

WEEK 1 – Opportunity of a lifetime

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me.’ But Jonah rose 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 the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.” (Jonah 1:1-3, ESV)

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and “call out against it”, because their evil had “come up before Him” (1:2). Yet Jonah fled in the opposite direction to Tarshish. From a purely human perspective, self-preservation made Jonah consider the consequences of going to a heathen city (that was at war with Israel) as a Jewish prophet. He knew his life may have been in danger, not only from Nineveh but also from his own countrymen, the Israelites who would surely punish him for extending God’s grace towards a heathen nation.

Nineveh was also not a small, random city, but the largest in the known world at the time. Consider God calling you to preach against Tokyo in Japan, the largest city today. It would seem to be an impossible task. One against 37 million!

“But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (1:3). Twice in verse 3 it says that Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord. Jonah deliberately chose to flee from the calling of God to go to Nineveh. Not only that, but he also paid his own way onto a boat sailing to Tarshish. All believers should have one desire, and that is to grow closer and closer to our Lord, in order to be in His presence. This closeness to God comes at a price and often the cost is too high, yet we still long for that closeness. Often, when it comes to the things of God and partaking in the calling of God upon our lives, we jump at the opportunity, saying “if God supplies, I will go.” But what if God’s supply is not an upfront sufficiency, but a lifelong journey of dependence?

“So he paid the fare” (1:3). Jonah was not willing to risk his life, to have faith that God would provide once he set out on the journey to Nineveh. However, Jonah was willing to use his own money to pay the fare to go to Tarshish for personal reasons of safety. Are we not doing the same when we present ourselves as willing servants to the call of God as long as He provides? Keeping our possessions to ourselves, willing to pay our own way for the things that we want, wasting precious time and money on selfish ambitions while we wait on God to “provide” before we “step out in faith”?

Choose today to be unconditional and unreserved in your service to God. Seek His presence no matter the cost. And remember that when God says “arise and go”, He’s presenting you with the opportunity of a lifetime, to partake in the miracle that is ‘one against 37 million’.

WEEK 2 – Consequences

“Then they said to him, ‘Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ And he said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ ... Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?’ For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.’” (Jonah 1: 8-9, 11-12)

A great tempest had broken out and the boat that was taking Jonah to Tarshish was about to capsize and sink, killing everyone on board. After the sailors woke Jonah, who was fast asleep and had to be woken up, he realised that what was happening was his doing. No one else was to blame, and Jonah began his confession.

“I am a Hebrew.” Jonah started his confession by confirming his position in relation to the God of Israel. Remember that Jonah was supposed to go to Nineveh, a heathen non-Hebrew city to “call out against” it. Jonah chose to flee to Tarshish because he was afraid of the heathen enemy. Now here on the boat, surrounded by non-Hebrew heathen sailors, Jonah confessed his identity as proof to God that he would now go to Nineveh and do the same there.

"I fear the Lord, who made the sea and the dry land." Jonah confessed that there was no place where he could hide from God: sea or dry land. But Jonah's confession of an omnipresent God was the key to his eventual going to Nineveh. Jonah feared going to Nineveh because they were an evil and a brutal people who would certainly kill him. Jonah realised that his fear of Nineveh reduced the power of God. Faced with a God able to command the seas, Jonah realised that God was to be feared and not Nineveh.

"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea" (1:12). Jonah, having confessed his wrongs in running away from God and placing others in danger because of his selfish choice, told the sailors to "hurl [him] into the sea". Jonah could have asked God to stop the storm, but he did not. Jonah could have prayed to God, allowing the sailors to see the power of Jonah's God, but he did not. It might seem as if Jonah perceived everything as lost. Having confessed his wrongs and acknowledged that God is all-powerful, Jonah might have felt as if God would not want to use him anymore because of his wrongs, and decided it was better to die. Jonah also knew that because God made the sea and dry land, God could save him from drowning if He still wanted to use him.

Jonah was willing to literally give his life so that the sailors on the boat could be saved. We all run at some time, and by God's grace we return after confession. Choose today if you are willing to literally give everything, even your life, so that God might save others, despite your reluctance.

