



JONAH'S *Desire to Die*

BIBLE STUDY

“I can’t believe it. My worst nightmare has come true. And every time my mind reruns the horror it feels like a sledgehammer crushing my heart. *I just want to die.*”

Have you ever felt like that? Do you know someone who feels like that? There are many setbacks that trigger extreme emotional pain—disease, divorce, downsizing, or a monumental disagreement. These and other problems bring people to the brink. A suffering person may come to prefer death to life.

Mental health experts have a term for this: suicidal ideation, a preoccupation with death and suicide. Just as there are no typical suicide victims, there are no typical suicidal thoughts and ideations. All victims, though, have one thing in common—unbearable emotional pain. It’s the feeling of being stuck and trapped with no way out, except through death.

God gives us the book of Jonah for such a time as this.

THE BOOK OF JONAH

We might think of the book of Jonah as a double act: “Jonah and the Whale,” like “Batman and Robin” or “Bert and Ernie.” In the story of Jonah, we meet a huge storm on the Mediterranean Sea, discover the insides of a fish, watch a plant come and go in a day. There are even repentant sailors and Ninevites.

Father Maple in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* famously says, “Even though Jonah is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures, the book is one of the most puzzling and intriguing of the entire Old Testament.” One of the biggest puzzle pieces in Jonah is the question of why the prophet wants to die. Wasn’t he wildly successful? Didn’t he preach a sermon that converted the entire city of Nineveh, along with its animals? What brought on Jonah’s wish for death?

Jonah is famous for his fish, but he also provides an illuminating case study of depression and suicidal thought. The questions that follow can guide our attention to this Scriptural portrait of despair.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. By the end of Jonah 3 we’re tempted to say, “All’s well that ends well.” Sailors have repented. The prophet has prayed. Ninevites and their animals have turned to the LORD. God is gracious to one and all. But the story isn’t over. Look at Jonah’s anger, seemingly coming out of nowhere. Jonah 4:1 literally translated from the Hebrew says, “It was evil to Jonah, a great evil and it angered him.” Why do you think Jonah is so furious?

2. Read Jonah 4:2. What Gospel characteristics strike you the most? More importantly, why do you think these gifts bring Jonah to the point of wanting to die?

3. There are only two other times in the Old Testament when a person wants God to kill him: Moses in Numbers 11:15, and Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4. (Jeremiah and Job wish they were never born; **JER. 20:14–18** and **JOB 3:2–7**). Read these verses, along with Jonah 4:3. What do you learn?

4. Read Jonah 4:5–8. What do these verses say about Jonah’s suicidal ideation?

5. What does God’s Word say about suicide?

6. Read Jonah 4:8. Here the progression of the divine names connected with “to provide/ordain/appoint” comes to an end. The subject in each occurrence is “the LORD” (**JONAH 1:17**), “the LORD God” (**JONAH 4:6**), then simply “God” (**JONAH 4:7, 8**). This movement is from the most to the least personal of the deity’s names and titles—from “the LORD” (or “Yahweh”) to finally just “God.” As Jonah’s prophetic ministry unfolds, his relationship with the LORD deteriorates more and more. What does this teach you about our need for a vibrant relationship with Christ to counter extreme despair and wishes for death?

7. What is the difference between the prophet’s desire for death in Jonah 4:3 and 4:8?

8. Read Jonah 1:5; 1:17; 4:8. What do these verses have in common?

9. What can we do when confronted with someone overwhelmed by suicidal ideation?

10. Read Jonah 4:9–11. Does God give up on Jonah?

CONCLUSIONS

There are several warning signs of suicide: talking or writing about death, dying or suicide; making comments about being hopeless or worthless; expressions of having no sense of purpose in life; saying things like, “It would be better if I wasn’t here” or “I want out”; increased alcohol and/or drug misuse; withdrawal from friends, family and community. Though not all answers to suicide are in the book of Jonah, there are many. And they are God’s gift to you.

(See next page for responses).

