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An
Evangelical Urban Training Project
Lent Course

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Using the study sheets.

The titles at the top of each page give the general approach of the study, and so set the theme for the session. They do not have to be slavishly followed as the group using them will have their own things to say.

The questions in script and the comments give suggestions for discussion and can be taken in any order, tackling as many as seems right for the group. It is not necessary to work on all of them. The key is to develop discussion as it is the group members' opportunity to contribute.

TWO THINGS WILL HELP MAKE THE STUDIES USEFUL

1. The conversation and events which involve Jonah and the Lord are looked at and discussed. It is an old story, but it has something to say to us.
2. The experiences of the people in the study groups are taken seriously and listened to. We will only *make use of* Bible teaching which 'rings bells' with our own lives.

The idea behind the studies is to help people make links between what the Lord was saying to Jonah and the way in which members of the group, and Christians together, respond to the Lord today.

SOME OF THE THEMES FROM THIS STORY ARE:

- a. What the Lord has to say about how people live and behave.
- b. What He wants to say to people, in judgment and in love.
- c. What choices we have about doing what the Lord wants us to do.
- d. How we show compassion to people.
- e. How we respond to our bad experiences.

PRAYING AS WE STUDY

Give some time to prayer in each study session, varying the kind of prayer. Some groups will be happy to pray out loud. Some will be happier with prayer that is directed by the leader, with time for quiet prayer.

An overall theme for prayer when looking at Jonah could be 'listening to what the Lord wants to say to us.'

Some background information on Jonah.

We do not know very much about Jonah. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14. v.25. in connection with the reign of Jereboam II, which was between seven and eight hundred years before the coming of Christ [786-746 BC]. This was not an easy time for the people of God. We do not know who later wrote the story, or when it was written. There is no doubt that it is part of the Old Testament.

Although it is given as 'one of the prophets' it reads like one of the historical books of the Old Testament. It is much more biographical than most of the prophets, and is within the story telling tradition of Old Testament times. If you read it all at once it makes a good story for telling at a camp-fire or at bedtime to children.

The Old Testament is mostly concerned with God's dealing with His special people, and this book tells us that His prophets and His compassion reach out to people who are not Hebrews. The people of Nineveh were Gentiles, and enemies of Jonah's people at this time. It is a statement as clear as Acts chapter 11 when Peter had to learn that the Good News was for people who were not Jews. It is a glimpse of what God was going to do through the Lord Jesus and His ministry. This broad vision of the God of the Hebrews being for the nations of the world comes up time and again in the Old Testament. One point being made is that being the People of God brings responsibilities as well as privileges.

Over the years there has been a lot of debate about whether this is the story of an historical fact, or a story made up to teach us a truth we may not otherwise grasp. If it is historical then it is certainly miraculous in a spectacular way for it would not fit anything we know about today. If it isn't, the story still stands and can speak to us and has a lot to teach us. The debate can use up a lot of energy and time, and can make us miss the truths which are being put forward.

People often challenged Jesus and sometimes He drew upon the Old Testament to answer them. In Matthew 12 vv. 38 - 41 He replies to people who are looking for a sign to give authority to His words. His reference to Jonah seems surprising, but it brings a vivid picture of despair becoming hope, and death becoming life. It is also a picture of Jonah being given another opportunity.

Jonah - One - He says 'no' to the Lord

Jonah chapter One verses 1 - 10



The people of Ninevah were enemies of Jonah's nation.

Why did the Lord want Jonah to warn Ninevah?

One day, the Lord spoke to Jonah, son of Amittai. He said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware how wicked its people are." Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the LORD. He went to Joppa, he found a ship about to go to Spain. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Spain, where he would be away from the LORD.

Does God ever force us to do things?

How would you feel if an enemy of your country told you about God?



But the LORD sent a strong wind on the sea, and the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god. Then, in order to lessen the danger, they threw the cargo overboard. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below and was lying in the ship's hold, sound asleep. The captain found him there and said to him, "What are you doing asleep? Get up and pray to your god for help. Maybe he will feel sorry for us and spare our lives."

Would you have gone to sleep at a time like this?



Have you ever felt like the sailors here?

The sailors said to one another, "Let's draw lots and find out who is to blame for getting us into this danger." They did so, and Jonah's name was drawn. So they said to him: "Now then, tell us! Are you to blame for this? What are you doing here? What country do you come from? What is your nationality?"

"I am a Hebrew," Jonah answered. "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made land and sea." Jonah went on to tell them that he was running away from the LORD.

How would you describe the Lord to a stranger?

Before He was arrested, Jesus prayed: 'If you will, take this cup of suffering away from me.'

Next week: He suffers the consequences. Jonah 1 vv. 10 - 17. 2. v.10

Jonah - Two - He suffers the consequences

Jonah 1. vv. 10 - 17. and 2. v.10

Why was Jonah reluctant to do what God wanted?

Jonah went on to tell them that he was running away from the LORD. The sailors were terrified and said to him, "That was an awful thing to do!"

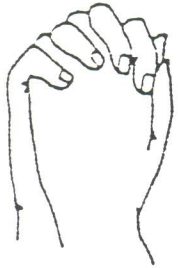


The storm was getting worse all the time, so the sailors asked him, "What should we do to you to stop the storm?" Jonah answered, "Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I know it is my fault that you are caught in this violent storm."

Who seem to be more Godly - Jonah or the sailors?

What made them pray like this?

