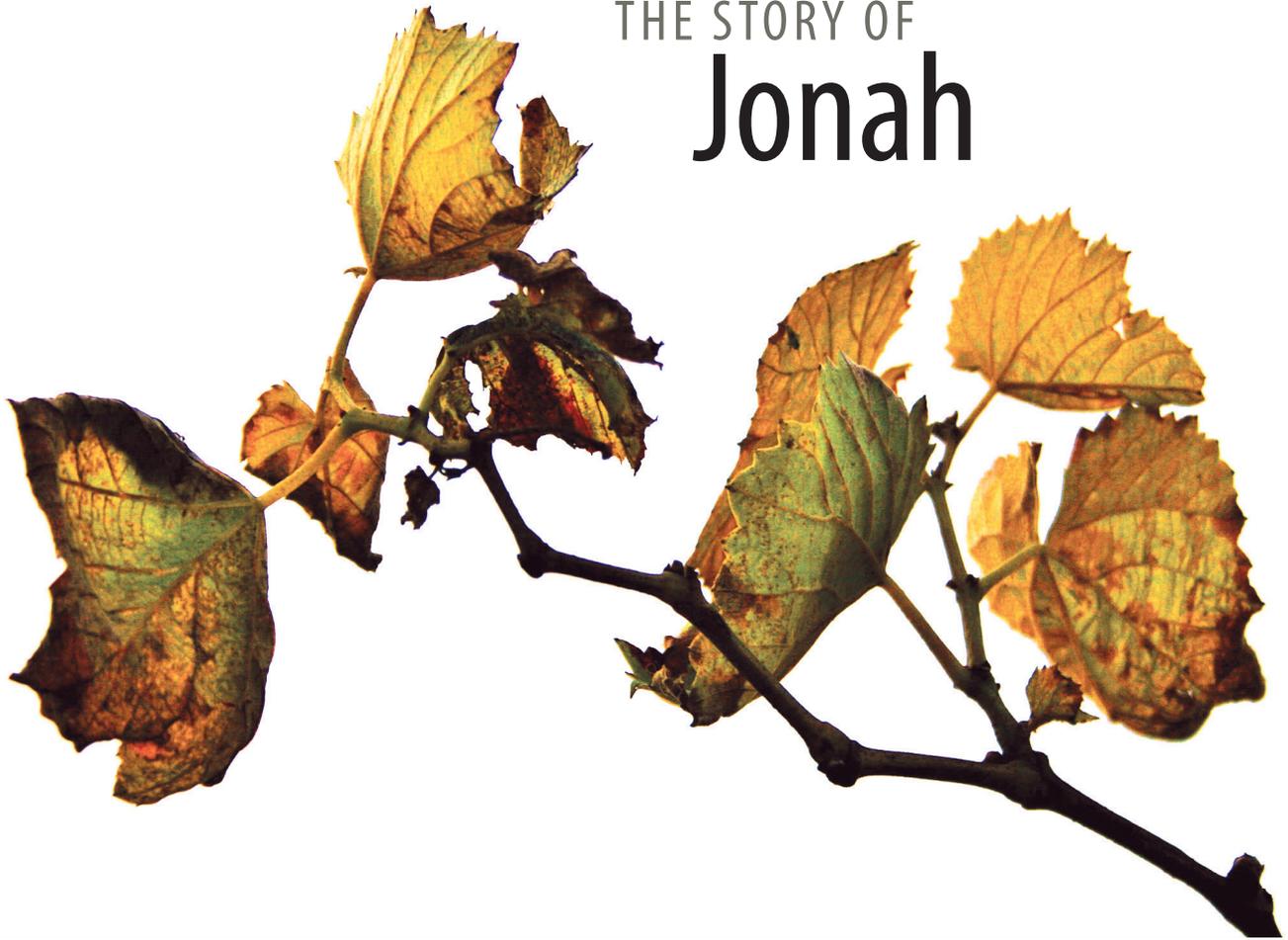


THE STORY OF Jonah



What does this old story reveal about our hearts, our relationships, our rhetoric, and our world view? Can it help us re-examine our categories, labels and boundaries? How does this story connect to your story?

