

Jonah: The Runaway Prophet The Reluctant Prophet Gospel of the Second Chance



Themes:

God is with us always. God loves everyone. God forgives us when we truly repent.

Workshops:

Jonah: (Chapter)

Drama	1 and 3	Obedience (and you get a second chance!)
Inside the Belly of the Whale	2	Prayer
Cooking	2 and 3	Repentance
Computer	4	Compassion and Grace

Objectives and Life Application:

- Children will retell the story in their own words.
- Children will locate the story in their Bibles.
- Children will identify the book of Jonah as an Old Testament book of Prophets (minor).
- Children will discuss the following terms in relation to the story: prophet (one who tells God's message), grace (undeserved favour), repentance (turning away from sin and toward God – an inward change that is reflected by outward actions), forgiveness, and obedience.
- Children will understand that God is with us always, even when we try to run away or are disobedient.
- Children will understand that God wants us to obey.
- Children will understand that God forgives us when we truly repent.
- Children will understand that God loves everyone and wants us to welcome everyone also.
- Children will memorize Jonah 2:2.

Background Information

The book of Jonah is one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament. The books of the Prophets are divided into major and minor prophets. This has nothing to do with the importance of the books, rather it simply designates the length of the book. The books of the Prophets are not in chronological order in the Bible. The Major Prophets come first, followed by the Minor Prophets.

The book of Jonah has been traditionally believed to be written by the prophet himself; perhaps during the same time as I and II Kings or perhaps after the exile.

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Jonah, although a very short 4 chapters, has much to teach us about God and ourselves. His story teaches us about the importance of listening to God's word and obeying it. We learn that we can never run away from God – no matter what, God is with us. We learn that God is the God of second chances. We learn that God desires most of all to be in relationship with all God's people. God is merciful and forgiving when we repent. Outward actions are important, but God truly looks on the heart. God wants us to have a heart of compassion and love and mercy toward everyone – not just those who are like us.

Ultimately Jonah's story is one of God's grace.

A Brief History

Assyria was a country located where northern Iraq is today. About the time when Jonah lived, Assyria was a world power. Nineveh was Assyria's capital city. It was across the river from today's Mosul, Iraq. Nineveh was destroyed in 612 to 607 BC by the Medes' and Persians' armies coming from the east.

The Assyrians and Israel were never friends. The Assyrian army attacked and raided Israel's cities for hundreds of years. The Assyrian army was cruel. They killed people in the cities by the hundreds. Sometimes they skinned their prisoners alive. They cut off hands or feet. They practised child sacrifice.

All of this may explain why Jonah hated Nineveh and its people. History in the *Bible* (II Kings, chapters 17, 18 and 19) tells about some of Israel's wars with Assyria.

Jonah's warning changed Assyria for only a short time. The Assyrians soon began raiding, killing and burning Israel's cities again.

Jonah's story is a very old one. Nevertheless, Jonah's story is important. It shows God's love for people, even enemies, if they repent. This was a new idea in Jonah's time.

Prophets

Prophets are spokespeople for God. They serve as "God's mouth" to speak God's word to the people, to be God's messenger. The Hebrew word in the text is *nabi* -- one who speaks for another. During times of apostasy¹, God raised up prophets to bring his Word to the people and call them back to repentance. Prophets retained their own personalities, communicating God's message in their own unique and individual ways. The prophet's communication was recognized as the "word of the Lord."

¹ Apostasy is the renunciation of faith.

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Most prophets took the “word of the Lord” to the kings in an attempt to convict them of their wrong ways and lead them back to the correct path. Sometimes they were successful, at other times the situation became confrontational. Throughout Israel’s history, we find a repeating pattern – a falling away from faithfulness, judgment, repentance and return to faith.

Israel during the time of Jonah.

Jonah, whose name means dove, was a prophet from Galilee, son of Amitai (2 Kings 14:25). He lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (793 – 753 BC). Assyria dominated the world at that time. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, located on the banks of the Tigris River. It was a great city and highly fortified. (The walls of Ninevah were so deep that three chariots could ride side by side on the top of the walls! It was so large, that it would take 3 days to ride through the city.) The Assyrians were noted for their engineering feats, their mighty and aggressive military and their harsh and cruel treatment of their enemies. Jeroboam II was a powerful king who took advantage of the political situation at the time and the multiple conflicts between Assyria and Israel’s neighbors. Jeroboam II restored the original borders of the Northern Kingdom during his reign. Jonah prophesied about these events and perhaps because of this positive message, Jonah was a popular prophet. This was the golden age of the Northern Kingdom. But Jeroboam II did not follow God’s ways and the people developed a sense of complacency and superiority over their pagan neighbors. They gloated over their victories and their favored status with God. They looked forward to the time when God would destroy the surrounding wicked nations, leaving Israel to bask in God’s light. This was the national attitude when the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

Jonah’s Story:

Jonah’s story is outlined in the four chapters as follows:

1. God calls Jonah; Jonah disobeys.
2. Jonah submits.
3. Jonah completes his mission.
4. Jonah’s motives are contrasted with God’s motives.

