



Book of Jonah – Lesson 1

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Book of Jonah

Week 1: You Can't Outrun God

Bible: Jonah 1

Bottom Line: We have to trust that God has our best interest in mind. Obedience to his commands is always the best option.

SUPPLIES

- A 4 Page – Origami Big Fish
- Print out “Help the Whale Find Jonah” Maize
- Print out “Jonah and the Big Fish” Word Search

Parent Preparation

Over these next four weeks, we are going to be diving into a Bible story that is probably so familiar to most of you that you could probably get up here and teach it to the rest of us.

You probably learned the story in Sunday school and maybe even watched the VeggieTales movie as a kid.

Our story has a runaway prophet, stormy seas, and a big fish (or whale, depending on your translation).

That's right, we're gonna talk about Jonah.

Now, before you start rolling your eyes and groaning, can we agree to put aside our past experiences with this story and agree to look at it - and the lessons God has for us - through a new set of eyes?

We have a four-week series of lessons on a four-chapter book of the Bible so, you guessed it, we are going to walk through and talk through one chapter each week.

We are going to get into some of the nitty-gritty details to see what God has to tell us.

Background

But first, let's take a step back and put this all-too-familiar story into its context.

The book of Jonah is toward the end of the Old Testament, along with the writings of the other Old Testament prophets.

But that doesn't tell us much about when Jonah lived or the other circumstances of the story.

Jonah is mentioned very briefly in 2 Kings 14, so we have an idea of when he lived. He lived in the northern nation of Israel (after the nation split in two after Solomon's reign) during the reign of King Jeroboam II.

Jeroboam II was the 13th king of the northern kingdom, so our story takes place a couple hundred years after King David and King Solomon.

The Bible tells us that Jeroboam II was an evil king, leading the nation of Israel into sin and allowing much suffering in the land. Most scholars believe the book was written about 750 BC.

The city of Nineveh, where God commanded Jonah to go, was in modern day Iraq, hundreds of miles northeast of Israel.

It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrians ruled much of the Middle Eastern region during the time of Jonah and were the dominant world power at the time.

And the Assyrians were bad people

They were vicious conquerors, often torturing or enslaving the slaves

So that is the backdrop of our story. There is an evil king on the throne of Israel, and the dominant world power is the viciously cruel Assyrian Empire. Depressing, isn't it?

With this in mind, let's read the first chapter of Jonah:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So, they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased.” Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him.

Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Through the history, Jonah has gotten a pretty bad rap for his disobedience.

But much of that bad rap is pretty well deserved.

God gave Jonah very specific instructions: Go to Nineveh and warn them that if they don’t change their ways, then God will destroy their city.

God’s instructions are straightforward.

And what did Jonah do? He ran away.

But he didn’t just go hide in the closet or go to a friend’s house down the street.

Jonah not only went the opposite direction from Nineveh, he tried to go as far as he could in the opposite direction.

Tarshish, the place that Jonah hoped to go to, was thousands of miles in the opposite direction on the southern tip of modern-day Spain.

There really wasn't anywhere in the known world that was farther away at the time.

So, yeah, Jonah does deserve some of the criticism that he gets.

He definitely gets the "award" for trying the hardest to run away from God.

Remember what we learned about the world Jonah lived in.

Jonah was a prophet of God in a nation that had turned its back on God.

Even though he was God's representative to the people, the people probably didn't want to hear what he had to say.

Have you ever felt this way?

Have you ever felt all alone as a follower of Jesus?

Parents - *Encourage you children to share their stories and encourage them to stay strong in their faith despite any opposition they face.*

Not only that, but God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of the evil Empire.

The Assyrians weren't very keen on taking advice from an Israelite.

If this trip didn't go well, it quite literally could have been a death sentence for Jonah

So maybe we can be a bit more understanding of the position Jonah was in.

We shouldn't excuse his behavior or decisions, but we can have a little bit of understanding.

Now that we are "in" the story a little bit more, what can we learn from it?

I think there are a couple important lessons to be found in Jonah's tale.

First, this story is an important lesson in obedience.

Just within this first chapter, we see all the bad things that can happen when we disobey God. God said to go, by land, to Nineveh to preach repentance to the people there. Jonah travels, by sea, to Tarshish.

Once on the boat, Jonah faced a huge storm that threatened to destroy the boat.

Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard because he figured the storm was God's way of punishing him.

Then, once in the water, a huge fish swallowed Jonah whole.

Talk about a rough day.

Things never go well when we decide to disobey God.

The Bible is full of examples from beginning to end of instances where disobedience leads to negative consequences.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for their disobedience. David's sin with Bathsheba cost him the life of their firstborn child.

This is an extreme example, but the point is that there are consequences to disobeying God's instruction.

But I think it is important to view these consequences correctly.

While there are times that people are punished for their sins, most often these consequences are God's way of redirecting us and getting us back on the right path.

For reasons unknown, God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh.

Of all the people on earth at that time, God chose him to deliver the message.

And God wasn't going to let anything stop Jonah, even Jonah himself, from completing that mission. Jonah hopped on a boat; God sent a storm.

The sailors tossed Jonah into the sea; God sent a fish.

In the same way, there may be tasks that God wants you, and only you, to complete. It may be something simple, like inviting a friend to church or youth group or telling a friend about Jesus.

Or it may be something big, like confronting a bully at school.

Whatever it is, God wants YOU to do it.

But what we need to realize is that God isn't some brutal taskmaster who tortures us into compliance. God is not like the Assyrians.

God loves us and wants to give us the privilege and pleasure of taking part in His work.

In many ways, God's commands are more like invitations than harsh do-or-die commands.

And when God invites us onto one of these adventures, and this is perhaps what Jonah failed to realize, God promises to be with us every step of the way.

There are so many verses all throughout the Bible that tell us not to be afraid because God is with us.

Have your children look up and read some of these verses.

- Joshua 1:9
- Isaiah 41:10
- Deuteronomy 31:6
- Romans 8:38-39
- Psalm 23:4

So, what can we take away from all this?

What can we learn from this all-too-familiar story?

First, we ought to rethink our ideas of God's commandments.

God is not a harsh ruler who wants to control our every move and action.

God wants us to be partakers in His work here on earth, and He invites us to join Him in that work.

Second, we can be assured that if God has called us on a mission to do His work, then He will be with us every step of the way.

God will never leave us high-and-dry.

And lastly, our disobedience can be costly.

If we decide to run the other way, God will stop at nothing to get us back on track.

Sometimes we might encounter stormy seas or even a giant fish, but it is because God loves us and wants us to join in His work.

And this is where we leave off for this week.

Jonah is in the belly of the fish.

Fortunately, our story doesn't end here with Jonah being digested by the giant fish.

We all know what happens next, but next week we will see what new lessons God has for us.

Discussion with kids

1. Before we began our series on Jonah, what did you know about the story of Jonah?
2. Why do you think Jonah ran away when God told him to go to Nineveh?
3. What would you have done in Jonah's situation?
4. Are there commands of God that you find particularly difficult to follow?
5. Has there been a time that God called you to do something difficult?
6. What did you do?
7. If you disobeyed, did you find things got difficult for you?
8. If you obeyed, how did things turn out?
9. What did you learn from this lesson?
10. What do you hope to learn from our next lessons?