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infuse

Jonah

fish, flaws, forgiveness





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Jonah

fish, flaws, forgiveness

by Linda Rozema
and Faith Alive staff



Grand Rapids, Michigan

*“Should I not have concern for the
great city Nineveh . . . ?”*

—Jonah 4:11

We are grateful for the many comments and helpful suggestions of interested small groups and leaders who contributed to the development of this study. Special thanks go to Christin Baker, Amy Brown, and Gwen Genzink for reviewing and commenting on this study of Jonah.

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Map: Matthew P. Faber

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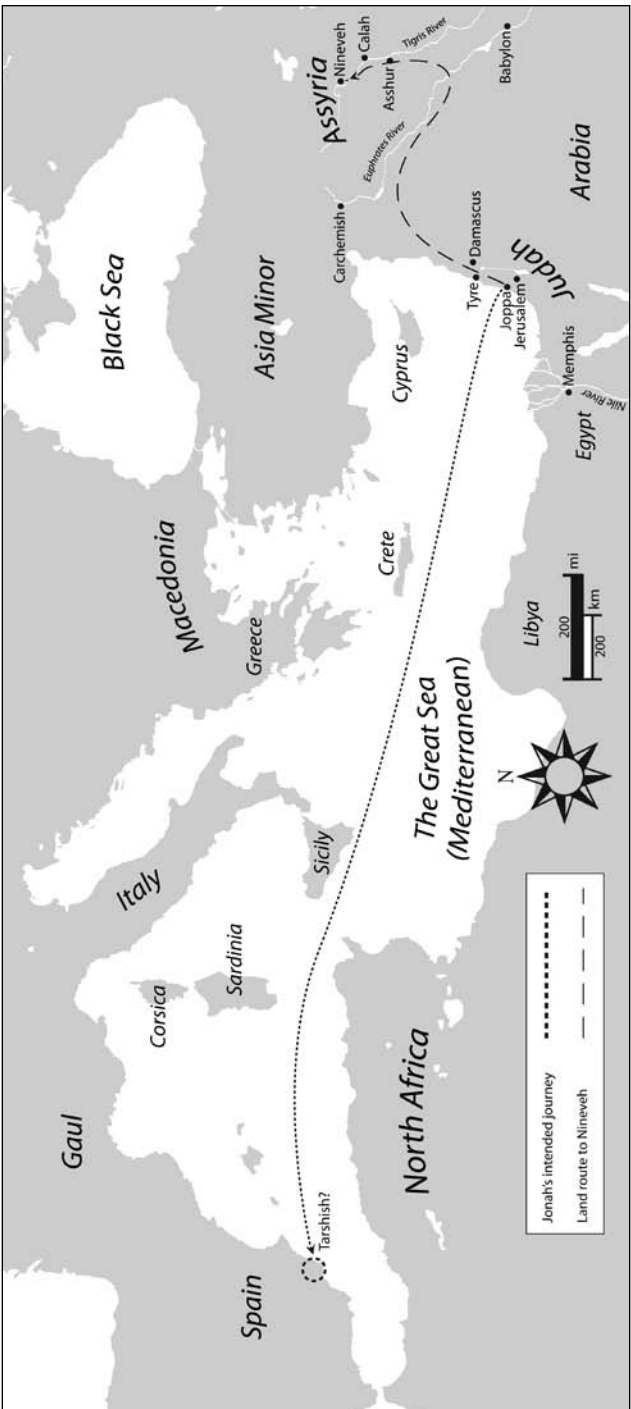
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4 Map of Jonah's Travels



Glossary

Amittai—the father of Jonah (Jon. 1:1). See *Jonah*.

fast (fasting)—an ancient religious practice in which people would go without food and/or water for set periods of time; in the Jewish tradition this was often accompanied by prayer to God for help in a time of great need (see 2 Chron. 20:2-4). In the regular practice of many religions today, people abstain from food during the day and drink only water; then at sundown they eat certain foods according to tradition in order to maintain their health.

Hebrew—a Jew or Israelite. Abram (Abraham) is the first person in the Bible to be called a Hebrew, probably in connection with his ancestor Eber (see Gen. 10:21; 11:16). The *TNIV Study Bible* explains that “‘Eber’ is the origin of the Hebrew word for ‘Hebrew.’”

idol—in ancient times, usually a sculpted or manufactured image worshiped as a god. In our day, an idol can be anyone or anything besides God that takes first place in our lives.

Jonah—a prophet of God (c. 800-750 B.C.) from the town of Gath Hopher in northern Israel (2 Kings 14:25; see Josh. 19:13). Jonah prophesied that Israel’s boundaries would be expanded to the north and south, and this

happened during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (c. 790-753 B.C.).

