

Series: "IS MY GOD **BIG** ENOUGH?"

Discussion Guide #1

Lesson: "Is My God BIG Enough.....To Be Everywhere?"

Texts: Jonah Chapter 1 / Matthew 28:18-20

Aim: to emphasize that our God is big enough to always be with us when we share our faith.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Suppose you have just won a sweepstakes, and the grand prize is an all-expense paid trip to any place in the world for a week. As we go around the circle, I'd like to know what destination you would choose. I'll begin: my name is _____, and if I could travel anywhere I wished, I think I would probably head to _____.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Now let's consider a second destination. This question is a little strange, but maybe someone in our group can come up with an answer for it. What if there were a sweepstakes in which the grand prize was the ability to send your **WORST ENEMY** to any location on earth (and they **HAD** to travel to the location you selected): Where do you think people would choose to send their worst enemy if they won that sweepstakes?

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Let's consider one last scenario. Suppose while you are praying tomorrow you distinctly hear the Lord say to you, "I have a mission for you. I want you to go and preach to people in Iraq." How do you think you would feel? How would you respond?

In this lesson we will see that Jonah was in a similar situation: God commanded him to travel to the last place on earth Jonah would have chosen for himself, because Nineveh (pronounced *NIN uh vuh*) was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians were the worst enemies Israel had!

TURN to the book of Jonah (its near the back of your Old Testament), Chapter 1. READ Verses 1-3. **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** 1. We are told what Jonah did, but we are not told how he felt about this summons from God. What would you guess might be some of the emotions that were going through Jonah's heart? 2. We are twice told that Jonah "ran away from the Lord." What does that suggest to you about Jonah's concept of God? If a person thinks he can hide from God, what does that tell you about the way he pictures the Lord?

LEADER'S INSIGHT: Nineveh was east; Tarshish was west (it was probably the city of Tartessus in southwestern Spain). Jonah obviously wanted to get as FAR AWAY from Nineveh as possible!

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Jonah foolishly thought that he could outrun God's presence by going in the **OPPOSITE DIRECTION** from where the Lord was leading him. Do you think people ever try to dodge their responsibility to God today by deliberately choosing a contrary path? What kinds of things might people do in order to push God out of their mind?

READ Verses 4-10 Jonah tried to run away from the Lord, but God is just too big to evade successfully! **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Do you believe God can get our attention, even if we are trying to avoid or ignore Him? If so, how do you think He makes his presence known?

READ Verses 11-16 LEADER'S INSIGHT: It was not the idea of these pagan sailors to throw Jonah overboard. (In fact, they tried their best to avoid it!) And it was not GOD'S idea, either: after all, Jonah could have repented, directed them to turn the ship around and head for Nineveh! By telling the sailors to throw him in the ocean, Jonah is still trying to run away from God!

QUESTION: God intended for Jonah to preach to pagans, but Jonah stubbornly refused. By contrast, in what ways does the behavior of these SAILORS put Jonah to shame? Can you see any ways in which the behavior of these pagan sailors is actually morally superior to his?

POSSIBLE ANSWERS: When the storm first hit, the SAILORS all prayed – JONAH didn't (verse 5); JONAH had endangered them all by his stubborn disobedience, but even so, the SAILORS were reluctant to toss him overboard, even though their own lives were at risk (verses 12-13): THEY showed compassion for Jonah, even though HE didn't seem to care about them; The SAILORS were deeply concerned that their actions might displease God (verse 14), while JONAH was not; At the end of the story these pagan SAILORS were honoring God with their worship and vows (verse 16) while JONAH never does!; These SAILORS worshipped God after the storm was over (that is, out of genuine reverence and gratitude, not fear) – by contrast, JONAH doesn't turn to God until he is in deep waters!

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What does this story suggest to you about judging those who are not yet Christians? What does the contrast between Jonah and these sailors teach you about the way we relate to unbelievers?

LEADER'S INSIGHT: It is ironic to note that Jonah was running away from God because he didn't want to preach to pagans, but even on a boat in the middle of the ocean Jonah was surrounded by unbelievers who asked about his God. In spite of himself, Jonah was used by God to reach these sailors, who end up worshipping the Lord and “made vows to Him”!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. Colossians 4:5 tells us, “Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.” How do you know when God is giving you an opportunity to share your faith? What might be a sign that someone you have met is open to hearing about Jesus? 2. 1 Peter 3:15 says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Has God ever given YOU an unexpected opportunity to talk to someone about your faith in the Lord? And if so, can you share with the group what that experience was like for you?

