

Anchored by God’s Mercy (Lesson 1)

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Words to Anchor Your Soul

“You are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one who relents concerning threatened judgment”

Jonah, speaking of God in Jonah 4:2 b (NET)

Introduction

How familiar are you with anchors? Maybe you have no experience with boats at all. I have spent some time in boats, but not a lot, and I was never the pilot! However, I grew up near the Texas Gulf coast and spent many hours there through the years with my friends, just floating on the waves in inner tubes or on floats. We would paddle out past the breakers and float back until we got caught in them; then, we would push back out and start over. The problem was that eventually we found ourselves far from “home”, being the area of beach where we began and where all our stuff was! I remember one day a storm came upon us, pushing us far away from home, even more quickly and violently than ever. It was a bit scary!

In time the ocean inevitably carries all that is on it away. The only way to prevent floating away from “home” is to be attached to the ocean floor by an anchor of some kind; otherwise, whatever is on the water drifts away.

Our study deals with anchoring our souls so that we don’t drift away from God—either slowly, by simply letting life carry us with it, or quickly, because of a storm that builds up around us.

Each week we will look at a portion of one of the books of the Minor Prophets and pair it with one Psalm that deals with a thought in the prophet’s message. Through the Old Testament prophets, God spoke to His people; in the Psalms, God’s people responded to God as He acted in their lives. One emphasizes God’s message to His people; the other focuses on their response to God. We begin with the book of Jonah and then will move chronologically to the end of the Old Testament period.

The Big Story

The Bible gives us one big story, made up of many smaller stories. Because people rebelled against God, who made them and loved them, all of creation has experienced upheaval. It doesn’t take much to see the hatred, broken relationships, and strife that have been spawned because we all choose to align ourselves with something other than the Creator. Yet, in the midst of it all, God is working to heal our lives and our relationships by placing us in alignment with His great purposes. He is constantly seeking our best and our good, but we generally go our own way and reject His call to us.

If we read the entire story in the Bible, we would see that long before Jesus came, God reached out to Abraham and his descendants, known as the children of Israel or the Jews. They were to be God's agents to the world, and He planned to bring His ultimate agent of restoration, Jesus, through them. God blessed them with special revelation so that they could know and worship Him and learn to have right relationships with one another. Despite this, they rebelled against God over and over again, unwilling to follow Him by aligning their lives with His plans for their best; nevertheless, God's love is persistent, and He continued to reach out to them, often speaking through the Old Testament prophets.

Eventually Jesus came to earth, as both God and man, and showed us how to heal our brokenness with God and with one another. He revealed God's desire that we ally our lives with His and, thus, be restored to His original intention.

Historical Background of Jonah

The book of Jonah takes us back to the middle of that story, before the days of Jesus. Because of their determination to go their own way rather than God's way, the nation of Israel itself was divided into two countries: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

The prophet Jonah lived during the time of this divided kingdom. His may be the earliest of the books of prophecy that we will study. He prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who ruled from 793-753 B.C.¹

The book of Jonah is a book about God's mercy. Jonah is very different from the other books of prophecy that we will consider. It reads as a biography, which tells the story of Jonah, a prophet from Israel, the northern kingdom.

There has been much controversy about the book's historicity. Many scholars who filter the Bible through their own reason insist that these events are impossible. Others insist upon a literal meaning, partly in response to those who criticize it on the basis of human reason. Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. of Dallas Seminary comments:

Unlike the exodus and the resurrection of Jesus, the historicity of the Book of Jonah is not foundational to redemptive history and the biblical faith. Unfortunately, the debate over the book's historicity has often distracted interpreters from focusing on its theological message, which is not affected by how one understands the book's literary genre. Whether the book is labeled historical narrative, legend, parable, or something akin to a historical novella, its themes seem apparent.²

In other words, we should focus on the message rather than the method of bringing that message. Jesus used stories to teach, and perhaps that is what Jonah did. We believe that God is perfectly capable of bringing these events to pass, and I read it that way. However, if we focus on the debate, we may miss the message that God has given us in this book, which is His very word.

