

Persistence of Prayer

January 26, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Jonah 3:1-10

Session Outline

1. God's Call to Jonah (Jonah 3:1-2)
2. Jonah's Message to Nineveh (Jonah 3:3-4)
3. Nineveh's Response (Jonah 3:5-10)

Theological Theme

Despite our brokenness, God desires to use us in His plan to reach the world with the gospel.

Call to Action

Jonah is one of the great mission books of the Bible. We focus our prayers on unreached people groups, asking that God would break our hearts for them and send workers to them.



Leader Guide

Persistence of Prayer

Introduction

Think about the longest you have prayed for something. Do you tend to pray persistently over a long time or give up quickly? Scripture contains numerous examples of people who prayed a very long time before seeing God's answer. This should encourage us to persist in prayer over time but most of us can share a time we stopped seeking the Lord in prayer over a specific matter because it felt like nothing was happening.

Today, we are focused on persisting in prayer and staying devoted to the work of the Lord, regardless of how circumstances appear. We don't have to understand how God is going to work, but we can trust He will do what aligns with His will and we can rest on that assurance.

- ❓ What is the longest you have persisted in prayer about something?
- ❓ Why is it easier to give up praying about specific things over time?

Session Summary

Countless stories tell of those who forsook all that was familiar to take the gospel to unreached people groups across the globe. Sometimes they met great resistance and other times acceptance. Each of us is tasked with sharing the gospel of Jesus as commanded in the Great Commission, and we can learn from those who obeyed God, no matter the response they received.

There are unreached people all around us regardless of where we live and we, like Jonah, must be willing to persist in our prayers that God will display His power in and through us as He invites us into His plan to save the world.

1. God's Call to Jonah (Jonah 3:1-2)

Despite Jonah's initial resistance (Jonah 1-2), the Lord gave Jonah another opportunity to listen and obey His instruction. Today's passage occurs after Jonah ran the opposite direction from God's original call for him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance. In his rebellion from the Lord, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish and spent three days inside its belly. Jonah cried out to God and repented of his sin. Once safely back on dry ground, Jonah heard from the Lord again.

The second call of God to Jonah reveals the great love God has for His people even when they fail and choose ungodliness. One of the primary reasons Jonah resisted preaching to Nineveh was his personal disdain for the Ninevites and his belief that God would show mercy on them (Jonah 4:2). We should consider the ways this same hardness of heart lives within us.

- ❓ Are there places you might feel reluctant to go or people you might feel reluctant to share God's grace with because you know God forgives and restores those who repent? If this is our posture, how have we misunderstood our own need for the gospel?

Ironically, the same mercy and grace Jonah feared God showing to the Ninevites was the same mercy and grace he needed when trapped in the belly of the fish. Consider the ways we often end up like Jonah, at the end of ourselves and in desperate need of God to work in our lives so we can be used for His purposes.


When God returned Jonah to dry land, He gave Jonah instructions for the next step he needed to take, though we are not provided many details. God would give him everything he needed along the way. Too many times Christians wait on a full picture from God before responding in obedience to the things we do know. God was teaching Jonah to rely on Him and obey without the temptation to skip ahead to the final step and without trying to manipulate circumstances to fit his own preference.

- ❓ Why do you think God often give us the next step but not the next ten steps? How is this connected to our need for persistence in prayer?

Jonah's Sermon


The message God gave Jonah to preach did not explicitly call for their repentance. Rather, it told the Ninevites that they had angered Jonah's God and punishment was on the way. The Ninevites did not presume that God could be appeased but repented in humility, hoping that "God may turn and relent" (3:9; see 1:6), which He did.

God told Jonah He would give him the message to proclaim once he arrived. Jonah's next step would follow his obedience to the first. Likewise, God often only reveals the first step for us. As we persist in prayer, we stay close to Him, learn ongoing dependence on Him, and continually seek to hear His voice as He continues to guide us.


 Application: How have prayer taught you to depend on God daily?