READ Verse 17 If Jonah thought that he had finally escaped God's calling, he was in for one last surprise, because even in the depths of the ocean, God still had his hand on Jonah! We'll have to leave Jonah in the fish until next week, but for now, TURN TO Matthew 28. READ Verses 18-20.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Jesus promises his disciples that when they are telling others about him, he will always be right there with them. Why do you think it is so important for us to know that Jesus is present with us whenever we are sharing our faith with others?

Background Note: For a similar promise, see Matthew 10:19-20.

SUMMARY STATEMENT: Jonah got into serious trouble because his concept of God was just too small! Our God is BIG enough to be near to us, even when WE want to be far away from Him. And the Lord is especially near to us when we are sharing our faith with others!

NEXT WEEK: We will hear a "fish story" to end all fish stories when we read Chapter 2 of the book of Jonah and ask the question, "Is my God BIG ENOUGH to answer my prayers?"

Series: "IS MY GOD **BIG** ENOUGH?" Discussion Guide #2

Lesson: "Is My God BIG Enough..... To Answer Prayer?"

Texts: Jonah Chapter 2 / Matthew 12:38-40

Aim: to enlarge our conception of the power of God that is available to us through prayer.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: One popular recreational sport in America today is fishing. Let's take a survey to see how many fishermen/women we have in our group. As we go around the circle, tell the group the **LAST TIME** you went fishing. I'll begin: my name is _____ and the last time I went fishing was _____.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. If you're a real fisherman you'll have a fish tale to tell: can anyone tell the group about the biggest fish you've ever landed, or the best fishing trip you've ever taken? 2. What is the biggest disappointment you have ever experienced: does anyone have a story about the "one that got away"? 3. Which would you rather do, and why: travel out into the ocean and go deep-sea fishing; fish from a boat in a lake or river; or sit on the bank with a pole in your hand?

In this lesson we will hear the "fish story" to end all fish stories: only, this one is true! Last week Jonah discovered God is BIG enough to be everywhere, even in the middle of the ocean. In this lesson he will learn God is BIG enough to hear our prayers, no matter how low we may get!

TURN to Jonah, Chapter 1. READ Verse 17 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** The account of Jonah's survival for three days and nights inside a huge fish is one of the most ridiculed stories in the Bible! What do you think Jonah's fish story is so hard for unbelievers to swallow?

BACKGROUND NOTE: Some in our group may have heard a story about a sailor named James Bartley who was supposedly swallowed by a sperm whale off the Falkland Islands and survived for 36 hours. When researchers investigated that story, however, it turned out to be a myth.

We shouldn't get side-tracked by attempting to explain how such an event could be humanly possible, because that is just the point – it **ISN'T**! This is an object lesson in the power of an Almighty God, who can do the impossible (See Mark 10:27, Matthew 17:20, Genesis 18:14, etc.)

TURN to Chapter 2 of Jonah. READ Verses 1-6 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Based on these verses, what do you suppose this experience was like for Jonah? AND, if you had to choose one word to **DESCRIBE** the time he spent trapped in the belly of this fish, what word would you pick? *Possible Answers:* Terrifying (cf. verses 2-3 "depths of the grave....hurled me into the deep"); Seasick, nauseous (cf. verse 3 "currents swirled.....breakers swept over"); Lonely (cf. verse 4); Claustrophobic, confining (cf. verse 5 "engulfing....surrounded"); Clammy, soggy, smelly (cf. verse 5 "seaweed was wrapped around my head"); Hopeless; Desperate.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Jonah was about as "low" as a person can get! Obviously none of us have found ourselves in an underwater predicament like this, but many of us **WILL** get "in over our heads" when we experience some overwhelming problem in life. Can you think of any circumstances that might make a person feel just as hopeless, or as desperate, as Jonah? What are some situations that could cause people to cry out to God for help?

DISCUSSION QUESTION: It wasn't until Jonah found himself in the belly of the fish that he turned to God in prayer. Suppose someone objects, "I don't feel that God will honor a prayer that is prompted only by desperation, because a prayer like that couldn't possibly be sincere." Do you agree with that statement? How would you respond?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. People who do not have a relationship with God cannot understand the value of prayer any more than they can understand how a man could survive in the ocean inside a great fish! What would you guess is the hardest thing for an unbeliever to understand about prayer? 2. If someone asked you why YOU pray, what would you say?

