



Session 5
Summer 2020
Multiage

The story of Jonah

THE BOOK OF JONAH

prepare



PRAYER

Merciful God, your love is beyond our comprehension. Help me nurture in these children a wonder and thankfulness for you. Amen.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

To understand God's great mercy

STORY SUMMARY

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah boarded a ship going the other way. During a storm, Jonah convinced the sailors to throw him overboard since he believed it would calm the storm. A large fish swallowed Jonah. Jonah prayed, and after three days, the fish spit him out. Jonah went to Nineveh and said that it would be destroyed. Jonah was angry that the people repented. God appointed a bush, worm, and wind to show Jonah God's mercy for Nineveh.

teaching tips for multiage

Like Jonah, we may find it hard to follow God's example of forgiveness and mercy. Guide the children to see how God cares for everyone, even those we consider to be our enemies. God is always ready to forgive and love. Encourage discussion as you explore ways of showing love in difficult situations.

During Peace notes the group will talk about ways to show love in different situations. Pass an item around to designate whose turn it is to talk. Remind the children to respect the opinions of others.

Decide which Explore options to offer. Check Supplies and To do throughout this session to see what needs to be prepared.

An atypical prophet

Jonah and the book of Jonah differ from other prophets and prophetic books. Jonah tells a story, whereas the other prophetic books mostly contain sayings. Jonah is different from other prophets in his response to God's call. When God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh [NIN-uh-vuh], Jonah runs in the opposite direction.

The book has elements of a parable told to instruct the reader. As a parable, it teaches us about the expansiveness of God's love and the potential of all people, even our enemies, to respond to God.

Preaching to the enemy

The Assyrians [Uh-SIHR-ee-uhns] were militaristic aggressors that swept across the ancient Near East in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The prophet Nahum gives us a view of Nineveh when he says, "Ah, city of crime, utterly treacherous, full of violence, where killing never stops!"¹

We can imagine that Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, would be the last place an Israelite prophet would want to visit. Before judging Jonah too harshly, we need to reckon with the reality of Nineveh and the people to whom he was sent. Reading the story as a parable, we might ask ourselves instead, whom do *I* view as an enemy?

Nineveh turns over a new leaf

The second time God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah obeys. We know from historical records that the Assyrians had their own pantheon of gods, which included Asshur, Bel, Ishtar, Marduk, and Shamash. To these people, Jonah proclaims the word of Yahweh: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4). Shockingly—for rarely in the Bible does a prophet receive such an immediate, positive response—the people of Nineveh believe. They all fast and put on sackcloth, two actions that signify repentance.

Jonah should be thrilled—but he isn't. Jonah is angry, and he prays to God and says (roughly paraphrased): "Isn't this just what I told you, Yahweh? This is precisely why I ran away from you. I knew that this would happen, because you are a merciful God."



Why does Jonah get angry? Is it that Jonah, the prophet, does not want his prophecy to be false? There is more to Jonah's prophecy than first meets the eye. As is sometimes the case with prophetic oracles, the proclamation has two possible but opposite meanings. The Hebrew word translated *overthrown* (3:4) can mean both "destroyed" and "turned over," that is, "reformed." The second meaning suggests that Jonah's displeasure with the turn of events in Nineveh stems from the outcome of the announcement, not from his having been shown to be a false prophet. The oracle is true: Nineveh's people have reformed themselves.

Does God change?

Some translations of Jonah 3:10 suggest that after seeing the repentant behavior of the people of Nineveh, God "changes his mind." The NRSV states: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God *changed his mind* about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (emphasis mine). Perhaps a better translation is this: "God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God *renounced the punishment* He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out."² After seeing the way the people respond to Jonah's proclamation, God decides not to carry out the planned destruction. Jonah's God is a responsive God.

What about Jonah?

Shouldn't Jonah be glad that the people of Nineveh repent? The reasons for Jonah's displeasure are not spelled out, and we, as readers, are forced to fill in the gaps. The book's odd ending, which seems to conclude without commenting on Jonah's reaction, suggests that we can learn from the story of Jonah by asking ourselves, when have we acted like Jonah? When have we rooted for God's punishment of enemies?

In Jonah, we rediscover the merciful nature of God and the ability of God to work through reluctant individuals.

1. Nahum 3:1 (New Jewish Publication Society).

2. Jonah 3:10 (New Jewish Publication Society; emphasis mine).

gather

supplies

- Prayer journals (Bonus Multiage Leaflets)
- *Shine Songbook and CD* (or digital versions)
- *Annual Shine Songbooks*
- CD player
- Craft sticks or straws
- Marker or colored tape
- Battery-operated or regular candle, matches
- Pencils or crayons

resource pack

- “Ways to pray” poster
- Bible memory poster (Psalm 90)

to do

- Set up a prayer place; see page 89 of this guide.
- Prepare the craft sticks or straws for the activity in Build community.

media connections

- “God’s Story: Jonah” from Crossroads Kids’ Club (YouTube)
- “Jonah and the Fish” by Saddleback Kids (YouTube)
- Books: *The Book of Jonah* by Peter Spier; *The Forgiveness Garden* by Lauren Thompson

BUILD COMMUNITY

Invite the children to learn about one another. Collect as many craft sticks or straws as you have children. Mark the end of one stick with a marker or colored tape. Place the sticks in a container for children to each choose one. The child who gets the marked stick gets to ask one question that all children take turns answering, including the child with the stick. Repeat as time allows. Questions might include: What is your favorite _____? What do you like to do when you are at _____? If you were an animal/plant/superhero, what would you be?

WORSHIP TOGETHER

Light a candle and invite the children into a time of silence. Let the silence settle for about a minute, then pray about God being ready and willing to forgive. Sing or listen to “More Than Words” (track 11, page 16).

