

RONNIE MARTIN

THIS IS FOR YOU

**TO READ, TO ENJOY THE DEPTH
AND BREADTH OF GOD'S MERCY.**

THIS IS FOR YOU

TO FEED, HELPING YOU

MEDITATE ON GOD'S

WORD DAY BY DAY. THIS

IS FOR YOU TO LEAD,

EQUIPPING YOU TO

TEACH THE BIBLE TO

OTHERS. THIS IS

JONAH

& NAHUM

FOR YOU



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& NAHUM
FOR YOU



Jonah and Nahum For You

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CONTENTS

Series Preface	5
Introduction	7
1. Running from God to Gods <i>Jonah 1:1-6</i>	11
2. The Price of Peace <i>Jonah 1:7-16</i>	23
3. A Divine Pruning <i>Jonah 1:17 – 2:10</i>	37
4. When Justice and Mercy Collide <i>Jonah 3:1-10</i>	51
5. The Conflict of Compassion <i>Jonah 4:1-11</i>	65
6. The God of Creation and Destruction <i>Nahum 1:1-15</i>	81
7. Discipline and Deliverance <i>Nahum 2:1-13</i>	97
8. The Seriousness of Sin <i>Nahum 3:1-19</i>	113
Glossary	125
Bibliography	129

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Jonah and Nahum For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the one he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used

ESV: English Standard Version (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)

INTRODUCTION TO JONAH AND NAHUM

The book of Jonah contains one of the most colorful stories in all of Scripture. Although in modern times it has gained a reputation for being a light, fun, and adventurous tale most appropriate for children in Sunday school, the words contained in this brief book offer serious **theological*** and practical implications for the entire church. Though short, these four chapters cover some of Scripture's darkest themes, such as rebellion, racism, **wrath**, and unrepentance. Not surprisingly, we also see God's **sovereignty**, mercy, **grace**, patience, and forgiveness illuminated with a light and intensity that is all the greater because of the darkness. If that wasn't enough, Jonah also delivers elements of humorous irony and exaggeration that provide an enjoyable, energetic, and story-driven flow.

We have very few biographical details about Jonah. Nothing is known of his father, Amittai (mentioned in Jonah 1:1). Jonah is mentioned one other time in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 14:25, where we read a brief summary of his prophecies concerning the re-expansion of northern Israel under King Jeroboam II. We learn that he is a citizen of Gath-Hepher, which was a moderate-sized city that lay three miles northeast of Nazareth, within the tribal border of Zebulun. Other than providing these scant details, the Bible is silent. But despite the obscurity of Jonah's personal life, we certainly learn a lot about his character by the time we reach the end of the book.

One thing that jumps out to the reader early on is how human and flawed Jonah is, even though he is the Lord's prophetic spokesman. He disobeys God's assignment to preach to the **Ninevites**, drawing our attention to our own tendency to oppose the Lord's calling. Jonah's stubborn, entitled, and grumpy nature mirrors the common struggles we face when serving God with less-than-pure motivations. We also see the somewhat humorous way God interacts with Jonah when he lands in an uncomfortable situation. Jonah's dialogue with the Lord at

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 125).

the conclusion of the book never arrives at a place of resolution, but it certainly broadens our imaginations regarding what might happen next! It's a snapshot of how we experience God's mercy and grace in the many unsolvable mysteries of our lives.

Throughout church history, the story of Jonah has been read and received as a historical account; but there have been attempts in recent years to approach it as an **allegory** or **parable**—a story that did not really happen. This does not satisfy. To view the man Jonah as merely an allegorical or symbolic figure does not make sense given the geographical and historical details provided for us in the book of Jonah (1:1-3; 3:2-10; 4:11) and 2 Kings (14:25). The reference Jesus makes to Jonah in Matthew 12:39-41 provides another reason to believe that Jonah was a real person who was involved in an authentic, albeit miraculous event ordained by God.

Mercy is the primary theme that runs through the pages of Jonah. We first of all see the prophet himself become a beneficiary of God's

mercy when, after blatantly disregarding God's direct command, Jonah is rescued from drowning by a divinely appointed fish. Second, after Jonah picks himself up and goes to deliver God's short but powerful message in Nineveh, we see the Ninevites respond in repentance, with the result that God relents from punishing them. Of course, the story is more complex than that! Jonah is a story of contrasts, illustrating how the character of a holy and merciful God interacts with

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the complexities of the human heart.

