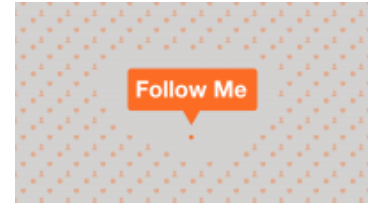


DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 2

FOLLOW ME
FOLLOW ME WHERE YOU DON'T WANT TO GO
JONAH 1, 3, AND 4
11/19/2017



MAIN POINT

God pursues us because He wants our hearts to be aligned with His.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Growing up, did you ever want to run away from home? Why or why not?

What has made or would make you want to run away from God?

The key question we want to focus on in today's lesson is: Are we running away from God, toward God, or with God? If we're not running with Him every day, then what must happen to change our direction?

The Book of Jonah is not a story about a fish. Neither is it simply a story about a rebellious prophet. The central character in the book is God. The book reflects God's love for the lost, the tragic failure of His people to share that love, and the extreme measures God may use to move His people to obedience. In chapter 1, we read how Jonah "paid the fare and went on board . . . away from the presence of the Lord." Jonah was onboard with his own plans that eventually led him overboard.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 1:1-2.

We know very little about the prophet Jonah. He is identified in verse 1 only as the "son of Amittai." He also is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. According to the 2 Kings passage, Jonah had experienced past success as a prophet. He had heard and delivered God's message to King Jeroboam II of Israel. As a result, Israel's territories had been expanded. Jonah most likely was highly popular and respected among the people of God because of this. God gave a specific command to Jonah: Go to Nineveh and preach against it.

When you struggle to obey God, what are the most common reasons why?

Is there anything you think God is asking you to do that doesn't make sense to you?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 1:3.

Jonah's response to God's call may have been something like: "Lord, You know I love You, but faith has limits. I will go anywhere You send me—just not to Nineveh." For some of us our personal Nineveh might actually be a place. For others it may be a task. Our personal Nineveh may be whatever God is requiring us to do right now.

Is there something you would have a hard time doing if God asked it of you? Why?

Contrast Jonah's response to God's call with how other Old Testament prophets responded to His call, by reading 1 Kings 17:1-6; Isaiah 6:8-11; and Jeremiah 1:4-10.

Is your response to God today more like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Jonah?

People today attempt to run from God in a variety of ways. Being in God's will is not primarily a matter of where we are geographically but has to do with where we are spiritually. We can run from God without ever leaving our geographic location. Jonah's disobedience was an expression of a cold heart, a heart that did not beat in sync with God's. While some believers run from specific tasks God calls them to, many more simply refuse to run with God in everyday life. We fill our lives with so many activities that time for God and ministry to people gets squeezed out.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 1:4-10.

In verse 4, what was the consequence of Jonah's disobedience?

What are some consequences we experience today when we run from God's will?

Any believer attempting to run from God eventually will come to face the consequences of that disobedience in the hope that he or she might turn back to God. Sometimes it may be months or even years before the consequences surface. For Jonah, it was a matter of hours or days. Though it may not happen immediately, we will always face the consequences when we do not obey God. God does not quickly give up on His people who fail to do His will. In spite of our stubbornness and self-absorption, He still desires to accomplish His purposes through us.

Lead in a discussion of some of the indicators that the church today has fallen asleep in regard to its mission. What "storms" do you think God has sent to awaken His church?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JONAH 3:1 - 4:4.

Describe Jonah's attitude through this entire ordeal. In what ways do sinful attitudes keep us from joining God in His mission?

Is it possible for us to be obedient to God and have a bad attitude at the same time? Why or why not?

Jonah had a better theological understanding of God, but he lacked compassion for others. The sailors showed greater concern for one physical life (see chapter 1) than Jonah displayed for a multitude of spiritual lives. Jonah learned the hard way that you can run, but you can't hide from God. Jonah also learned that God will spare no expense in pursuing those who run away from Him. God will pursue us to bring Him back to Himself. The greatest evidence of this truth is seen on the cross (Rom. 5:8).

Read Matthew 12:40-41. What is the meaning of Jonah's entombment for Jesus? How did Jonah compare to Jesus?

