

Jonah And The Great Fish

Jonah 1:1-2:10

MEMORY VERSE

MATTHEW 12:40

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:

A “Big Fish” template for each child, color tissue paper cut into small triangles (light colors), glue, poster board, crayons, and/or markers

ATTENTION GETTER!

The Big Fish

Set boundaries for your class. Each wall will represent a shore and the center of the room is the ocean. Choose one volunteer to be the big fish. Have kids line up around the shore. When the big fish yells, “swim” all players must “dive” into the ocean and move toward another shoreline. The big fish tries to tag players as they run. Anyone who’s caught before getting to another shoreline must drop immediately to the ocean floor.

Play the game again. This time, though, the captured swimmers from the previous round join the big fish to catch more swimmers. Play continues until only one swimmer remains. That child then becomes the new big fish.

LESSON TIME!

Jonah’s book is short and we are not given very much information about him. Scholars have put the date of this book around 775 – 755 BC. In this short book, we find quite a few lessons about the character of God and walking with Him. In today’s lesson, we learn that **it is foolish to run from God’s good plan for us.**

Have you ever been asked to do something and you hesitated? Maybe it was something that you didn't feel like doing. Maybe you even refused to do what you were asked to do and got into trouble. It does not make parents happy when their children refuse to do what they are asked to do. It does not make God happy when we refuse to do what He asks us to do. Jonah learned the hard way that it's a good idea to obey God when He asks us to do something. God's plan for us is the very best we can imagine. **It is foolish to run from God's good plan for us.**

JONAH 1:1-6

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish."

Nineveh was a great city ruled by the Assyrians. It had a large population, possibly even a million people. It was a wealthy city protected by a great stonewall around the city so wide that two chariots could race on top of it! The city was very strong militarily. In their self-sufficiency and pride, they did not acknowledge the true and living God. Instead, they were a wicked people who worshipped many idols.

They stood condemned. God noticed them the way He noticed Sodom and Gomorrah. He was ready to rain down judgment, but in judgment, God always remembers mercy. He decided to give them one more chance to turn from their ways; God determined to send his servant Jonah to warn them.

God wanted to use Jonah in a great way, to bring His warning that judgment was forthcoming to the unrepentant city; but, Jonah did not want to be used. Jonah was a Jew from Israel and Assyria was a Gentile nation. The Assyrians had a reputation for great cruelty to the conquered people of other nations, and they had no love for the Jews. Yet, God loved them and desired to see their salvation.

To avoid what he did not want to do, Jonah decided to run away! What was he afraid of? Being mocked or rejected? Being laughed at or ignored? Maybe he was afraid of being stoned. So, Jonah boarded a ship going to Tarshish, the opposite direction of Nineveh.

Have you ever heard the Lord instruct you and you ran away? How do we hear Him? (Most often, through His Word.) What has God told you to do with your life? Pray and read the Bible? Obey your mom and dad? Be kind and gentle with others...? **It is foolish to run from God's good plan for us.**

The ship going to Tarshish encountered a great storm. Who sent the storm? Jonah was certainly foolish to feel he could run away from God. Jonah went down below in the ship and fell asleep. Have you ever been on a boat during a storm? Jonah must have been feeling pretty miserable in heart and mind to be able to sleep in those conditions! But he did not sleep for long. The captain woke him up to pray. It seems, in those days, everyone had a god to call on and the captain wanted every god's attention to help him. Everyone on board the ship had to be praying--they thought they were going to lose their lives. So, the captain woke Jonah up. Jonah was to experience the consequences of his disobedience.

Fish Net Game

Depending on the size of your class, choose one or more sets of three students to be fishnets. Other students will be the fish. Game is played within pre-established boundaries. Fish "net" group must hold hands and move in a line to try to surround a "fish" (student). Students on ends of fish "nets" clasp hands to complete a circle around the fish to capture them.

JONAH 1:7-17

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

So he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me."

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them.

Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You."

So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Two thousand years ago there was not very much navigational or weather knowledge. The Greek and Roman cultures worshipped hundreds of gods; whenever something uncomfortable or painful or dangerous or sad was going on in their life, it was blamed on “the gods being upset.” Thus they held to the superstition that they must labor to “keep the gods happy.” Thus, the sailors did the only thing they knew how to do--try to find out which god was mad and which person he was mad at.