In this series we'll listen to six Mars Hill Bible Church sermons by Shane Hipps and Rob Bell. Together we'll work through this poetic, funny and satirical story ... and find ourselves in it.

Find the Mars Hill sermon series as a free download here: shanehipps.com/teachings/series/jonah/

NOTES ABOUT THE AUDIO: This was a Lent series preached at Mars Hill Bible Church, so the opening announcements are included. The sermons begin after a few minutes of Marsh Hill business at the top of each recording. If the URL above doesn't work, search Shane Hipps + Jonah and download the entire series.

NOTES ABOUT THE STUDY GUIDE: Each recording has seven sets of questions – one for each day of the week – so you can use this as a springboard for a group discussion or else as a daily reflection.

WEEK 1
JONAH 1:1-3

THE STORY OF
Jonah

The God in Nineveh

shanehipps.com/teachings/series/jonah/



SYNOPSIS

The word of God came to Jonah, telling him to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against the wickedness of the people who live there. But Jonah does not want to go. Instead he gets on a boat and heads for a different city, called Tarshish, to flee from the Lord.

FROM THIS WEEK'S RECORDING:

If you want to experience the presence of God ... look in the dark shadowy back alleys of the soul and the world, in the parts of ourselves that we repress, deny and disown. ...

In that dark back corner room with the locked door, what you'll find nestled in between the sin and the shame and the sickness and the sorrow is the creator of the universe, reclined and relaxed, completely at home. ...

The divine dwells in the darkest places.

— Shane Hipps

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Listen to researcher/storyteller Brené Brown's TED Talk: [ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en) (or else search "Brené Brown + TED + vulnerability").

How does Brown's research about vulnerability and numbing connect with our story about Jonah, Tarshish and Nineveh? How are we like Jonah? Have human beings changed very much since this story was written?

How does owning and naming our own darkness, instead of running from it, help us move forward? Would owning and naming the darkness in the world, instead of running from it, help us all move forward? How do we walk the thin line between naming the world's darkness and sitting in judgment of others?

Where is God? Where do you experience God most fully? Why do you feel God's presence so strongly in that place?

Where do you go to get away from God? Is there any place where God isn't present? Do we imagine that God abandons the darkest places and moments in our lives? Why? Is that where we get the term "godforsaken"? What does this story have to say about the presence of God? Is this a surprise? Why, or why not?

Do you think Jonah will find joy in Tarshish? Why, or why not? Is your own happiness rooted in your circumstances? Is your faith also rooted in circumstances? Does the changing world alter your happiness?

What kind of joy does God offer? Can you imagine a joy that's indestructible? Is that realistic? What does it look like? What does it feel like? Can you access that kind of joy? How do you do it?

How is Tarshish a symbol of escape, something Jonah uses to avoid the darkness? Do you ever try to escape, avoid, or block out the darker parts of your life? What do you do instead of dealing with real issues in your life? What is your escape? What is your Tarshish?

What is your Nineveh? What do you need to escape from? What makes you feel shame, fear or darkness? What don't you want anyone to know? Do you believe that you can find God even in those places?

God doesn't tell Jonah to fix Nineveh. Jonah is only asked to name their darkness. Can you do that in your own life? What happens when you're able to name your darkness?

WEEK 2
JONAH 1:4-17

THE STORY OF
Jonah

The Human Heart is a Mystery

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SYNOPSIS

The Lord sends a storm so strong that the ship feels like it will break. The sailors cry out to their own gods for deliverance and start throwing valuable cargo overboard to lighten the load. But Jonah just falls asleep.

The men, desperate, cast lots to see who is responsible for the storm. The lots fall on Jonah, so they question him. Jonah tells the sailors that his God made the sea, and they are terrified. They ask Jonah how to save the ship. “Pick me up,” says Jonah, “and throw me into the sea.”

The men try to row back to land, but they can't. Out of options, they ask for forgiveness and throw Jonah overboard. Then God provides a fish that swallows Jonah.

FROM THIS WEEK'S RECORDING:

First read Matthew 12:38-45, as Jesus responds to the religious leaders who want him to perform magic tricks.

It's as if Jesus says, "If you want to know where life is found, it's not in conquering, or being victorious, or being better than everybody and showing off. The sign I'm going to give you is death, weakness, execution. I'm going to be naked and bloody, hanging on a cross. Death that leads to resurrection. ..."

