

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.

Use this game to introduce today’s lesson about Jonah.

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. Today's lesson is about Jonah running away from God. And in this lesson we will learn that **God wants us to obey Him the first time.**

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. I know our Dads and Moms would not like it very well if we refused to do what they asked. God does not allow us to do that either. Jonah learned the hard way that he needs to obey God the first time. How much better if we would only learn the easy way that our lives are blessed when we obey God.

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 with a large population. It was possibly even a million people. It was a wealthy city and had no needs. It was ruled by and populated by the Assyrians. They did not think they needed God or His protection because there was a great, stonewall around the city so wide that two chariots could race on top of it!

The city was very strong militarily and the people worshipped a lot of idols. They were self-sufficient and they stood condemned because they had no relationship to the living God. God noticed them the way He noticed Sodom and Gomorrah. He was ready to rain down judgment, but He decided to give them one more chance to turn from their ways. He was going to send his servant Jonah to warn them.

God will often use people to share His message of hope and salvation. God wanted to use Jonah's life in a great way, but Jonah didn't want to be used. Jonah was a Jew from Israel and Assyria was a Gentile nation. In fact, they were not all that nice to the Jews, but God still loves everyone and desires to see them saved, whether or not they are from a certain country.

So 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. Have you ever heard the Lord instruct you,

and you ran away? How do we hear Him? Through His Word. What has He told you to do with your life? Pray? Read His Word? Obey your mom and dad? Be kind and gentle with others...? Can you think of any others? **God wants us to obey Him the first time.**

It sounds as if Jonah was pretty miserable so he 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 bad in his heart and mind to be able to sleep in those conditions! But he didn't 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. The Lord prompted the captain to wake Jonah up. The Lord wanted Jonah to experience the consequences of his disobedience. He wanted to remind Jonah that **God wants us to obey Him the first time.**

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.

Use this game to reinforce the lesson about Jonah.

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 had influenced the people of the world so much, that whenever there was something uncomfortable or painful or dangerous or sad going on in their life, it was blamed on “the gods being upset.” There were literally hundreds of gods. All of life was based on superstition and “keeping the gods happy.”

So 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. Jonah got picked (how neat that God used something they all understood to continue to show Jonah He wasn’t leaving him alone!). The sailors started bombarding him with questions. From other conversations they knew he had something to do with being a man of God and that he was running away. (Would you ever tell a group of strangers that you were trying to get away from God?! How about your whole class? Or your whole family?) How neat that these men heard about the Almighty God, the One who created the heavens and the earth.

They were terrified of Him. Remember that all of this was going on during a violent storm. They wanted to make God happy, but they did not like the idea of murdering a man. They did not really have any guarantees that throwing Jonah overboard was going to make the storm go away. They tried something else first. They went for “plan B.” How often do we say to ourselves, “I will just do this thing first; then I will do it God’s way”?

It did not work, did it? We do not know if God put the thought in Jonah’s head to be thrown overboard or not, but even though God knew He was sending the big fish to swallow Jonah, Jonah did not know it. Jonah acted as if he would rather be dead than obey God!

He certainly showed that he knew that **God wants us to obey Him the first time.**

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.

What a beautiful prayer! This prayer shows how thoughtful Jonah had grown down there in the depths of the ocean. There was a lot to consider, was there not? The fact that he had indeed been thrown overboard and the sea had grown calm was one of those things. Then there was the fact that he had not drowned, but a great fish had come along to "save him." What a testimony to Genesis 1:20-21.

Could 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's prayer shows him to be a man of scripture. A lot of these verses sound like David's prayers from Psalms.

It is a beautiful thing to have scripture in your heart and your memory when you find yourself in a position of pain or anguish. These verses are similar to Psalm 18:1-6. (See also Psalm 40:1-2, Psalm 69:1-2, Psalm 103:4, and Job 17:16.)

Jonah's prayer is words of repentance. They are words of acknowledging an Almighty God, who not only made the earth and sea and everything in it, but He commands the creatures to do His will. One of Jonah's thoughts could have been "what if this great fish had disobeyed God like I did?" This is a prayer of gratefulness for being allowed to live, for getting a second chance. He is thankful that God heard him in his distress and answered him. This is a very different Jonah from the first verse, isn't it? There is no trace of rebellion now is there?

Jonah has had a change of heart. God sure let him go through a lot of pain and suffering, but was Jonah ready to obey God before that? God is so good to keep paying attention to us even when we are disobedient. His love and care come through loud and clear while at the same time He lets Jonah find out the hard way about God's will. God's plan was to send Jonah to Nineveh.

God's plans are God's plans. It is a comfort to know and remember from the story of Jonah that God's ways are stronger and better than our ways. How good to know He gives us second chances too! And how good He is to tell us in His Word what He wants from us every day. What did we learn today? **God wants us to obey Him the first time.**

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. Next, 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 today's memory verse and your name on the back of the fish.

PRAYER

Lead the children in a prayer of commitment to obey God the first time no matter what. If there are any children who have not yet responded to the gospel, give them opportunity to do so.