Why do you think God didn't simply raise up someone else to do the task Jonah refused?

Why do you think following God is always in our best interest?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

The Bible lets us look at the interaction between God and Jonah so we can understand better our own interaction with God. God still calls people into service and sends them to faraway nations. He also sends His servants to next-door neighbors, to friends and coworkers, to enemies and opponents. So before we condemn Jonah too harshly, let his example remind us of how we have responded or are responding to God's call. The key question each of us must ask ourselves today is this: Am I running away from God, toward God, or with God? If I'm not running with Him, then what must happen to change my direction?

How has this lesson encouraged you? How has this lesson challenged you?

Does God have your head and heart?

To whom might God be sending you to share the gospel as you follow Him? How can you take advantage of opportunities to share with them this week?

PRAY

Thank God for loving us and calling us to follow Him with our whole person. Pray that we will follow Him and not run from Him.

COMMENTARY

JONAH 1:1-17

1:1. Jonah in Hebrew means "dove." His father's name Amittai means "faithful is Yahweh."

1:2. Nineveh on the east bank of the Tigris River became the Assyrian capital after 705 B.C., well after Jonah's day. Its ruins are found in the northern part of modern Iraq, opposite the city of Mosul 220 miles northwest of Baghdad. For Jonah, Nineveh was an arduous journey of over 500 miles to the northeast of Samaria. His probable route—first traveling north and then east—would have made the trip closer to 600 miles. God's holiness is offended by sin. He showed Himself judge of the world by holding these distant pagans accountable for their wickedness, though He also showed His mercy by commanding His prophet to warn them.

1:3. To flee from the Lord's presence is to attempt the impossible since God is everywhere, though people still try. (See 4:2 for why he fled.) Joppa on the Mediterranean coast just south of modern Tel Aviv was one of Israel's few natural seaports. The location of Tarshish is uncertain. Its association with ships (1 Kings 10:22) suggests it was near the sea. The "ships of Tarshish" used by King Jehoshaphat on the Red Sea were probably merchant ships of design similar to those used by sailors from Tarshish on the Mediterranean Sea. Tarshish has sometimes been identified with Paul's home of Tarsus in Cilicia or the city of Tharros on the island of Sardinia west of Italy. But the most probable identification of Tarshish is the Phoenician colony of Tartessus, located on the Guadalquivir River on the southwestern coast of Spain about 2,000 miles west of Palestine. This is about as far in the opposite direction from Nineveh that Jonah could have gone.

1:5-6. Jonah's spiritual decline is depicted in parallel with the descriptions of his response to God's call. He was told to "get up" (v. 2) to go to Nineveh, but instead he "went down to Joppa" (v. 3), "went down" to the ship (v. 3) and finally

went down to the lowest part of the vessel. Eventually he will be swallowed by a fish and sink down to the foundations of the mountains at the bottom of the sea (2:6). Only then did he hit bottom and begin to go back up. His deep sleep in the midst of a storm also symbolizes his spiritual condition. It may have been a symptom of depression stemming from his willful disobedience.

1:9. Worship is literally “fear.” Fear of God in the Old Testament is the respect that a person has for God, causing him to turn from evil and obey God’s commandments (Gen. 22:12; Job 1:8; 28:28; Prov. 8:13). Ironically God’s prophet Jonah showed no such fear by his disobedience. It is also ironic that Jonah fled to avoid preaching to Gentiles in Nineveh, but now found himself preaching to Gentiles in the ship. Yahweh means “He is present” and is God’s personal name in the Old Testament, ordinarily rendered in translation as LORD (as in vv. 1,3,4,10,16,17). The substitution in translation of the title LORD for the personal name Yahweh goes back to postexilic Jewish reluctance to pronounce the divine name. Neither Jonah nor these sailors had any qualms about using the term Yahweh at this time.

1:12-15. Rather than submitting to God, Jonah asked these men to kill him by throwing him overboard. Yet despite Jonah’s confession of guilt, these pagan Gentiles had moral scruples about sending a man to his death and tried to row ashore instead. Only after they saw no other option and had prayed that Yahweh would not hold them accountable for taking a human life did they throw Jonah into the sea. The integrity and spiritual sensitivity of these Gentiles would have shocked Israelite readers of this book, confronting their belief that non-Hebrews were unworthy of God’s mercy. Certainly this is a lesson Jonah himself needed.

