



Looking Inwards (15 mins)
Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however: 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins)
Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

- Thanksgiving?
- Prayer?
- Encouragement?
- Support in any way?

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The Story Of Jonah (3/4)
HG90: Jonah Goes To Nineveh

Jonah 3:1-10

Home Group Study Notes

9th March 2014 - Revd Tom Loh



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.



Welcome (10 mins)
Ice Breaker

Have you decided to give up anything for Lent this year? If so, what? And why?



Looking Upwards (10 mins)
Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: Verse 1-3. Why do you think Jonah is now willing to go to Nineveh?

2: Verse 4-6. How can we explain the incredible success of Jonah's very short sermon? Can you share a personal story of someone you know unexpectedly believing the gospel?

3: Do you find it hard to talk about God's anger and judgement? Why? Can you think of helpful ways to communicate this hard truth?

However, unlike the Ninevites, the sad reality of our Christian lives is that many of us grow complacent with our sins. We get used to failing, and falling short. We tell ourselves God is forgiving and understands. The longer we tell ourselves this, the less our sins begin to trouble us. We grow hard and cold in heart, and become blinded to our own condition.

If we have become like that, then Jesus warns us that our attitude needs to be like that of the Ninevites, who urgently pleaded with God knowing their very lives were in danger. Jesus said, *"The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here"* (Matthew 12:41). How grieved are we about the evil in our lives? How wounded are we when anger and violence bursts out so easily from our hearts? How sorry are we when we curse our neighbour, or show impatience with our loved ones? Are we driven to our knees in urgent prayer? Do we care enough to switch off the TV, or put away our comforts and treats until we know we are straight again with God and neighbour?

Church of England liturgy is rich with heart-felt prayers of contrition. At times we need to refresh and remind ourselves of the strength of language often used, and so to check the complacency of our own hearts. To prepare for Holy Communion by confessing our sins, the Book of Common Prayer uses these words:

ALMIGHTY God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God has compassion on the contrite Ninevites, v10: God saw how the Ninevites responded to Jonah's message of God's judgement, and he chose to have compassion on them and spare them the destruction he had threatened. As we see in chapter four, Jonah is not best pleased about this, and was hoping that the Ninevites would be destroyed. I'm sure many of us who have witnessed great evil and violence would sympathise with Jonah. However, in chapter four we see that God's desire is to always have mercy on sinners. We learn from stories like Jonah that God infinitely prefers to show mercy than to bring judgement and destruction, and that he is concerned for all people, no matter how far gone, or evil they have become.

This is the great wonder of God: he befriends and welcomes sinners. Through the life of Jesus we see the extent to which God is prepared to save sinners – *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* - Jesus would rather die than see one of his beloved creatures perish.

"As we know Jesus better, His divine power gives us everything we need for living a godly life." 2 Peter 1:3

Forty days/years seem to represent a time of trial and testing in the Bible. Thus, the Ninevites are given forty days to test their humility before the Lord. The spiritual practice of fasting, and wearing sackcloth and ashes are symbolic of repentance and humility. Let us briefly think through the significance of each of these:

Fasting: Jesus sets the standard for fasting. During his time of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus rebuked the devil with these words from scripture (Deut 8:3), *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* By quoting these words and by abstaining from food and drink Jesus is witnessing to the fact that being in a right relationship with God is more vital to sustaining his life than bread and water is. Fasting makes a powerful statement. By giving up the things that sustain our life on a day-to-day basis we truly find out whether God is at the centre of our lives. It is easy to say God is first in my life, but when we decide to give up certain things we enjoy or need, we quickly find out the truth. Each day our tendency is to look to temporal and worldly things to give us meaning, hope and comfort. For some it is the thought of a nice meal, for others it is the hour down the gym to unwind, whilst for most it is the hours spent veg’ing in front of the telly. We can often be surprised by how dependent we have become on some of these things to get us through life. Giving up some of these for Lent can reveal how serious our spiritual sickness has become.