The book of Nahum, named after the prophet Nahum (meaning "comfort"), provides a sequel to the book of Jonah. In it we glimpse God's eventual judgment against the Ninevites. Years after they responded in repentance to Jonah's prophetic sermon and were spared

God's wrath, the Ninevites returned to their cruelty against Israel. This time they would receive God's judgment and be overthrown.

We can see Nahum, like Jonah, as a book about God's mercy—this time toward his people, whom he delivers from the hands of cruel and godless nations. Nahum is a welcome reminder for us today that God remains in control over the most powerful nations in the world, and that he is still a stronghold and refuge for those who humbly submit to the rule and reign of Christ.

In today's world, ongoing wars, political unrest, and cultural divisions permeate our day-to-day existence. These short but powerful Old Testament narratives could not be more timely—showing us that despite the fearful news delivered daily to our doorsteps and inboxes, we have a just and holy God who is Lord over all the seen and unseen events of the world. The same long-suffering Lord of Jonah and Nahum still has mercy for the humble, grace for the repentant, and forgiveness for those who look to Christ for their salvation.

As you read through this volume, you will notice that every chapter is divided into two sections. The first is an overview of the text itself. The second section reflects on the broader themes of the text and provides practical application, with insights for how these stories might help us live out our faith.

My prayer is that you will be deeply encouraged in Christ, who is revealed as our undimmed hope throughout all the pages of Scripture.

1. RUNNING FROM GOD TO GODS

The writer of Jonah begins his story in a flurry of darkness and drama. Unlike many books or films that begin by giving you some historical background or personal insight into the life of the protagonist, the story of Jonah opens with God giving instructions to his prophet, followed by Jonah's not-so-subtle reaction to God's incredibly clear command. As these brief, punchy chapters unfold, we plunge into the murky depths of Jonah's character while learning how deep the ocean of God's mercy is for his people.

You Had One Job

The prophet Jonah had a very straightforward, though not undemanding, job profile. As God's mouthpiece and chosen spokesperson, it was his duty to faithfully speak the words that the Lord spoke to him. In the same way that an ambassador speaks to other nations on behalf of their government or an administrative assistant sends letters to clients on behalf of their boss, the words that God's prophets spoke were not supposed to represent their own opinions but those of God himself. Consider what God said to Jeremiah: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9). Or Ezekiel: "And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear" (Ezekiel 2:7).

It isn't surprising, then, how clear God's instructions are to Jonah: "Arise, go to Nineveh ... and call out against it" (Jonah **1:2***).

* All Jonah and Nahum verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

Whatever was going on at that moment in Jonah's day-to-day life, God gave an assignment that he expected him to obey and execute. It was time to pack his bags, head to Nineveh, and let them know that judgment was coming on account of their wicked deeds.

It reminds me of the opening scenes of the Mission Impossible movies. In each one, Ethan Hunt (played by Tom Cruise) receives a recorded message outlining his next assignment from the undercover agency he works for. At the end of the recording, Ethan is given the qualifier: *"This mission, if you choose to accept it..."* But Jonah had no such option. He didn't have a choice. A prophet of the Lord had one job: to speak the word of the Lord without question!

So, what was so evil about Nineveh that God needed to send Jonah to call out his judgment against it?

A Great and Terrible City

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The word "great" in **verse 2** could also be translated as "important" or "leading"—it was an influential city in the ancient world. Nineveh's reputation as a major center of power would have been well known by the Israelites. The Assyrians were violent, brutal, and oppressive people who would later be responsible for destroying **the northern kingdom of Israel** and its capital city of Samaria. Although we are not told specifically what kind of evil had "come up before" the Lord (**v 2**), Jonah likely needed no further details—the reputation of the Assyrian Empire at that time would have been enough.

The news of God's impending judgment on a capital city as wicked as Nineveh would have felt like vindication to someone from the nation of Israel. Yet the surprising nature of God's judgment is that it comes with the potential for mercy if the recipients respond rightly to his warnings.