"The world that you live in? It's about winning. It's about having all the answers. It's about power. It's about making more money. It's about putting on the right presentation. It's about letting everybody know that you've figured it out. ..."

*"That isn't life. Life is when you're willing to be weak and humbled, when you're honest about your frailty, and your smallness, and your pettiness. When you're ready to deal with that kind of death ... when your ego, the part of you that's easily offended, the part of you that wants to impress ... when you're ready to let **that** die, that's something. You asked for a sign? I'll give you the sign of Jonah."*

Jesus connects everything he's doing with Jonah being thrown over the side of the boat.

— Rob Bell

Why does Jonah's heart react this way to God's invitation? Why do people make decisions that seem destructive? Have you ever done this? Are you doing it now? Why? Why is the human heart such a mystery?

Who is the "good guy" in this story? Who is hard-hearted? Who is a worshipful follower of God? Who is not? Is that a surprise? Why, or why not?

[Go to sermonspice.com, search for the video called "More Than a Label," and watch the free preview.] Do people defy your expectations like this today? Have you ever encountered a person who exists outside of the categories and boxes you've created in your mind? What happens then? Do preconceived expectations need to change? Is that painful? If our categories and labeling systems are inadequate, why do we create them in the first place?

What would change in your life if you could erase all the ways you label and categorize other people? What would you gain? What would you lose? Is this scary? Why?

Does the world work the way it's supposed to? How do you think it's supposed to work? Who decided this? And can we be delighted when the world doesn't work out the way we think it should? Why, or why not?

Is your entire life, for better or worse, a witness to God? In what way? How is God a constant part of your story, and the unfolding story of the world?

How are you like Jonah in this story? How are you hanging on to old categories and old ways of thinking? What do we need to let go so that we can be open to this story?

WEEK 3
JONAH 2

THE STORY OF
Jonah

Storms and Fish

shanehipps.com/teachings/series/jonah/



SYNOPSIS

Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. Inside the fish, neither dead nor really alive, Jonah prays a long, eloquent prayer of gratitude from the psalms. Then the fish vomits Jonah up on dry land.

FROM THIS WEEK'S RECORDING:

All of a sudden your awareness of good events and bad events starts to wobble a bit. ...

What the narrator of Jonah does is take these simplistic categories and just beats them to a pulp. There is a wisdom that is not trapped in dualities that say "this is how the world works." There is a whole other realm of wisdom that understands that the world doesn't work the way that it's supposed to, and labels don't work, that is not trapped in dualities, a wisdom that transcends and embraces all of it. ...

It's an awareness that whatever it is, however it comes to us, however it's labeled, God can work even in the midst of even that. ... This is not the dominant way that our culture speaks, but it is the wisdom you find in the scriptures over and over again. It's like the narrator of Jonah says, "I'm going to shred to pieces your conventional ways of ordering the world. And when your boxes and labels are smashed, and your world view is just obliterated, when you get to that point, then you will have wisdom. But it will be wisdom that's be able to wrap its arms around the complexities of life instead of clinging to the same old simplistic dualities that don't serve anyone well."

— Rob Bell

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Do improbable tales like this one make Christianity hard to swallow? Is your first impulse to find a rational explanation for this story, or dismiss it entirely? What do you miss when you approach stories that way? Is the world more mysterious than you'd like to admit? Can God work in mysterious ways?

Or do you think this story happened exactly as it's written, big fish and all? What do you miss when you approach stories that way? Could you get so wrapped up in the literal plot that you miss how this story engages, invites, and transforms you now? Could you miss your role in this story? Can God reveal powerful truths through satire and parable?

What do the storms and the fish reveal about Jonah? Have you encountered storms and fish in your life? What do they reveal about you? Have your storms and fish changed the value of anything in your life? Do they change what you care about? What has this storm dragged to the surface?

Is Jonah's prayer about lament or thanksgiving? Why do we assume Jonah needs or wants to be rescued from the storms and fish? Is there any reason to give thanks for the storms and fish? Can Jonah's hardships help, even rescue him? How?

Can your hardships rescue you? From what? Does that make your hardships a good thing? Does God send you struggle? Is this a God of tough love, who wants us to suffer? Is God punishing Jonah here?