READ Verses 7-9 The real issue is not what was going on inside the great fish, but what was going on inside Jonah! Maybe the greater "miracle" is that God was still willing to LISTEN to the prayer of this man, in spite of the fact that Jonah had brought his troubles on himself! **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** After considering this prayer, in what ways has Jonah's attitude changed since we first met him in Chapter 1?

READ Verse 10 **BAD JOKE:** Do you suppose this great fish ever told his friends about "the one that got away"? **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** 1. Let's try to consider PRAYER from the perspective of the Almighty. Why do you suppose the Lord invites us in 1 Peter 5:7 to "cast our cares on him"? Why do you think God actually WANTS to hear our petitions? 2. Do you ever wonder if God gets tired of hearing about our petty problems? Do you ever feel maybe we're "bothering" him with our requests? 3. How can we keep our prayers from becoming just "wish lists"?

LEADER'S INSIGHT: Jonah tried to run away from God, but God had not run away from him! Even when Jonah was in the belly of the fish, God was as near to him as a penitent prayer. Jonah said in verse 1 that he called out to God "from the depths of the grave," and God in his power heard and answered Jonah's prayer. This particular story had a special significance to Jesus.

TURN to Matthew (first book of the New Testament), Chapter 12. READ Verses 38-40. **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why do you suppose Jesus used this figure of speech to allude to his own resurrection? In what ways do you think the story of Jonah might have been especially meaningful to Jesus? *Possible Answers: The "three days and three nights" that Jonah spent in the deep probably reminded Jesus of the time he would soon spend in the grave; From a human standpoint, the prospect of spending three days and nights in the grave must have been just as frightening as Jonah's stay in the belly of the whale; Since Jesus was depending on His Father to raise him from the dead, Jonah's rescue must have reassured Jesus that God had the power necessary to save him; Jonah was thrown overboard because he refused to preach to Gentiles – Jesus would die, be buried, and raised again so that God's grace could be preached to Gentiles!*

SUMMARY STATEMENT: The fact that God was willing to hear the prayer of stubborn Jonah and rescue him from the belly of the fish, and that He later did the impossible and raised Jesus from the grave, can reassure us that our God is BIG enough to listen to our requests and answer our prayers!

NEXT WEEK: We will read Chapter 3 of Jonah and learn that God is BIG enough to give second chances!

Series: "IS MY GOD **BIG** ENOUGH?"

Discussion Guide #3

Lesson: "Is My God Big Enough.....To Provide A Second Chance?"

Texts: Jonah Chapter 3 / Nahum 3:1-7 / 2 Corinthians 7:8-11 / Luke 11:29-32

Aim: to emphasize that our God is BIG enough to give us a second chance when we repent.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: From time to time we have all had a friend ask us for advice. Are you comfortable being in that position? If someone asks for your opinion about some personal problem, how do you feel? I'll begin: my name is _____, and whenever someone asks me for advice, I _____.

CASE STUDY: Some good friends have come to you for advice. Their daughter, Connie, who is now 22, began using drugs when she was a teenager, caused them much heartache and expense during her high school years, and eventually ran away from home. Connie did not contact them for several years until she finally hit bottom a year ago. She came back home and seemed to be doing well for a while, but then disappeared again. Not until a month later, when the parents got a bill for \$7300 from a riverboat casino, did they realize she had taken one of their credit cards. Now Connie is calling again, telling her parents she is sorry, has learned her lesson, and wants to come back home again. The parents ask, "How can we tell whether we should give her a second chance? Some people have said we should 'write her off,' but she sounds sincere. Do you think we should take her back? "

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. How would you feel about being asked by your friends for advice? What would be your INITIAL reaction? 2. We know it is POSSIBLE for people to change, and we want to help people when they're really ready to turn their life around, but how can you determine when someone deserves a second chance? 3. It's one thing to give advice to someone else in a situation like this, but it is another when it is your own daughter? What do you think you would do if you were Connie's parents?

It can be difficult for us to know when to give someone a second chance, but what about God? How does he react when we have disappointed Him by our sins? In this conversation we will learn our God is BIG enough to provide a second chance when we truly repent. **TURN TO** Jonah, Chapter 2. **READ** Verse 10. **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What do you suppose was the **FIRST** thing Jonah did when his feet touched dry land once again?