WEEK 3 – Action, not pity

"Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, 'O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You.' So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." (Jonah 1: 13-16)

Jonah knew that he was the reason why God allowed a tempest over the sea, and he knew that in order to calm the sea, he needed to separate himself from the innocent sailors. But the sailors "rowed hard to get back to dry land", before the sea "grew more and more tempestuous against them" (1:13). There were two things the sailors realised during this time. Firstly, that Jonah was a paying customer and they had promised to get him to Tarshish, and secondly, that the God of Jonah was to be feared – if they threw Jonah overboard as he asked, they would surely be punished in some way by the Jonah's God. These two truths made the sailors row as hard as they could to get to dry land.

The sailors pitied Jonah and tried to save his life, but the more they tried, the fiercer the storm became and the more their lives were in danger. Often when we are confronted with hurt or disappointment in others, we pity them and inadvertently keep them where they are, still hurting and disappointed. Pity will never make a situation better – only deliberate action will bring healing to the hurt and hope to the disappointed.

"Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (1:16). Firstly, it's important to note that when the tempest started over the sea, the sailors had "hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it" (1:5). How were they able to offer a sacrifice to the Lord if there was nothing on board the ship to sacrifice? Secondly, after the tempest died down, the men started to fear the Lord "exceedingly", making vows to him. Could it be that once they had thrown Jonah overboard and the tempest had died down, the sailors realised that the God of Jonah was the true God, and they all converted? They "sacrificed" by means of giving their lives over to the God of Jonah, and because God is merciful, He calmed the seas and saved their lives.

The sailors needed action and not pity, so they threw Jonah into the sea, and the tempest died down. Their lives were saved by the God of Jonah, and instead of fearing retribution for taking Jonah to Tarshish, they sacrificed and made vows to God. Choose today to stand up and take action to get out of your tempest, and when the storm has passed, choose to honour the One who allowed the storm and brought you through it – the Lord.

WEEK 4 – The intentional God

“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves and Your billows passed over me.’” (Jonah 2:1-3, ESV)

Who threw Jonah into the sea? The sailors, after he asked them to do so. But now Jonah is saying that God Himself cast him into the seas. Jonah, in his time of distress during the raging tempest that threatened to kill everyone on board the boat, realised that yes, he had run away from God, and yes, he did deserve punishment, but God was the one who has power over everything – power over his life, and those of the sailors; power over the seas to raise a tempest and to calm it down. Jonah realised that it was actually God casting him into the seas, doing it through the sailors.

Jonah was tossed by the waves and billows of the sea, struggling to breathe while being pulled under water to his grave. In seeming separation from God, Jonah compared his deathly struggles in the water to being in the ‘belly of hell’. Yet even there, Jonah called out to the Lord and the Lord heard his cry, sending a great fish to swallow Jonah and vomit him out later onto dry land. When he was still on the boat and the tempest was raging, Jonah confessed that the Lord was the “God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9). Jonah therefore knew that if God could command a tempest over the seas, He could command it to stop. Nothing was impossible for God. If God created everything, then He was able to save Jonah from the ‘belly of Sheol’.

From being cast into the seas to being swallowed up by a great fish, Jonah makes two very important conclusions. First, that God intentionally allows events to take place in our lives, even ones where we cannot breathe because the waves and billows of the situation are pulling us down. And second, that even when we have all the reasons to lose hope, God is still able to save if we cry out to Him.

Choose today to acknowledge the supremacy of God in everything. Allow Him, who is able to save, to take you through the waves and billows of disappointment, heartache and the hardship in your life. And when you are at your very end and are unable to save yourself, call out to God and He will hear your cry!

WEEK 5 – The only constant

“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves and Your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from Your sight; yet I shall again look upon Your holy temple.’” (Jonah 2:1-4, ESV)

Jonah found himself inside the belly of a giant fish the Lord sent to save his life, after the anger of God had raged over the seas as Jonah tried to run away from God’s presence. Inside the fish, Jonah experienced complete loss, calling out from the “belly of Sheol” (or “belly of hell”), but it was also here, in Jonah’s situation of complete hopelessness, that he came to the startling realisation that God is the only constant.

