

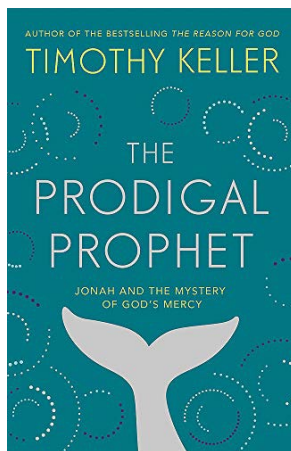


SMALL GROUP RESOURCES

AUTUMN 2022

'JONAH'

The Prodigal Prophet



Jonah and the mystery of God's mercy

Before studying the book of Jonah using this guide, consider looking at the character of God shown in Exodus 34:6-7 using studies created by the Bible Project.

There are podcasts to listen to if you would like to explore these topics further which can be found on the Bible Project app or at <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/series/character-of-god/>

The studies are:

Exodus 34:6-7 **How does the Bible describe God's character?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/exodus-34-6-7/>

Compassion **What does the Hebrew word rakhum mean, and why is it significant?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/compassion/>

Grace **What does it mean for God to be full of grace?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/grace/>

Slow to anger **What does it mean for God to be slow to anger, or 'long of nose'?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/slow-to-anger/>

Loyal love **What does it mean for God to have loyal love?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/loyal-love/>

Faithful **Is God trustworthy?**
<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/faithful/>

This small book seems to be about many things: race and nationalism; God's call to mission; struggles that believers have to obey and trust in God, and more.

One of the main messages of the book is that God cares how we believers relate to and treat people who are deeply different from us. He wants us to be respectful, loving, generous and just.

Yet the main teaching in the book is theological rather than sociological. Jonah wants a God of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people for instance the wicked Ninevites, and blesses the good people, for instance Jonah and his countrymen. When the real God – not Jonah's counterfeit – keeps showing up, Jonah is thrown into fury or despair. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the mercy of God with his justice. That question is not answered in the book of Jonah, but it teaches us to look ahead to how God saved the world through the one who called himself the ultimate Jonah (Matthew 12:41) so that he could be both just and the justifier of those who believe (Romans 3:26).

The problem facing Jonah is the mystery of God's mercy. Unless Jonah can see his own sin and see himself as living wholly by the mercy of God, he will never understand how God can be merciful to evil people and still be just and faithful.

God does not just accept Jonah and leave him alone. He does not allow Jonah to remain undisturbed in his foolish, wrongful attitudes and behaviour patterns. God sends a storm, a fish, a plant. He commissions him again and again and in the end counsels and debates with him directly. Here we see God's righteousness and love working together. He is both too holy and too loving to either destroy Jonah or to allow Jonah to remain as he is, and God is also too holy and too loving to allow us to remain as we are.

This book shows us that anyone, even a successful prophet, can be in the dark about grace. Jonah's fears, prejudices and emotional breakdown all stem from his blindness to the reality of grace.

In chapter 1 he runs away because he finds God's grace and mercy an

inexplicable mystery. In chapter 2, in the belly of the fish, we find him wrestling with that same mystery. It is only when he has a breakthrough in his understanding about grace that he is released. Only then can he become a fearless preacher.

The main purpose of God is to get Jonah to understand grace. The main purpose of the book of Jonah is to get *us* to understand grace.

I pray that as you read this story again you will understand how great is God's mercy and grace to you and that that will transform your life.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The four chapters of Jonah recount two incidents. In chapters 1 and 2 Jonah is given a command from God but fails to obey it; and in chapters 3 and 4 he is given the command again and this time carries it out. The two accounts are laid out in almost completely parallel patterns.

Scene 1: Jonah, the pagans, and the sea

Scene 2: Jonah, the pagans, and the city

Jonah and God's Word (1:1-3) (3:1-3:3)

- God's Word comes to Jonah
- The message to be conveyed
- The response of Jonah

Jonah and God's world (1:4-17) (3:4 – 3:10)

- The word of warning
- The response of the pagans
- The response of the pagan leader
- How the pagan's response was ultimately better than Jonah's

Jonah and God's grace

- How God taught grace to Jonah
 - Through the fish (2:1-10)
 - Through the plant (4:1-11)

Do not get distracted by the fish! The fish is mentioned only in two brief verses and is reported as a simple fact of what happened.

Both episodes show how Jonah, a staunch religious believer, regards and relates to people who are racially and religiously different from him. The book of Jonah yields many insights about God's love for societies and people beyond the community of believers; about his opposition to toxic nationalism and disdain for other races; and about how to be in mission in the world despite the subtle and unavoidable power of idolatry in our own lives and hearts. Grasping these insights can make us bridge builders, peacemakers and agents of reconciliation in the world.

