



## ***Jonah***

A narrative about justice and God's concern for all people.

## ***THE BIBLE***

Jonah 1-4

*Prepare for the Story*

## **ICEBREAKER**

What is the hardest thing you've ever been asked to do? Were you able to do it? Share about what that experience was like.

*Rewind the Story*

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- Divided Kingdom – Israel (North) & Judah (South)
- Elijah – Ahab, Jezebel, and the contest on Mt. Carmel
- Passing the Torch – Elisha's Ministry

*Hear the Story*

### **Scene One: God Calls, Jonah Runs**

While Elisha was serving God in Israel, He called Jonah, another man from Israel, to be His prophet to another group of people. God spoke to Jonah, saying, *"Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."*

Jonah heard God's instruction, but instead of going to Nineveh, he got up and went in the opposite direction. At the port in Joppa, he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and got on board, hoping to avoid the task God had asked him to complete.

### **Scene Two: Trouble on the High Seas**

While en route to Tarshish, God sent a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and began to throw their cargo overboard to lighten the load. While this was happening, Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold.

The captain found him, woke him, and asked, *"How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."*

Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots indicated that Jonah was the culprit. "Who are you?" They demanded. "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from?"

Jonah answered them, saying, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship Yahweh, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." This terrified them, and they asked, "What have you done?" and since the storm was getting worse, they asked him, "What should we do to you to stop this storm?"

*"Throw me in the sea,"* Jonah said, *"and it will become calm again. I know that all of this is my fault."* The sailors didn't want to do this, but the storm kept getting worse, and Jonah insisted it was the only way.

The sailors cried out to Jonah's God, *"Please, Yahweh, do not let us die because of this man's mistakes. If we do this, please don't hold it against us because you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reason."*

So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the moment Jonah hit the water, the storm dissipated. The sailors were in awe of God's power, and they offered sacrifices and vowed to serve Yahweh instead of their gods.

### **Scene Three: Three Difficult Days**

While the sailors found safety from the storm, God provided Jonah his own form of deliverance; he arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. For the next three days, Jonah remained alive inside the belly of the great fish.

During this time, Jonah cried out to God from inside the fish, saying: *"When I was in trouble, I called out to you, LORD, and you answered me ... I almost drowned in the waves; the waters were deep all around me, and I sank to the sea floor. I thought I had died, I thought I had gone down to the grave forever. But you brought me back from the pit, from the edge of death you saved me ... Some people worship worthless idols as their gods, but not me. I will give sacrifices and praise to you for the rest of my life because you are the God who saves."*

The Lord heard Jonah's prayer and knew his heart had changed, so after three days, God commanded the great fish to release Jonah, and he was spat up on dry land.

### **Scene Four: Jonah's Second Chance**

Then God spoke to Jonah again and instructed him, *"Go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce to the Assyrians the message I give you."* This time Jonah obeyed. He went directly to the city and began sharing the message that God had given him.

The city was very large – so large, in fact, that it took Jonah three days to share the message with all the people. As he went through the city, this is the message he shared with the people, *"In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed."*

Upon hearing the message, the people of Nineveh believed God and listened to his warning. As was their custom, a fast was proclaimed, and every person, from the most important to the least important, put on sackcloth to mourn their situation and acknowledge their sins.

Jonah's message reached the king of Nineveh, and when He heard the warning from God, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robes, and joined the people, covering himself in sackcloth.

Then the King sent this message to his people, *"By order of the King and his nobles, I give this order: Do not let people or animals taste anything. This includes your herds and flocks. Every living thing in the kingdom must not eat or drink anything. Then every person and animal should put on sackcloth and let everyone call out urgently and desperately to God. Immediately stop doing what is selfish and evil. Perhaps, if we do this, God might take pity on us. Maybe he will have mercy on us and show us compassion so that we might avoid the destruction that we deserve."*

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He took pity on them and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

### **Scene Five: The Plant, the Worm, and the Wind**

The people of Nineveh heard God's message and repented, avoiding certain ruin, this should have been good news for Jonah, but the results were not what he wanted. He believed the Assyrians deserved God's punishment, so he became angry that God had let them off the hook.

