

# Jonah and the Big Fish



Scripture Reference: [Jonah 1-4](#)

**Suggested Emphasis:** Everyone deserves a chance to hear about God.



Background Study



Story Introduction



Telling the Story



Review Questions



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## Story Overview:

Ninevah was the capitol city of Israel's enemy, Assyria. The Lord commanded Jonah to go and tell the people in the city of Ninevah that their city would be destroyed if they did not repent of their wickedness. Jonah did not want to teach the people of Ninevah because he thought they would never change. He headed in the opposite direction - away from Ninevah - to try to hide from God. When the boat that he boarded ran into a storm, Jonah was thrown overboard and swallowed by a big fish. Jonah spent three days praying inside the fish and then he was spit out. When Jonah finally went to Ninevah and preached, the wicked people repented and turned to God.

# Background Study:

Jonah ministered as a prophet to Israel from 800-750 BC during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753). During this time the nation of Assyria controlled a large portion of the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. Because Israel's northern borders touched Assyria there were often border conflicts. Since Nineveh was a major city in Assyria, Israel would have considered the people their enemies. Nineveh had a population of 120,000 (Jonah 4:11). Shortly after the events in today's story, Nineveh became the capitol of Assyria.

Although Assyria was strong, Israel's King Jeroboam II was able to restore Israel's traditional borders for a time (2 Kings 14:23-25). Still, the hard feelings and prejudice remained. Israel gloated over her newfound power. The prophets Amos and Hosea were prophesying during this time that Israel would be taken away into exile.

Considering the general bad feelings and fear towards Assyria, it is no wonder that Jonah did not want to go to the city of Nineveh. He did not like them and he assumed that they would reject and probably kill him. What good things could come from going to Nineveh?

When God instructed Jonah to go east to warn the Assyrian capital of Nineveh that it would be overthrown, Jonah decided to go in the opposite way and boarded a ship headed west. The city of Tarshish mentioned in Jonah 1:3 is possibly the city of Tartessus in southwest Spain, a Phoenician mining colony near Gibraltar. By heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh, to what seemed like the end of the earth, Jonah seemed to be trying to escape the work that God wanted him to do.

When the Lord wants something to happen, there is no way that anyone can escape. The Lord sent a strong wind (1:4) and then he revealed Jonah's identity when the sailors cast lots (1:7). Jonah knew that he was the problem. He told them to throw him into the sea. The sailors did not want to do that. They might have thought that they would be in more trouble for killing a prophet of the God of Israel or they might have just not believed that

throwing Jonah in would make any difference. It is interesting to note that these heathen sailors were reluctant to hurt Jonah but Jonah was refusing to help the heathen people of Nineveh. In any event, as soon as Jonah was thrown overboard, the storm stopped.




The Hebrew term describing the creature that swallowed Jonah is the general term for a large fish, not necessarily a whale. This could possibly be a species of giant fish that no longer exists today. Pictures often depict Jonah inside the fish's belly with all sorts of extra room. It more possibly was a very tight squeeze.

After three days, Jonah was spit out of the fish's mouth. He knew that he had ignored the Lord's command. When God again commanded him to go to Nineveh and preach, Jonah obeyed and went.

Jonah was surprised when his message was heard and heeded. The king of Nineveh, himself, led the people in repentance. In response to their contrite hearts, the Lord decided to not bring judgement on the city. Instead of being happy, Jonah was angry. He did not like the people and he did not think they deserved to have God's mercy. He went outside the city and built himself a shelter as a shade from the hot sun and then "waited to see what would happen to the city" (Jonah 4:5). I call this pouting!

The Lord used a vine, a worm and a wind to teach and rebuke Jonah. He caused the vine to grow up and make a cool shade for Jonah. Jonah's attention went from the city to the vine. The next day God caused a worm to come and chew the vine until it died. Then he caused a "scorching" wind to come up. Jonah was miserable and wanted to die.