You Can Run, but You Can't Hide

We're not given much insight into Jonah's thought process in how he responded to the Lord's instruction. All we know is that he clearly heard it but decided to disobey. Not only that but he attempted to escape the Lord's presence altogether by fleeing to a place called Tarshish (v 3).



There is no corner of the earth where God is absent.

When I was a child, I lived across the street from a friend named Dawn. One day I saw her walk outside, holding a piece of her mother's fine china, and then smash it on her driveway. It exploded into a thousand pieces. This looked like fun, so I followed her straight to the china cabinet in her dining room and we embarked on our mission to destroy every dish we could. Everything was going well until we heard Dawn's mother shout down from upstairs, "Dawn, what have you done?" I promptly ran home to avoid the coming wrath. As I entered my house, I decided to hide... but I picked my dad's office as my hiding place—the one place he spent most of his time in! He found me within minutes. I learned very quickly that destroying a neighbor's family china was not the wisest decision of my young life.

I laugh looking back at this because of the absurdity of it. Yet in many ways we do a similar thing with God. We think we can hide. We think there are places in our lives that he can't see or is willing to ignore. This is the mistake Jonah made.

Tarshish was in the region of southeast Spain, so if you broke out a map, you'd see that Jonah was trying to go about as far away from Nineveh as was physically possible within the known world at that time. But Jonah wasn't just fleeing Nineveh—he was trying to get away from God's presence.

Jonah must have known that he was trying to do something impossible. As God's resident theologian, he would have understood the concept of God's omnipresence—which means he is present

everywhere at all times. There is no dark, uninhabited corner of the earth where God is absent. Scripture is very clear that “the eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). **David** wrote in Psalm 139:7-8, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in **Sheol**, you are there!” There is no human way possible to flee from the presence of the Lord. It would be like trying to run away from your own skin.

Interestingly, as David wrestled with the inescapability of God’s presence, he saw it as a source of comfort. But Jonah seems to come to the opposite conclusion. For him, God’s presence is only good if his commands fall into line with Jonah’s own desires and beliefs. As Tim Keller writes:

“Jonah concluded that because he could not see any good reasons for God’s command, there couldn’t be any. Jonah doubted the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God.”

(The Prodigal Prophet, p. 15)

You Can’t Flee, but You Can Be Found

Jonah goes to the port city of Joppa, pays his fare, and boards a ship to Tarshish (Jonah **1:3**). But God has more in store for him than he expects. In **verses 4-6**, Jonah’s disobedience creates a crisis situation for all those on board the ship to Tarshish, while he himself remains seemingly detached and apathetic.

God sends a storm. The word “hurled” in **verse 4** provides us with a violent metaphor: the Lord is throwing this great wind at the ship in the same way one might throw a spear. He whips up a “mighty tempest” that threatens to break the boat. It’s a compelling illustration of God’s sovereign control over nature—imagine being able to generate a storm powerful enough to destroy an entire ship!

As one might imagine, the crew is thrown into a panic, and the sailors cry out to their respective gods while taking practical steps to lighten the ship’s load. Whether intentionally or not, Jonah remains

impervious to all the commotion, until the captain finds him sleeping in a nook of the inner deck (perhaps a passenger's cabin). Aghast, the captain shakes Jonah from his slumber and calls him to prayer.

There is an irony at work here that we don't want to miss. The first inclination of the crew was to appeal to their gods (**v 5**). However misguided they were when it came to the objects of their faith, they were very much aware of their powerlessness to save themselves. They knew they needed divine help. Then we have Jonah, a prophet of the living God, who had to be told to pray! Jonah seems unconcerned for the lives of the crew as well as his own life. Sometimes the heart of unbelievers can be more aligned with God than the heart of believers.

Jonah may have been physically asleep, but there was a deeper, spiritual slumber that he had fallen prey to. Perhaps he would have recognized the description of the **theologian** A.W. Tozer:

"To have a cold heart with little pity, little fire, little love and little worship is spiritual lethargy."