Joppa—a major port on the ancient eastern Mediterranean coast. Today it is called Jaffa, and it’s a suburb of Tel Aviv, Israel.

the Lord—God Almighty, the covenant God of Israel. God made a covenant (promise agreement) with Abraham, the father of the Israelites, promising to make him into a great nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; Ex. 3:13-17).

lots (casting lots)—Since ancient times people have used lots as a means of deciding something (as by chance), or to try to determine something that was unknown. In the Jonah story the sailors cast lots to try to find out who was to blame for the storm (Jon. 1:7). Casting or drawing lots has been done in many ways—by flipping a coin, throwing dice or other small objects with marks on them, drawing sticks of different lengths, pulling different-colored pieces out of a hat, and so on. Sometimes the Lord chose to reveal things to people through lot casting. See Numbers 27:18-21 for God’s instructions on lot casting in Joshua’s day. Other lots approved by God for use in Israel were the Urim and Thummim, to be placed in

the breastpiece of the sacred ephod worn by the priest of God (see Ex. 28:30).

Nineveh—a major city of the Assyrian Empire (c. 950-612 B.C.), a brutal, oppressive regime that was often a threat to ancient Israel. Nineveh became the capital of Assyria around 700 B.C. under Sennacherib (see 2 Kings 18:17-19:37), who built up its architecture and influence. The Babylonians totally destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C., and it was never rebuilt. Today its ruins lie across the Tigris River from Mosul in Iraq.

prophet—someone God chooses to speak his message (see Deut. 18:17-19); generally a person who preached God's Word and (in some cases) foretold the future as revealed by the Lord.

sackcloth—coarse material worn to show remorse or grief.

sacrifice—an offering to God, a gift of special value brought to God as an expression of worship. In Old Testament times, various livestock (the best of a flock of sheep, goats, cattle, or birds) and grains (firstfruits of harvest) were offered as sacrifices of guilt, sin, and gratitude for God's goodness (see Lev. 1-7; 16).

salvation—God's deliverance of his people, ultimately from the curse of sin and death.

Tarshish—a city that was probably in the western Mediterranean, possibly the same as Tartessos, a mining colony in Spain. In the story of Jonah, it appears that Jonah heads

for Tarshish to travel as far away as possible from Nineveh, where God has told him to go (Jon. 1:1-3).

temple—in ancient Israel, the temple for the worship of God was in Jerusalem and was built by Solomon around 946 B.C. This temple was destroyed when the Babylonians took Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

How to Use This Study

This Bible study aims to help people engage in lively discussion and learning without having studied the text before doing each lesson together.

Map, Glossary

Near the front of this booklet are a map and a glossary that can be useful for locating places and the meanings of terms used in the book of Jonah.

Questions for Discussion

The main questions for discussion are numbered and are in bold print. Along with these questions you'll find points "to think about as you discuss" to help spark ideas for responding to each main question. In addition, you'll often see questions that help to connect the story to everyday life under the subheading "What does this mean to me?"

Please do not feel you have to answer every question in the lesson material. Our goal is to help make Bible study a creative, flexible, exploratory exercise in which you engage with your group and grow to know God and each other better.

Episodes

Some of the lesson materials are divided into Episodes. Together with your group you should feel free to decide whether you want to do all the

episodes of a lesson in one meeting, or perhaps do just one episode and then wait till your next meeting to pick up where you left off. The choice is yours!

Follow-up Ideas

At the end of each lesson are ideas that you might like to use for follow-up. These include Explore! activities that can help you learn more about items of interest related to the lesson, develop service projects that help you apply your learning to everyday life, or come up with creative writing or art that connects with the lesson material. There are also movie and video suggestions.

Break Away (at-home readings)

After the material for each lesson you'll also find readings for use at home. Take a break with God and do some thinking about the lesson material and how the Lord can use it to shape your life. If you like, clip these pages out and set them in places around your home or at work where they can remind you to spend time with God. You might also like to memorize some of the Scriptures used in these pieces.

An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment

If you're searching for a relationship with God, or studying with a friend who is searching, see An Invitation (to believe and commit to God) and the

Prayer of Commitment provided at the back of this booklet. These can be helpful in talking one-to-one with God or with someone who is ready to make a faith commitment to God.

Leader's Notes

At the Faith Alive website page featuring this Bible study—see www.FaithAliveResources.org, search for “Jonah,” and click on the link “Leader’s Notes”—you’ll find tips for leading this small group study.

We wish you God’s blessing as you participate in Bible study together. Have fun as you learn and grow closer to God and one another!

Introduction

In the story of Jonah, the Lord calls an unlikely prophet to preach to an unlikely, enemy people. God wants to warn the hostile, cruel Assyrians of Nineveh that they will soon be destroyed for their wickedness.