The Lord pointed out Jonah's concern for the vine (even though Jonah did nothing to tend or destroy it). The Lord could make or destroy a vine as he saw fit. If Jonah could be that concerned over a vine then why was he not concerned about the 120,000 people of Nineveh? The Lord was concerned and he knew that the people of Nineveh deserved a chance to hear about him.

-  [What happened before this story?](#)
-  [What happens after this story?](#)
-  [List of all Bible stories and themes on this website.](#)

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## Way to Introduce the Story:

Before class prepare several sealed containers of “smelly” items. You might try things like perfume, chocolate, oranges, etc. Make sure one container has fish in it - tuna fish is easy to obtain. Don't allow the children to see what is inside the container (blindfold them if you wish) and let them try to guess what is in the container by smelling it. Tell them that today's story has something to do with one of these smells. Let the children try to guess which smell.

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## The Story:

Not far from Israel there was another country called Assyria. Assyria was very mean to Israel. Soldiers would often come and fight. The Assyrians wanted to take the land away from Israel and make slaves out of the people. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord who lived in the country of Israel. He did not like Assyria one bit!

Jonah often gave messages from God to the people but this time God had a different kind of job for Jonah. God had a message for the people of Nineveh. He told Jonah to go and tell the people of Nineveh that he would destroy their city if they did not follow him.

Jonah could not believe it! Not Nineveh! Nineveh was a city in Assyria. How could God send him to those bad people? Jonah didn't even like those people. He decided that he would ignore God. Nineveh was to the north of Israel so Jonah travelled south. Maybe God would forget about it if he travelled far enough away.

After the ship was out to sea, a huge wind began to blow. The ship was tossed about until it began to break apart. All of the sailors were afraid of what might happen to them. What was causing this terrible storm?

Jonah knew what was causing the storm. He knew that the Lord was punishing him for trying to run away from his important job. Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard into the sea. Then the storm would stop.

The sailors were frightened. They did not want to throw Jonah overboard. He would drown. No one could survive the terrible storm! The soldiers tried to row back to shore but the storm was too strong. Finally, they tossed Jonah overboard into the rolling waves. They just knew Jonah would die.

But Jonah did not die. Instead, the Lord saved him. The Lord caused a big fish to come and swallow Jonah. The fish did not chew him up - it just swallowed him and Jonah was safe inside. Meanwhile, as soon as Jonah was thrown from the ship, the storm stopped and the water became calm again.

Jonah was inside the fish for three days. What do you think that Jonah did in there? Well, there isn't much to do inside a big fish so Jonah prayed to God. Jonah told God that he was sorry for running away. Jonah said that he was ready to obey the Lord now.

Then an amazing thing happened. The big fish spit Jonah out of its mouth onto dry land! Jonah knew that God had saved him for a special reason. God spoke to Jonah and told him again to go to Nineveh. What do you think Jonah did this time? He obeyed God! He went to Nineveh and taught the people about God.

Jonah preached about God but he didn't think anyone would really listen. After all, these were enemies of Israel. But Jonah preached anyway. He told the people of Nineveh that God would destroy their city. Then the people did something that Jonah did not expect. They listened! They were sorry for all of the bad things that they had done. They prayed to God and said that they wanted to obey him. When the Lord heard the prayers of the people of Nineveh, he decided not to destroy their city.

Jonah could not believe it! He didn't even like these people and now God was forgiving them. Jonah was not happy. In fact, he became angry. He went outside the city and built a little shelter to keep the hot sun from giving him sunburn. Jonah thought that maybe God would change his mind. He kept watching the city of Nineveh to see if it would be destroyed.

Jonah got very hot. Then he noticed something. A little vine began to grow on his shelter. The vine got bigger and bigger until it made a nice shade for Jonah. Now Jonah was cool and comfortable and he went to sleep for the night.

