



## CONGREGATIONAL STUDY GUIDE

# Jonah: Running From Mercy

*A summer journey through the book of Jonah — for personal and family study*

*“Salvation belongs to the LORD!” — Jonah 2:9*

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There is a book in the Bible that makes everyone a little uncomfortable. It is only four chapters long and tells one of the most famous stories in all of Scripture — yet most of us have misread it. **Jonah is not really a story about a fish.** It is the story of a God who will not give up on the nations, a prophet who finds that mercy offensive, and a question, left hanging at the very end, that each of us must answer for ourselves.

This guide is designed to walk beside the sermon series. Use it on your own, with your family, or in a small group. Read the background, sit with the study points, and follow the weekly reading plan so that Scripture — not just the sermon — does its work in you.

## Who Wrote It, and When?

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The book never names its author, but its central figure, **Jonah son of Amittai**, was a real prophet. We meet him in 2 Kings 14:25, where he ministers in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II — roughly the early-to-mid 700s B.C. He came from Gath-hepher, a town in Galilee. The book was likely written by Jonah himself or drawn from his own testimony, which means it reads in part as his honest confession of his own failure.

Faithful, conservative scholarship reads Jonah as **real history**, not fable. The strongest reason is the simplest: **Jesus treated it as history.** He pointed to Jonah’s three days in the fish and to Nineveh’s repentance as actual events (Matthew 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32). If our Lord took the account at face value, so do we.

## The World Behind the Book

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**Nineveh and Assyria.** Nineveh was a leading city of the Assyrian empire (in modern-day Iraq). Assyria was the great superpower of the day — and the great terror. Their own records boast of horrific cruelty toward conquered peoples. For an Israelite, being sent to preach to Nineveh was like being sent to the capital of the enemy who would soon destroy your homeland. This is why God’s command lands like a scandal.

**Tarshish.** When Jonah runs, he sails for Tarshish — most likely in distant Spain, at the far western edge of the known world. Nineveh lay to the east; Jonah bought a ticket as far west as a ship could carry him. He didn’t just hesitate; he fled in the exact opposite direction.

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**Joppa.** Jonah set sail from the port of Joppa. Centuries later, it was at this very same harbor that the apostle Peter received God’s vision opening the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10). The same port that launched a man running from the nations would one day launch the good news toward them.

## How the Book Is Built

Jonah is told in two matching halves. The same story runs twice — God shows mercy to outsiders both times, and Jonah resists both times. Watching the parallels is one of the keys to understanding the book:

	Half One: Jonah & the Sailors (ch. 1–2)	Half Two: Jonah & Nineveh (ch. 3–4)
<b>The Call</b>	1:1–3 God calls; Jonah runs	3:1–3 God calls again; Jonah goes
<b>The Outsiders</b>	1:4–16 Pagan sailors fear God and are spared	3:4–10 A pagan city repents and is spared
<b>Jonah Prays</b>	1:17–2:10 Saved from the sea — a prayer of thanks	4:1–11 Angry at mercy — a prayer of complaint

**Notice the heartbreaking contrast:** In the first half, Jonah rejoices that God showed mercy *to him*. In the second half, he rages that God showed mercy *to others*. The truth he loved for himself, he resented for his enemies.

## Key Things to Watch For

Seven simple insights that will help you read Jonah well:

1. **It’s not about the fish.** The fish appears in only three verses. The book is about God’s heart for people who don’t know Him — and a believer’s reluctance to share it.
2. **Watch Jonah go “down.”** He goes down to Joppa, down into the ship, down to sleep, down into the sea (1:3, 5; 2:6). Running from God is always a downward path — until God lifts him back up.
3. **The “outsiders” look better than the prophet.** The pagan sailors pray and worship while God’s prophet sleeps. A whole city repents at one short sermon while Jonah sulks. It’s a mirror: those who know the least sometimes respond the most.
4. **Jonah ran because of mercy, not fear.** Most of us assume he was afraid. But Jonah himself tells us why he fled (4:2): he *knew* God was gracious and would forgive Nineveh — and he couldn’t bear it. His real problem was his heart, not his nerve.
5. **The fish is mercy, not punishment.** Jonah was drowning. The fish wasn’t a prison — it was God’s rescue. Sometimes grace arrives in a form we’d never have chosen.
6. **“Salvation belongs to the LORD” is the center (2:9).** This single line is the heartbeat of the whole book. No one is saved by their goodness — not the sailors, not Nineveh, and not Jonah. Salvation is God’s work from start to finish.

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7. **The book ends with a question — for you.** God asks, “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (4:11). Jonah never answers. The silence is left for the reader to fill. How would you answer?

## A Reading Plan for the Series

Five short readings each week prepare your heart for Sunday’s message. Each week pairs the sermon passage with cross-references that open it up across the whole Bible.