Being an Israeli prophet, Jonah knew almost everything (humanly) that there was to know about the God of Israel. You didn’t just become a prophet or priest serving in the temple by your own choice. It took years and years of studying the Hebrew Scriptures, and even when you excelled in your scriptural knowledge, it was still only by God’s anointing that you become a prophet. A prophet was called by God to serve the people of God. Jonah was one such man, who, by all the standards of the day, knew God. Yet he ran away from God, and found himself “going down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever” (2:6).

Despite all his training and all his knowledge, it was only at the bottom of the ocean, in the belly of a fish, in total abandonment from God, that Jonah understood who God really is. Jonah had already confessed that God is “the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land”, proclaiming that God is all-powerful, but now for the first time, the penny dropped and Jonah realised that there is something more than God being all-mighty: He is always constant.

It was with joy that Jonah cried from within the belly of the fish, at last proclaiming that he “shall look again upon [God’s] holy temple”. For Jonah, death was not the end. If God is constant, then He would raise Jonah up again, just like He will raise up you and me on the last day to be with Him in heaven.

Choose today to place your trust in a God that is constant, in life and death. Believing in a constant God takes away the fear of death, because He promises life after death. And because He is constant, His promises never fail.

WEEK 6 – Stormy vows

“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:8-9, ESV)

Jonah was lying in the belly of a fish, and having made peace with the fact that God had created a tempest over the sea and had commanded a fish to swallow him up after he had been thrown overboard, he concluded that no one was to blame but himself. After giving himself up to God – the only constant in every situation, good or bad – Jonah started to see and understand what God was seeing and wanting him to do.

In chapter 2 verse 8, Jonah expresses an understanding that it’s not about Israel being the chosen people of God and the rest of humanity mere observers to the blessing on Israel. No, in God’s eyes, there were those who worshipped Him and those who “paid regard to vain idols”.

When Jonah was flung into the sea and swallowed by the fish, he had no idea whether the sailors had survived. For all practical reasons, the storm was still raging and could have capsized the boat, drowning them all. The sailors, however, were safe and the storm was over, and because the God of Jonah saved them, they “feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows” (1:16). What the sailors did was exactly what Jonah was now promising to do: sacrifice and vows.

Jonah deliberately used the words “vain idols” when he called out to God, because it was the last thing he saw before he was flung into the sea. He had seen the frightened sailors paying regard to their gods, hoping they would save them from the storm. When Jonah became a prophet, he would have made vows to God to always follow and be obedient to whatever God asked of him. But when God asked him to go to Nineveh, he had run away, breaking his vows. In running away, Jonah realised he was no better than the sailors paying regard to vain idols. At that moment, in the belly of the fish, he was as lost without God as they were. Realising this, Jonah quickly recalled his vows, promising to fulfil them and to bring sacrifices to God.

Watch that you do not become like Jonah who needed a storm and a fish-home to remind him of his vows, his promises and his intended sacrifices to the Lord. Recall your vows to God today, and start fulfilling them before the storm comes.

WEEK 7 – No limits

“Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.” (Jonah 3:4-5, ESV)

Jonah got a second chance to go to Nineveh and “call out against it”, and when he went and told the people of Nineveh what God said, the whole city repented and believed in God.

Nineveh was the largest city in the known world at that time. Jonah walked into this city, started to preach, and literally overnight, the whole city turned to God – not to vain idols, but to the living God. This seems impossible! One theory is that God had already prepared their hearts for the message that Jonah was to bring, and as a result, they turned to God. Whether the theory holds or not, the question of how a whole city left their evil ways and turned to the God of

their enemy (Israel) is one that will force believers to examine the limits of their faith. Do you really believe God is able to save?

The only limits to the saving mercies of God are the ones we put in place, like Jonah who ran away, not wanting God to forgive Nineveh. God wants to save, and he wants to use you to play a role in it. When Jonah ran away, the consequences were not only a tempest over the sea and being swallowed up by a fish; more importantly, the people of Nineveh may have suffered eternally without knowing the true God because Jonah had run away with the message of salvation. God wanted to save Nineveh, and He placed His full power of salvation into the message given to Jonah. All Jonah had to do was preach, and salvation would follow. But Jonah ran away.