The next day Jonah noticed something else. A worm began eating the vine. Soon the worm had eaten the whole vine. Now Jonah was hot again! The Lord caused a hot wind to come up. Jonah was so miserable he just wanted to die.

Then the Lord spoke to Jonah, "Jonah, you sure are worried about the vine and the worm. Did you make the vine? Did you destroy the vine? No, you did not. I did. If you worry so much about a vine then why don't you worry about the 120,000 people in Nineveh? I made them and I want them to hear about me. It is not for you to decide who gets to hear about me!"

Jonah now knew that everyone - even the people of Nineveh - deserves to hear about God.

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## Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using a variety of methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection, student interaction and/or emotion.

[Click here for visual aids and story-telling methods.](#)

[Click here to download these illustrations and slideshow.](#) Be selective. Each teacher is unique so only use the illustrations that best relate to the way YOU are telling the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

## Review Questions:

1. What did the Lord command Jonah to do? Go and preach to the people of Nineveh
2. Instead of obeying God, what did Jonah do? He got on a ship headed in the opposite direction
3. When Jonah was tossed overboard, why didn't he drown? A big fish swallowed him
4. After the fish spat Jonah out, what did Jonah do? He went to Nineveh and preached
5. What did the people of Nineveh do when they heard about God? They said they were sorry
6. When Jonah sat outside the city, what did God use to teach him a lesson? A vine, a worm and a hot wind

## Song Suggestions:

- [Who Did Swallow Jonah? Song](#)
- [Rejoice in the Lord Always Song](#)
- [My God is So Big Song](#)
- Refer to the [Song Page](#) on this website for more options.

## Learning Activities and Crafts:

[\(How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation\)](#)

*Activities:*

- Have a picnic and eat tuna sandwiches or fish and chips
- Locate Nineveh and the other places on a map

- Turn out the lights or cover everyone with a blanket and talk about how it would feel to be inside a big fish
- Invite someone who is involved in missions to come to class and talk about the places where our congregation helps spread the word of God.

*Crafts:*

- Make a fish puppet

Check the [Teaching Ideas](#) page on this website for ideas that are adaptable to any lesson.



[Click here for "Jonah and the Big Fish" printables to print on A4 size paper](#)

[Click here for "Jonah and the Big Fish" printables \(Letter size-USA\)](#)

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## Other Online Resources:

- [Colouring page from http://www.christiananswers.net/](http://www.christiananswers.net/)
- [Colouring page and puzzle worksheets-Jonah and the great fish \(Calvary Curriculum\)](#)
- [Colouring page and puzzle worksheets-Ninevah repents \(Calvary Curriculum\)](#)
- [Colouring page and puzzle worksheets-Jonah humbled by God \(Calvary Curriculum\)](#)
- [Craft: Illustrated instructions to make a paper boat can be found at http://kirstymcallister.blogspot.co.nz/](http://kirstymcallister.blogspot.co.nz/)



- [Craft: Doorknob hanger from http://www.sundayschoolcrafts.net/](http://www.sundayschoolcrafts.net/)
- [Craft: Video instructions \(3 minutes\) on how to make a paper fish on a popsicle stick at http://www.simplekidscrafts.com/](http://www.simplekidscrafts.com/)
- [Craft: Printable paper craft at http://sundayschoolresources.co.uk/](http://sundayschoolresources.co.uk/)
- [Study material on how Jonah could have survived being swallowed by a fish from http://www.christiananswers.net/](http://www.christiananswers.net/)
- [Online activities and games at http://gardenofpraise.com/](http://gardenofpraise.com/)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(1\) from http://www.churchhousecollection.com/](http://www.churchhousecollection.com/)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(2\) from http://www.churchhousecollection.com/](http://www.churchhousecollection.com/)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(3\) from http://www.churchhousecollection.com/](http://www.churchhousecollection.com/)
- [Chart: Chronology of the Prophets before the Fall of Samaria \(Israel\) at http://www.biblecharts.org/](http://www.biblecharts.org/)

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