

Jonah and the Big Fish



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

Suggested Theme: God wants everyone to hear about Him. Everyone deserves a chance to choose God.

Memory Verse: “But God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost. He wants everyone to change his heart and life.” [2 Peter 3:9b, ICB](#)

Story Overview:

Nineveh was the capital city of Israel’s enemy, Assyria. The Lord commanded Jonah to go and tell the people in Nineveh that their city would be destroyed if they did not repent of their wickedness. Jonah did not want to teach the people of Nineveh because he thought they would never change. He headed in the opposite direction – away from Nineveh – to try to hide from God. When the boat 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 Nineveh and preached, the wicked people repented and turned to God. The Book of Jonah ends with Jonah still resentful that these evil people received God’s mercy.

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](#)).

Although Assyria was strong, Israel’s King Jeroboam II was able to restore Israel’s traditional borders for a time ([2 Kings 14:23-27](#)). Still, the hard feelings and prejudice remained. Israel gloated over her newfound power.

Considering his general bad feelings and fear toward Assyria, it is no wonder that Jonah did not want to go to 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 oppositely 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 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, and then he revealed Jonah's identity when the sailors cast lots. 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 would make any difference. Interestingly, these heathen sailors were reluctant to hurt Jonah, but Jonah refused to help the 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 extra room. It was possibly 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.

No one was more surprised than Jonah 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 not to bring judgment on the city. Instead of being happy, Jonah was angry. He did not like the people and did not think they deserved God's mercy. He went outside the city, 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, 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.

Study Note:

Sometimes it is difficult to place the prophets into a chronological story line because they are prophesying at the same time the kings of Israel and Judah are ruling. For instance, shortly after the events in today's story, Nineveh became the capital of Assyria. Then, years after the story of Jonah, the nation of Israel will fall and be taken into captivity by the Assyrians. It will be in those times that the prophets, Amos and Hosea will prophesy.

Way to Introduce the Story:

Before the teaching session begins, prepare several sealed containers of "smelly" items. You might try things like perfume, chocolate, oranges, etc. Ensure 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 is about one of these smells. Let the children try to guess which smell.

The Story:

Not far from Israel 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 the people slaves. Jonah was a prophet of the Lord who lived in Israel. He did not like Assyria one bit!

Jonah often gave messages from God to the people, but this time, God had a different job for Jonah. God had a message for the people of Nineveh. He told Jonah to go and tell the people of Nineveh that God 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 to ignore God. Nineveh was to the north of Israel, so Jonah travelled south. Maybe God would forget about it if Jonah 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 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 he 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 and 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 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; now God forgave them. Jonah was not happy. 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!"

God was showing Jonah that everyone – even the people of Nineveh – deserved to hear about God.

The book of Jonah ends without telling us whether or not Jonah believed what God was saying. At the beginning, Jonah did not think the people of Nineveh were too bad and did not deserve to hear God's

message. What do you think? Do you think Jonah changed his mind?

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Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using various 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 or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell 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.

[Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.](#)

View this slideshow and download it from the original source:

<https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/jonah-disobeys/>

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Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. [Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.](#)

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Review:

- What did the Lord command Jonah to do? (Go and preach to the people of Nineveh)
- Instead of obeying God, what did Jonah do? (He got on a ship headed in the opposite direction)
- When Jonah was tossed overboard to stop the storm, why didn't he drown? (A big fish swallowed him)
- After the fish spat Jonah out, what did Jonah do? (He went to Nineveh and preached)
- What surprised Jonah about the people of Nineveh?
- What did the people of Nineveh do when they heard about God? (They asked God for forgiveness and stopped their evil ways of living)
- When Jonah sat outside the city, what did God use to teach him a lesson? (A vine, a worm and a hot wind)
- Does everyone deserve the chance to hear about God? Even people who do terrible, evil things?
- What did this story teach you about God?

Reflection:

- What question do you have for God about this story?
- Why do you think Jonah did not want to preach God's message to the people of Nineveh?
- How do you think Jonah felt when the storm came up on his boat headed away from Nineveh?
- What do you think it smelled, looked, felt or sounded like when Jonah was inside the fish?
- How do you think God felt when the people of Nineveh repented and stopped living in their sinful ways?

- How did Jonah feel when the people of Nineveh repented? (angry)
- How are you similar or different from Jonah?
- Is there someone you know who hasn't heard about God? How could you show them God's love or tell them about God? (Suggestion: Pray with the children about this, and for the people they mention)
- Sometimes God asks us to do things we don't want to do. When did God ask you to do something? How did you know it was God asking you to do it? Tell us about what happened.

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a lifelong friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. [A variety of prayer methods are found here.](#)

Song Suggestions:

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

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Activities and Crafts:

- [How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.](#)
- [Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.](#)

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 being inside a big fish would feel.
- Invite someone familiar with missionary work to talk about the places where our congregation helps spread the word of God.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable "God's Story" printable reflection page. [Free printables for this story.](#)

Crafts:

- Draw a simple fish and then add a stick figure of Jonah inside.
- Make a collage (or draw pictures) depicting all kinds of people. Write “everyone deserves to hear about God” across the top of the paper.
- Make a fish puppet

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. [Free printables for this story.](#)

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Other Online Resources:

- [Colouring page \(Christian answers\)](#)
- [Colouring page with text \(Ministry Spark\)](#)
- [Craft: Illustrated instructions to make a paper boat \(Kristy Mcallister\)](#)
- [Craft: Doorknob hanger \(Sunday school crafts\)](#)
- [Craft: Printable paper craft \(Sunday school resources\)](#)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(1\) \(Church house collection\)](#)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(2\) Church house collection\)](#)
- [Activity and craft ideas \(3\) \(Church house collection\)](#)
- [Printable: Chronology of the Prophets before the Fall of Samaria \(Israel\) \(Bible charts\)](#)
- [Study material on how Jonah could have survived being swallowed by a fish \(Christian answers\)](#)

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Date

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