

**Jonah**  
**#thepoutingprophet**  
**Read Jonah 1-4**

**Background Information for Study Leaders**

**What is a prophet?**

Jonah is a prophet for God which means it is vital to understand a prophet's job description. Prophets do not look into a crystal ball, predict the future, and then tell people what to do.

No, a prophet's job is to speak God's Word to the people. Unfortunately God's message is not always what the people want to hear. This means prophets rarely get asked out to dinner after church on Sunday. In fact, prophets are not popular, often considered a nuisance, and worst case scenario can wind up with their head on a platter.

**What makes the book of Jonah unique?**

- It is one of the most quickly recognized stories of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.
- It is considered a classic children's bible story and if you are old enough you saw his story played out on a mysterious invention called a flannel board complete with Jonah, a boat, and a whale.
- Most prophets for the Lord give multiple prophecies; Jonah has only one prophecy to share.
- Jonah is one of only two prophets (Amos is the other) who are charged with giving a prophecy to a foreign people.
- Some prophets argued with God concerning their inability to be an effective prophet. Remember Moses who told God he couldn't speak well or Jeremiah who said he was too young. Jonah, however, goes way beyond argument and denies God's claim and attempts to flee from God's presence.
- Additionally, the book of Jonah is unique due to its remarkable circumstances, miraculous rescues, peculiar reversals and of course, lots of surprises along the way.

**Book Sections**

**The Refusal** (or Jonah, what were you thinking?)

God tells Jonah to ***"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."***(NIV)

To our modern ears, God's command does not sound that terrible, but what about it turns Jonah into the prophetic equivalent of a "runaway bride?"

The answer is Nineveh! Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, was a wicked and powerful city. Jonah had grown up hating the Assyrians and their atrocities. According to the prophet, Nahum,

Nineveh was guilty of evil plots against God, exploitation of the helpless, cruelty in war, idolatry, prostitution, and witchcraft.

So God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, about 500 miles northeast of Israel to warn of judgment and to declare the people could receive mercy and forgiveness if they repented. God was going to offer repentance to Israel's hated enemies? No way, no how, so Jonah jumped on a slow boat to Tarnish. It would be like God telling us to go to Trussville and we booked a ship to Thailand. However, Jonah will soon learn that running away from God is never a viable exit strategy.

### **A Perfect Storm**

Jonah's attempted flight away from God is blocked by a storm. Imagine being on one of the trading ships of that day and time with the perfect storm pounding down on you. Obviously, Jonah was not guilt ridden concerning his disobedience to God. While the terrified sailors were desperately praying to their individual gods and throwing cargo overboard to lighten the ship, Jonah was sound asleep below deck. The captain wakes Jonah to ask him to pray to his God.

Finally, the sailors cast lots to determine who needs to shoulder the blame for the life threatening storm. Guess who won the lottery! Jonah actually tells the sailors to throw him into the sea; he takes responsibility for the storm. But the sailors are reluctant and attempt to row to shore with no success. Then they pray to the God of Israel by saying, ***"O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased" (NIV).*** This is the height of irony; the sailors show more compassion than Jonah who refused to warn the Ninevites of the coming judgment of God. In another ironic twist, the pouting prophet who refused to become a missionary to the heathen ends up doing missionary work after all. As a result of Jonah's willingness to sacrifice himself, the sailors now believe and pray to the God of Israel. The real hero of this section is not Jonah or the sailors; it is God who can use both human beings and natural forces to bring about belief.

### **A Whale of a Tale**

The moment Jonah's toes touch the water the storm disappears, but instead of a Motel 6 Jonah takes a 3-day vacation inside a big fish. Now the flannel board story tells us Jonah was swallowed by a whale, but the word in Hebrew is **dag gadol** which means "big fish." It can also be used to describe a sea monster or serpent. So basically Jonah has 3 days to eat sushi and contemplate his behavior and this is when we see a faint sign of change in our pouting prophet.

