
THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

• STUDY GUIDE •
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

JONAH

GRACE FOR SINNERS AND SAINTS

IAIN DUGUID

JONAH: GRACE FOR SINNERS AND SAINTS

Iain M. Duguid

Study Guide with Leader's Notes



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CONTENTS

About This Study	1
Lesson 1 – Not Just a Fish Story	4
Text: Entire book of Jonah	
Article: <i>Confessions of a “Good” Christian</i>	
Exercise: <i>Joys and Trials</i>	
Lesson 2 – Running from God	12
Text: 2 Kings 14:23–27; Jonah 1	
Article: <i>Why We Run</i>	
Exercise: <i>Life on the Run</i>	
Lesson 3 – Redeeming the Runaways	21
Text: Jonah 1; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 22:39–46	
Article: <i>Into the Storm</i>	
Exercise: <i>The Storms of Life</i>	
Lesson 4 – Salvation Is of the Lord	30
Text: Jonah 2	
Article: <i>God in Charge</i>	
Exercise: <i>Insiders and Outsiders</i>	
Lesson 5 – Full Judgment, Full Salvation	40
Text: Matthew 12:38–42	
Article: <i>Faithfulness to the Unfaithful</i>	
Exercise: <i>Dead and Alive in Christ</i>	
Lesson 6 – The Most Difficult Areas of Life	49
Text: Jonah 3:1–5	
Article: <i>A Reluctant Prophet</i>	
Exercise: <i>Look at Your Heart</i>	

Lesson 7 - A Call to Repent	58
Text: Jonah 3	
Article: <i>A Repentant People</i>	
Exercise: <i>Repentance Roadblocks</i>	
Lesson 8 - The God Who Relents	69
Text: Jonah 3:5-4:2	
Article: <i>The God Who Does Not Change</i>	
Exercise: <i>Repent of Trying to Govern the World</i>	
Lesson 9 - Is It Good That You Are Angry?	79
Text: Jonah 4	
Article: <i>The Heart of Our Anger</i>	
Exercise: <i>Interrogate Your Feelings</i>	
Lesson 10 - Mercies and Trials	90
Text: Jonah 4	
Article: <i>Deliver Us from Evil</i>	
Exercise: <i>Joys and Trials (revisited)</i>	
Leader's Notes	97

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Like the other small group resources in this series, *Jonah: Grace for Sinners and Saints* has a distinct focus: Your goal will be bigger than merely to study the book of Jonah. You will also keep your eyes on Jesus and the good news of God's love and power to save you as well as learn how that power takes you beyond yourself to love others—especially those who don't yet know Jesus.

Growing as a Christian is not simply a matter of learning about the Bible or trying hard to live according to it. Instead you must grow in your awareness that you need Jesus every day to help you turn from yourself and turn toward him and others. The heart of the gospel message is to know we need forgiveness, to ask God for forgiveness for Jesus's sake, and then to extend to others the grace we have been given. The message of grace and hope that brought you to Jesus is the same message of the gospel you need to hear every day as you follow Jesus. And it's the same message we get to share with other needy people. *Jonah: Grace for Sinners and Saints* is designed to help you do this in a group. Studying with others will let you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it will give you encouragement as you apply what you learn.

The group will be a place to share not only successes but also sins and weaknesses, so expect differences in how people participate. It's okay if some in the group are cheery while others are weary, if some "get it" quickly while others want to look more deeply, or if some are eager to share while others take it slowly. But because you'll be studying the Bible and praying together, also expect God's Spirit to work and change people—starting with you!

Each participant should have one of these study guides to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the

study. The facilitator for each lesson should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before the lesson begins, but otherwise no preparation or homework is required.

Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

BIG IDEA. This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

BIBLE CONVERSATION. You will read a passage or passages from the Bible and discuss what you read. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers and a few best answers.

ARTICLE. This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author.

DISCUSSION. The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life. Again, there will be several good ways to answer each question.

EXERCISE. The exercise will be a section of the lesson you complete on your own. You can write in the book if that helps you, or just think about your responses. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and pray so everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER. Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. You will be asking him to do that good work.

