

WHO, ME?



JONAH

RUNNING FROM GOD

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WHO, ME?

Each of us has a story to tell, a journey of faith that began at God's invitation and will continue throughout eternity. In the *Who, Me?* series you'll be drawn into the life of one person in Scripture by hearing their ancient story and exploring it in deeper ways. As you immerse yourselves in Jonah's life your group will see how God was at work and is still at work in similar ways in our lives today. You'll use essential questions to find points of connection between your life and Jonah's, so that you can experience God's grace more fully and grow as a follower of Christ.

GETTING STARTED

Jonah: Running from God and all of the Bible studies in the *Who, Me?* series, are designed to be easy to use in large or small group settings for Bible study, youth group, church school, or para-church ministry. Aside from a few supplies, you'll find everything you need on one disc, including an outline of the essential questions for the study, all of the leader's materials with Bible backgrounds, and printable pages for use within your group. Simply make as many copies of the leader and participant materials as you need.

STRUCTURE

Each Bible study in this series follows the same pattern:

- **The Study Outline:** This outline offers a quick look at the questions you'll be exploring in each session.
- **Scripture, Materials, and Bible Background:** This section helps leaders prepare. We hope leaders will spend time prayerfully reading the Bible passage and Bible background in advance, and gathering or printing the materials listed for the session.
- **Connecting:** This section offers ideas for getting started as your group arrives.
- **Rewind:** After session 1 the short Rewind section will recap where you've been so far in the study. It's also an opportunity for the group to share ways they saw themes from the previous session emerge in their lives throughout the week.
- **Hearing the Story:** In this step a portion of the Bible story or passage is shared by the leader or someone in the group, and a short discussion follows.
- **Entering the Story:** This step helps you engage the story a second time in creative and imaginative ways that draw out your questions and open you up to the Spirit's nudging and new insights about the story.
- **Living the Story and In My Life:** Here the rubber meets the road, usually through a time of discussion and reflection. Each person has the chance to consider how God is speaking to them and seeking to shape them through this story.
- **Closing prayer:** Depending on the timeframe you are working with, you may want to use this time for a brief prayer or expand it to include the requests of the group.
- **Additional Ideas:** Each session will include at least two additional ideas for you to use along with or in place of ideas that were offered in the session. You know your group best, so always read these additional options and build a session that will work best for you.

This study is intended to be a tool for you, so feel free to tweak and change any part of it to fit your unique ministry setting!



JONAH OUTLINE

SESSION ONE: CHAPTER 1 p. 6

Essential Questions: Who or where is your Ninevah? Are there people you think are unworthy of God's love? Why is it difficult to love our "enemies"? Where is your Tarshish? Where do you turn when you don't want to do God's will? Where do you go to try to escape from God or from the harsh realities of the world? How does God use "storms" in life to make his will clearer?

SESSION TWO: CHAPTER 2 p. 14

Essential Questions: What kinds of things keep you from praying? When have you been disappointed with prayer in your life? How do you choose what to say to God in prayer? For whom is prayer more important: God or us? When have you experienced real transformation in prayer?

SESSION THREE: CHAPTER 3 p. 22

Essential Questions: What does it mean to repent? How many chances do you think God should give people to repent? How many mistakes are too many? Can someone be too evil for forgiveness? What does repentance require of people? Why is it so difficult? How do you know when you need to repent?

SESSION FOUR: CHAPTER 4 p. 28

Essential Questions: What does grace mean to you? What places or people do you know that could use some grace instead of judgment? Where in your life do you need to take the "plank out of your own eye" before you judge the splinter in others' eyes?



SCRIPTURE

Jonah 1

MATERIALS

- Bibles or printout of Jonah 1 (p. 11), one per person
- Writing utensil for each person
- Printouts of the descriptions of Nineveh, Tarshish, and Jonah (p. 12)
- Printouts of the In My Life page for each participant (p. 13), optional

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Without wasting any words, verse one puts us right in the middle of the action. God commands Jonah to go to “the great city Nineveh and preach against it.”

To the Israelites, Nineveh is not only a great pagan city at the center of the Assyrian empire but a symbol of violence and oppression. Jonah is to preach against Nineveh because its wickedness has come up before God.

At this point there is no hint of God’s love for Nineveh, or the remotest idea that Nineveh might repent. Jonah only knows that he’s supposed to go there as a prophet of doom and judgment—that’s it.

But here the narrative takes a strange turn. Reading all the other prophets, we expect to see that Jonah sets off and goes to Nineveh. But, shockingly, the pattern is broken. Jonah not only says no to God’s command but flees in the opposite direction and heads toward the sea.

Strangely, the text offers no hint of why Jonah refuses God’s call. Was he afraid of the brutal Ninevites? They were widely despised and feared because of their violent conquest and enslavement of other nations. Did Jonah resent God for laying claim to his life? Did Jonah suspect that God might be merciful to the undeserving Ninevites?