Instead, the sailors tried to get the ship to shore, rowing with all their might. But the storm was getting worse and worse, and they got nowhere. So they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, we pray, don't punish us with death for taking this man's life! You, O LORD, are responsible for all this; it is your doing." Then they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and it calmed down at once.



What questions would you like to ask Jonah about this?

This made the sailors so afraid of the LORD that they offered a sacrifice and promised to serve him.

Have you ever made this kind of promise to God?



At the LORD's command a large fish swallowed Jonah, and he was inside the fish for three days and nights.

....Then the LORD ordered the fish to spew Jonah up on the beach, and it did.

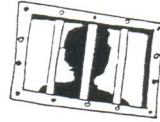
Read Matthew 12 v38-41. Does it help you to understand the story?

In Luke 8 v22-25 Jesus calms a storm because the disciples are frightened.

Next week: He tries to work it out. Jonah 2. vv. 1 - 9

Jonah - Three - He tries to work it out

Jonah chapter Two verses 1 - 9.



How does the Lord do this kind of thing today?

From deep inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God:

"In my distress, O LORD, I called to you, and you answered me. From deep in the world of the dead I cried for help, and you heard me. You threw me down into the depths, to the very bottom of the sea, where the waters were all round me, and all your mighty waves rolled over me.

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Was this a good experience for Jonah?

I thought I had been banished from your presence and would never see your holy Temple again. The water came over me and choked me; the sea covered me completely, and seaweed was wrapped round my head. I went down to the very roots of the mountains, into the land whose gates lock shut for ever.

The temple was the focus of worship and of God Himself

Was Jonah repentant or desperate?

But you, O LORD my God, brought me back from the depths alive. When I felt my life slipping away, then, O LORD, I prayed to you, and in your holy Temple you heard me.

Does the fact that many people turn to God in a crisis mean that deep down everyone believes?

Why bring in idols?

Those who worship worthless idols have abandoned their loyalty to you. But I will sing praises to you; I will offer you a sacrifice and do what I have promised. Salvation comes from the LORD!"



What does 'salvation' mean to you?

In John 17 v20-23 Jesus prays for the whole world. It is a confirmation of Jonah's mission.

Next week: He obeys the Lord Jonah 3. vv. 1 - 10.



Jonah - Four - He obeys the Lord

Jonah chapter Three verses 1 - 10

Is this God being patient?



No-one is sure how big Nineveh was, but Chapter 4 v 10 says '120,000 innocent children'

Once again the LORD spoke to Jonah. he said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to the people the message I have given you." So Jonah obeyed the LORD and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to walk through it.

Why?

Jonah started through the city, and after walking a whole day, he proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believed God's message.

Is it Good News to be told your city will be destroyed?



What made them believe this strange foreigner?

So they decided that everyone should fast, and all the people, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to show that they had repented.

How do we show repentance today, as individuals and as a nation?

Is this good leadership? Do we need this kind of leadership today?

When the king of Nineveh heard about it, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. He sent out a proclamation to the people of Nineveh: "This is an order of the king and his officials: No one is to eat anything; all persons, cattle, and sheep are forbidden to eat or drink. All persons and animals must wear sackcloth. Everyone must pray earnestly to God and must give up his wicked behaviour and his evil actions. Perhaps God will change his mind; perhaps he will stop being angry, and we will not die!"



Is it possible to make people sorry for what they have done?

God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behaviour. So he changed his mind and did not punish them as he had said he would.

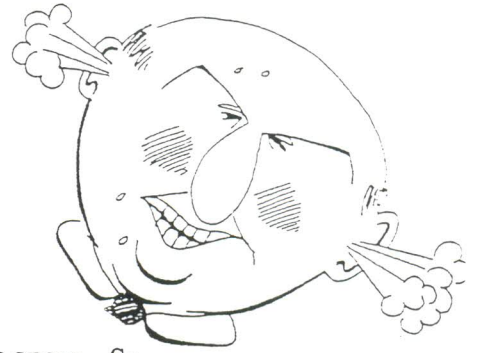
Does God change His mind?

In Luke 10. Jesus sends out His disciples to say 'The Kingdom of God is near you'.

Next week: He faces up to himself. Jonah 4. vv. 1 - 10.

Jonah - Five - He faces up to himself

Jonah chapter Four verses 1 - 10



Jonah knew this because of the way God had treated him.

Jonah was very unhappy about this and became angry. So he prayed "LORD, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish. Now, LORD, let me die. I am better off dead than alive." The LORD answered, "What right have you to be angry?"

In 1 Kings 19 v3-5
Elijah has very similar feelings

Self pity!
Shown up as wrong!?

Jonah went out east of the city and sat down. He made a shelter for himself and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. Then the LORD God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable, Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant.

What different ways does God use to teach us important lessons?

What kind of a person do you think Jonah was?

But at dawn next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, and it died. After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind, and Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. So he wished he were dead. "I am better off dead than alive," he said. But God said to him, "What right have you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry - angry enough to die!"

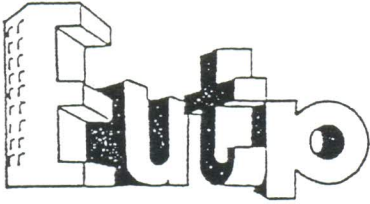
The LORD said to him, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it, and you didn't make it grow - yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!

In Luke 24 v45-49,
Jesus explains his suffering and resurrection.



How does God show pity today?





Evangelical Urban Training Project

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