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Jonah didn’t have trouble telling God what was on his mind. Use the Daily prayer on the “Ways to pray” poster from the resource pack to illustrate how we can pray to God about what makes us happy, mad, confused, and sad. Invite the children to spend time alone with God. Send one child at a time to the prayer place (see To do). Display the “Ways to pray” poster in that area.

While the children take their turn in the Prayer place, the rest of the group draws or writes about a place they like to spend quiet time with God on page 2 of their prayer journals (Bonus Multiage Leaflets), as well as their praises and concerns on page 3 of the journal.

Bible memory

Today is the last session for this memory passage. Challenge the children to recite the memory passage individually or in groups.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

—Psalm 90:1–2

experience

SHARE THE STORY

Ask a child to find the book of Jonah in the Bible; use a bookmark for nonreaders. Open *Shine On* to page 154. You will begin telling the story as the group sits on a blanket, representing the boat. When the fish swallows Jonah, cover the group with a sheet. When the fish spits out Jonah, move to “Nineveh” and sit on chairs arranged in rows (the king’s throne room). When Jonah leaves Nineveh, sit by a plant, or open an umbrella over the group to represent the vine.

After the story, show the map from the resource pack. Locate Joppa, the town where Jonah boarded a boat to Tarshish. Find the arrow pointing in the direction of Tarshish, then find the arrow pointing in the direction of Nineveh. Notice how the two places are in opposite directions.

WONDER AND REFLECT

Reflect on the story together, pondering the following questions. Leave space for silent reflection, responses, and questions from the children.

- I wonder why Jonah thought he could run away from God.
- Imagine how Jonah felt while he was in the belly of the fish.
- I wonder why Jonah did not want God to forgive the people of Nineveh.
- I wonder how I can show mercy and forgiveness to others.

PEACE NOTES

Jonah expected that God would show love and forgiveness to the people of Nineveh. God wants us to show love and forgiveness to others. As a group, think of ways to show love and forgiveness in the following situations:

- You’re playing a game with friends when Jessie asks to play. You remember that Jessie cheated the last time you played a game together. What do you do?
- Darvon was messing around in art class. He spilled paint on your project and laughed about it. Now he made a dumb mistake in science class and the other kids are laughing at him. What do you do?
- The new neighbor kids pushed a small boy down and made him cry at the bus stop this morning. Now you see one of them sitting alone during school lunch. What do you do?

Then, pass an object around the circle, signaling whose turn it is to share. Let the children experience the complexity of the situations. Remind them that there are many different ways to show love and forgiveness.



The story of Jonah

The book of Jonah
Shine On, p. 154

supplies

- Bible
- *Shine On: A Story Bible*
- Talking object

storytelling props

- Blanket
- Sheet
- Chairs
- Plant or umbrella

resource pack

- Map

to do

- Prepare the story areas as described in Share the story.

explore

CREATE

Make a comfort vine with construction paper leaves. Children can trace copies of the Leaf template on page 89 of this guide. Cut out the leaves and ask children to write or draw on them things God has done for them or that give them comfort; for example, family, a favorite meal, a loved place. Connect the leaves with string and tape.

supplies

- Leaf template (from Additional resources)
- Green construction paper
- Crayons/markers/colored pencils
- Scissors
- String
- Tape

MOVE

Jonah did a lot of traveling. Make a path with tape on the floor, with traffic cones, or using crepe paper strung along chairs. Invite the children to travel along a path one at a time. Give children each a stone to carry as they think about something they're sorry for or something they want to forgive. At the end of the path they can leave the stone behind.

For larger groups: Make several paths to reduce children's waiting time.

supplies

- Supplies to make path (tape, traffic cones, or crepe paper and chairs)
- Stones

RETELL

Children can cut out the story blocks on page 3 of the Multiage leaflet and glue them in the correct order to complete "The story of Jonah" on page 1. Take turns reading the story again, this time using the story blocks and text prompts.

supplies

- Multiage leaflets
- Scissors
- Glue



LEAFLET

The children can look for Jonah and other items in "Where's Jonah?" on page 2 of the Multiage leaflet. On page 3, in "Cause and effect," they can learn how their actions matter. Read about the strange eating habits of some creatures on page 4.

supplies

- Multiage leaflets
- Pencils

other ideas

- Play "Hide-and-seek" as a reminder of how Jonah ran away and tried to hide from God.
- Connect the similarities between Jonah and Moses, both of whom were reluctant and vocal about God's plan for them.

bless

PRAY

Gather together in a circle. Ask a child to mark with stickers the categories on the “Faithful followers” poster from the resource pack that fit Jonah (*Old Testament, public speaker, traveler, called by God, changed mind, faced danger*).

Ask the children to echo each phrase in the following prayer. Pause after each sentence and cue the echo.

Dear God, you are good.
You listen to us.
You understand us.
You forgive us.
You love us.
Amen.



SEND

Send the children with these words adapted from Luke 6:36:

Be kind to others even when it's hard, just as God shows love and mercy.

Make sure to send leaflets home with the children.

supplies

- Multiage leaflets
- Small stickers

resource pack

- “Faithful followers” poster



Telling the story of Jesus and of God's love for each person is such a privilege. Our job as Sunday school teachers is to plant the seed, pray for each child in our classes, and leave the results up to the good Lord.

—Patty Woodyard
Ottawa, Ontario

leader's closing prayer

Jonah had a long-standing relationship with God. Nineveh was wicked one moment and repented the next. Both received God's mercy, but Jonah thought he deserved more. Where does God show mercy that you find hard to accept?

God, who am I to judge your fairness? Help me show the mercy you so generously show me. Amen.