From inside the **dag gadol**, Jonah prays a beautiful prayer/psalm ( I would strongly urge your class to read this section aloud). The words of the prayer are powerful, but even in his prayer Jonah still dodges the consequences of his actions. Jonah says, **"you hurled me into the deep, in the very heart**

**of the seas.”** Let’s just name it and claim it. Jonah is accusing God of throwing him into the stormy sea, but obviously Jonah suffers from selective memory. In a previous chapter, Jonah tells the sailors the storm is his fault and they should pick him up and throw him into the sea (Jonah 1:12). Of course we cannot overlook Jonah’s longing to see the holy temple once again. So, if that is true, then why did Jonah disobey God and run away from the Temple? To be fair, Jonah acknowledges his rescue from death (aka the pit), his willingness to sacrifice in thanksgiving to God, and how salvation comes from the Lord. Jonah has not come full circle, but at least there is progress. Immediately after Jonah’s prayer/psalm, the fish vomits Jonah onto the shore to the delight of third grade boys.

### **Nineveh’s Repentance**

This time Jonah obeys the word of the Lord and goes to Nineveh. However, he walked through the great city for three days, preaching the shortest and least heart felt sermon in history. Jonah the pouting prophet proclaims, **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”** Much to Jonah’s shock and probably horror, the entire city repents all the way from the king down to even the animals. Look what happens when Jonah is faithful and obedient to God; thousands of lives are saved. But Jonah is horrified; these people of Nineveh are the enemy and God should know better than to save people who did not deserve saving.

### **Jonah Pouts It Out**

So what does our prophet do? He gets mad and acts like a whiny two-year old who has missed his nap. Jonah walks outside the city and builds a shelter and pouts it out. He is confident God will change his mind; after all Jonah knows best. Jonah is sure God will destroy the city so he waits and he waits and he waits some more. Despite his childish attitude, God provides a vine to give shade from the scorching sun and Jonah was very happy about the vine.

But the next day, God changes tactics. He provides a worm that destroys the shading vine, sends a scorching wind and now the sun beats down on Jonah like Alabama in August. Our very dramatic prophet tells God he would rather die than live. But God turns the tables on our pouting prophet with a question. “Jonah, do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” Jonah of course says he is angry enough to die. God reminds Jonah and us who is in charge. God tells Jonah that he did not tend or make the vine grow. It grew overnight and then died overnight. But Nineveh has over 120,000 people and should I not be concerned about this great city? Jonah is silent.

### **A story with no resolution**

And here comes the best part; there is no real ending to our story. It just stops. We don’t know what Jonah said or did next and to me that is the section of our story with such potential. Why? It forces us to ask our own questions and write our own ending. Here’s the thing: God is going to accomplish his

goals with our without us; I don't believe God was done with Jonah and I know God is not done with us. So, for that and so much more, we thank God for a pouting prophet named Jonah.

**Questions (Please pick and choose which questions your group would like to cover)**

1. Does the story of Jonah make you smile, and if so, when and how and why? Do you think it was designed to make its readers smile? Why or why not? How might humor help to get its message across to people?
2. What does God's initial call and Jonah's response tell us about Jonah and how do they shape the rest of the story? Have you, like Jonah, ever run away from God's call? What happened?
3. What storms in your life have revealed God to you?
4. In what ways are the sailors religious? How do their actions, their questions, and their prayers help us answer this question?
5. Jonah was swallowed up before changing his behavior. What swallowed you up before you understood God's love for you and/or were willing to change your behavior?
6. Jonah never seemed to take responsibility for his actions; when have you attempted to blame the consequences of your actions on others or even on God?
7. How does Jonah's attitude towards the Ninevites compare with the sailors' attitude towards him? Does this challenge attitudes in your community?
8. Jonah's problem with God is God is more merciful than Jonah wants. Have you ever felt the same? What did you learn from that experience?
9. If you could write an ending to the book of Jonah what would it be?
10. What are the lessons from the book of Jonah?