NOW TURN to Chapter 3. **READ** Verses 1-2 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** 1. Verse 1 tells us this is the "second time" Jonah has received this command. In what ways could we say this represents a "second chance" for Jonah? 2. Can you think of any other characters in the Bible who were given a second chance by God? If so, who were they?

To get an idea of the audience to which Jonah was called to preach, **TURN AHEAD** to the book of Nahum, Chapter 3. (After Jonah comes Micah; Nahum is the next book after that.) The entire book of Nahum is a prophecy against the cruelty and wickedness of the people of Nineveh.

READ Verses 1-7 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** After reading this vivid description of the wickedness of Nineveh, how do you think Jonah felt as he was on the way to that city? What do you suppose he was saying to himself as he headed toward Nineveh?

NOW TURN BACK to Jonah, Chapter 3. READ Verses 3-4 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** **In your imagination, how do you picture Jonah delivering this message? For example, what tone of voice do you think he was using?** LEADER'S INSIGHT: If Jonah's message seems remarkably blunt in English (only eight words!) it is even shorter in Hebrew (only five!).

READ Verses 5-9 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** **As you read this passage, what, to you, is the most remarkable thing about the reaction of the Ninevites? Why?**

Possible Answers: The fact that these cruel and wicked pagans "believed God" (verse 5); That they recognized Jonah's message as coming from God; That they responded to his message with genuine repentance – especially since Jonah's message had not given them any hope of salvation! (see verse 9); Even the KING responded with a public display of contrition (verse 6); Their repentance was so comprehensive, even the ANIMALS were included! (verses 7-8); That the preaching of ONE MAN could have such a dramatic impact on a whole society.

BACKGROUND NOTE: The "sackcloth" referred to in verses 5 & 8 was a rough cloth made of goat's hair. It was worn to signify grief, humility, and contrition (see Genesis 37:34, Nehemiah 9:1, Esther 4:1-2, Revelation 6:12.)

NOW TURN TO the book of 2 Corinthians (it is the eighth book of the New Testament), Chapter 7. READ Verses 8-11 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** **1. What would be an example of "worldly sorrow"? And in what ways would it be different from "godly sorrow"? 2. Why do you think Paul says that godly sorrow "leaves no regret"? What does that suggest to you? 3. What do you think it takes to trigger "godly sorrow"? For example, consider the story of Connie that we discussed at the beginning of this conversation: what would need to happen for her to experience "godly sorrow"?**

Let's apply this to the response of the people of Nineveh. TURN BACK TO Jonah, Chapter 3. RE-READ Verses 6-10 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** **What would you say are some marks of GENUINE REPENTANCE that we can see in the reaction of these Ninevites?**

Even though they were pagans, and in spite of the fact that the Lord had already decided to destroy their city, after the Ninevites repented, God relented and gave them a second chance. Jesus used their remarkable story as a model of true repentance. TURN TO the gospel of Luke (third book of the New Testament), Chapter 11. READ Verses 29-32. **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** **1. Unlike Jonah, Jesus did not always receive a positive response from those to whom he preached. How do you think Jesus felt when people refused to turn away from their sins and accept His grace? What do you think the experience of being rejected by his audience was like for him? 2. How would you respond to someone who sadly says, "I can't change, because I've done too many bad things. God would never forgive me now"?**

SUMMARY STATEMENT: If we feel that the Lord will just "write us off" when we fail, our God is too small! A God who is BIG enough to give Jonah a second chance, and is BIG enough to spare the wicked city of Nineveh when it repented, is BIG enough to take us back if we will turn to Him.

NEXT WEEK: We will read the surprising conclusion to the story of Jonah in Chapter 4 and discover that our God is BIG enough to love everybody.

Series: "IS MY GOD **BIG** ENOUGH?"

Discussion Guide #4

Lesson: "Is My God BIG Enough.....To Care About Everybody?"

Texts: Jonah Chapter 4 / John 4:6-9, 27-36

Aim: to emphasize that God cares about everybody, and thus we should also.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: One of the unique things about America is that ALL of us are originally from some other place. As we go around the circle, I'd like to know if you can identify where your ancestors came from. I'll begin: my name is _____, and based on what I know about my family, we originally came to this country from _____.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. Have you ever found yourself in a foreign country, or in some setting in this country, where everyone around you was of a different race or culture? If you have ever been in a place where NO ONE ELSE looked or talked like you, did it affect the way you felt? 2. It may be human nature to feel more comfortable around people who are most like us, but is it wrong? Is there a difference between being uncomfortable around those of a different race and being prejudiced? 3. While listening to a radio talk show you hear the host make the comment, "Everyone has some prejudice; it is unavoidable. Whether we recognize it or not, all of us are prejudiced to some degree." Would you agree or disagree with his statement? 4. Have you ever heard someone admit they are prejudiced? Do you think anyone WOULD? 5. The Lord could have chosen to make all human beings exactly alike, but obviously He didn't. Why do you think God made such a wide variety of people? What purpose might that serve?

