



# A Rebellious People Receive Mercy

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** God's love and mercy extend to all people and are expressed through His sending of messengers to proclaim forgiveness and life through Him.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Jonah

Perhaps you have heard the story about a man being swallowed up by a big fish and living to tell the tale. Immediately this conjures up thoughts of fables and campfire stories. So, what are we to make of this story? Is the Book of Jonah just a fairy tale with a good moral, or is it more? Can we really believe in extraordinary stories like this?

Well, do we believe in miracles? Because the most miraculous part of Jonah's story isn't the fact that a large fish swallowed him and he somehow lived. The part that should overwhelm us with awe, wonder, and shock is where a great and holy God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, has mercy on sinners. Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites—these were people God pursued, and God is intent on working in the hearts of rebels just like them and turning them into worshipers.



Why should God's mercy on sinners qualify as a miracle?

# Group Time

## Point 1: God pursues a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 1:1-4,17).

<sup>1</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

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<sup>17</sup> And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

When the word of God came to Jonah to preach a message to Nineveh, he ran. This command of God came to his ears and his heart’s response was rebellion. What this revealed about Jonah was that he, like every Ninevite, was a sinner. His status as an Israelite, his calling as a prophet, his previous acts of obedience—none of these things made it easy for him to obey this command. He would rather leave his home and sail for the ends of the earth than obey God in this.



What are some reasons God’s commands may cause us to run and hide from His presence?

Jonah had faithfully served God as a prophet in Israel (2 Kings 14:25). But suddenly, God’s message came and Jonah’s immediate response was to run from God’s presence, and not for the reason we might think. Jonah feared going to Nineveh, but it wasn’t for his own life or the possibility that no one would repent in response to his preaching. His fear was tied to believing that God could actually spare such evil people (Jonah 4:1-2).



What must be true about God to pursue those who rebel against Him for reconciliation and obedience?

## Point 2: God extends mercy to a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 2:10–3:5,10).

<sup>2:10</sup> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

<sup>3:1</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

God’s forgiveness and mercy do not diminish His call to obedience. When God once again spoke to Jonah, after responding in mercy to his prayer, His command was the same: Get up, go to Nineveh, and preach. In God’s mercy, He doesn’t lower the standard for our obedience. He doesn’t lower the bar, thinking, “Oh, maybe what I’m asking is too much.” God’s mercy won’t allow His children to miss out on the joy of fully obeying His Word.



Why might obedience to God often feel like an option or a chore rather than a joy?

The sermon delivered by Jonah was short, only five words in Hebrew. Yet at this simple message, this entire city of Nineveh repented. Even the king stepped down from his throne, removed his robe, and repented (3:6-9). While the words were few, two critical components were clear: **1) judgment was coming** and **2) there was time to repent**. God hates sin and seeks to destroy it, and at the same time, He loves sinners and seeks to reconcile them to Himself. He is slow to anger and quick to forgive; He is merciful.

**God Is Merciful:** Mercy refers to God’s \_\_\_\_\_ and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin. Both mercy and grace are \_\_\_\_\_.

### Point 3: God reveals His patient love for a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 4:1,8-11).

<sup>1</sup> But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

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<sup>8</sup> When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” <sup>9</sup> But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

When God saw Nineveh’s repentance, He relented from His anger; when Jonah saw this same result, he was greatly displeased and furious. We were created for God’s glory, and our hearts were designed to align with His heart. When our hearts are out of sync with His, when we don’t love what God loves and hate what He hates, we often become angry, bitter, or depressed. But rather than becoming greatly displeased and furious at Jonah’s response, God instead continued His patient work of pursuing Jonah’s heart.

The astonishing thing throughout the Book of Jonah is that *all of creation, except Jonah, was fully submitting to God’s word*. All of creation was available to God as He loved, disciplined, and pursued the heart of Jonah. This is no less true today. God uses all necessary means to bring people to the foot of the cross and align our hearts with His heart. He continues to work sovereignly and lovingly as He carries out His perfect plan of sanctifying and glorifying a people for Himself.



How should Christians view the opportunities they have to share the gospel with unbelievers and encourage believers in the faith?

#### Voices from the Church

“God’s too big for us to control. You can’t pick and choose which of God’s attributes you want to see displayed and when and where you want to experience them.”<sup>1</sup>

—Priscilla Shirer



# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Jonah 1:1-17

The word of the Lord had come to Jonah commanding him to go to Nineveh and preach a message. Yet Jonah fled. In his disobedience, he found what he thought was an open door as he ran from God. When he reached the dock, there was a ship leaving. He had the fare to purchase a trip heading hundreds of miles away from Nineveh. Perhaps he justified his actions believing that God was providing a way out from the original call. Wasn't it providential that a ship was heading out and he had the financial means to go?