(The Dangers of a Shallow Faith, p. 55)

This metaphor of spiritual sleepiness is found in several places in Scripture. **Paul** urged the Thessalonians, "Let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:6); he told the saints in Rome that "the hour has come for you to wake from sleep" (Romans 13:11). The **apostle Peter** encouraged believers to "be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). For us, spiritual lethargy can manifest itself in different ways. It can start to creep in when we let other priorities take control of the time we should be investing in our churches and neighbors. It can set in when other passions in life consume our emotional energy to the point that we have little left over for prayer and **communion** with Jesus. When we stop guarding the time that we spend with the Lord and his people, we inevitably lose our desire for the deeper things of God and become susceptible to greater temptations that hinder our walk with Christ.

The captain hoped that Jonah's god might be the one to spare them (Jonah **1:6**). Because Jonah was God's chosen prophet, this prayer was about to be answered! Jonah may have been fleeing and sleeping, but God was waking him up.

Thankfully, both for Jonah and for us, God in his mercy keeps on presenting himself to us in the faraway places where we try to hide. This clues us into something wonderful about God. However fast and however far we attempt to run, he keeps pace with us, never abandoning the path we're on, even when it's the wrong path. God was setting Jonah up—not to fail but to be found.

Questions for reflection

1. Could there be an area in your life in which you are running from God? What would it look like to turn back toward him?
2. How does God use difficult circumstances to produce ongoing sanctification (growing more like him) in our lives? Can you think of a time when this has been true for you?
3. As you think about Jonah's uninterested response to God's command, consider where spiritual lethargy may have crept into your life. What are some changes you can make to reorder your priorities and passions so that they fall back in alignment with the Lord's desires for you?

PART TWO

We can all give testimony to moments in our lives when we have resisted the call of God. This might be you today, even though your call is likely not anything as dramatic as Jonah's call to preach judgment to an enemy nation. What can we learn about ourselves if we're willing to soften our hearts and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading?

There may be some simple matters of obedience you keep running away from because you don't like the discomfort or awkwardness they bring. Here are some categories to consider that can easily slip below our radar:

- *Relationships*: Perhaps you need to graciously confront a friend, family member, or coworker whom you have wounded or who has wounded you. Instead of courageously approaching them, you have been running away from them because you fear that further damage may result.
- *Personal finances*: Maybe you are struggling with **stewardship** when it comes to your personal finances, but instead of taking practical steps to get back on track, you keep running down a path of indulgent and unwise spending habits.
- *Marriage*: Perhaps some unhealthy patterns of behavior between you and your spouse are not receiving the attention they need. Whenever an unresolved conflict arises, you or your spouse run the other way to avoid the pain and keep the peace.
- *Secret sins*: You are engaged in shameful activities and behaviors behind closed doors, where nobody can see. Instead of confessing your sin and seeking help, you keep running from your conscience and from the **conviction** of the Holy Spirit.

We can find encouragement as we soberly reflect on our failures of obedience. The God who pursued Jonah is the same God who pursues us wherever we are, calling us to heed his voice, believe his word, and receive his merciful restoration. When we run the other way, we

remove ourselves from the place of flourishing that God desires for us. Before we make fast and foolish decisions like Jonah, we should instead ask questions like...

- Where am I?
- What is the state of my heart?
- What do I want the Lord to do for me right now?
- What is one evidence of grace I've been given?
- In which areas of my life am I not trusting the Lord?
- What sins do I need to acknowledge, confess, and turn away from?
- Who do I need to seek forgiveness from?
- Who can I encourage and be a light to today?

John Calvin famously stated, "Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.1). What Calvin was driving at was that we must learn and accept uncomfortable truth about ourselves in order to better understand the comforting truth of God's love and mercy. Wisdom leads us to a place of honest self-reflection, not so that we become expert-level navel-gazers but so that our gaze becomes more profoundly fixed on Christ. Sin doesn't merely blind us to our own foolishness; it blinds us, most significantly, to God's faithfulness and forgiveness! Instead of running further from the Lord, let's fall back into his arms of mercy, grace, and compassion.