Are the answers that black and white? What does it mean to be trapped in a duality? Are our experiences only good or only bad? What changes when you let go of those categories and infuse your life with God's restoration and hope?

Was God present in Jonah's storms and fish? Is God present in your storms and fish? Does that change the way you experience storms and fish? How?

WEEK 4
JONAH 3

THE STORY OF
Jonah



When God Repents

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SYNOPSIS

Jonah prophesies against the people of Nineveh. The king of Nineveh commands everyone in the city, including animals, to repent. Every living creature is to fast and cover themselves with sackcloth as a sign of their repentance.

FROM THIS WEEK'S RECORDING:

The narrator is trying to tell us something very important about the nature of God. ...

Mirroring takes place as a way to establish trust, to deepen connections, to demonstrate that you're not alone. "I'm going to be with you. I'll meet you where you're at." It's an absolutely essential ingredient in any relationship.

What God is doing in this passage is the ultimate in divine mirroring of his people. The people of Nineveh repented of their evil, and their evil is considerable. And what does God do? God repents of his evil. ...

Repentance is a humiliating act. ... This is God humiliating himself for the sake of ensuring that his people know that they are not alone. This is not the cosmic judge who stands above you, arbitrating your fate. It is a loving parental relationship who comes down off the bench and stands next to you, and says, "What should we feel now? I will feel what you feel, because I don't want you to ever be alone." ...

God is foreshadowing what he will ultimately do in Jesus. ... He has no problem saying, "You know what? I don't even have to act godlike. I can just experience what you experience. I promise."

That's why Jesus came. That's why this God decided to become a body. To be with us. And even here, you see an instance of the incarnation ...

– Shane Hipps

What do you think of Jonah's prophecy? Is he doing his best work here? Why, or why not? What is motivating Jonah? Have you ever acted this way? Why?

Is this story funny? How are Jonah and the Ninevites comical here? Why has this story endured for so long? Why do you think this story matters today? Do you see any parallels between behavior or situations in this story, and behavior or situations in your own life?

Do the Ninevites repent because of Jonah? Does God ask Jonah – or us – to change other people's hearts and minds? Is that our job? Does God leave us alone with insurmountable tasks, or is God doing the heavy lifting? Is this an invitation to check out, be lazy, and let God do God's thing? Could it be an invitation into freedom and aliveness, instead? How?

Does God repent? Is that an audacious claim? Is it offensive? Why, or why not? Why would God repent in this story? And what does that mean for us today?

How does the mirroring that Hipps describes establish trust? Does this story give us a glimpse into a God that is present with us? Does that matter? Why?

What do you want God to mirror back to you right now? What are you experiencing now that you need to see reflected in the face of God? And how would that help you?

What does this story tell us about our own relationships? How does it translate into our families, culture, politics, schools and corporations? Do we underestimate the power of not being alone? How does this impact the way we welcome other people, and seek to understand them?

WEEK 5
JONAH 4:1-4

THE STORY OF
Jonah

Troubling Love

shanehipps.com/teachings/series/jonah/



SYNOPSIS

God responds to the Ninevites' repentance with compassion and grace. But Jonah is angry, claiming that this sort of compassion is exactly why he didn't want to come to Nineveh in the first place. Jonah knows that God is slow to anger, abounding in love, and unwilling to rain destruction down on anyone. While Jonah is almost suicidal in his fury and frustration, God asks him if he has any right to be angry.

FROM THIS WEEK'S RECORDING:

This is what we are ultimately called to – the ultimate ethic that Jesus comes to model is love of enemy. That's the most profound, powerful, unthinkable thing that anybody could do. ...

God is not nearly as interested in punishing our enemies as we are. And God is not nearly as interested in punishing you as your enemies are. ...

God comes along and says, "Hey, I want you to know something. We're all good here. I don't need to punish you the way they want me to. Because that's not how my love operates. It never has. Even if people say that it has, it hasn't. ... Look, I forgave the most brutal empire in the world that committed genocide and all kinds of terrible things. Do you think you can even remotely compete with that? You're easy."

What would it mean to join with this God in receiving that kind of compassion, and offering that kind of compassion? How different would our world be if people were capable of that kind of forgiving in their lives?