Week & Message	Daily Readings
<b>Week 1 — June 14</b> <i>A God Who Sends (Jonah 1:1–3)</i>	Day 1 — Jonah 1:1–3 (the call and the flight) Day 2 — 2 Kings 14:23–27 (the real prophet Jonah) Day 3 — Matthew 28:16–20 (the Great Commission) Day 4 — Psalm 139:1–12 (you cannot flee God’s presence) Day 5 — Genesis 12:1–3 (God’s heart for all nations)
<b>Week 2 — June 21</b> <i>Guest Missionary (Matthew 1)</i>	Day 1 — Matthew 1:1–17 (the family tree of Jesus) Day 2 — Ruth 1:14–18 (a Gentile grafted in) Day 3 — Isaiah 49:5–6 (a light to the nations) Day 4 — Romans 10:11–15 (how will they hear?) Day 5 — Revelation 7:9–10 (every nation before the throne)
<b>Week 3 — June 28</b> <i>The Storm That Finds You (Jonah 1:4–16)</i>	Day 1 — Jonah 1:4–16 (the storm and the sailors) Day 2 — Psalm 107:23–32 (God stills the storm) Day 3 — Mark 4:35–41 (Jesus calms the sea) Day 4 — Psalm 135:5–7 (God’s sovereignty over creation) Day 5 — Proverbs 16:9 & Acts 27:21–26 (God directs every step)
<b>Week 4 — July 5</b> <i>Salvation Is of the LORD (Jonah 1:17–2:10)</i>	Day 1 — Jonah 1:17–2:10 (a prayer from the depths) Day 2 — Psalm 130 (out of the depths I cry) Day 3 — Psalm 42:1–8 (the source of Jonah’s prayer) Day 4 — Matthew 12:38–41 (the sign of Jonah) Day 5 — Romans 6:3–5 (buried and raised with Christ)
<b>Week 5 — July 12</b> <i>The Shortest Sermon (Jonah 3:1–10)</i>	Day 1 — Jonah 3:1–10 (a city repents) Day 2 — Luke 11:29–32 (Nineveh will rise in judgment) Day 3 — Acts 17:30–31 (God commands all to repent) Day 4 — Romans 10:14–17 (faith comes by hearing) Day 5 — 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 (the ministry of reconciliation)
<b>Week 6 — July 19</b> <i>The Angry Prophet (Jonah 4:1–11)</i>	Day 1 — Jonah 4:1–11 (anger at God’s mercy) Day 2 — Exodus 34:5–7 (the God Jonah quotes) Day 3 — Psalm 86:15 (slow to anger, abounding in love) Day 4 — Luke 15:25–32 (the older brother who resents grace) Day 5 — Matthew 20:1–16 (grumbling at God’s generosity)
<b>Week 7 — July 26</b> <i>From Jonah to Jesus (Matthew 12:38–41)</i>	Day 1 — Matthew 12:38–41 (one greater than Jonah) Day 2 — 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 (the resurrection we proclaim) Day 3 — Acts 1:8 (witnesses to the ends of the earth) Day 4 — Romans 15:8–13 (Christ for the nations) Day 5 — Revelation 5:9–10 (ransomed from every people)

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**A simple way to read each day:** (1) Pray, asking God to speak. (2) Read the passage slowly, twice. (3) Ask: What does this show me about God? What does it show me about myself? (4) Respond — in confession, thanks, or obedience.

## Questions to Sit With

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- Is there a “Nineveh” in your life — a person or group you would secretly rather God not reach? What would it mean to pray for them instead?
- Where do you run when God’s call feels hard? What is your “Tarshish” — the comfortable place you escape to?
- Jonah believed all the right things about God and still disobeyed. Where might that be true of you?
- How does the willing obedience of Jesus — the greater Jonah who truly went — free you to love and to go?

## Going Deeper: Recommended Resources

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### Start Here (accessible for everyone)

- **The Bible Project** — “**Overview: Jonah**” (**free video**). A clear, beautifully illustrated summary of the whole book in a few minutes.
- **Sinclair B. Ferguson**, *Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah* (**Banner of Truth**). Warm, devotional, and rich in gospel application — ideal for a thoughtful reader.
- **Timothy Keller**, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God’s Mercy* (**Viking**). A pastorally rich, modern exposition on God’s mercy and our reluctance to share it.
- **Mark Dever**, “**Overview of Jonah**” (**sermon/video**). A faithful, big-picture walk through the book’s message.

### For Those Who Want to Study Further

- **T. Desmond Alexander**, *Jonah* (**Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries**). Concise, conservative, and very readable — a great first commentary.
- **Kevin J. Youngblood**, *Jonah* (**Zondervan Exegetical Commentary**). Written with careful attention to the text’s structure and theology.
- **Bryan D. Estelle**, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy*. Shows how Jonah points forward to Christ and the gospel for the nations.
- **Douglas Stuart**, *Hosea–Jonah* (**Word Biblical Commentary**). A more technical resource for the historical and Hebrew details.
- **Daniel C. Timmer**. *A Gracious and Compassionate God: Mission, Salvation and Spirituality in the Book of Jonah*. *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 26. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011.

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