Sackcloth: It is amazing to consider how much of our identity comes from what we wear. Choosing our clothing empowers us to determine who we are, or to cover up what we don’t want others to see. We learnt this lesson so long ago when our first parents, Adam and Eve, tried to hide their shame by making clothes from fig leaves. So much of fashion today is about this. Looking good and having the right clothes gives us all opportunity to cover over who we are on the inside. Therefore, in the Bible, rejecting our shallow and deceptive clothes and choosing to wear unflattering sackcloth humbles us and makes us honest before God.

Ashes: Biblically speaking (and physiologically), we human creatures are made from nothing more than the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). The only thing that animates us, and makes us living, is the breath of God breathed in through our nostrils. Between our first breath of air and our last we have life for a short time, but as soon as we breathe out our last gasp we return to the dust (Job 34:14-15). To remind ourselves that our lives are merely a breath given to us by God, every year Christians celebrate Ash Wednesday. During this special service ashes are imposed upon our foreheads in the sign of a cross. As this is done the following words are said, *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ”*. Therefore in the Bible, sitting down in the dust is a sign of humility and penitence before God, that acknowledges that without the grace of God we have nothing. The prophet Job famously sat among the ashes after losing a great part of his wealth and family and spoke these words *“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away...”* (Job 1:21, 2:8). Being reminded we are but dust makes us mindful of our own mortality, and causes us to look to Christ alone as our hope for eternal life.

Jesus warns us we need to repent like the Ninevites, 8b-10a: The king of Nineveh commanded that everyone should call urgently on God, and give up their evil ways and their violence in order that God would show them mercy. This is true repentance. Notice that repentance does not begin with us giving up our sinful ways, but rather it begins with us calling on God. This is extremely important to grasp. Many people think that we only receive God’s mercy *after* we have changed our ways. But this is to miss understand the gospel. Jesus came to save sinners, not the righteous. As sinners, we seek Christ, we are forgiven, we receive his Spirit, and *then* our lives turn from evil. If our lives had to be sorted before we come to God, then the reality would be that none of us ever would.

4: Verse 5-8. Why do you think fasting, sackcloth and ashes are helpful symbols of repentance in the Bible? Can you think of different ways we can do a similar thing today?

5: Verse 6-7. Do you think it would be helpful if the British government made it law that everyone must attend church?

6: Verse 10. Do you think God should have shown mercy to these evil and violent people? If God is just, how can he let evil go unpunished? How does Jesus resolve this tension?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



The Story Of Jonah (3/4)
HG90: Jonah Goes To Nineveh

Jonah 3:1-10

Home Group Sermon Notes

9th March 2014 - Revd Tom Loh

Introduction: Jonah has been on quite the journey, spiritually and literally. He has spent three days in the belly of the great fish and has risen to a new life where he has been given a second chance. Jesus himself did not fail to see the parallel between his own journey and Jonah's, when he told the religious leaders, "...as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40).

Jonah is born-again, v1-3a: Jonah's salvation experience gives him renewed faith in the Word of the Lord, and he obediently makes his way to Nineveh to preach God's message of judgement. This is an important moment to understand in the book of Jonah. Jonah's change of heart comes only after God has saved him. Jonah has had a resurrection experience which has opened his eyes to the goodness of the Lord in a way that he had never experienced before. Perhaps we see a similar thing in the Gospels. It is only after the disciples encounter the risen Jesus that they have a dramatic turn around in their faith. Before Jesus' death and resurrection his followers were often faithless, self-centred and afraid, but afterwards they became fearless and willing to go anywhere for God. Many Christians can express this experience of new resurrection life taking hold of them. Jesus himself describes it as new birth, or being born again (John 3:3) where spiritually speaking we have shared in a death and resurrection from our old life to the new life of God. A key sign of being born again is repentance. Just like Jonah we stop running from the Lord, and turn towards him, even if it means following him to the ends of the earth.

Jonah preaches a hard message, v3b-4: Just as Jonah has been on an incredible three day journey from death to life - from God's judgement to God's salvation - now the city of Nineveh is about to undergo a similar three day journey, v3b. As Pauline Woolnough reminded us in the previous study, we can rightly rejoice in the downfall of evil people and regimes, and perhaps Jonah is keen to declare the ruin of this wicked city as he walks the streets proclaiming "*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned*". But the Lord has other plans. We might be tempted to think that God's desire is to see the righteous rewarded and the wicked punished, but at the heart of the Living God is a longing to see even the most undeserving and wicked saved.