– Shane Hipps

Does Jonah have any right to be angry? Why is he so upset?

Is the extent of God's grace dependent upon your behavior? Does God forgive you as long as you are only sorta bad? Can God forgive you if you're really bad? What if you're downright violent? Can God forgive you if you're Hitler, or ISIS, or if you've opened fire with an assault weapon in a public place? Does God's compassion and grace have limits?

What would you do if you were in Jonah's shoes? How would you feel about professing God's grace and forgiveness to the equivalent of Hitler, ISIS and mass shooters? Would this make you bitter, like Jonah?

Is anger over God's love and compassion a strange response? Isn't grace a good thing? Would you prefer a vengeful god over a forgiving god? Why don't we want expansive grace?

How do you feel about the terms of this prophesy? [Around 17 minutes into the audio]. Does God give the Ninevites too much time to repent? How does this lack of urgency and "karmic debt" feel to you? Is it frustrating? Why? Are we as a culture all about urgency, karma and knee-jerk reactions? Why are we so quick to place blame, to tear other people down on social media, and to exact revenge?

Why is it so hard to imagine the enormity of God's love and forgiveness? Does God work in a completely different way than we do? How can we learn to work God's way?

What would it mean to join with God in receiving this kind of compassion, and offering this kind of compassion? How different would our world be if we were capable of that kind of forgiving in our lives?

WEEK 6
JONAH 4

THE STORY OF
Jonah

The Gourd from the Lord

shanehipps.com/teachings/series/jonah/



SYNOPSIS

Jonah made a shelter outside the city, sat in the shade, and waited to see what would happen to the Ninevites. God provided a plant to grow up over Jonah to shield him from the sun, which made Jonah happy. But overnight a worm came and devoured the plant. This made Jonah angry, and he wished he would die. God asked him if it was right that he was angry about the gourd, and then ends with a question. “You’re concerned about this plant, that you did not tend it. Should I not be concerned for a great city filled with many people and animals?”

FROM THIS WEEK’S RECORDING:

“You care about your little plant? I care about people. Jonah, you take great joy in the plant flourishing, and you have great despair when the plant perishes. I have great despair when people perish, and I take great joy when people flourish. Jonah, you love your plant? Now you know how I feel about Nineveh.”

This isn’t how God is supposed to work. ... You want me to bring revenge? You want me to crush your enemies? ... I’m not like that.”

The prophets came to very religious people and announced truths that were a bit hard for those people to hear, and often got the prophet killed. So what is the book of Jonah? It is a prophetic book, which means it is a sharp, pointed critique meant to provoke religious people to ask themselves difficult questions about ways in which they had betrayed their God with the way they were living.

Is this why the book ends, not with a statement, but with a question? ... Are you going to continue to hold out for revenge against your enemy, or are you going to love and bless your enemy, because that’s what God is like?

– Rob Bell

Why does the plant make Jonah happy? Does this part of the story sound absurd ... yet also alarmingly relevant today? Do we get so obsessed with our own comfort that we fail to care about real struggles in the world? Do we miss our invitation to be part of the solution?

Is there a modern-day equivalent of Assyria? Who do we hate and fear as much as Jonah hates and fears Assyria? Who would we like God to destroy? Why? How is this hatred played out in political and social arenas today?

What is God’s response? Is God’s heart revealed in this odd, unraveled, unresolved ending? What are the implications of the final question in this book? What kind of book is it?

Is God’s love subversive, countercultural, even dangerous? Does God’s mercy win over God’s judgment? How far does mercy go? Does God’s mercy reach farther and wider than we’d like? Does this make us angry? Why?

How does anger at God’s expansive love and mercy play into the crucifixion story? Were the new testament religious leaders as offended and threatened by Jesus’ expansive love and mercy in that story as Jonah is in this one? Why?

Is that why Jesus refers back to the Jonah story in Matthew 12:39? Of all the illustrations Jesus could use to help the Pharisees understand what he’s up to, why do you think Jesus chooses the Jonah story?

Does this story help us capture something of God’s heart? Does it work today as a sharp, pointed critique that provokes you to consider difficult questions about your own life? Is the message in this story hard for you to hear? Why?