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

Focus: Identity

This week we are looking at the big picture going on in Jonah.

Jonah's call to go on a mission trip to Nineveh was shocking: never before had a Hebrew prophet been asked to leave Israel and address a Gentile city; Assyria was one of the cruellest and most violent empires of ancient times; the Assyrian empire threatened the Jewish nation throughout the lifetime of Jonah; there would be no reason for sending a warning unless there was a chance that judgment might be averted.

Jonah is in desperate need of the very mercy of God that he finds so troubling. Under the power of God's grace his identity will have to change, as will ours.

Watch the Bible Project video giving an overview of the book of Jonah (9 minutes) <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/jonah/>

Read the whole of the book of Jonah out to each other.
(Approx. 8 minutes.)

1. *What struck you as you read the book through?*

The sailors' questions to Jonah (1:1-8) are essentially identity questions. Who you were and what you worshipped were just two sides of the same coin – the most foundational layer of your identity. To ask, 'Who are you?' is to ask, 'Whose are you?'

2. The order in which we list our identity – shows what is most important to us.

- a) *What is most important to Jonah?*
- b) *What is most important to you? (Whose are you?)*

3. Read Luke 15:11-24

- a) In what ways is Jonah like the 'prodigal son' in Jesus' parable?
- b) In what ways is Jonah like the 'older brother'?

- c) Compare the question of the father to the pharisaical son to the question to Jonah at the of the book of Jonah.
- d) There are two ways to run away from God: by becoming immoral and irreligious or by becoming very religious and moral. In the story of the prodigal son, neither son trusted his father's love. Both were trying to find ways of escaping his control. One did it by obeying all the father's rules, the other by disobeying them all.
Which way are you more likely to run away from God?
4. *What difference will this reading make to how you go about the coming week?*

Taking it further:

- a) Look at Abraham and how he responded to God's commands.
Compare with Jonah.
- 'Go.' Where? 'I'll tell you later. Just go.' (Genesis 12)
- 'You will have a son.' How? 'I'll tell you later. Just trust. (Genesis 15)
- 'Offer up your son on the mountain.' Why? 'I'll tell you later. Just climb. (Genesis 22)
- b) Every believer is called to go. It means to be willing to leave safety and security in order to share the good news of Jesus with others. This may or may not entail leaving physical and social locations, but it always means risk and vulnerability. God is by nature a sending God. He never calls us in to bless us without also sending us out to be a blessing to others. Hebrews 11:8-10 uses Abraham's answer to God's call away from security as a model for all believers. It is only God's kingdom that has 'foundations' that will last. It is only God's approval, God's protection and God's eternal inheritance that are permanent.

Are you willing to go where God wants to send you?

WEEK 2: Jonah 1

***Focus:** Response to God's character*

God sent his prophet to point the pagans toward himself yet now it is the pagans pointing the prophet toward God.

Exodus 34:6-7 'The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

1. *What struck you as you read the passage through?*
2. *How do we see God's character as expressed in Exodus 34:6-7 shown in this passage?*
3. *How do the non-believers respond to God's character in this passage?*
4. *How does Jonah respond to God's character in this passage?*
5. *What happens when Jonah starts to look at the other people in the boat?*
6. Compare Jonah's experience in the storm and Jesus' experience in the storm on Lake Galilee in Mark 4:35-41.
Why are the other characters in the story more afraid after the storm?
7. *What difference will this reading make to how you go about the coming week?*

Taking it further:

Compare the story of Jonah in the storm with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

WEEK 3: JONAH 3

Focus: God's compassion

Compassion (v10,11) – means to grieve over someone or something, to have your heart broken, to weep for it (Genesis 6:6). God doesn't need us but he makes himself vulnerable by voluntarily attaching his heart to us.

Though the people of Nineveh do not forsake their idols and sacrifice to him, God in his mercy relents from his threat to destroy the city. For the time being, he expresses favour in response to the city's intention and effort at social reform.

This text encourages both social reform and repentance through preaching the word of God fearlessly.

Exodus 34:6-7 'The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.'

1. *What struck you as you read the passage through?*
2. *How do we see God's character as expressed in Exodus 34:6 shown in this passage?*
3. *How do the non-believers respond to God's character in this passage?*
4. *How does Jonah respond to God's character in this passage?*
5. *What difference will this reading make to how you go about the coming week?*

Taking it further:

- a) Compare Jonah to the ungrateful servant in Matthew 18:21-35
- b) Read through a gospel and record the number of times that Jesus weeps and the number of times that he laughs. Why the difference?

