
Is My God Big Enough?

Discussion Guide 1: Is My God BIG Enough To Be Everywhere?

Discussion Guide 2: Is My God BIG Enough To Answer Prayer?

Discussion Guide 3: Is My God BIG Enough To Provide A Second Chance?

Discussion Guide 4: Is My God BIG Enough To Care About Everybody?

Is My God BIG Enough To Be Everywhere?

Discussion Guide #1

Texts: Jonah Chapter 1/ Psalm 139:1-10

Aim: to emphasize that we cannot avoid our responsibility to God by running away.



ICE-BREAKER: Suppose you had just won a sweepstakes, and the grand prize was an all-expense paid trip to any place in the world for a week. As we go around the circle, I'd like to know what destination you would choose. I'll begin. If I could travel anywhere I wished, I think I would probably head to...

Now let's consider a second destination. This question is a little strange, but as we go around the circle a second time, I want you to think: What if there was a sweepstakes in which the grand prize was the ability to send your *worst enemy* to any location on earth (and they *had* to go to the location you selected): Where do you think people would choose to send their worst enemy if they won that sweepstakes?

As we begin our study of the book of Jonah, we will see that Jonah's situation was just the opposite: God was sending him to the last place on earth Jonah would have chosen, because Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and it was the worst enemy Israel had!



READ JONAH 1:1-3



QUESTION: We are twice told that Jonah "ran away from the Lord." What does that suggest to you about Jonah's conception of God? Based on these verses, how do you think Jonah pictured the Lord?

Possible Answers: As being limited to a particular geographical area (since Jonah imagined he could escape God by taking a cruise!); Perhaps Jonah saw God as being harsh or unreasonable in His demands; Since Jonah felt he had to run away in order to avoid God's command, he was probably afraid God would be persistently remind Jonah of his calling unless he left town!

[Background Note: Nineveh was east; Tarshish was west (it was probably the city of Tartessus in southwestern Spain). Jonah obviously wanted to get as *far away* from Nineveh as possible!]



Discussion: Jonah foolishly thought that he could outrun God's presence by going in the *opposite direction* from where the Lord was leading him. Do you think people today ever try to dodge their accountability to God by deliberately choosing a contrary path? What would you say might be some things people do in order to push God out of their mind?



READ JONAH 1:4-10

Jonah may have been able to run away from the Lord for a while, but God is just too big to evade successfully!



Discussion: Do you believe God can get our attention, even if we are trying to avoid or ignore Him? If so, how do you think He makes his presence known?


Look again at the question of the sailors in Jonah 1:10. Why do you suppose Jonah never answers that question?




READ JONAH 1:11-16


Notice that it was not the idea of these pagan sailors to throw Jonah overboard. (In fact, they tried their best to avoid it!) And it was not *God's* idea, either: after all, Jonah could have repented, directed them to turn the ship

around, and headed for Nineveh! By telling the sailors to throw him in the ocean, Jonah is still trying to run away from God!

 Discussion: Jonah resisted God's command so stubbornly that he would rather *die* than repent! Does this strike you as unrealistic? Or do you believe there are people today who would rather continue their self-destructive ways than yield to God? If so, why?

 QUESTION: God intended for Jonah to preach to pagans, but Jonah stubbornly refused. By contrast, in what ways does the behavior of these sailors put Jonah to shame? As you look at these verses, how many ways can you identify in which the behavior of these pagan sailors is actually morally superior to his?


Possible Answers: When the storm first hit, the *sailors* all prayed—*Jonah* didn't (Jonah 1:5); Jonah had endangered them all by his stubborn disobedience, but even so, the sailors were reluctant to toss him overboard, even though their own lives were at risk (Jonah 1:12-13); The sailors showed compassion for Jonah, even though Jonah didn't seem to care about them; The sailors were deeply concerned that their actions might displease God (Jonah 1:4), while Jonah was not; At the end of the story these pagan sailors were honoring God with their worship and vows (Jonah 1:16), while Jonah never does; These sailors worshipped God *after* the storm was over (that is, out of genuine reverence and gratitude, not fear), while Jonah doesn't turn to God until he is in deep waters!