Do you believe that God can save? Do you believe that God wants to save – even your enemies? Do you believe God can turn a city around? Then understand today that when you confess faith in a God who is able and wanting to save, He has chosen you to carry the message of salvation: a message so powerful that whole cities can turn from their evil ways and worship God. Choose today not to run away. If you do, lives may be lost.

WEEK 8 – The truly regenerated life

“... the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.’” (Jonah 3:5-8, ESV)

After Jonah “called out against” the evil of Nineveh, the Bible says “the word reached the king” (3:6), and he sent a decree throughout the kingdom, commanding the people of Nineveh to do four things in response to what Jonah had preached. In verse 5, we see that the people had already called for a fast and had covered themselves in sackcloth – now the king decreed it again so that all the people of Nineveh would participate. The king realised that Nineveh had sinned collectively and all would have to show repentance, even the herds and flocks. The king also told the people to “call out mightily to God” (3:8).

Everything the people of Nineveh were doing showed Jonah that they were truly repentant. It must have been a sight to see the largest city in the known world covering itself in mourning sackcloth because of their sins. Jonah might even have felt a sense of achievement – what other prophets had had such success? But was it all a show, a moment of remorse?

The king of Nineveh added a final requirement to the decree: “let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands” (3:8). The king knew that his people were remorseful but not repentant, and he called them out by telling them to stop their “evil way” (unseen sin) and “the violence that is in their hands” (visible sin). The king understood that a remorseful fuss, such as sackcloth and fasting, means nothing if there is not a deliberate change from evil to good. God sees the sackcloth and the fasting, and hears the calling from them, but He also sees when the sackcloth and fasting is hiding sin.

Without deliberate change, repentance will always be spelled “remorse”. Remorse is saying sorry without changing. Remorse is putting on the show of sackcloth and fasting, while holding on to “the violence in (our) hands”. Repentance is deliberate change after remorse. Choose today to allow God to identify the areas in your life that need change. Then choose to deliberately pursue lasting change, with sackcloth and fasting presenting themselves in a regenerated life through Christ Jesus.

WEEK 9 – God’s Hope

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10. ESV)

When the people of Nineveh repented of their evil ways and stopped their violent deeds, God chose not to destroy them as Jonah had prophesied would happen within forty days if they did not repent. Matthew Henry said the reason for God relenting was because the people of Nineveh had “broken and contrite hearts”. Nowhere do we read that they sacrificed offerings to the Lord – only that they were genuine in their repentance, and therefore God relented from punishing them.

The direct Hebrew translation for “God relented” is “God repented”. Can God repent? Repentance is only necessary when you have done something wrong. If God is incapable of sin, why does it say then that He repented? John Piper says the following: “The repentance of God is His expression of a different attitude and action about something past or future—not because events have taken Him off guard, but because events make the expression of a different attitude more fitting now than it would have been earlier. God’s mind ‘changes’, not because it responds to unforeseen circumstances, but because He has ordained that His mind accord with the way He Himself orders the changing events of the world.”

As we will see later in Chapter 4, Jonah did not believe Nineveh deserved God’s forgiveness, and waited to see how they would turn to their old ways and how God would realise His mistake in forgiving them. But God is not man that He should doubt. Nor is He changing like the wind that He should change His mind every now and then. No, God “repented” of what He was going to do to Nineveh because Nineveh changed, and the hope that they would remain changed is what saved them. Human hope is wavering. When God hopes, it’s in accordance with His will.

Choose today to change. Not because you hope for something better, but because your hope is in a God that is infinitely more than any change you could hope to make. Trust Him to change you, and allow Him to continue that change till perfection.

WEEK 10 – Selfish Destruction

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.’” (Jonah 4:1-2, ESV)

God relented from punishing Nineveh because they repented of their evil ways. And now we find Jonah, who ran away from God, angry with the same God who showed him mercy by saving his life, just like He did for Nineveh. Jonah deserved the full wrath of God, but God relented, and Jonah was pleased. Nineveh deserved the full wrath of God, but God relented, and it “displeased Jonah exceedingly”. Could Jonah be so selfish?

The Hebrew word use here for angry is “*charah*”, meaning “to glow or grow warm, to blaze up, anger, zeal, jealousy”. Jonah did not suddenly become angry at God – it started the moment the fish spat him out. And from there, with every step he took towards Nineveh, the anger grew and grew to the point where Jonah was blinded by his anger, unable to see the repentance of Nineveh. There was an inner battle between flesh and spirit going on inside of Jonah, and the flesh won. How quickly the praise of Jonah in Chapter 2:9 was forgotten (“But I with a voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord”).

