“Israel, return to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words of repentance with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our iniquity and accept what is good, so that we may repay you with praise from our lips.’”

—Hosea 14:1-2
A Rebellious People Receive Mercy

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God’s love and mercy extend to all people and are expressed through His sending of messengers to proclaim forgiveness and life through Him.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Jonah

Perhaps you have heard the story about a man being swallowed up by a big fish and living to tell the tale. Immediately this conjures up thoughts of fables and campfire stories. So, what are we to make of this story? Is the Book of Jonah just a fairy tale with a good moral, or is it more? Can we really believe in extraordinary stories like this?

Well, do we believe in miracles? Because the most miraculous part of Jonah’s story isn’t the fact that a large fish swallowed him and he somehow lived. The part that should overwhelm us with awe, wonder, and shock is where a great and holy God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, has mercy on sinners. Jonah, the sailors, and the Ninevites—these were people God pursued, and God is intent on working in the hearts of rebels just like them and turning them into worshipers.

Why should God’s mercy on sinners qualify as a miracle?
Group Time

Point 1: God pursues a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 1:1–4,17).

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because their evil has come up before me.” 3 Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the LORD’s presence. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the LORD’s presence.

4 But the LORD threw a great wind onto the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break apart.

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17 The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

When the word of God came to Jonah to preach a message to Nineveh, he ran. This command of God came to his ears and his heart’s response was rebellion. What this revealed about Jonah was that he, like every Ninevite, was a sinner. His status as an Israelite, his calling as a prophet, his previous acts of obedience—none of these things made it easy for him to obey this command. He would rather leave his home and sail for the ends of the earth than obey God in this.

What are some reasons God’s commands may cause us to run and hide from His presence?

Jonah had faithfully served God as a prophet in Israel (2 Kings 14:25). But suddenly, God’s message came and Jonah’s immediate response was to run from God’s presence, and not for the reason we might think. Jonah feared going to Nineveh, but it wasn’t for his own life or the possibility that no one would repent in response to his preaching. His fear was tied to believing that God could actually spare such evil people (Jonah 4:1-2).

What must be true about God to pursue those who rebel against Him for reconciliation and obedience?
Point 2: God extends mercy to a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 2:10–3:5,10).

2:10 Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.
3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you.” 3 Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the LORD’s command.

Now Nineveh was an extremely great city, a three-day walk. 4 Jonah set out on the first day of his walk in the city and proclaimed, “In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!” 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least.

God saw their actions—that they had turned from their evil ways—so God relented from the disaster he had threatened them with. And he did not do it.

God’s forgiveness and mercy do not diminish His call to obedience. When God once again spoke to Jonah, after responding in mercy to his prayer, His command was the same: Get up, go to Nineveh, and preach. In God’s mercy, He doesn’t lower the standard for our obedience. He doesn’t lower the bar, thinking, “Oh, maybe what I’m asking is too much.” God’s mercy won’t allow His children to miss out on the joy of fully obeying His Word.

Why might obedience to God often feel like an option or a chore rather than a joy?

The sermon delivered by Jonah was short, only five words in Hebrew. Yet at this simple message, this entire city of Nineveh repented. Even the king stepped down from his throne, removed his robe, and repented (3:6-9). While the words were few, two critical components were clear: 1) judgment was coming and 2) there was time to repent. God hates sin and seeks to destroy it, and at the same time, He loves sinners and seeks to reconcile them to Himself. He is slow to anger and quick to forgive; He is merciful.

God Is Merciful: Mercy refers to God’s ________________ and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin. Both mercy and grace are ________________.
Point 3: God reveals His patient love for a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 4:1,8-11).

1 Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious.

8 As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah’s head so much that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, “It’s better for me to die than to live.”

9 Then God asked Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

“Yes, it’s right!” he replied. “I’m angry enough to die!”

10 So the LORD said, “You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. 11 But may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?”