Jonah the prophet doesn't like the Assyrians because they are the enemies of his own people, Israel. He doesn't want anything to do with the Assyrians. But God has other plans—and one thing we learn from this story is that God will work things out for good according to his will, even if someone like Jonah doesn't like it.

As you study the short book of Jonah, invite the Lord, through his Holy Spirit, to enlighten the “eyes of your heart” and give you an understanding of this passage of Scripture (see Eph. 1:18). Seek to study, discuss, and pray with others, if possible, as you work through these lessons. A trio of the Holy Spirit, a friend (or friends), and yourself provides a relational environment for learning from God's Word (see Matt. 18:20).

Lesson 1

On the Run

Jonah 1:1-16

In this lesson we meet the Lord and Jonah and some people Jonah encounters on a journey. God has a job lined up for Jonah, and we soon see how Jonah reacts to it. As we explore the first part of Jonah's adventure, let's keep an eye open for the way Jonah deals with God and others.

Option: Before you begin discussing the story of Jonah, you may wish to read the whole book (it's quite short). Some groups have found that reading the whole book ahead of time gives them a better perspective from which to respond to discussion questions.

Opener (optional)

Have you ever received an assignment that you thought was totally unreasonable? How did you respond?

EPISODE 1

Note: This lesson is divided into episodes. With your group you should feel free to do either the whole lesson or just the first episode during your first meeting. Then at your next meeting you can pick up where you left off.

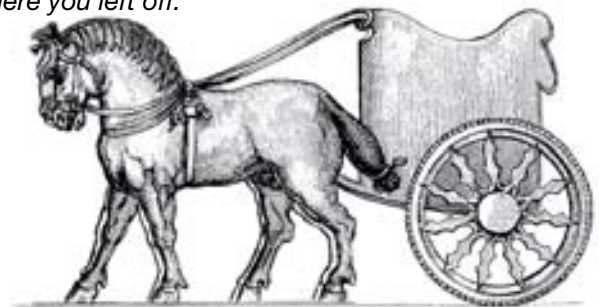
Jonah 1:1-2

1. What assignment does the Lord have for Jonah?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- where Jonah is commanded to go
- what that would mean to someone like Jonah
- how Nineveh is described in these opening lines

Nineveh was a major city of the **Assyrian Empire** (c. 950-612 B.C.), a brutal, oppressive regime that was often a threat to Israel. (Jonah served as a prophet around 800-750 B.C.) To punish Israel for its wickedness, God eventually sent Assyria to topple the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.



2. Why do you think God would command this?

3. Read 2 Kings 14:23-27—what does this tell us about the prophet Jonah?

See **glossary** for the meaning of **prophet**.

To think about as you discuss . . .

- what Jonah had prophesied
- notes on this passage in a study Bible, if you have one handy. We recommend the *TNIV Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2006).

Jonah 1:3

4. How does Jonah respond to God's instructions?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- where Jonah goes and why he might do this

What does this mean to me?

- Have you ever tried to run from God or avoid something that you knew God wanted you to do? Explain.

FLASHBACK

While Jonah was a prophet in Israel (around 780 B.C.), Jeroboam II was king of the northern ten tribes of Israel. (Israel had originally had twelve tribes but had split into two kingdoms that became known as Israel and Judah—see 1 Kings 12.) Though Jeroboam II did “evil in the eyes of the LORD,” God announced through Jonah that Jeroboam II would expand Israel’s boundaries nearly to the position they had about 200 years earlier, under Solomon (2 Kings 14:24-25; see 1 Kings 4:24). Jeroboam II accomplished that after Israel’s latest oppressor to the north, Damascus, was weakened by the Assyrians in 773-772 B.C.

Joppa is an ancient seaport northwest of Jerusalem (see map). Today it is called Jaffa, and it is a suburb of Tel Aviv in Israel.

Tarshish is thought to have been a port on the coast of Spain. It would be as far west or as far away from Nineveh as Jonah could go in the commercial world of that day.

More About Nineveh and the Assyrians

Nineveh was one of the world's oldest cities. Genesis 10:11-12 shows that even in early times, grouped with other cities nearby, it was known as "the great city" (see Jon. 1:2; 3:2). The history of the Assyrian people, who occupied Nineveh in Jonah's day, goes back nearly 7,000 years. Many people who identify themselves as Assyrians today are Christians belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East, founded in the second century A.D. Modern-day Mosul, Iraq, lies across the Tigris River from the ruins of ancient Nineveh and is home to a large population of Assyrian Christians.

Jonah 1:4-10

5. How do Jonah's actions affect everyone else in the story?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how the Lord responds to Jonah's actions
- how the sailors react and what they do to try to survive
- what Jonah does and how the captain reacts to this

6. How do the sailors find out the cause of all this trouble?

What do they learn? (See vv. 7-9.)