 Discussion: What does this story teach you about judging those who are not yet Christians? What does it teach you about our relationship with unbelievers?

Jonah was running away from God because he didn't want to preach to pagans, but even on a boat in the middle of the ocean he was surrounded by unbelievers! Why do you suppose we sometimes fail to take advantage of the opportunities we have to "raise our flag" or share our "faith story"? What might keep us from speaking up?

 READ JONAH 1:17

If Jonah thought that he had finally escaped God's calling, he was in for one last surprise, because even in the depths of the ocean, God still had his hand on Jonah! We'll have to leave Jonah in the fish until next week.

 READ PSALM 139:1-10

 Discussion: These verses vividly describe the presence of God as being *everywhere*. Do you believe that thought is supposed to *frighten* us or *comfort* us? Why?

SUMMARY STATEMENT: Jonah got into serious trouble because his concept of God was just too small! Our God is BIG enough to be near to us, even when *we* want to be far away from Him!

NEXT WEEK we will hear a "fish story" to end all fish stories when we read Jonah 2 and ask the question, "Is my God BIG enough to answer my prayers?"


Is My God BIG Enough To Answer Prayer?


Discussion Guide #2

Lesson: "Is My God BIG Enough.... To Answer Prayer?"

Texts: Jonah Chapter 2/ Matthew 12:38-40


Aim: to enlarge our conception of the power of God that is available to us through prayer.

 **ICE-BREAKER:** One of the most popular recreational sports in America today is fishing. Let's take a survey to see how many fishermen we have in our group. As we go around the circle and state our name, also tell the group the last time you went fishing. I'll begin: my name is _____, and the last time I went fishing was _____.

 **Discussion:** The rest of our questions are for anyone who wants to answer. 1. Why do you think fishing is so popular? What would you say is the main attraction of the sport? 2. What is the most popular place to go fishing around here? Is there some place nearby that folks really like to fish? 3. People often joke about the truthfulness of "fish stories." Why do you suppose fishermen have a reputation for being untrustworthy? Do you think that reputation has any basis in fact?

In this lesson we will hear the "fish story" to end all fish stories: only, this one is true! Last week Jonah learned the hard way that God is big enough to be everywhere, even in the middle of the ocean. In this lesson we will learn that God is big enough to hear our prayers, no matter how low we may get!


 **READ JONAH 2:17**

 **Discussion:** The account of Jonah surviving for three days & nights inside a huge fish is one of the most ridiculed stories in the Bible! What do you think makes Jonah's fish story so hard for unbelievers to swallow?


[Background Note: Some group members may have heard a story that used to circulate about a sailor named James Bartley who was supposedly swallowed by a sperm whale off the Falkland Islands and survived for 36 hours. When researchers tracked down the source of that story, however, it turned out to be false.]

We shouldn't get side-tracked by attempting to explain how such an event could be humanly possible, because that is just the point—it is not! This is an object lesson in the power of an Almighty God, who can do the impossible (See Mark 10:27, Matthew 17:20, Genesis 18:14, etc.)

 **READ JONAH 2:1-6**

 **QUESTION:** Based on these verses, what do you suppose this experience was like for Jonah? If you had to choose *one word* to describe his underwater ordeal, what word would you pick?

Possible Answers: Terrifying (Jonah 2:2-3 "depths of the grave....hurled me into the deep"); Seasick, nauseous (Jonah 2:3 "currents swirled...breakers swept over"); Lonely (Jonah 2:4); Claustrophobic, confining (Jonah 2:5 "engulfing...surrounded"); Clammy, soggy, smelly (Jonah 2:5 "seaweed was wrapped around my head"); Hopeless; Desperate.

 **Discussion:** Suppose that you were in Jonah's shoes: what would be your reaction? What might be going through your own mind?