BIBLE STUDY LEADER'S GUIDE

1. *By the end of Jonah 3 we're tempted to say, "All's well that ends well." Sailors have repented. The prophet has prayed. Ninevites and their animals have turned to the LORD. God is gracious to one and all. But the story isn't over. Look at Jonah's anger, seemingly coming out of nowhere. Jonah 4:1 literally translated from the Hebrew says, "It was evil to Jonah, a great evil and it angered him." Why do you think Jonah is so furious?* The ESV renders Jonah 4:1 as follows: "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." In Hebrew (the original language of the Old Testament) the word for "evil" appears twice in this verse. In fact, evil frames the book. There is evil beginning with the Ninevites (JONAH 1:2), moving to the sailors (JONAH 1:7), returning to the Ninevites (JONAH 3:10), coming to the LORD (JONAH 3:10; 4:2—his threatened destruction of Nineveh), and falling upon Jonah (JONAH 4:1). But "great evil" (a term in JONAH 4:1) only applies to Jonah. He has the greatest evil in the book. And why is that? Jonah has an unforgiving heart that asks, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive the Ninevites?" (See MATT. 18:21.). It's great for God to be gracious to Jonah, but to extend the same benefits to the evil Ninevites is, in Jonah's mind, a horse of a different color! The limited association between anger and suicide is that anger leads to isolation and a sense of being a burden to others. Both of these are risk factors for suicide. The chief cause of suicide is unrelenting emotional distress, an experience Jonah displays throughout chapter four. Note that he ignores God (JONAH 4:4–5). Not wanting to talk about pain is sometimes a sign of depression. Additionally, read Jonah 4:8 where the prophet grows faint from the scorching sun; still another depressing incident.

2. *Read Jonah 4:2. What Gospel characteristics strike you the most? More importantly, why do you think these gifts bring Jonah to the point of wanting to die?* Answers may vary. Ironically, though, Jonah's anger is a response to God's slowness to anger. In Jonah 4:4, the prophet indicates that the LORD isn't angry when He should be angry. This makes Jonah, well, angry! Jonah's struggle is a conflict over the Gospel: who owns it, provides it, manages it and delivers it. The prophet can't bear that God oversees the Gospel and Jonah doesn't. Being frustrated with how God works prompts some people to feel as though life is hopeless, and just isn't worth living anymore.

3. *There are only two other times in the Old Testament when a person wants God to kill him: Moses in Numbers 11:15, and Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4. (Jeremiah and Job wish they were never born; Jer. 20:14–18 and Job 3:2–7). Read these verses, along with Jonah 4:3. What do you learn?* In Numbers 11, during the constant complaining of the Israelites, Moses prays for death. He places the responsibility for his frustration on the people, but also upon God. Moses hears the weeping of the people and the anger of God being kindled, and he becomes unsettled (v. 10). Moses also makes it

clear that his predicament is due to God's less than compassionate dealings with him (v. 11). God's response is to anoint seventy assistants to Moses, easing his burden of dealing with the people (v. 16–17). God does not grant Moses' request to die.

In 1 Kings 19, while running from Jezebel, Elijah comes to Mt. Horeb and begs God to kill him (v. 4). Elijah's motivation appears to be twofold: he's a failure as a prophet, and he's the only true follower of the LORD left. Elijah overlooks not only Obadiah and the hundred faithful prophets still in hiding (1 KINGS 18:3–4), but also the 7,000 people left in Israel who have not worshipped Baal (1 KINGS 19:18). There is more hope in this seemingly hopeless situation than Elijah recognized. In response, God commissions Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor (v. 15).

The upshot with both Moses and Elijah? God is "pro-life" no matter how low and lost people may feel. God is faithful. He provides hope, comfort and salvation to us, no matter how dire the circumstances around us may seem. He is truly the Father of Moses, Elijah and of each one of us, and He cares deeply for His precious children.

4. *Read Jonah 4:5–8. What do these verses say about Jonah's suicidal ideation?* In the book of Jonah, the captain (JONAH 1:6), the sailors (JONAH 1:14), and the king of Nineveh (JONAH 3:9) all pray for life in the face of death. However, when the Ninevites are spared from death, Jonah ironically wishes to die (JONAH 4:3, 8). The prophet has yet to learn the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The prophet has yet to learn that his body is not his own, but is a temple of the Holy Spirit, given by God Himself (1 COR. 6:19). There are two important truths to spiritual enlightenment: number one, there is a God; number two, we're not Him. The answer? Submit to the gracious will of God who loves us with an everlasting love.