WEEK 4: JONAH Chapters 2 and 4

Focus: God's grace

The root of Jonah's disobedience was his mistrust in the goodness of God. He did not believe God had his best interests at heart. But here is the ultimate proof that this deeply rooted belief is a lie. A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust.

It is an understanding of God's grace that makes a person a Christian and not merely a moral person or religious person or a nice person.

To understand God's grace, we need to grasp our 'moral ill-desert', our spiritual impotence and how costly the salvation is that God provides.

How can we be freed from our idols, self-salvations, and self-justifications, which are so fragile and subject to circumstances? Only through the grace of God which grounds our happiness and identity in the unchanging love of the Father. The gospel holds out to us the prospect of a self-worth not achieved but received.

Most of us are like Jonah. We must have multiple exposures both to our need for God's grace – which usually come through experiences of disappointment and failure – and to the gospel message. To get God's love and Christ's grace down into the motivational principles of our hearts, to the foundational layer of our identities, is a process, and often a slow one.

Exodus 34:6-7 'The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

1. *What struck you as you read the passage through?*
2. *How do we see God's character as expressed in Exodus 34:6 shown in this passage?*
3. *How does Jonah respond to God's character in this passage? (What clue is there in Jonah's prayer in the great fish of his future meltdown?)*
4. *Why did Jonah have such difficulty receiving God's grace? What stops you from understanding and receiving God's grace?*
5. Matthew 12:41 – Jesus speaks of 'the sign of Jonah' and calls himself 'greater than Jonah'.
In what ways are Jesus and Jonah similar and in what ways are they different?
You may find the following passages helpful: Philippians 2:1-11, Mark 10:45, Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2, Matthew 26:39,41
6. *What difference will this reading make to how you go about the coming week?*

Taking it further:

- a) Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah and Peter all experienced failure and suffering before they became leaders, dependent on God.
Take a look at their lives and look at how God used their failure and suffering to help to make them good leaders.

b) *In what ways is this hymn by John Newton a commentary on the final dialogue between Jonah and God?*

I asked the Lord, that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know;
And seek more earnestly his face...

I hoped that in some favoured hour,
At once he'd answer my request;
and by his love's constraining power
subdue my sins – and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel
the hidden evils of my heart;
and let the angry powers of hell
assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with his own hand he seemed
intent to aggravate my woe;
crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

'Lord, why is this,' I trembling cried,
'Wilt thou pursue thy work to death?'
'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,
from self, and pride, to set thee free;
and break thy schemes of earthly joy,
that thou may'st find thy all in me.'

More wisdom from Jonah...

'You never realise that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have - you must lose your life to find your life (Matthew 10:39).

Whatever you live for actually owns you. You do not really control yourself. Whatever you live for and love the most controls you.

David Foster Wallace said that in daily life 'there is no such thing as ..not worshipping. Wherever you tap real meaning in life – whether it is having enough money, being beautiful (or having a beautiful partner), or being thought smart or promoting some political cause – everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.'

For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. (John Stott)

No human heart will learn its sinfulness and impotence by being told it is sinful. It will have to be shown – often in brutal experience. It is a combination of hard circumstances, insight from the biblical gospel of atonement for sin and prevailing prayer that can move us to wonder and amazement even in the darkest deepest places.

The greatest danger of all is that we never become aware of our blindness, pride and self-sufficiency. We naturally believe that we have far more ability to direct our lives wisely than we really have and that we are far more virtuous, honest, and decent than we really are. These are deadly errors, and Satan would be happy to let you have a charmed and prosperous life for many years so that you don't see the truth until it's too late. God, however, out of love, wants to wake you up to your condition so you can do something about it. In many lives he uses storms.

Repentance is always a work of God (2 Timothy 2:25).

The gospel gives us the ability and the resources to love people who reject both our beliefs and us personally.

Why choose Jonah – a man who was intensely patriotic and a highly partisan nationalist to preach to the very people he most feared and hated?

Jonah's anti-missionary activity has ironically resulted in the conversion of non-Israelites (Daniel C Timmer).

Jonah runs and runs. But even though he uses multiple strategies, the Lord is always a step ahead. God varies his strategies too and continually extends mercy to us in new ways, even though we neither understand nor deserve it.

With gratitude to 'The Prodigal Prophet' by Timothy Keller for insights into the book of Jonah, represented here in this booklet.