1:16. When the sea calmed, these Gentile sailors then feared the Lord in the sense of revering and worshiping Him. Jonah, who was fleeing from a mission to preach to Gentiles, had unintentionally converted an entire crew of Gentile sailors.

1:17. The huge fish that swallowed Jonah was not necessarily a whale. Yarns of a sailor surviving Jonah-like in a whale have been widely repeated in recent centuries, but no account has ever been authenticated. Three days and three nights parallels Christ’s resurrection on the third day (Matt. 12:40).

JONAH 3:1-10

3:1 If we read the Book of Jonah in one sitting, these words will be familiar, for 3:1-2 is strikingly similar to 1:1-2. In a sense Jonah was back to where he began. However, the Jonah in chapter 3 is somewhat different from the person found in chapter 1. Much had happened, and many lessons were learned, but the process of discipleship obviously was not yet complete. The text simply points out that God spoke to Jonah again. There is no mention of reproach for the prophet’s former disobedience. The Lord simply repeated his command. While Jonah had taken quite a detour since the first command, God’s will remained steadfast.

3:2 Although the precise content of the message Jonah was commanded to preach to this Assyrian city is not yet mentioned, two things are made clear: where he should preach and the source of the message. Jonah was given specific “marching orders” about the destination. He also was reminded that the message would not come from him nor from anyone else, but only from the Lord. His job was to deliver the message, not to critique or revise it.

3:3 Clearly God cared deeply about the Ninevites, whom he had created in his image. Therefore he sent this prophet with a message that would ultimately lead to their turning.

3:4 Jonah’s arrival in Nineveh probably was dramatic. His clothing was no doubt different from the norm, his bearing gave evidence of a different lifestyle, and a possibly bleached skin color provided for much attention. The message from the Lord, imparted by Jonah, was a relatively short one. In the Hebrew the message was only five words long. While it is not clear that this was all he had to say, the text does suggest that God’s message was brief and that Jonah simply preached it repeatedly. If these words were the sum total of the message, no reason for the destruction was given, nor was the manner of destruction described. There was not even an explicit call to repentance. Although Jonah apparently did not mention the possibility of deliverance in response to repentance, both he and his audience may have assumed it. At least his audience hoped for it. If this were not so, why had Jonah’s deity given them forty days?

3:5 Jonah’s message, heard by many and no doubt shared with others, spread to every part of the populace. Not only did they hear his message, they believed that it was a serious one. Thus the residents of Nineveh sought to avert their destruction. Like the reaction of the sailors in 1:5, the Ninevites’ reaction is conveyed by three verbs: “believed ... declared ... put on.” These describe three stages of response: inward, articulated, then outward.

3:6 The turning of Nineveh began with the common people, not with royalty. The king rose from his throne, the seat of his royal power, and humbled himself with the common people. He laid aside his robe, which was a large and beautifully embroidered mantle. In its place the king put on sackcloth as a sign of mourning, and he sat in ashes, a sign of deep humiliation. He who was the highest in the empire took the lowest position of abasement.

3:7-9 The previous verse shows the personal response of the ruler of Nineveh. This verse further details the official response. By the issuing of a proclamation the king added official sanction to that which already was underway. The decree called for four behavioral responses to Jonah's message: fasting, wearing sackcloth, pleading with God, and turning from evil and violence. The inclusion even of animals in this royally mandated fast is the act of a desperate monarch and a desperate people.

3:10 As the king and people of Nineveh had hoped, God relented. God pulled back his hand of judgment, though not forever. As prophesied by Nahum, Nineveh later experienced total destruction. The very thought of God "changing his mind" causes difficulty for some believers. In perfect consistency with his justice, righteousness, and mercy, he spared Nineveh. There is absolutely no contradiction here. God's character and his promises do not change. This passage speaks of the incredible mercy of God's heart, of his incredible love.