When God saw Nineveh’s repentance, He relented from His anger; when Jonah saw this same result, he was greatly displeased and furious. We were created for God’s glory, and our hearts were designed to align with His heart. When our hearts are out of sync with His, when we don’t love what God loves and hate what He hates, we often become angry, bitter, or depressed. But rather than becoming greatly displeased and furious at Jonah’s response, God instead continued His patient work of pursuing Jonah’s heart.

The astonishing thing throughout the Book of Jonah is that all of creation, except Jonah, was fully submitting to God’s word. All of creation was available to God as He loved, disciplined, and pursued the heart of Jonah. This is no less true today. God uses all necessary means to bring people to the foot of the cross and align our hearts with His heart. He continues to work sovereignly and lovingly as He carries out His perfect plan of sanctifying and glorifying a people for Himself.

Voices from the Church

“God’s too big for us to control. You can’t pick and choose which of God’s attributes you want to see displayed and when and where you want to experience them.”

–Priscilla Shirer

How should Christians view the opportunities they have to share the gospel with unbelievers and encourage believers in the faith?
My Mission

Because we were enemies who received God’s grace and mercy, we break down walls and put to death our prejudices as we share the news that forgiveness is available through repentance and faith in Christ.

- How will you respond to God’s work in your life to align your heart and priorities with God’s?
- In what ways can your group reflect God’s mercy for sinners in your community?
- To whom will you go in mercy, joy, and obedience to share the good news of Jesus, the better Jonah?

Voices from Church History

“Let us sow in tears, so that we may reap in joy ... Let us amend our wickedness, lest we be consumed with it.”

—Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390)
Day 1: Read Jonah 1:1-17

The word of the Lord had come to Jonah commanding him to go to Nineveh and preach a message. Yet Jonah fled. In his disobedience, he found what he thought was an open door as he ran from God. When he reached the dock, there was a ship leaving. He had the fare to purchase a trip heading hundreds of miles away from Nineveh. Perhaps he justified his actions believing that God was providing a way out from the original call. Wasn’t it providential that a ship was heading out and he had the financial means to go?

Addressing the faithful use of our tongues, Henry T. Scholl once wrote: “For training the tongue aright God has given us the salutary example of his Son. That we may habitually conform to that example, he would fain work in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Testings come in his wise providence; but these testings are no valid excuse for testiness of speech.” This same idea was working in Jonah’s life for his obedience. Though fleeing was possible, these circumstances did not override the word of God to Jonah. God had told him to go to Nineveh, and no matter how many affordable rides were headed in the opposite direction, the circumstances did not change his call. Jonah took the opportunity to turn his back on God and His word, but God was not going to turn His back on Jonah.

When your circumstances, advice from others, or your own feelings contradict God’s Word, how do you come to a final decision?
**Day 2: Read Jonah 2:1-9**

All the discipline that God had brought upon Jonah—the storm, being cast into the sea with anticipation of death, dark isolation inside the fish—brought about God’s intended work in Jonah. From the belly of the fish, Jonah cried out to his God and acknowledged that salvation belongs to Him. Hardhearted and rebellious Jonah had been the recipient of great mercy and grace from the Lord. What better way to prepare the heart of a person to go and deliver God’s word to hardhearted and rebellious people!

Before these events, Jonah refused to deliver a message to Nineveh because he judged them to be great sinners. But here, God reminded Jonah that he too was a sinner and that he needed exactly what the Ninevites needed—the great mercy of God. A man who deserved to be dead at the bottom of the sea for his disobedience instead received mercy. Consequently, Jonah opened his mouth in prayers of praise and thanksgiving to his God from inside a fish.

> When has God used His perfect and loving discipline to reveal sin that was in your heart?

**Day 3: Read Jonah 2:10–3:10**

We can see now that Jonah’s life would have gone so much better if he had just obeyed God in the first place. He had wasted money on a fare to Tarshish. He had wasted days traveling out to sea and then was transported by a fish. If he had immediately responded to the call, there would have been no storm, no drowning, and no fish. All of his efforts to derail God’s will for him had been a waste. If you could talk to Jonah at this point in the story, you might ask him, “Jonah, is there anything you would have done differently?” Surely he would scream: “Of course, I would! I’d obey the first time!” But even still, as we will see, Jonah’s heart was not right in his obedience.