Jonah was now angry with God, and he took it a step further by accusing God of His very nature (“You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster”). Jonah accused God of making a mistake – that because He is steadfast in love, gracious and merciful, Nineveh would no longer get what it deserved. The men of Nineveh had killed men of Israel; they had stolen, raped and pillaged, and now God had forgiven them as if these sins had never happened...

Jonah wanted Israel, the chosen people of God, to be the only benefactors of God's salvation. And now God had extended it to Nineveh – a heathen, idolatrous nation and the enemy of Israel. Could Jonah be more selfish?

If you are the only one benefitting from your relationship with Christ, then something is wrong. Christ Jesus did not come to save only you but all who repent, deserving or not, chosen or not. Beware that your flesh does not overpower the Spirit of God in you. Choose today to share the benefit of having Christ. Choose today to praise the steadfast love, mercy and goodness of God, so His kingdom may advance. If you don't, His kingdom within you will be destroyed by your selfish flesh.

WEEK 11 – Blessings of God?

"... O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:3, ESV)

After 40 days of calling out against the evils of Nineveh, seeing their repentance and God's forgiveness, Jonah went outside the city to see what would become of it. Jonah must have doubted the people's repentance and thought that God would still punish the city for false repentance.

Jonah went to the east of the city, the highest elevated part of the area. Some suggest that Jonah went there to get a better view of what he thought might happen to the city. But once again, we see Jonah placing himself (as an Israelite) higher than the people of Nineveh. Once again, we see the selfishness of Jonah wanting no one other than himself and his people to benefit from God's mercy. No wonder Biblical historians call him the "miserable prophet".

Jonah was still angry with God, to the point that he said: "O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (4:3). God responded by doing three things: He "appointed" a plant to give Jonah shade, then a worm to attack and destroy the plant (taking away the shade), and then a scorching wind to burn Jonah. These three powerful acts of God – who has power over His creation – should have been enough prompting for Jonah to repent again and let Nineveh be. But his attitude went from bad to worse.

Note that when the plant gave Jonah shade, it caused him to be "exceedingly glad". The last time Jonah was exceedingly anything was when he was displeased with God and "exceedingly angry". But when God showed favour to Jonah, he soaked up the blessing for himself. When the worm ate the plant and caused Jonah discomfort, Jonah's 'multiple personality disorder' kicked in and he once again said that it would be better for him to die than to live (4:8).

How often do we praise the Lord and feel blessed when everything works out? And how often do we feel depressed and hurt and confused and even angry when things don't work out and there seem to be no blessings? Beware of measuring God in terms of His blessings. Choose today to praise God, during the good and the bad times.

WEEK 12 – See What God Sees

After God appointed a worm to destroy the plant that was providing Jonah with shade from the scorching sun, God asked Jonah if he had any reason to be angry, and Jonah answered "yes". Jonah was sitting outside the city of Nineveh, waiting to see what God would do to it. He was sitting in the sun and feeling miserable. All of a sudden, a plant grew over him and provided a cool shade, and the Bible says that Jonah was "exceedingly glad" (4:6). Then the plant died. Jonah probably got up and tried everything he could in his limited human power to save the plant. Why? Because if the plant died, he would lose the shade and become miserable again.

God told Jonah that the city of Nineveh had 120,000 people who did not "know their right hand from their left" (4:11) – in other words, there were 120,000 infant-like citizens of Nineveh who did not know right from wrong. 120,000 people who did not know better, and who would have been killed if God had not relented from destroying the city. John Gills, in his exposition of the Bible, notes that "it may be reasonably supposed Jonah was convinced of his sin and folly; and, to show his repentance for it, penned this narrative, which records his infirmities and weaknesses, for the good of the Church, and the instruction of saints in succeeding ages."

Choose today to see what God sees when you look at the world: a world full of hate, ravaged by war and inequality and greed; a world full of sin, deserving God's judgement. Choose today to change your perspective, to see what God sees: a people worth saving.