As a character, Jonah is refreshingly honest. You will likely find him saying what you sometimes think but might hesitate to say aloud. As a book, Jonah is full of gospel encouragement. You will see God's compassion for sinners and hear of his long-planned rescue through the

JONAH: GRACE FOR SINNERS AND SAINTS

death and resurrection of Jesus. And you will feel God's tug on your heart, which calls all who believe to come nearer still to their good, good Father.

Lesson

1

NOT JUST A FISH STORY

BIG IDEA

Is Jonah's story yours as well? At first sight, this book about a prophet, a fish, and a hostile culture may seem very distant from your situation. Yet in our hearts, each of us is like Jonah: We rebel against holiness. We resist compassion and grace. We remain distant from the God we claim to serve. Everyone in Jonah's story is in desperate need of heaven's mercy—including you, the reader.

BIBLE CONVERSATION *20 minutes*

In the lessons to come, you will be studying the book of Jonah piece by piece. But in this lesson, you will begin by getting an overview of the entire book and considering it as a whole. Have four volunteers **read all of Jonah aloud** for the group, each taking one chapter. Then discuss the questions below.

Most people think of the big fish when they think of the story of Jonah. What other important elements or themes do you notice that make this more than a fish story? In a few words, what is the book about?

JONAH: GRACE FOR SINNERS AND SAINTS

Which of Jonah's behaviors or reactions feel familiar to you because you recognize them as being similar to your own behaviors and reactions? Explain.

* * * *

In the article below, the author reflects on how Jonah's behaviors remind him of his own attitudes. Read it aloud, taking turns at the paragraph breaks.

Lesson

1

ARTICLE

CONFESSIONS OF A “GOOD” CHRISTIAN

5 minutes

Do good people really need grace? Many of us were brought up to think grace was for other people: those who had trampled on God’s laws and ruined their lives and the lives of others. Grace was for people who slept around, had uncontrollable tempers, or abused drugs and alcohol. Why would good, church-attending, Bible-believing, law-keeping Christians need grace?

Of course, we made *mistakes*, or sometimes even messed up. But we expected God to forgive us for those minor peccadillos because—well, the rest of our lives were pretty much under control, so why wouldn’t he? I mean, otherwise who would be left to make up the numbers in his church? Certainly not those wild and rebellious sinners out there! Many of us grew up with a clear division of the world into good people and bad people. Bad people could become part of the church, provided they gave up being bad and became good like us. And good people had better not ever commit a Really Big Mistake, because that might ruin everything.

Of course, one problem with this world view is the surprising reluctance of our own hearts to fall into line. Outwardly, we might be able to meet the expected standards of righteousness. Most of the time we

might not say out loud what we are thinking about others (at least not to their faces), but what are we thinking? Inside we still struggle with a hidden cesspool of anger, bitterness, lust, pride, jealousy, and assorted other sins.

Recently, I have been struck by my own self-righteousness in response to the news of a well-known pastor who committed adultery. My outward, “correct” response was: *I could do that too. Thank you, Lord, for your grace, which is the only thing that keeps me safe.* But I showed an inner condemnation of him in how critical I was of his subsequent words and actions. I expected him to respond perfectly to a situation in which his whole world must have been falling apart. Like Jonah, I had no compassion on him.

The result of this perspective is a world divided into black and white, with us clearly on the side of the angels. We may speak of grace in precise theological terms, but we are never really astonished by it. It is there for bad people who really need it, but we don’t personally have much use for it. As a result, we sometimes have a problem with how freely God seems to dole it out. In principle, we might be comfortable with the idea of bad people receiving grace—but not when their sins make people think badly about the church, or hurt us deeply and personally.

The book of Jonah was written for people like us. In it, we see God do some astonishing things. There is the huge fish that swallows Jonah, of course, and the luxuriant plant that sprouts in the desert. Even more remarkable is the totally unexpected repentance of a group of hardened sailors, and the repentance of an entire city after probably the shortest and worst evangelistic outreach in history. Yet the central focus is the Lord’s unrelenting pursuit of Jonah, the self-righteous prophet, who flings Scripture back in God’s face to justify his anger.