God has promised that He will patiently and lovingly work discipline into the lives of His people to bring about repentance and obedience. Disobedience is a waste of our time. God will continue to pursue us, sanctify us, and create in our hearts a greater desire for Him and His gospel. We will be brought to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6), so let us join God in this work that He is doing in us rather than futilely fight against it.

> How might you use your sinful choices and their consequences in the past to encourage a younger believer to obey God immediately today?
Day 4: Read Jonah 4:1-11

Jonah’s angry words were affirmations of God’s character: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in faithful love” (v. 2). These were things that Jonah knew in his head to be true. His theology of God was excellent. Yet what he knew of God had not affected his heart; he did not love these things about God. This was at the root of Jonah’s disobedience. What he knew and what he loved didn’t match up.

We don’t often think of sin as a theology problem, but we should. We know what God thinks about lies, gossip, lust, and greed, so we aren’t disobedient in these ways because of uncertainty. Instead, we disobey because our hearts do not love God completely; we don’t love the things that He loves. Jonah did not want God to save Nineveh because he didn’t love sinners and desire their salvation the way that God did. Jonah and his will were at the center of his heart. God wanted to put Himself and His will at the center of Jonah’s heart. To do so, He first had to show Jonah what was truly in his heart.

Where in your life do you see a misalignment between your theology (what you know is true about God from His Word) and your heart (what you love)?

Day 5: Read Matthew 12:38-42

Something greater than Jonah is here. Whereas Jonah said he’d rather die than go to sinners, Jesus said He would go to sinners so that He could die. Whereas Jonah was thrown into the sea to appease God’s wrath against him, Jesus was thrown into the sea of God’s wrath to appease His anger against us. Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days and nights and vomited out, but Jesus was in the belly of the grave for three days and nights and then resurrected out.

Jonah preached his message, and the people of Nineveh repented with uncertain hope of forgiveness (Jonah 3:9). Jesus preached the gospel of the cross, which promises us, if we confess our sins, that God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9). God used Jonah to spare one city, but Jesus came to save people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. Indeed, Someone much greater than Jonah is here.

If an entire wicked city repented at the preaching of Jonah, why should you have hope that many sinners might repent in response to your sharing of the gospel?
Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- God pursues a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 1:1-4,17).
- God extends mercy to a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 2:10–3:5,10).
- God reveals His patient love for a rebellious people and prophet (Jonah 4:1,8-11).

How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?

When have you seen “unlikely” people reached with the gospel?

In what ways have you struggled with Jonah-like tendencies to resist God’s will?

Notes
The prophetic books of the Old Testament can be confusing, both to the newcomer to the Bible and the longtime reader. Where do these prophets fit in the overall narrative of Israel and Judah? What messages did they communicate? What was God doing in and through their work? The benefit of this volume of The Gospel Project is that it gives you a glimpse of the prophets right at the point their message was going forth to God’s people. We can ask questions of God with Habakkuk, look forward to the coming Suffering Servant with Isaiah, stand amazed at the stunning picture of relentless love in Hosea, and learn something of God’s extravagant love with Jonah.

As you work through the sessions in this volume, keep an eye on all the different ways God reveals Himself and communicates His messages of judgment and grace. Fall to your knees in awe, and then stand up and boldly proclaim the love of this great God, who inspired the prophets to deliver His word.
UNIT 13
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3
2. Charles Spurgeon, in *Charles Spurgeon’s Classics* (Charles River Editors, 2016) [eBook].

SESSION 4

UNIT 14
SESSION 1

SESSION 2

SESSION 3

UNIT 15
SESSION 1

SESSION 2
3. Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Charles River Editors, 2018) [eBook].

SESSION 3

SESSION 4

SESSION 5

SESSION 6