It may be human nature to feel more comfortable around those folks who are most like us, but we should never imagine that God only cares about "our kind" of people. In this conversation we will learn that our God is BIG enough to love everybody, no matter who they are.

TURN TO Chapter 4. READ Verses 1-4 Jonah has to be the most peculiar preacher who ever lived: he has just preached the most successful revival in history, and he is bitterly disappointed!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: 1. If you were reading this book for the first time, would Jonah's response in these verses change the way you understood his actions in the first three chapters of the book? If so, how? 2. Jonah was bitter and angry because he knew the forgiving nature of God, but still wanted Him to be different. What kind of God do you suppose Jonah wanted? 3. Do you think people today are ever disappointed by God's grace to others? Can you think of a situation in which individuals might become upset at the idea that God would forgive someone they know?

READ Verses 5-11 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What do you feel is the point of this curious object lesson? Why would God first provide for Jonah's needs, and then take his treasured vine away? What do you suppose the Lord is trying to teach Jonah?

Possible Answers: To convict Jonah of his self-centeredness, since Jonah was "very happy" (verse 6) when God did something to take care of his needs but was "greatly displeased" (verse 1) when the people of Nineveh were saved!; To try to get Jonah to see things from GOD'S perspective- i.e., if Jonah felt that strongly about losing a vine, how does Jonah think GOD feels about losing the soul of one of the humans He had created?; To teach Jonah that he had no "right" (verse 9) to be upset about the destruction of a vine that didn't even belong to him and thus he had "no right" (verse 4) to be angry about the salvation of the Ninevites when they, like all people, belong to God.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Most of us would have to admit that we are richly blessed with things that make our life more comfortable. Suppose God wanted to use an object lesson about priorities today like He did with Jonah and the vine. What appliance or gadget would He take away from US to convict us of becoming more concerned about losing one of our conveniences than about another human being who is in danger of losing their soul?

The problem with Jonah is that he can't see the world through God's eyes! RE-READ Verses 10-11 **DISCUSSION QUESTION:** When God looked at Nineveh, what do you think HE saw that Jonah didn't? *Possible Answers: Their ability to repent, to truly change; Their innocent little children (verse 11); Their reflection of His own image (Genesis 1:26-27); Their spiritual helplessness, their "lostness" (Matthew 9:36); God saw individuals, not a "crowd" or a race.*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: Notice that the book is open-ended, and we are never told Jonah's response. Why do you suppose it ends with God's unanswered question?

LEADER'S INSIGHT: Here is the "rest of the story": about 50 years after the brief ministry of Jonah, Israel was defeated by Assyria and carried off into captivity. If the peevish prophet had cared enough about these Ninevites to more completely instruct them in God's will, would history have been different? After all, if we teach our enemies about God, we might make them our brothers!

We can never know the answer to that question. The very fact, however, that this story about God's concern for the Ninevites was included in the Jewish scriptures, even though the nation of Assyria was Israel's most hated enemy, makes the story of Jonah the strongest possible statement of God's gracious love for ALL humanity.

[OPTIONAL: USE IF TIME PERMITS] TURN to the gospel of John (it is the fourth book in the New Testament), Chapter 4. READ Verses 6-9, then Verses 27-36 **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** 1. When the disciples were surprised to find Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, Jesus told them to "Open your eyes" and to take a fresh look at the people around them. What do you suppose it was that the apostles couldn't see? 2. If we truly saw people the way Jesus saw them, how do you think it would change our feelings about those of other cultures or races? 3. Has YOUR faith ever led you to get out of your "comfort zone" and make friends with someone of a different background? And if so, what did you learn from that experience?

SUMMARY STATEMENT: Our God made everybody, and He is BIG enough to love every single one of his creations. Once we learn to see the world the way He sees the world it will help us to stretch out of our "comfort zones" and care about the souls of other people, even if they are not like us.

THIS CONCLUDES our series on Jonah.