Day One Study

Today you will read through the book of Jonah. Try to read it all at once rather than in smaller chunks. Although it is four chapters long, there are only 48 verses, less than one chapter in many other books of the Bible. So don't let the chapter numbers scare you! Read it as Jonah's story, which is exactly what I believe that it is.

1. Read the book of Jonah and record your thoughts, feelings, and first impressions below.
2. A good journalist includes the answers to the "who, what, where, when, and why" questions to cover a story well. Either summarize Jonah's story by answering those questions, or write a short "newspaper article," telling the story.

We certainly see here the truth that the Bible does not paint a picture of perfect people!

Diamonds in the Word: Make a book chart of Jonah. Instead of giving you an optional assignment each day, I will just give you a weekly assignment if it is a book chart. Just work on it a bit each day. I have found that my charts are more insightful if I work on them for several days rather than all at once. There is something about coming back to the text several times that allows God's Spirit to give me fresh insights.

3. **Write down your insights into Jonah's character from his words and actions in the book.**
4. **Sharing question:** Have you ever tried to run away from God? You may not have fled literally, but you ran nevertheless. You may have avoided church or your friends who followed Jesus. You may have quit praying or reading the Bible. Share what you did and what happened to bring you back to God with your small group.
5. **Responding to God:** Write a prayer or a poem of praise to the God who rules the seas.

Day Two Study

Reread Jonah 1:1-2:10.

6. Jonah's actions (1:3, 10) suggest a misunderstanding of God's character and power; yet, his words to the sailors (1:9, 12) suggest that he really knew better. Compare his words and his actions with Psalms 139:7-12. Write down your insights.
7. **Sharing question:** Share about a time when you acted in accordance with some misunderstanding of God's character. Maybe you misunderstood who God was, His feelings toward you, or how He would respond to you.
8. **Sharing question:** What comfort does Psalms 139:7-12 give you today? Write down your thoughts to share with your group.

9. How would you have felt in you were one of the sailors in the ship with Jonah? What could they have learned about the God of Israel from what happened? (LORD in all caps stands for the name YHWH, the God of Israel.)

10. *Sharing question:* What one truth about God did you learn or apply in a hard time? Share the truth and the situation with your group.

11. *Responding to God:* If you feel far from God today, write a prayer or poem or draw a picture reflecting how you feel. Express your desire to move closer to Him in the midst of hard situations. If you feel close to Him now, thank Him for His loving mercies.

Day Three Study

Read Jonah 3:1-10.

12. Describe the reaction of the people of Nineveh to God's message. What was the key to their avoiding judgment?

13. What does this chapter reveal about the character of God and His purposes in sending prophets to speak of coming judgment?

14. Jonah responded differently this time when God told him to go to Nineveh. How does Hebrews 12:5-13 relate to Jonah's story?

15. How do you see God as an anchor for Jonah's soul?

16. *Sharing question:* How do Heb. 12:5-13, which you read above, and the story of Jonah encourage you as you follow Jesus today?

17. *Responding to God:* Spend some time quietly before God, asking Him to show you any areas where He, as a good Father, is bringing discipline into your life because you are running away from what is truly best for you. Write down your response to Him.

Day Four Study

Read Jonah 4:1-11.

18. Compare 2 Peter 3:8-9 with what you learn about God's judgment and mercy in Jonah.

19. Contrast God's heart for the people of Nineveh with Jonah's heart.

This week's memory verse, our *Words to Anchor Your Soul*, is taken from this chapter. Knowing God's character can truly be your anchor when times of crisis develop.

I find memorizing verses difficult and growing more difficult as I get older. You may want to cut out the card with this week's verse and carry it with you this week. Then, place it in a file of all the verses in this study. As you learn a new one, go back and review all of those that precede it at least once a week. By the end of this study, you will know all of them.

20. God gave Jonah an object lesson with the small shade plant. Explain the lesson.

Justice sometimes demands severe consequences. I think of those who mistreated others in the Nazi concentration camps; we would all agree that justice required serious punishment. Our inner sense of justice leads us to cheer when the bad guys get their due and the good guys win.