Forty years before the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom, Jonah heard the word of the Lord. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach his word there. God had seen the evil ways and wickedness of the Assyrian nation. God wanted them to be in relationship with him. Now Jonah was willing to take God’s message to his own people, but when it meant going to the chief enemies of his people, that was another story entirely. Jonah left and traveled to the seaport Joppa (modern day Jaffa) and bought a ticket to Tarshish – in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh! In Old Testament times, people believed that a god was confined to the territory in which the god’s worshipers lived. So, when Jonah hopped on board a ship heading far away from Israel, he hoped to escape God’s reach. But Jonah soon learned that God is not confined by earthly territory. We cannot hide from God. God pursues us wherever we may go.

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A huge storm blew up threatening the lives of everyone on board the ship. The sailors cast lots and discovered that Jonah was the source of their trouble. Jonah confessed that he was running away from his God-given task. The sea grew rougher and rougher. Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard, but they resisted, instead trying to row to shore. But the sea was too rough. Finally the sailors cried out to God asking for mercy and forgiveness. Then they threw Jonah overboard. And the sea became calm. Meanwhile, a great fish swallowed Jonah where he stayed for three days and three nights.

Now much attention has been focused on the problem of Jonah. Is it a true story? Did it really happen as described? What fish is large enough to hold a man? How could he survive for that length of time inside a fish? Many interpreters think the story of Jonah is simply an allegory or parable. Jesus himself referred to the story of Jonah at least two times in his ministry. He contrasted Jonah's stay in the belly of the fish with his own death and burial in the tomb and ultimately with his resurrection. Jesus' statements assume the historicity² of the story. And there are descriptions of survivors who have been swallowed by whales or large fish that are forever scarred by gastric juices. Certainly the God who raised Jesus from the dead is capable of keeping Jonah alive inside a fish. But regardless, the *message* of Jonah is true!

Sometimes the book of Jonah is called the "Gospel of the Second Chance." While inside the belly of the great fish, Jonah calls out to God in a thankful prayer. "When I was in trouble, I called out to you. And you answered me. When I had almost drowned, I called out for help. And you listened to my cry... And I will sing a song of thanks. I will do what I have promised. Lord, you are the one who saves." (Jonah 2:1, 9) And God had the fish spit (or vomit) Jonah out onto dry land.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah for a second time, "Go to Nineveh and announce the message I give you." This time Jonah obeyed. He went to Nineveh and preached that God would destroy that great city in forty days. And amazingly, the Ninevites listened and believed! They responded to Jonah's message by fasting and wearing sackcloth and ashes as a sign of humility and repentance. Even the king took off his royal robes and dressed in sackcloth! He ordered everyone to stop their wickedness, turn to God and pray for mercy. These outward signs reflected an inward change and a hope for God's mercy. This is what true repentance means. Repentance is not simply mouthing the words, "I'm sorry." Rather repentance means making a true turnaround in behavior, a turning away from sin and a whole-hearted turn toward God.

God heard the repentant cries of the Ninevites and he had compassion on them. He didn't destroy them. Now we might think that Jonah would rejoice over the success of his mission. Not so! Instead, Jonah was angry! He told God that this is exactly why he didn't want to go to Nineveh. He knew God was compassionate, tender and kind, slow to anger and full of love! He knew that God didn't really want to destroy the Ninevites. Here we see the true condition of Jonah's heart. He obeyed God outwardly, but his heart still wasn't in it. In his heart he still

² *Historicity: historical authenticity*

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resented the enemies of his people. He secretly hoped that they wouldn't listen to his message so that God would destroy them! After all, it isn't fair! How can God allow a happy ending for these mean and wicked people? In fact, because of his prejudice and hatred of the Assyrians, Jonah would rather die than see this ending.

God then taught Jonah a final lesson. As he sat pouting outside the city, in the hot sun, God sent a vine to bring him shelter. But then, less than a day later, a worm ate the vine and it dried up. Jonah sat sweltering in the blistering heat, crying out to God once again to let him die in his anger and frustration over everything that had happened. It wasn't fair that good things should happen to this undeserving people. It wasn't fair that Jonah, who obeyed God, was now left sitting in the heat without shade. God then explained that if Jonah can care so much about a simple plant that he had nothing to do with growing, then surely he can understand how much God cares for the people in Nineveh, the people he created and loves. God is the one who made the vine. God is the one who created the people of Nineveh. God cares about everyone. God desires that all of creation should return to him, be restored and blessed. God used a pagan nation and Israel's greatest enemy to teach a powerful lesson about the right way to respond to God's message. God teaches Jonah and us that our hearts should be set on God himself, not on the gifts that God provides.

Lessons from Jonah

This little story will provide many opportunities for discussion! Use the following reflection and discussion topics/questions to help the children understand more about the nature of God and the meaning behind the events of the story. Elementary children are concerned with matters of justice and fairness. They struggle with getting along with others who seem "different" than they are. They (like the Israelites), are clique-ish. This story sends us a powerful message of God's love for everyone.