Perhaps you are familiar with Jesus’s parable about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). That story does not conclude with the wayward son’s return but shifts focus to the heart of the elder brother. So too, the book

of Jonah shows us an angry believer who would rather die than see God's grace extended to the undeserving. In the prodigal son story, one amazing element is the Father leaving his son's welcome home party to search for the lost elder brother. He too must be brought back for the celebration to be complete.

Here is great news for self-righteous elder brothers like me: The Good Shepherd is not just seeking the wandering sheep who have strayed into a far country; he is seeking the sheep who are proud of the fact they stayed home. The Great Physician not only has a cure for those who know their disease to be terminal but he also has the remedy for those who dismiss their spiritual malady as a mere sniffle. It is not an easy and painless cure. It involves opening our hearts up to public display and recognizing the truth about our inner selves. We are indeed much more sinful than we have ever dared to confess, perhaps even to ourselves.

All this the book of Jonah makes clear, yet it ends with an unanswered question. We never do hear the end of Jonah's story. The reason is simple: what counts today is not what Jonah decided to do, but what you will do with the Father's grace. Will it melt your icy heart, or will you remain stuck in your self-confident assertion that you don't really need it?

The gospel is, after all, not just the good news of forgiveness. It is also the announcement of a gift—the righteousness of Christ. This is the perfect righteousness God demands of us. Only this righteousness of Christ can finally give our frantic hearts the rest we so crave. And to receive this gift, we have to open our hands and let go of our efforts to prove ourselves worthy of God's love (our self-generated righteousness). I need to hear that message repeated regularly, and so do you—especially if you are one of the good people.

DISCUSSION *10 minutes*

Do you tend to think of yourself as one of the bad people or as one of the good people? Explain why.

The article mentions being searched out by God, opening your heart to public display, and recognizing the truth about yourself—all of which will be part of the coming lessons! What about this feels inviting to you, and what feels uncomfortable? Again, explain why.

Lesson

1

EXERCISE

JOYS AND TRIALS

15 minutes

The book of Jonah is about a series of events—pleasant and troubling, big and small—in the prophet’s life. They are events arranged by God to teach Jonah about his heart and bring him closer to God. So, studying Jonah will include examining the events in your life and thinking about how God has used them to do the same. Sharing some of this with the group will also help you get to know one another better.

Begin on your own. Read the statements below about the joys and trials God has put in your life. Consider how you would complete the sentences. When you’re finished, you’ll discuss them as a group.

JOYS

Something in my life that has made me very happy is

A little thing in my life that always gives me joy is

One thing I’ve learned about myself, by considering what makes me happy, is

One thing God has taught me about himself, through his grace in my life, is

TRIALS

A particularly difficult trial in my life was/is

A little thing that always irks me or makes me sad is

One thing I've learned about myself, by considering my trials and what makes me angry or sad, is

One thing God has taught me about himself, through the trials in my life, is

Now share some of your findings with the group. If you notice any pattern in how God deals with you, tell about that.

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *5 minutes*

As with Jonah's story, your story is not about what you achieve on your own but rather God working through you and in you. Use your remaining time to pray together. Ask God to work in you through your study of Jonah, bringing you closer to him.

Lesson

2

RUNNING FROM GOD

BIG IDEA

Life's disappointments often distance us from God. We become angry or discouraged because he has not given us what we wanted. Yet this very frustration may be the means by which the Lord gives us what he wants, which is so much better.

BIBLE CONVERSATION *15 minutes*

Jonah had already served as the Lord's prophet before the book of Jonah begins. He had spoken of the Lord's undeserved grace to his home nation, the northern kingdom of Israel. King Jeroboam II was sinful and idolatrous, and yet the Lord sent Jonah to him with a surprising message of compassion and deliverance. Have someone in your group **read 2 Kings 14:23–27 aloud.**

In the book of Jonah, though, the message Jonah is sent to convey is not for Israel, but for Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians, a traditional enemy of Israel. The Assyrians were notoriously brutal warriors, who regularly flayed their enemies alive, or cut off their lips or their heads. There was plenty of wickedness in Nineveh for the Lord to judge. **Read chapter 1 of Jonah aloud,** and then discuss the following questions.