God Asks Us to Do Uncomfortable Things

Regardless of who we are or what job we do, we can be sure that the Lord will ask us to do uncomfortable things. As a Southern California native, I felt the call some years ago to relocate to rural Ohio for a **ministry** opportunity. Comparing the suburban sprawl of SoCal to

the farm pastures of mid-Ohio is like comparing the North Pole with the Sahara Desert—they could hardly be more different! It wasn't only the climate. The differences in culture, values, and mindset made us feel as if we had traveled to an uncharted universe. But as my wife and I look back over this tumultuous move, we are now able to see many different ways in which God used these difficult times to grow and mature us.

As believers, whenever we find ourselves contemplating an uncomfortable step into something that looks like a shadowy valley, we can know that the Lord is using these times of testing to draw us closer to him. Yes, God asks us to do uncomfortable things but never in the absence of his comfort.

“For you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4)

God Allows Us to Take Foolish Steps

Jonah disobeys the Lord and ignores his assignment, and the Lord just lets him take the Tarshish-bound ship and go on his merry way. Why didn't God stop Jonah in his tracks? Sometimes, the Lord allows us to start something so that he can stop us at just the right moment! This should give us great encouragement as we reflect on some of the foolish steps we have taken in our own lives and realize that they are never a step far enough to disassemble God's plans.

We will unpack this in greater detail as we explore Jonah's story. What we will see is that Jonah's stubborn revolt against God was used by God for all kinds of good. This doesn't justify Jonah's disobedience, but it does point us to the redemptive nature of God. His plans are powerfully at work, even when it seems that we do everything in our feeble power to unravel them.

We only have to look at the story of **Joseph** in Genesis 37 – 50. Think of how God could have prevented Joseph's angry brothers from

taking their foolish and wicked steps against Joseph. Think about the grief and loss that Joseph and his father, Jacob, would have been spared! Why didn't God do that? Why did he allow this level of foolishness and wickedness to prevail against Joseph? We're given the answer from the lips of Joseph himself:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Genesis 50:20)

Because his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, Joseph was ultimately able to save many lives.

God allows us to take foolish and sometimes even wicked steps in order to bring about something that is far better and far more

reflective of his goodness than we could otherwise have dreamed of. Of course, this doesn't always help us answer the "why." We don't typically know *why* God allows what he allows when it's happening. But we can know that he doesn't do anything that betrays his goodness and glory, and that has to be enough this side of eternity.

I like to say it like this: we don't always know the *why*, but we know the *who*, and the *who* is infinitely more important

than the *why*. There's even a benefit to our lack of knowledge: not knowing the *why* is how our faith increases. Otherwise, why would we need faith at all? If God revealed everything to us in the most visible way possible, why would we ever need to trust him? It's a kindness of the Lord to withhold what he withholds. It leads us to increased faith.

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always know
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Is God Calling You to Stop in Your Tracks?

The first three verses of Jonah's story prompt us to ask if God is calling us to stop in our tracks.

- Are you ignoring the clear voice of the Lord by moving forward with a decision that you know will not please him?
- Is there something God is clearly calling you to act on that you continue to ignore and push to the side?

Although it's true that God is gracious to us when we make disobedient decisions, we still face the consequences of our disobedience. Have you counted the cost? Maybe the Lord is speaking to you through these words right now, providing you with the opportunity to stop in your tracks, reverse course, repent, and return to what you know is the good, pleasing, and obedient thing before the Lord. Don't squander this divine opportunity! Don't ignore the conviction of the Holy Spirit and try to foolishly flee God's presence.

In our spiritual sanctification, God reorders our desires. He changes our hearts slowly but dramatically so that our desire to obey him becomes all the sweeter and the thought of disobeying him becomes all the more bitter. Maybe this needs to be your prayer right now as you consider areas in your life that have fallen into disrepair due to disobedient decisions.

Living on the other side of Christ's death and resurrection means we have a beautiful portrait of the mercy and grace available for those who stop in their tracks and fall back into the welcoming arms of Jesus. When we become God's children, we not only enjoy his presence in this life but for all eternity in the next one.

Questions for reflection

1. Is there an area in your life where you are running from obedience, like Jonah? How will you respond?
2. Can you think of a time when the Holy Spirit empowered you to take a step of faith into something that was fearful?
3. What truth about God do you want to remember that will help you grow in obedience to him in the future?