Jonah was about as "low" as a person can get! Obviously none of us have found ourselves in his predicament, but many of us will experience similar feelings when we get "in over our heads" in some overwhelming problem. Can you think of any situations that might make a person today feel just as hopeless, or as desperate, as Jonah?

It was not until Jonah found himself in the belly of the fish that he turned to God in prayer. What does this suggest to you about the connections between our inward prayer life and the outward circumstances in which we find ourselves?

Unbelievers cannot understand the value of prayer any more than they can understand how a man could survive in the ocean inside a great fish! If someone asked you why you pray, what would you tell them?


 **READ JONAH 2:7-9**

The real issue is not what was going on inside the great fish, but what was going on inside Jonah! The greater “miracle” is that God was still willing to hear the prayer of this man, in spite of the fact that Jonah had brought his troubles on himself!

 Discussion: Can you identify any ways that Jonah has changed since we first met him in Chapter 1?


 **READ JONAH 2:10**

Do you suppose this great fish ever told his friends about “the one that got away”?

 Discussion: Jonah had run away from God, but God had not run away from him! Even when Jonah was in the belly of the fish, God was as near to him as a penitent prayer. Let’s try to consider prayer from the perspective of the Almighty. Why do you suppose the Lord has invited us to “cast our cares on him” (1 Peter 5:7)? Don’t you think God ever gets tired of hearing about our petty problems?

Jonah said in Jonah 2:1 that he called out to God “from the depths of the grave”, and God in his power heard Jonah’s prayer. This particular story had a special significance to Jesus.

 **READ MATTHEW 12:38-40.**

 QUESTION: Why do you suppose Jesus used this figure of speech to allude to his own resurrection? What personal meaning do you think the story of Jonah might have had for Jesus?

Possible Answers: The “three days and three nights” that Jonah spent in the deep probably reminded Jesus of the time he would soon spend in the grave; From a human standpoint, the prospect of spending three days and nights in the grave must have been just as frightening as Jonah’s stay in the belly of the whale; Since Jesus was depending on His Father to raise him from the dead, Jonah’s rescue must have reassured Jesus that God had the power necessary to save him; Jonah was thrown overboard because he refused to preach to Gentiles—Jesus would die so that one day both Jews and Gentiles could receive the message of the gospel!

SUMMARY STATEMENT: The fact that God was able to do the impossible and raise Jesus from the grave, and that God was willing to hear the prayer of stubborn Jonah and rescue him from the belly of the fish, can give us the confidence that our God is BIG enough to hear and answer our prayers!

NEXT WEEK: We will read Chapter 3 of Jonah and learn that God is BIG enough to provide a second chance!

Is My God BIG Enough To Provide A Second Chance?

Discussion Guide #3

Texts: Jonah Chapter 3/ Nahum 3:1-7/ 2 Corinthians 7:8-11/ Luke 11:29-32

Aim: to emphasize that our God is BIG enough to give us a second chance when we repent.



ICE-BREAKER: CONSIDER THIS SCENARIO: Some good friends have come to you for advice. Their daughter, who is now 22, began using drugs when she was a teenager and ran away from home for several years after she graduated from high school. She came back home a year ago, and seemed to be doing well for a while, but then disappeared again. It wasn't until a month later, when the parents got a bill for \$5000 from a river boat casino, that they realized she had taken one of their credit cards. Now the daughter is calling again, telling her parents she is sorry, has learned her lesson, and wants to come back home. The parents ask you in an anguished tone, "How can we tell whether we should give her a second chance? Some people have said we should "write her off", but she sounds sincere. Do you think we should take her back?"

This question is for anyone who wishes to answer: What was your initial reaction to the question of those parents? If I am going to be totally honest, my first emotional response was _____.

I would suspect that the initial reaction of many folks would be skepticism. Do you agree that many people might doubt the sincerity of the daughter? Why, or why not?