Compared to his earlier work, how might Jonah feel about his new assignment to go to Nineveh? Discuss considerations such as safety, job satisfaction, potential rewards, popularity, et cetera.

Once the Lord sends the storm, does Jonah change his attitude or does he continue to “run” from God’s command? Explain your answer.

Compare Jonah with the sailors. How are they different in their knowledge about God, and how are they different in their responsiveness to God? Which can you identify with?

When we sin, we imagine it will bring us safety and satisfaction. But instead, as with Jonah, it always leads to some form of death. Read the article “Why We Run” aloud, taking turns at the paragraph breaks.

Lesson



WHY WE RUN

5 minutes

Although the book of Jonah starts with the Lord declaring the evil of Nineveh has come up before him, the bulk of the story is more concerned about an evil prophet. Jonah is surrounded by creatures that run to do the Lord's will—a fish, a plant, a worm, a wind, pagan sailors, and cruel Ninevites. Only Jonah stands against God and against grace, ready to die rather than relent. Jonah's evil is subtle and deep-rooted; healing him will be a delicate task.

Instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah found a ship and fled about as far west as you could possibly go, to Tarshish. As William Banks puts it, "When a person decides to run from the Lord, Satan always provides complete transportation facilities." Even in the storm, face-to-face with the reality of the Lord's judgment, Jonah preferred to hide. What's more, his willingness to be thrown overboard for the sake of the sailors may sound quite noble until you realize that in doing this, Jonah would still achieve his goal of frustrating the Lord's plans. He might die, but he would not deliver God's message to Nineveh.

In chapter 4:2, Jonah explains why he ran from God. He wasn't afraid of danger or failure in Nineveh; he was afraid of success. He feared that if he preached the Lord's message, the people would repent and escape God's judgment. Why should those brutal people receive grace

* William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 20.

so easily? Yet Jonah's problem was not ultimately with the Ninevites, but with God. Jonah quit and ran away from God because the Lord violated his sense of what kind of God he should be.

This is the same reason we turn our backs on God. Perhaps right now you are disappointed with the circumstances of your life. God has not given you the job, or the spouse, or the child you wanted—he has not been, for you, the God you think he should be. We typically respond to these disappointments in one of two ways: we live in denial and pretend all is fine, or we give up on God answering our prayers. Either approach means running away from a real relationship with God. In a real relationship, we must actually interact with the God who stubbornly refuses to conform to our wonderful plan for life but has his own—often more painful—plan for us.

For some of us, it is not so much our circumstances that frustrate us as our lack of holy living. You struggle with ongoing sin, which ties you in knots and hurts you and those around you. You have prayed and prayed for the Lord to take it away, but so far he has not seen fit to do so. How will you respond?

Again, your struggle is not merely with your sin; it is with God. That is why in the midst of our sin we often distance ourselves from God. I see this dynamic in my own heart as I wrestle with pride and self-centeredness. I pray for the Lord to change me, but I hate it when he actually confronts my sin. I bristle and resent it when other people point out my pride. I want to be fixed, but without actually having to be exposed and repent. So I find myself withdrawing, running from God.

Jonah's example shows that when we run from God, we go downward and inward. From the mountains of Israel, Jonah goes down to Joppa on the coast, then down into the inner part of the ship, and finally down into the depths of the sea itself. His physical movements parallel his spiritual journey away from the Lord. Moreover, his journey is inward, away from people as well as from God. He cuts himself off from

his home and family, and even onboard ship he isolates himself from others and their needs.

This is what running from God does in our lives as well. We may still be Christians on the outside, answering the questions of those around us with a theologically correct, “I fear the Lord, the God of heaven.” But in our hearts there is no affection, only a cold withdrawing into ourselves and away from God and others.