JONAH 4:1-11

4:1. Jonah's message to the Ninevites was from God, but his attitude was not. God's graciousness on the Ninevites made Jonah angry. The prophet did not share God's love for the Ninevites and did not want to see them spared. He became upset when he realized that the people of Nineveh had repented. He considered the Ninevite revival a great calamity. Rather than being pleased that the Ninevites had turned to God, Jonah burned with anger.

4:2. Jonah prayed to the Lord. We do not know how often Jonah prayed. At least we know that Jonah prayed during crises, when he needed God's help or when he was upset with God. Jonah recalled the time when he was running from God before he went to Nineveh. He told the Lord that he realized then the compassionate nature of the Lord. This awareness of God's character had prompted the prophet's attempt to run from God. Jonah identified five key aspects of God's character. First, God is merciful or "gracious." The term communicates the Lord's attitude toward those who are undeserving. Second, God is compassionate; God understands our suffering and our needs. Third, God is slow to become angry. God is patient and forbearing with sinners. He gives us second chances just as He did with the rebellious Jonah. Fourth, God has faithful love. The Hebrew word refers to God's loyal, steadfast love in His covenant relationship with His people. Fifth, God relents from sending disaster. Ironically, Jonah did not use this description in praise of God but in anger against Him.

4:3-4. Jonah was so upset with the turn of events in Nineveh that he wanted to die. Jonah could see no reason to keep on living. He felt he would be better off dead than alive. Some other biblical figures expressed similar thoughts. For example, Elijah felt desperate when Jezebel threatened to take his life. He had defended God against the pagan prophets at Mount Carmel but afterward he became a fugitive. He wanted to die (1 Kings 19:4). The Lord responded to Jonah's outburst with a question. Throughout this story God had dealt patiently with His rebellious prophet. God did not scold him here; rather, He asked Jonah if it was right for him to be angry. Rather than telling Jonah directly that he was selfish or disobedient, God asked a probing question.

4:5. We do not know if Jonah answered God's question. No answer is recorded. Jonah went outside Nineveh to see what would happen to the city. Jonah knew revival had broken out in the pagan city. Perhaps he wondered if God might still punish the Ninevites. Although Jonah knew how loving and compassionate God is, maybe he still hoped that his message of judgment would come to pass. Jonah built a shelter, probably a temporary hut or booth, to provide shade. The prophet's main concern was to find some relief from the sun's heat. He cared much more about relief from the heat than about the eternal destiny of an entire city.

4:6-7. God graciously appointed a plant to give Jonah more shade. The word appointed appears at several key points in Jonah's story. God had "appointed" a large fish to swallow Jonah (1:17). Jonah was happy for the further protection from the sun. Before Jonah could enjoy his shelter and the plant too long, God appointed a worm that destroyed the plant. God was trying to teach Jonah a lesson with this plant and its short life.

4:8-9. Jonah had been concerned about the bright sun and the heat. God, however, next appointed a scorching east wind to add to Jonah's discomfort. Again Jonah wanted to die. Previously the prophet had expressed a desire to die because Nineveh was escaping divine judgment. At this point Jonah wanted to die because of the physical discomfort he was experiencing. Again God responded to Jonah's concern with a question. Rather than telling Jonah directly that he was selfish, God probed his motivation with a question. Was Jonah right to be so upset about the dying plant? Jonah's quick response was a resounding, "Yes."

4:10. After Jonah's angry outburst, God responded to him with a direct statement and another question. God noted that Jonah had cared about the plant. Jonah had done nothing to bring the plant into existence yet he wanted the shade it provided. Jonah apparently had no concern for the city of Nineveh. The prophet had reluctantly obeyed God's command to preach in Nineveh but had no real concern for the Ninevites' spiritual well-being. Jonah's concern was focused on his physical condition.

4:11. The Book of Jonah ends with a question from God. God questioned Jonah about His concern for the great city of Nineveh. The obvious answer is that God does care about the Ninevites. God created all people and He loves all people. God's concern for Nineveh is a case study, a small sample, of His concern for all people. The obvious answer to God's question is that His concern for Nineveh is consistent with His character. Since God cared for the Ninevites, so should Jonah.