We know it is possible for people to change, and we want to help people when they're really ready to turn their life around, but how can you tell when someone deserves a second chance? For example, what would you tell these parents?

It can be difficult for us to forgive someone when they have wronged us! What about God? How does he react when we have disappointed Him by our sins? In this lesson we will learn our God is BIG enough to provide a second chance when we truly repent.



READ JONAH 2:10.



Discussion: What do you suppose was the first thing Jonah did when his feet touched dry land once again?



READ JONAH 3:1-2



Discussion: Jonah 3:1 tells us that this is the "second time" Jonah has received this command. In what ways could we say this represents a "second chance" for Jonah?

To get an idea of the audience to which Jonah was called to preach, we will turn ahead to the book of Nahum.

[After Jonah comes Micah; then, Nahum is the next book after that. The entire book of Nahum is a prophecy against the cruelty and wickedness of the people of Nineveh.]




READ NAHUM 3:1-7



Discussion: After reading this description of the people of Nineveh, how do you think Jonah felt as he was on the way to that city? What do you suppose he was saying to himself as he headed toward Nineveh?




READ JONAH 3:4

 Discussion: In your imagination, how do you see Jonah delivering this message? For example, what tone of voice do you think he was using?

[Background Note: If Jonah's message seems remarkably blunt in English (only eight words!); it is even shorter in Hebrew (only five words!)]

 **READ JONAH 3:5-9**

 QUESTION: As you read this passage, what, to you, is the most remarkable thing about the reaction of the Ninevites? Why?


Possible Answers: The fact that these cruel and wicked pagans "believed God" (Jonah 3:5); That they recognized Jonah's message as coming from God; That they responded to his message with genuine repentance- especially since Jonah's message had not given them any hope of salvation! (see Jonah 3:9); Even the king responded with a public display of contrition (Jonah 3:6); Their repentance was so comprehensive, even the animals were included! (Jonah 3:7-8); That the preaching of one man could have such a dramatic impact on a whole society.

[Background Note: The "sackcloth" referred to in Jonah 3:5 & 8 was a rough cloth made of goat's hair. It was worn to signify grief, humility, and contrition (see Genesis 37:34, Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:1-2, Revelation 6:12.)]

 **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-11**


Paul here tells us that there is a difference between just being "sorry", and true repentance based on "godly sorrow." Let's apply this to the response of the people of Nineveh.

 **RE-READ JONAH 3:6-10**

 Discussion: What would you say are some marks of true repentance that we can see in the reaction of these Ninevites?

Even though they were pagans, and even though the Lord had already decided to destroy their city, when the Ninevites repented, God relented and gave them a second chance. Jesus used their remarkable story as a model of true repentance:

 **READ LUKE 11:29-32**

 Discussion: The word "repent" means to "turn". How do you think God feels today when people refuse to turn away from their sins and accept Jesus? Why?

How would you respond to someone who says, "I can't change, because I've done too many bad things. God would never forgive me now?" What would you say to that person?

SUMMARY STATEMENT: If we think that the Lord just "writes us off" when we fail, our God is too small! A God who is BIG enough to give Jonah a second chance, and is BIG enough to spare the wicked city of Nineveh when it repented, is BIG enough to take us back if we will turn to Him.


NEXT WEEK: We will read the surprising conclusion to the story of Jonah in Chapter 4 and learn that our God is BIG enough to love everybody.


Is My God BIG Enough To Care About Everybody?

Discussion Guide #4

Text: Jonah Chapter 4

Aim: to emphasize that God cares about everybody, and thus we should also.

 **ICE-BREAKER:** One of the unique things about America is that ALL of us are originally from some other nation. As we go around the circle, I'd like to know if you can identify where your ancestors came from. I'll begin: my name is _____, and based on what I know about my family, we originally came to this country from _____.

 **Discussion:** Have you ever been in a foreign country, or in any other setting, where everyone around you was of a different race or culture? If you have ever been in a place where no one else looked or talked like you, did it affect the way you felt or acted? If so, how?