God used the sailor’s superstition to deal as He desired in Jonah’s life. For when they cast lots, the lot fell on Jonah. The sailors started bombarding him with questions. From other conversations, they knew he was a man of God who was fleeing from the presence of his God. Would you ever tell a group of strangers that you were trying to get away from God? Yet, God used even the stubbornness of Jonah to be a witness that He was almighty, the creator of the heavens and the earth.

The men were terrified. They wanted to make God happy in order to spare their lives, but they did not like the idea of throwing a man overboard, nor did they have any guarantee that throwing Jonah overboard was going to make the storm cease. So first they tried plan B: rowing “hard” to land.

It did not work! Now, God knew He was sending the big fish to swallow Jonah, but Jonah did not know. Jonah acted as if he would rather be dead than obey God! How foolish!

JONAH 2:1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly.

And he said: "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, And You heard my voice.

For You cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'

The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; The deep closed around me; Weeds were wrapped around my head.

I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD, my God.

"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; And my prayer went up to You, Into Your holy temple.

"Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy.

But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD."

So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Jonah had a lot to consider while down in the belly of the whale in the depths of the ocean. He knew he was suffering the consequences of running from God. He had indeed been thrown overboard; and for that reason, the sea had grown calm. Yet, he had not drowned; a great fish had come along to “save him.” God was not finished dealing with Jonah.

Can you imagine being inside of a big fish? It must be dark, slimy, and smelly inside a great fish. Do you think he was squished, getting cramped? Did he sleep in there, using a fish for pillow? Three days and three nights are a lot of hours for thinking. Jonah remembered the Lord. He came to his senses. Finally, he cried to the Lord. His beautiful prayer reflects a completely changed attitude.

Jonah’s prayer of repentance tells us that he had planted God’s Word deep inside his heart. He evidently had a good knowledge of the psalms, for the verses of his prayer are similar to Psalm 18:1-6. (See also Psalm 40:1-2, Psalm 69:1-2, Psalm 103:4, and Job 17:16.) Now, in distress, his memory of scripture prompted him to turn fully from his rebellion and acknowledge the true and living God, the God of His salvation. How important it is that we have scripture in our heart and memory. When we find ourselves in a position of pain or anguish, God’s Word will be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, leading us out of the darkness and confusion as it did Jonah.

Jonah was thankful, now! He exclaimed, "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice." He was thankful for being alive, getting a second chance. This is a very different Jonah from the stubborn man that tried to flee from the presence of God.

Jonah had a change of heart. God's plan was to send Jonah to Nineveh; now, he is ready to go! He went through much pain and suffering before he came to that "change of heart" but consider how good God was to continue to deal with Jonah in order to bring him to repentance. How good God is to give us second chances when we are disobedient.

Jonah had learned a valuable lesson the hard way; he shares it with us that we might learn it the easy way! "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercies." It is a lie for you to think that you know better for your own life than God does. It is a lie to think you can find happiness apart from God or escape from the call of God or the presence of God. To attempt to do so will only bring misery and disaster upon you. **It is foolish to run from God's good plan for us.** Do not forsake your own mercy. God is merciful and loving. Whatever God has in mind for you is truly the best thing that could ever happen to you.

Fishy Scales

For this craft, you will need one template for each child, colored tissue paper cut into small triangles (light colors), glue, poster board, crayons and/or markers. When Jonah found himself in the belly of the great fish, he turned from his sin and decided that he would follow God. In this craft, you will draw a Jonah inside of a great fish to help you remember today's lesson.

On the template, color the fins, face, and tail of the fish. Using a marker, draw a small "Jonah" inside of the belly of the fish. Cut out the fish and glue it onto the poster board. Next cut out the fish from the poster board. Layer the poster board with various colors of tissue paper. Glue the tissue pieces onto the poster board fish. Glue the tissue paper onto the fish in such a way that Jonah can still be seen through the tissue paper. Write the memory verse on the back of the fish.

PRAYER

Lead the children in a prayer of commitment to pursue rather than run from God's will and calling for their lives. If there are any children who have not yet responded to the Gospel, give them opportunity.