Yet the good news of the passage is that the Lord is in charge even of those who try to run from him. We need to nuance the earlier quote I cited: it was not ultimately Satan who provided the transport for Jonah, but God. The Lord provided the boat so Jonah could experience how the Lord is indeed the God “who made the sea.” The Lord provided the storm so Jonah could see with crystal clarity that he could never get away from God. Even Jonah’s attempt to end his own life could not succeed without the Lord’s permission.

God doesn’t even need our holiness to get his work done. Jonah was in no fit state to preach the gospel to anyone—he refused even to pray for the sailors—but the Lord saved them anyway! In the sovereignty of the Lord, Jonah’s rebellion became the means for these sailors to experience the power of God and come to know him.

You will never outrun God or escape his perfect will for your life. Indeed, when you have run as far as you can, you will find that he has run further and is waiting there to greet you and show you the grace you have long resisted, to welcome you into his safe harbor in Christ. Here in this broken world, we continue to experience the storms of life, complete with rolling waves and fierce winds. Here our wicked and evil hearts continue to rebel and run away, as you and I have done repeatedly even this past week. Yet here too the Lord’s grace is sufficient for us. And he has prepared a new world for us where our disappointment, grief, and fear will finally be gone, swallowed up in fullness, joy, and love. Stop running from him, and rest in that reality.

DISCUSSION *10 minutes*

Think about times when you don't want to be near to God, either because you don't like the life he has given you or you don't want to obey him. Why do you run and hide instead of admitting your struggles to God?

How do you feel about the way God kept pursuing, using, and teaching an obvious sinner like Jonah?

How might God flip your personal "Jonah story" around so instead of causing you to run from God, your disappointments and anger cause you to run to him?

Lesson

2

EXERCISE

LIFE ON THE RUN

15 minutes

In this exercise, you will chart in more detail what it looks like in your life to run from God. If you can, think of a way you have distanced yourself from God, perhaps by pretending everything is okay or by giving up on praying about something. Using that example, fill in the chart where applicable. When you are done, share some of your observations with the group.

1. I have avoided God because:

- I am angry at him about _____ .
- I am discouraged about _____ .
- I don't want to obey God about _____ .
- I don't want to be reminded of _____ .
- I'm just not interested. I care more about _____ .
- Other: _____ .

2. Instead of having a real relationship with God (which includes struggling to trust him when his plans are different from mine), I am tempted to treat him like:

- A lucky charm I carry around, hoping it might make things work out the way I want.

- A listening ear to whom I pour out my sorrows, as therapy.
- A multilane highway that ought to let me progress as a Christian without delays or detours.
- A rulebook to follow, within reason.
- Other: _____ .

3. I have gone *downward* and *inward* by becoming like:

- A turtle, hiding from God and others inside my shell.
- A spiky hedgehog, prickly when God or others come near.
- A stubborn mule, doing whatever I want even when faced with God's truth.
- A sloth, intending to draw nearer to God . . . someday . . . soon.
- A puppy, wearing a happy face no matter what.
- Other: _____ .

4. In spite of my coldness toward him, God has pursued me by:

- Sending a "storm" in the form of _____ .
- Reminding me of the truth that _____ .
- Showing me mercy and kindness by _____ .
- Other: _____ .

5. I am most encouraged to come near to God by the good news that:

- God's sovereign care for me does not stop even when I try to run from him.
- God is in control of the storms of life, and he will use them for my good.

- God is not shocked by my sin; he is waiting at the end of my run to show me the grace I have resisted.
- God has prepared a new home for me where my disappointment, grief, and fear will one day be gone.
- Other: _____ .

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER

Most of us find it intensely hard to trust God when he tells us to do something that makes our skin crawl. Yet this is how we truly fear the Lord and accept he is God. And our frustration with his choices may be the means by which he gives us what he wants for us, which is so much better.

Spend your remaining time praying together that God would help you draw near to him in all situations—which is the best gift of all.