It may be natural to feel more comfortable around those people who are most like us, but is it wrong? What would you say is the difference between that feeling and the sin of prejudice?

I suppose God could have made all human beings exactly alike, but obviously He didn't. Why do you think the Lord made such a wide variety of people? What purpose might that serve?

It may be human to feel more comfortable around those folks who are most like us, but we should never imagine that God only cares about "our kind" of people. In this lesson we will learn that our God is BIG enough to love everybody, no matter who they are, because they are His creation.

READ JONAH 4:1-5


Jonah has to be the most peculiar preacher ever known: he has just preached the most successful revival in history, and he is bitterly disappointed!

 **Discussion:** Does Jonah's response in these verses change the way you have understood his actions in the first three chapters of the book? If so, how?


Jonah was bitter and angry because he knew the nature of God, but still wanted Him to be different. What kind of God do you suppose Jonah wanted?

Do you think people today are ever disappointed by God's grace? Can you think of a situation in which they might want the same God Jonah desired?

READ JONAH 4:6-11

 **QUESTION:** This is the third time Jonah has said he wanted to die! Do you think he is truly suicidal, or would you use another word to describe Jonah?

Possible Answers: Stubborn; Extremely Prejudiced; Petulant; Peevish; Self-Centered.

 **QUESTION:** What do you think is the point of this curious little episode? Why would God first provide for Jonah's needs, and then take his treasured vine away? What do you think the Lord is trying to teach Jonah?

Possible Answers: To convict Jonah of his self-centeredness, since Jonah was "very happy" (Jonah 4:6) when God did something to take care of his needs but was "greatly displeased" (Jonah 4:1) when the people of Nineveh were saved!; To try to get Jonah to see things from God's perspective—that is, if Jonah felt that strongly about losing a vine, how does Jonah think God feels about losing the soul of one of the humans He had created?; To teach Jonah that he had no "right" (verse 9) to be upset about the

destruction of a vine that didn't even belong to him and thus he had "no right" (Jonah 4:4) to be angry about the salvation of the Ninevites when they, like all people, belong to God.



Discussion: Most of us would have to admit that we are richly blessed with things that make our life more comfortable. Suppose that God wanted to use an object lesson today like He did with Jonah and the vine. What appliance or gadget would He take away from US to convict us of caring more about our conveniences than about people who do not yet know of God's love? Why did you choose that particular object?

The problem with Jonah is that he can't see the world through God's eyes!



RE-READ JONAH 4:10-11



QUESTION: When God looked at Nineveh, what do you think He saw that Jonah didn't?

Possible Answers: Their ability to repent, to truly change (cf. John 4:34-35); Their innocent little children (Jonah 4:11); Their reflection of His own image (cf. Genesis 1:26-27); Their spiritual helplessness, their "lostness" (cf. Matthew 9:36); God saw individuals, not a "crowd" or a race.



Discussion: If we truly saw people that way, how do you think it would change our feelings about those of other cultures or races?

Notice that the book is open-ended, and we are never told Jonah's response. Why do you suppose it ends with God's unanswered question?

[Background Note: Here's the "rest of the story": Israel was defeated by Assyria and carried off into captivity about 50 years after the brief ministry of Jonah. If the petulant prophet had cared enough about these Ninevites to more completely instruct them in God's will, would history have been different? After all, if we teach our enemies about God, we might make them our brothers! We can never know the answer to that question, but the very fact that this story about God's concern for the Ninevites, Israel's most hated enemies, was nevertheless included in the Jewish scriptures, is the strongest possible statement of God's gracious love for all humanity.]

SUMMARY STATEMENT: Our God made everybody, and He is BIG enough to love every single one of his creations. If we ever learn to see the world the way He sees the world it will help us to stretch out of our "comfort zones" and care about the souls of other people, even if they are "not like us".

This ends our study of the book of Jonah.