2. Jonah's Message to Nineveh (Jonah 3:3-4)

Sometimes lessons must be learned the hard way and that is what happened with Jonah. When he resisted obedience to God by running from Nineveh the first time, he learned that life outside of God's will is not the place to be. So, the second time he heard from the Lord, he responded immediately, "according to the Lord's command" (v. 3).

 How do Jonah's actions show that He learned from his previous disobedience to God and the consequences that followed? When have you had to learn a lesson from God the hard way?


The distance across Nineveh is described as a three-day journey. This reminds us of the magnitude of this city. This was more than a handful of people who were in rebellion to God. But God had a heart for these people; He wanted them to hear the truth and turn back toward Him. This is a reminder that God's desire for salvation is greater than our own and only He has the power to save. When God pursues people for Himself, it doesn't matter if it is one person or one million people. Nothing is impossible for Him.

 How would the overwhelming nature of the city and the task to be completed require Jonah to continue to depend on God? How do overwhelming tasks or circumstances lead you to persist in reliant prayer?

One man was being tasked with taking a stand for God in the face of widespread ungodliness. It was daunting and yet Jonah began walking and declaring what would happen if the people of Nineveh didn't repent. The entire city would face judgment and be overthrown. This was not a happy, feel-good message, but it was what God commanded Jonah to proclaim.

Jonah was given a difficult task and a difficult message. No one wants to hear they are about to face judgment or be punished due to their sinful choices. Yet, we are reminded how God uses our obedience to accomplish His purposes without fail.


As far as we can ascertain, Jonah was sent to Nineveh much like we send missionaries to unreached people groups today. The people needed to hear from the Lord and be challenged in their lack of faith so that they could repent and come to know God. When considering a large group of people who are far from the Lord, we might assume they would not receive anything a Christ follower has to say. This is one reason many Christians keep to their circles or comfort zones instead of seeking to take the gospel to others. Like Jonah, we must trust the Lord each step of the way, and we do this by persisting in prayer and trusting Him with the outcome.

 Application: Who do you have a hard time believing could ever become a Christian? How can you persist in prayer for that person or group of people?

3. Nineveh's Response (Jonah 3:5-10)

Jonah's task was not a futile one; it was fruitful. The people believed God and responded in repentance. Jonah's words landed on people who were ready to receive them even though it may not have seemed that way. God had been working to prepare the hearts of the Ninevites so that they would receive His message and be changed.

This reminds us that we never know what God is doing in the hearts and lives of other people. We are simply called to pray and believe. When God speaks, our response is to be obedient even if we don't have all the answers or details. We can trust God has a plan, and He invites us to join what He is doing.

 When have you seen God work in a person's life in an unexpected way? When we fail to act because we don't believe a person can change, how is this a failure of faith in God?

When the people in Nineveh heard God's message from Jonah, they responded with action. Although the word repentance is not used, the people's actions were in line with repentance. Repentance starts with believing God about your own sin and need for salvation outside of yourself. It also requires action. We are called to respond in keeping with the truth we claim to believe.

- ❓ How has your life changed as you've experienced conviction of sin and responded in repentance?

The people responded to God's message by fasting and mourning. They didn't just change their behaviors; they even changed their clothing. To put on sackcloth was a visible sign of mourning. Verses 6-10 provide further context, telling us the King also took part in these rituals of grief. Even the animals were included in the fast!

The people in Nineveh responded, from the least to greatest. The entire city cried out to God in response to the truth they had heard. Nineveh was no longer business as usual. God spoke through Jonah, and everything changed. As a result, God did not destroy the city. There is no limit to the response that God can bring about through our obedience and prayers.

- ❓ Application: Where might you need to call out to God in repentance now?

Conclusion

Unreached people groups exist all over the world. Many people around us are familiar with the name of Jesus but are far from Him. We are all called to follow the example of Jonah and be willing to proclaim the Word of the Lord and invite others to know Him. As we depend on the Lord in persistent prayer, He will work according to His will.

Through Jonah's obedience to God, an entire city of people responded in repentance and was spared devastating judgment. This reminds us that God can work in the heart of any person or group of people, even those we deem most hopeless for salvation. Our role is never to save others, it is to depend on God who has the only power of salvation. We are to seek Him daily, trusting that He will accomplish His will.