Whatever his reasons for doing so, Jonah boards a ship sailing for Tarshish. He might as well be headed to Timbuktu. Tarshish is as far to the west as Nineveh is to the east. But once on board, and facing a fierce storm, the presumably pagan sailors prove to be more godly than the prophet himself. They ask all of their shipmates to pray to their gods for help.

When nothing happens, the sailors cast lots to discover who is angering the gods. The lot falls on Jonah. He admits that he worships the one who made heaven and earth; in other words, Jonah's God is greater than all the other gods. He had already told the sailors that he was running away from his God (v. 10)—a fact that fills them with fear. So they ask Jonah what should be done.

Jonah tells them the storm is his fault and that they should throw him overboard, as a kind of sacrifice. To their credit, the sailors hesitate, trying instead to row back to land. But their efforts are in vain. When they finally decide to take the dreadful measure of throwing a man overboard, they cry out to God to forgive them for what they're about to do. When they throw Jonah overboard the sea immediately calms. Then they worship God, the maker of heaven and earth.

It seems that Jonah is destined by God to be an evangelist, whether or not he agrees. Even his refusal brings about the faith of pagans, just as his surly denunciation of the Ninevites will later ignite their repentance.

But God will not let Jonah go. He sends a great fish to swallow Jonah up, and the prophet spends three days and nights in the fish's belly.

CONNECTING (VARIED)

As your group arrives, encourage everyone to share stories from their week. Do this as people are coming in and getting settled. If you like, provide snacks for people to munch on while they listen. Don't put any pressure on the group to get philosophical about their stories. But if the timing feels right, encourage some of them to share stories about where and how they've seen God working in their lives over the past week. Wrap up this time by opening in prayer.

REWIND (5 MINUTES)

In future sessions this step will give you time to review where you've been in the Jonah story. For this first session, introduce the Jonah series by saying a few words about why you chose this study and why the book of Jonah interests you. Explain the format to your group: each week you'll start by talking a little about what is happening in your own lives. Then you'll spend a few minutes reviewing what you've already discussed before hearing the next portion of the story and exploring it together in a variety of interactive ways. Invite the group members to look for similarities between their own lives and the life of Jonah.

HEARING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

READ JONAH 1

This is an important step in helping students engage with the story. Think of yourself as a storyteller. Practice a few times reading the story from your Bible or the Jonah 1 printout before your group meets so you'll be able to look up occasionally to make eye contact and make sure your group is engaged. Pause occasionally for emphasis, or repeat key verses. When you're finished sharing the story, ask everyone to open their Bibles to Jonah 1, or hand out the printout of Jonah 1.

In the future, rather than telling the story yourself each time, consider assigning students to present the story to the group.

Lead a short discussion, using all or some of the following questions:

- What are the main events in the story?
- What is the key conflict in the story?
- Describe the setting—where does this take place?
- Who are the main characters in the story? Ask your group to describe what each one is like. (The sailors provide an interesting contrast to Jonah, so spend a few minutes talking about them. For example, the sailors seem to fear Jonah’s God more than Jonah himself does. They seem very willing to do God’s will, even though they may not know God at all. They also show mercy to Jonah by not throwing him overboard when he first tells them to, and they repent when they do have to throw him overboard.)
- Do you identify yet with any of the people in the story?
- What don’t we know about the story at this point?

Tell your group that, as with most stories, we need background and context to fully understand it. There are things, people, and places in the Jonah story that we don’t know much about yet—like Nineveh, Tarshish, and even Jonah himself!

Use these questions to help get everyone thinking about these missing pieces:

- Why would knowing more about Nineveh, Tarshish, or Jonah help us understand the story better?
- What do we need to know about them?

ENTERING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

ACTIVITY

If you have six or more people in your group, divide them into three smaller groups. Give each group the activity printout of Nineveh, Tarshish, or Jonah.

If your group is larger, divide the members into six smaller groups and print out two of each descriptor paragraph. If your group is smaller, divide into just two groups, giving each the Jonah printout and either the Nineveh or the Tarshish printout.

Have each group plan and perform a short retelling of Jonah 1, given the new information they have just received. Explain that the key is to tell the story in a way that highlights the additional background information. Encourage the students to both speak and act. They don’t have to use the text’s exact words. (In fact, you might consider taking their sheets from them and asking them to retell the story from memory.)

Here are a few ideas you can give to groups that are struggling with this assignment:

- Suggest that the Tarshish group retell the story by including a commercial for Tarshish as a get-away spot where you can go to “forget your troubles.”

WHO, ME? IN MY LIFE



Who or where is your Nineveh? Is there anyone you think of as being unworthy of God's love?

Why is it difficult to love our "enemies" or to love people we think are evil? How does this story make you think differently?

Where is your Tarshish? Where do you turn when you don't want to do God's will? Where do you go to escape dealing with difficult people or situations?

How is God using "storms" in your life to show you where you need to make changes?

How can you better learn to accept God's will, even if it scares you or you don't agree with it?