw them with compassion. And notice that He mentions the animals too. God cares about all of His creation.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Unanswered Question**
>
> The book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible that ends with a question. We never find out how Jonah answered. Did he soften his heart? Did he keep pouting? The book doesn't say. That's intentional. The question isn't just for Jonah. It's for every reader. The author leaves it hanging so that we have to answer it ourselves.

So the question is for you. Should God care about the people you don't like? The people who hurt you? The people from the other

group, the other school, the other side? Should God be concerned for your Nineveh?

REAL TALK **Your Answer**

Jesus said, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you." That doesn't mean pretending people didn't hurt you, staying in unsafe situations, or excusing wrongdoing. It means asking God for a heart that wants good for others, even people who are hard to love. That's not something you can do on your own. It takes God's help. Start by praying for one person by name. You might be surprised at what God does, both in them and in you.

KEY VERSE

He prayed to the LORD, and said, "Please, LORD, wasn't this what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I hurried to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, and you relent of doing harm.

Jonah 4:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why was Jonah angry that God forgave Nineveh?
2. Have you ever been upset that someone else received mercy? Why?
3. Why do you think God used a plant, a worm, and a wind to teach Jonah?
4. How would you answer God's question at the end of the book?

TRY THIS *Write down the name of one person or group you find hard to love. Every day this week, pray for them by name, asking God to bless them and to change your heart toward them.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Jonah ends with a question about whether God should care for His enemies. Jewish readers have treasured the book for centuries as a call to repentance and a picture of God's mercy to all people. Christians believe the full answer to Jonah's question is Jesus.

When religious leaders demanded a miracle from Jesus, He said that no sign would be given except "the sign of Jonah the prophet." Then He explained, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Jesus was predicting His death, burial, and resurrection. And He added, "behold, someone greater than Jonah is here." Think about how much greater. Jonah ran away from his enemies. Jesus came toward His. Jonah was thrown into the sea because of his own disobedience. Jesus went to the cross because of ours. Jonah went into the depths unwillingly. Jesus said of His life, "No one takes it away from me, but I lay it down by myself." Jonah was angry that God forgave his enemies. Jesus prayed for His enemies while they were crucifying Him: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." The Bible says that "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." We were the Ninevites. And Jesus didn't run.

Here's what that means for you, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He cares about every person, even the ones we would write off.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Like Jonah, all of us have run from God, and like Nineveh, all of us need mercy. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is holy, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus did not run.

Jesus, someone greater than Jonah, willingly died for our sins, spent three days in the tomb, and rose again to rescue His enemies.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation belongs to the LORD. It isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Stop running.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? Like the people of Nineveh, you can turn to God and find Him gracious and merciful. You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running from You. I've gone my own way, and sometimes I've wanted mercy for me but not for others. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus didn't run, but willingly died for my sins, spent three days in the tomb, and rose again. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Give me a heart like Yours for people I find hard to love. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read all of Jonah, then Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 15:11-32.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Pray for an enemy. Choose one person you find hard to love, and pray for them by name every day this week.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Jonah argued with God right to the end, and God kept talking with him. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Jonah is right, you can't outrun God, and His mercy is bigger than you ever imagined.

But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the LORD.

Jonah 2:9 (WEB)