I can't imagine the kind of courage it took Jonah to walk into this violent and evil city preaching a message of judgement. Yet, despite the hardness of the message, Jonah obediently delivers it. It is very common amongst Christians to shy away from telling people the hard truths of the gospel. We all understandably feel the tension when talking to unbelievers about our faith, especially when it comes to warning them of the very real danger they are in. We can sometimes be prepared to share the love of God with unbelievers, but we must not forget that God's love is revealed in the context of his wrath against sin. God's salvation can only be truly understood and appreciated when we know what we are being saved from. The full message of the cross of Christ is both God's wrath against sin and his love for sinners.

The reality is, without a message of warning, people will never know the very real danger they are in. Imagine you are walking with a friend along a country path enjoying a pleasant conversation, and ahead you see that the path leads over the edge of a cliff. Whilst you have spotted this, your friend has not and continues on as before. At this point it would be most unloving and perverse not to warn your friend of the impending disaster. It may be awkward to interrupt the conversation with your friend, but in the end your friend would be thankful. If they won't listen but carry on as they were, rather than give up we would most likely re-double our efforts, plead if necessary, or even physically restrain them. As Christians, part of loving people is telling them the hard truths of the gospel.

Never underestimate the power of the gospel: It might be that Jonah has no expectation that Nineveh will respond to God's message. But as a demonstration of the evangelistic power of the Holy Spirit, amazingly the whole city is stricken to the heart and repents. We should take encouragement from this in our own struggles with evangelism. It might be that we think some people are beyond saving, or would never believe in Jesus. The story of Jonah goes to prove that anything is possible if we are willing to speak out about our faith. If God can convert 120,000 people in the matter of a few days using Jonah's sermon of only eight words, then surely God can use our feeble attempts as well.

On the first day, Jonah begins his preaching and it isn't long before his message spreads like wild-fire across the whole city. The fear of God captivates the population and on mass they repent. Why were they so struck to the heart? Perhaps the Ninevites knew their history well and remembered how the Lord God once destroyed cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. The same word 'overturned' used by Jonah is the same word used in judgement against Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter nineteen. Or perhaps they remembered how the Lord God judged Egypt with ten plagues, and how he swept away the nations dwelling in the Promised Land to make room for his people. This would certainly explain why they took the message so seriously.

Another explanation might be that the people of Nineveh witnessed Jonah's miraculous deliverance from death, and so were prepared to listen carefully to what he said. This would fit well with Jesus' own reference to the miracle of Jonah, when he said "*For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of man be to this generation*" (Luke 11:30).

Whatever the reason, the dramatic conversion of the entire city of Nineveh is a miraculous event that witnesses to the extraordinary evangelistic power of the Holy Spirit. Even if Jonah had been a gifted speaker, the result and impact of his min-sermon can only be attributed to God.

In verse 6, we read that the news reaches the king of Nineveh and he too is struck by Jonah's message. So concerned by God's judgment, the king makes it law that everyone must repent of their evil ways. Even the cattle and livestock are to join in. It is interesting to consider how effective the king's law was. It is often the case in the Bible that when a king repents, the people also follow. And conversely, when the king is evil the nation falls into ruin. However, today, we Christians need to think carefully before we petition too hard for governments to issue laws of this nature, or promote our own agenda. Like Jonah, our priority should not be law making, but our own faithfulness to proclaiming the gospel and witnessing to Jesus.

Fasting, sackcloth and ashes: The Ninevite people demonstrate their repentance by enacting a holy fast, and by donning sackcloth and ashes. At this time of year, Christians practice similar traditions to mark the beginning of Lent, the forty days leading up to Easter. What is it about forty days and fasting in the Bible? Jesus himself spent forty days in the wilderness fasting and praying. Israel spent forty years in the desert surviving mostly on bread and water.