Addressing the faithful use of our tongues, Henry T. Scholl once wrote: "For training the tongue aright God has given us the salutary example of his Son. That we may habitually conform to that example, he would fain work in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Testings come in his wise providence; but these testings are no valid excuse for testiness of speech."<sup>3</sup> This same idea was working in Jonah's life for his obedience. Though fleeing was possible, these circumstances did not override the word of God to Jonah. God had told him to go to Nineveh, and no matter how many affordable rides were headed in the opposite direction, the circumstances did not change his call. Jonah took the opportunity to turn his back on God and His word, but God was not going to turn His back on Jonah.

### Voices from the Church

"The only real solution to my disobedience isn't behavior modification, but belief transformation. Only when we begin to believe God is more valuable than anything else will we begin to live as if it is true. Like a loving parent, God is after our hearts, not our behavior."<sup>4</sup>

—Spence Shelton



When your circumstances, advice from others, or your own feelings contradict God's Word, how do you come to a final decision?

## Day 2: Read Jonah 2:1-9

All the discipline that God had brought upon Jonah—the storm, being cast into the sea with anticipation of death, dark isolation inside the fish—brought about God’s intended work in Jonah. From the belly of the fish, Jonah cried out to his God and acknowledged that salvation belongs to Him. Hardhearted and rebellious Jonah had been the recipient of great mercy and grace from the Lord. What better way to prepare the heart of a person to go and deliver God’s word to hardhearted and rebellious people!

Before these events, Jonah refused to deliver a message to Nineveh because he judged them to be great sinners. But here, God reminded Jonah that he too was a sinner and that he needed exactly what the Ninevites needed—the great mercy of God. A man who deserved to be dead at the bottom of the sea for his disobedience instead received mercy. Consequently, Jonah opened his mouth in prayers of praise and thanksgiving to his God from inside a fish.



When has God used His perfect and loving discipline to reveal sin that was in your heart?

## Day 3: Read Jonah 2:10–3:10

We can see now that Jonah’s life would have gone so much better if he had just obeyed God in the first place. He had wasted money on a fare to Tarshish. He had wasted days traveling out to sea and then was transported by a fish. If he had immediately responded to the call, there would have been no storm, no drowning, and no fish. All of his efforts to derail God’s will for him had been a waste. If you could talk to Jonah at this point in the story, you might ask him, “Jonah, is there anything you would have done differently?” Surely he would scream: “Of course, I would! I’d obey the first time!” But even still, as we will see, Jonah’s heart was not right in his obedience.

God has promised that He will patiently and lovingly work discipline into the lives of His people to bring about repentance and obedience. Disobedience is a waste of our time. God will continue to pursue us, sanctify us, and create in our hearts a greater desire for Him and His gospel. We will be brought to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6), so let us join God in this work that He is doing in us rather than futilely fight against it.




How might you use your sinful choices and their consequences in the past to encourage a younger believer to obey God immediately today?

## Day 4: Read Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah's angry words were affirmations of God's character: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (v. 2). These were things that Jonah knew in his head to be true. His theology of God was excellent. Yet what he knew of God had not affected his heart; he did not love these things about God. This was at the root of Jonah's disobedience. What he knew and what he loved didn't match up.


We don't often think of sin as a theology problem, but we should. We know what God thinks about lies, gossip, lust, and greed, so we aren't disobedient in these ways because of uncertainty. Instead, we disobey because our hearts do not love God completely; we don't love the things that He loves. Jonah did not want God to save Nineveh because he didn't love sinners and desire their salvation the way that God did. Jonah and his will were at the center of his heart. God wanted to put Himself and His will at the center of Jonah's heart. To do so, He first had to show Jonah what was truly in his heart.

 Where in your life do you see a misalignment between your theology (what you know is true about God from His Word) and your heart (what you love)?

## Day 5: Read Matthew 12:38-42

Something greater than Jonah is here. Whereas Jonah said he'd rather die than go to sinners, Jesus said He would go to sinners so that He could die. Whereas Jonah was thrown into the sea to appease God's wrath against him, Jesus was thrown into the sea of God's wrath to appease His anger against us. Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days and nights and vomited out, but Jesus was in the belly of the grave for three days and nights and then resurrected out.

Jonah preached his message, and the people of Nineveh repented with uncertain hope of forgiveness (Jonah 3:9). Jesus preached the gospel of the cross, which promises us, if we confess our sins, that God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9). God used Jonah to spare one city, but Jesus came to save people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. Indeed, Someone much greater than Jonah is here.

 If an entire wicked city repented at the preaching of Jonah, why should you have hope that many sinners might repent in response to your sharing of the gospel?