- ❓ Who have you resisted sharing Jesus with because you assume they won't receive the message? How is God challenging you in this today?
- ❓ How can we encourage one another toward obedience to God even when it doesn't make sense to us or goes against our personal preferences?
- ❓ Who might you tell about the love of God through the story of Jonah?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for giving second chances and using His people to reach the world. Ask for God to break your heart for what breaks His and to give you a burden for people who need to know the love of Christ.

Memory Verse

*Then the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and dressed in sackcloth—from the greatest of them to the least. —
Jonah 3:5*

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Jonah* by Eric Redmond, Bill Curtis, Ken Fentress
- *Be Amazed* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Jonah and Micah* by J. Vernon McGee

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Jonah

Purpose

The book of Jonah shows God's gracious concern for the whole world, his power over nature, and the futility of running from him. In addition, it foreshadows Jesus's burial and resurrection. Matthew 12:38–45 and Luke 11:24–32 compare the ministry of Jesus with that of Jonah, Jesus being the greater. Both texts see Jonah's great fish as a foreshadowing of Jesus's burial in the tomb, making Jonah a "type" of Christ. If Jonah actually died in the fish, then his resuscitation further parallels the resurrection of Jesus.

Author

The book is an anonymous narrative about Jonah.

Setting

Jonah appears in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet from Gath-hepher in the territory of Zebulun in northern Israel. He was active around the first half of the eighth century BC. Jonah predicted the restoration of the northern kingdom's boundaries. This occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II (ca 793–753 BC). This book about Jonah could have been composed at any time from the eighth century to the end of the OT period.

Jonah preached to the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was a major city of the Assyrians, a cruel and warlike people who were longtime enemies of Israel. Assyrian artwork emphasizes war, including scenes of execution, impalement, flaying the skin off prisoners, and beheadings. This explains Jonah's reluctance to preach to the infamous city of Nineveh.

Special Features

The book of Jonah, the fifth of the Minor Prophets, is more like the stories of the prophets found in the Historical Books in both form and content. The book gives us a brief glimpse into the life of Jonah, the "wrong-way prophet," who ran from God and was swallowed by a fish. Throughout the book, we see evidence of God's grace and his love for all people.

Extended Commentary

Jonah 3

3:1–3 Jonah went to Nineveh as God had commanded. Extremely great city (lit “a great city to God”; see textual footnote) may have a double meaning: great in size (where “God,” Hb *elohim*, is used as a superlative for “extremely”) and a city “important to God” even though inhabited by Gentiles. Three-day walk could refer to greater Nineveh that included the region around Nineveh proper, including modern Kuyunjik, Khorsabad, and Nimrud with a sixty-mile perimeter. More likely, however, it refers to how long it would take for Jonah to preach thoroughly throughout Nineveh itself, street corner by street corner.

3:4 Forty often refers to a period of testing or judgment in the Bible (Lk 4:2; Heb 3:9), serving here to give Nineveh time to repent.

Jonah preached only on the first day of his three-day task (see note at 3:1–3), showing his half-hearted obedience. Demolished (Hb *haphak*) has a secondary meaning of “changed” which is not the sense Jonah meant, but ironically that is how the word of prophecy was actually fulfilled. Nineveh was not destroyed, but was instead changed.

3:5–8 After recounting that Nineveh repented and believed the deity whom Jonah represented (v. 5 uses the impersonal term God, not the personal name Yahweh/Lord), the text then explains that this overwhelming response was a result of a royal decree. The king led by example. Sackcloth was worn during times of mourning and repentance, usually while sitting atop ashes (Gn 37:34; 1Kg 21:27; Mt 11:21). Person or animal means even the animals fasted, bellowing miserably to heaven along with the people.

3:9 Who knows? indicates that Jonah had not explicitly stated that judgment against the city could be averted by repentance. The king of Nineveh took a shot in the dark.

3:10 Prophecies of doom are often conditional warnings that can be averted through repentance (Jr 18:8–10).¹

References

1. Joe Sprinkle, “Jonah,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1403–1404.