God is both just and merciful, and those truths are anchors for our souls. There are times when we see His mercy emphasized, and there are other times when His justice is at the forefront. As we study these selections in the prophets, we will see both His justice and His mercy and will continue considering them in the coming weeks, as they are themes in the prophets.

20. *Sharing question:* Some of us tend more toward justice and some toward mercy. I think we balance one another out if we are willing to listen. Which tends to be your fallback concern? Why?

21. *Sharing question:* Is there a group of people or one person that you would not desire to receive God's mercy? Who and why?

22. *Responding to God:* Talk to God about His mercy and His justice. Pray to be like Him, being both just and merciful with your children, with your employees, with your neighbors, and others. Thank Him that knowing that He is merciful and just will be an anchor for your soul. Write your prayer or poem below.

Day Five Study

Today we will look at a selection from the psalms and read a story that relates to this lesson.

Understanding Hebrew Poetry: The psalms, and much of the prophets, are written in Hebrew poetry, which is very different from the poetry that we write and read in English. The primary poetic form is found in the relationship of the lines to one another, and not in rhythm or rhyme.

“Although Hebrew poetry contains some rhythm, it primarily makes use of repetition and recapitulation. One line of a verse is followed by another that gives a variation of the same idea. . . The first line makes a statement that the second line sharpens or heightens.”³

In order to understand it, realize that there is much figurative language. The psalmist intends us to understand his message through the rich symbolism and the relationship between the lines of poetry; however, parts of it are literal, as in our poetry. The way the psalmist speaks his message is simply a different method of speaking than you would find in a narrative or a letter, but his message is there to be understood. As we go through particular psalms and prophets, we will look at some features that relate to that particular passage.

We have already read some poetry in Jonah 2:2-9. Jonah wrote his prayer in poetry. Perhaps it is a poetic rendition of the words that he actually said. This poem represents his heart before God. Spend a couple of minutes rereading those verses. Notice what a great visual picture Jonah paints through his poetry.

24. What speaks to you from this poetic section? What pictures catch your attention?

Now we are going to look at a psalm written by David that emphasizes one thought from our study this week. Although both Jonah and David refused to align themselves with God's best for their lives, at least in these instances, He granted mercy. This psalm is one of confession. It is important that we confess our sins. When we experience broken relationships with others, confession and forgiveness are needed in order to restore those relationships. The same is true of our relationship with God.

25. Copy 1 John 1:9 below and express your feelings about its promise.

Read Psalms 51, which David wrote after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband.

23. What principles do you learn from David about confession? Write down your thoughts.

24. On what did David base his prayer for forgiveness? Which characteristics of God did he recognize? (Consider particularly v. 1, 4, 7, 17.)

25. *Sharing question:* Share with your group the one line of this psalm that is most meaningful to you, and give your reasons for choosing it.

26. *Responding to God:* Pray through this psalm, expressing confession for a sin in your life.

Jan shares her story of not wanting to follow God's call. Hers may have been closer to reluctance than rebellion; however, our reluctance becomes rebellion when we continue to refuse God's leading. Thankfully, Jan did not refuse!

Jan's Story

Years ago while I was living in New York, my pastor called me into his office, along with his assistant pastor. He said that the Bible teacher at the Presbyterian Old People's Home on Long Island was moving away and they needed someone to take her place. Both of them had prayed and God told them I was to be the new teacher. I said that was impossible because I was just learning the Bible, I didn't have the gift of teaching and I'd never been around old people as all of my grandparents had died while I was a baby. They told me to go home and pray about it for a week before giving them my answer. I went home and once again fell to my knees sobbing to God about this impossible situation and as I was praying, God changed my heart and gave me a desire to teach this class.

Our four children were all in grammar school, so I drove out there for my first class and told them that I felt like Moses when God told him to lead His people out of Egypt. I told them that I was just learning myself and would have to use the Living Bible. One of the women raised her hand and said that was fine with them. She said that I had a loud, clear voice and that's what was most important to them. Every Friday, God kept my children healthy for the next three years while I taught. Then my husband was transferred to Houston and on my final day, they gave me a farewell party. Once again I cried all the way home because I would miss all of these grandparents whom God had given to me.