1. God wants us to obey. In his book, *Twelve Prophetic Voices: Major Messages from the Minor Prophets*, Mariano DiGangi makes this comparison. "Anyone who refuses to fulfill the Lord's orders joins Jonah in buying a ticket to Tarshish." In what ways are we like Jonah? How often do we secretly wish evil on our enemies? Do we really want God to forgive them? Do we believe that we deserve special treatment from God because we feel we are "better" or more deserving than others? Do we truly want God to love and care for people we don't like or who are different than we? Are we kind and welcoming to others? Are we nice to people at school? Do we welcome the new kid in class? Do we welcome refugees? Do we stand up for someone who is being picked on? Do we come to church on Sunday, but act totally different the other six days of the week? Do we cheat, lie, steal? Do we gossip and say mean things about others?

2. God wants more than our obedience. He wants us to become like him, to have a heart of compassion and love toward others – even those we don't like, or who don't like us.

3. God is always with us! Even when we try to run away, God is with us. God never leaves us. Sometimes it takes a difficult situation to make us see and feel God's presence. God uses those

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dark times to turn our hearts back to God. Sometimes God asks us to do something that is hard. Surely it must have been very difficult for Jonah to go to the homeland of his enemies to preach about God. Even though it is not always easy to follow God, God promises to be with us and to help us accomplish those difficult tasks.

4. God gives us second chances! Even when we mess up, disobey, or do wrong things, God is willing to forgive us when we are truly sorry, when we repent! Remember, repentance means a turning away from the wrong things we are doing and putting our whole hearts toward God.

5. God's love is for everyone. We get disgruntled or angry when good things happen to people who don't deserve them. Like Jonah, we sometimes wish people would be punished for their wrongdoings. But God's ways are not our ways. God uses all circumstances to bring about his purpose and plan for good. When we repent, God rejoices! God is glad to have us back and welcomes us with open arms! (Think about the story of the Prodigal Son) We are called to be like God and be welcoming and happy for others too!

6. Grace is a gift from God for everyone. We all have done wrong things and deserve to be punished. Grace means undeserved favor. It is a free gift of God's love. There is nothing we can do to earn it or buy it. We just accept the gift and live our lives showing how thankful we are for God's mercy.

7. Evangelism means to share the gospel (good news) with others. Like Jonah, God calls all believers to go into the world to share God's message of repentance, forgiveness and new life. Jesus in the New Testament, lamented over the people who resisted his message of grace and mercy. Today, too, many resist the word of Jesus, one far greater than Jonah. Our responsibility as believers is to shine brightly in a dark world, so that others may see God's light through us. By living like Jesus and telling others about what God has done in our own lives, others will see God's love. God will use us to bring others to him.

8. Jonah needed an attitude adjustment! Jonah was angry with God. First he was commanded to go to the capital of Assyria, the archenemies of Israel. Second came the indignity of being thrown overboard and swallowed by a big fish. Then God actually granted forgiveness to the people of Nineveh. And, to top it all off, God had taken away the nice shade that was making Jonah's suffering a bit more endurable. Jonah cried out in his anger!

When life doesn't go our way we can react in much the same way as Jonah. We can whine when the car won't start, or the kids are obnoxious, or things at work are unmanageable. (What things would the kids relate to when discussing this concept?)

But none of these are important. Poverty, war, and injustice are important. Jonah moaned in despair because he lost his plant, but didn't care if 120,000 people died without the knowledge of God. What is our attitude? Do we need to look at life a bit differently?

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Discussion/Reflection Questions:

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| What is a prophet? | <i>(Someone who speaks for God, God's messenger)</i> |
| What did God tell Jonah to do? | <i>(Go to Nineveh to preach to the people)</i> |
| Why did Jonah run away? | <i>(He didn't want to do what God asked)</i> |
| How did Jonah feel about the people of Nineveh? | <i>(Didn't like them, they were his enemies)</i> |
| How did God feel about the people of Nineveh? | <i>(Loved them, wanted to save them)</i> |
| What happened to Jonah? | <i>(Thrown overboard, swallowed by giant fish)</i> |
| I wonder what Jonah thought about while inside that great fish? | |
| What did Jonah do inside the fish? | <i>(Prayed in thanksgiving to God, promised to obey)</i> |
| What happened after Jonah preached in Nineveh? | <i>(People repented, God showed them mercy)</i> |
| How did Jonah feel about that? | <i>(Angry)</i> |
| What can we learn about God from this story? | <i>(God loves everyone, grace, mercy, forgiveness)</i> |
| How do we show forgiveness in our lives? | |
| How do we tell others about the good news of God's grace and love? | |
| How can we change our attitude toward others who are different than us or who are not easy to love? | |

Sources:

Background information is based on materials found on www.rotation.org, using those from State Street UMC, Bristol, VA as the primary resource. The lesson plans from St. James United were the initial resource used, and primarily used for cooking and drama workshops. The prayer workshop (Inside the Belly) was based on other prayer resources found on the Internet. The computer workshop details come from www.sunday.software.com, the source of the software to be used.