5. *What does God's Word say about suicide?* The LORD of life unequivocally rejects suicide. Suicide shows scorn not only for the sanctity of life (EX. 20:13), but for the God who gives life. The sanctity of life is so dear to God that He provides a commandment about life. In the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shall not murder," God prohibits murder of our neighbor and murder of ourselves. There are few suicides in the Old Testament. Abimelek is killed at his own request by his armor-bearer, to avoid the disgrace of a woman killing him (JUDGES 9:53). The wounded Saul kills himself to avoid the shame of being killed by the Philistines (1 SAM. 31:3–6). Ahithophel, David's advisor who deserts to Absalom, hangs himself when Hushai contradicts his advice (2 SAM. 17:23). And the rebellious Zimri burns himself to death when his coup d'état fails (1 KINGS 16:18). In every situation, utter hopelessness leads to suicide.

6. Read Jonah 4:8. Here the progression of the divine names connected with “to provide/ordain/appoint” comes to an end. The subject in each occurrence is “the LORD” (Jonah 1:17), “the LORD God” (Jonah 4:6), then simply “God” (Jonah 4:7, 8). This movement is from the most to the least personal of the deity’s names and titles—from “the LORD” (or “Yahweh”) to finally just “God.” As Jonah’s prophetic ministry unfolds, his relationship with the LORD deteriorates more and more. What does this teach you about our need for a vibrant relationship with Christ to counter extreme despair and wishes for death? We need to stay connected to Jesus, who comes to us with forgiveness, salvation and mercy through the means of grace: the Word of God, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. Each of these means that God so graciously provides points us to the reality we have in Christ, a reality that Satan seeks nothing more than to distort. Our reality, in Christ, is resurrection. The cares, fears and feelings of hopelessness of this world do not get the final say. Christ has won the victory over these in His atoning death on the cross. In His glorious resurrection, Christ promises us that He will deliver us from this vale of tears to Himself in eternal bliss. In this life, Christ promises that He will provide for our every need, of both body and soul, and that He will guard and protect us against the evil one.

7. What is the difference between the prophet’s desire for death in Jonah 4:3 and 4:8? When the prophet desires death in Jonah 4:3, he directs his petition to the LORD. But in Jonah 4:8, he doesn’t cry to God for help. Feeling totally helpless and alone, with no one to assist him, Jonah directs his last request not to the LORD, but to himself. This plea connects with the decrease in intimacy among the divine names and titles used with the verb “to provide/appoint/ordain.” (See the eighth question above.) As the story progresses, Jonah moves further and further away from God. This is an awful place to be, spiritually as well as emotionally. It may create suicidal ideation.

8. Read Jonah 1:5; 1:17; 4:8. What do these verses have in common? Jonah is alone. Throughout the story the prophet is withdrawn and isolated, with his last “prayer” spoken to himself (JONAH 4:8). In some scenes he appears alienated and disconnected from everyone, including and especially God. People overwhelmed with suicidal thoughts are often cut off from others, either intentionally or unintentionally.

9. What can we do when confronted with someone overwhelmed by suicidal ideation? Answers may vary, but getting a person to talk about his thoughts and feelings may save his life. Additionally, if you believe someone is in danger of suicide, note the following: call 911 if self-harm seems imminent; listen to her and when there is a lull in the conversation say, “Tell me more”; stay with the person or make sure she is in a private, secure place with another caring adult; remove objects that could be used in a suicide attempt; make sure that the troubled person knows the National Suicide and Crisis Hotline number (988) for both calling and texting.

10. Read Jonah 4:9–11. Does God give up on Jonah? Never. God wants Jonah to make a paradigm shift. The change from Ptolemy to Copernicus may illustrate the divine strategy. Ptolemy, a second-century Egyptian astronomer, worked out a presentation of the universe with the earth as the center, and with the sun and stars revolving around it. Copernicus, a sixteenth-century Polish astronomer, argued that the earth revolves around the sun, a complete reversal of the way people thought of the earth and universe. God wants Jonah to admit that he isn’t at the center of the universe any more than the earth is at its center. Events and circumstances don’t revolve around Jonah. Rather, they revolve around the one who is at the center, God. Jonah is Ptolemaic, at the center; the LORD seeks to make him Copernican, to live toward and around the center. Or, in Paul’s words, Jesus “the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.” (COL. 1:18). This is life with purpose and meaning, hope and joy!