He prayed to God and said, *"LORD, isn't this exactly what I told you would happen? This is why I ran away to Tarshish. I know that you are gracious, tender, and kind. I am aware that you are slow to anger and full of love. I have first-hand experience that you are a God who takes pity on people; you don't want them to be destroyed. But God, this is not right. These people deserve your wrath. If this is how things are, take away my life. If this is how you handle our enemies, I would rather die than live."*

God heard Jonah's prayer and replied, *"What do you have to be angry about?"*

Hearing God's response, Jonah didn't want to spend another minute around the Assyrians, so he stormed off and found to rest outside of the city. Then he made a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and shade in the shade to see if anything would happen to the city.

While he was resting, God arranged for a leafy plant to spring up. It grew over Jonah, and the shade it provided cooled him off. In the shade, he was comfortable and began to cheer up; Jonah was finally able to rest.

But while Jonah slept that night, God sent a worm. It chewed the plant, destroying the leaves, and the plant withered away. When the sun rose, God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he was so overheated that he began to faint. He cried out to God, *"I'd rather die than live."*

Then God spoke to Jonah and said, *"What right do you have to get angry about this plant?"* "I've got plenty of right," Jonah replied, *"It's made me so angry I would rather die than deal with this heat."*

Then God said, "Who do you think you are? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a little bit of shade ... shade which you did nothing to get? You didn't sow the seed. You didn't water the plant. It grew up one night and died the next night, I'm the One who made it grow, and I'm the One who sent the worm, and I'm the One who send the wind. I was working through all of them. I'm the One who makes the decisions.

*"Do you really want the Assyrians to get what they deserve? Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who still don't know me; should those who don't know better stand condemned?"* "Should I show you mercy and not them?"

#### Retell the Story

- Who was Jonah, and what did God ask him to do?
- How did Jonah respond to God's request?
- What happened while Jonah was on a boat to Tarshish?
- What happened with the sailors?
- How did God deliver the sailors and Jonah?
- What happened while Jonah was in the belly of the fish?
- How did Jonah respond to his second chance?
- What was the response from the Assyrians to Jonah's message?
- How did Jonah feel about God's decision?
- What object lesson did God use to challenge Jonah's mindset?

## Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What from this story made you wonder?
- Why do you think Jonah's first reaction was to run in the opposite direction?
- Why do you think God was so concerned for Nineveh, a city that had oppressed His people?
- Why do you think God gave Jonah a second chance to deliver a message to Nineveh?
- In what ways does Jonah change? In what ways does he stay the same?
- Why did God's mercy make Jonah mad?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of **other** stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- What do you notice from this story about God's character or qualities?

## 1) ROCK BOTTOM

Jonah's story is an excellent example of what it looks like to hit rock bottom. While you may not know what it's like to spend three days in the belly of a fish, many people have been at their lowest and experienced the same thing with God. When we hit rock bottom, we cry out to God. Consistently the scriptures teach that God hears our prayers even when we are far from Him. Why do you think it takes us to hit rock bottom before we turn to God? Does God NEED us to experience the worst of things so that we can turn to Him and experience the BEST of things?

## 2) GOD'S PEOPLE

From Jonah's story, we learn one monumental truth. God values people – all people. Sadly, the same can not be said for all who claim to follow Jesus. Why is that? Why do many Christians look for ways to exclude people from God's kingdom instead of inviting them into it? Why don't we see all people as children of God, made in His image, and worth saving, redeeming, and restoring to wholeness? How can we make sure that we see all people the way God sees them?

## 3) DO HARD THINGS

When faced with an overwhelming task, Jonah didn't rise to the occasion ... instead, he ran the other way. What is it that keeps us from believing that God can use us to do incredible things? What ceilings have we placed on ourselves, or what limiting beliefs keep us from God's preferred future? What's one hard thing that God might be asking you to do in this next season?

## Pray

God,

*We confess that too often when you have asked us to do something, we have gone the other way. We apologize for the times we have argued with you and ignored your direction. Lord, we want to build your kingdom; give us the courage to be obedient, especially when it seems difficult. We also confess that at times we have been unfair and biased, judging people based on what we see and neglecting that they are made in your image. God, break our hearts for what breaks yours. Help us to see every person the way you see them. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and the courage to extend the invitation to all people to join Your Kingdom. Amen.*