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how the sailors try to discern the cause of the storm
- the questions they ask, and how Jonah answers (see Ps. 95:5)
- consider also how Jonah can declare such a belief in God and yet disrespect God's commands

7. Why do you think this makes the sailors even more afraid?

(See v. 10.)

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the significance of Jonah's answer, considering the storm they are in
- what Jonah has also told them (about running from God)



Assyrian relief (c. 860 B.C.) showing cuneiform writing

See **glossary** for info about **lot casting**.



Jonah 1:11-17

8. Picture the ship and crew reeling and straining as the storm grows wilder and wilder. What do you notice about the sailors as they respond to Jonah's plan?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- the sailors' first reaction to Jonah's proposal
- their cry to the Lord as the sea grows even rougher
- what this tells us about the sailors

9. What happens after Jonah is thrown overboard?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- what the sea does
- what the sailors do
- what the Lord does for Jonah

EPISODE 2

10. If you haven't already done so, take some time to read (or skim through) the rest of the short book of Jonah. (We'll look at Jonah 2-4 in more detail in the next few lessons.) What clues do you find that help us learn more about Jonah and about God?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- note especially some key lines in Jonah 2:2; 3:1-5, 10; 4:1-3, 11

11. Reflect on the story as a whole. Many readers have concluded that this story or some parts of it are not historical. What parts of the story do you think they might wonder about, or what reasons would they give? Are there parts you wonder about? Explain.

To think about as you discuss . . .

- See the box below for different views about the book of Jonah. See also additional interpretations in the appendix on pages 55-59.

A Big “Fish Story,” Real History, Something Else?

Is the Bible’s story about Jonah a description of actual events in history? Or is it more like a parable intended to teach a lesson? Interpreters have taken various positions:

- Some have said Jonah’s story must be entirely factual because it’s in the Bible.
- Others have said the story is monstrously unbelievable and think it shouldn’t be in the Bible.
- Many point to Jesus’ statement about “the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:4; 11:29-30) as proof that the story must be true.
- Others say Jonah’s survival for three days and nights in the “belly of the fish” (Jon. 1:17), along with other miracles in the story (4:6-8), must be legend or fantasy. Some add that composing a psalm in the belly of a monster would be ridiculous.
- They are countered by an argument that because God can do all kinds of miracles (such as creation—Gen. 1-2; the parting of the Red Sea—Ex. 14-15; the virgin birth of Christ—Luke 1:26-38), God surely could keep Jonah alive in a fish’s belly. Others suggest that Jonah may have died inside the fish but was then restored to life, like people in other stories (see 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:8-37).
- Debates continue about whether the “huge fish” was a whale or a whale shark or maybe some other, now extinct, sea creature—or perhaps a special creature God made for this purpose.
- Other interpreters, looking at the literary structure of the story, at some of the words it uses (4th-5th century versus 8th century B.C.), and at the high number of miracles, conclude that it is probably a parable (or maybe an allegory, and possibly midrash, a form of storytelling that aims to expand on teachings in the biblical text) intended to teach an important point to God’s people: *that God loves and cares for all people, not just the Israelites—so the Israelites, as God’s people, are called to show God’s love and mercy to all other peoples, even their enemies.* Many supporters of this view do not deny God’s ability to do miracles or that God could have choreographed a real-life story with so many miracle and literary elements. But they say we should not ignore that God also uses literary and creative talents within writers to bring his Word to us.

Note also that another miracle described in the book of Jonah gets little or no comment: God’s incredible ability to turn people’s hearts to repent of their sin and call on the Lord for mercy. Perhaps even more astonishing may be God’s continued mercy toward a person like Jonah, who knows God and has experienced God’s love but cares little for people of other nations. Certainly the page-turning story of Jonah leads us to discover lessons for ancient Israel that are no less true for us today.

12. Does everyone in your group agree about how to interpret the book of Jonah? Wrestle with this question respectfully with one another.

To think about as you discuss . . .

- It's not often that everyone agrees totally about interpreting issues that are questioned, so everyone should feel free to raise questions, even if some answers can't be found.

13. Even if there are different opinions, focus together on God's Word to us in the story of Jonah. What do we learn here about God, his people, other nations, and how God wants us all to live?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- If you wish, you can take time at the beginning of the next lesson to discuss this matter again, so you may want to give each other ample time to reflect and then discuss in more detail at your next meeting.

More to Think About

- How do you react to crises or other "storms" in your life?
- When you were at fault for something, how did that affect others? Give a brief summary, if comfortable doing so.
- Have you had a sense of God's calling in your life? If so, what was your response?

- Is there anyone who has left (run away from) your church or family circle? If so, have you been able to stay in contact with that person? Maybe this is someone you have prayed for, asking God to watch over and protect this person. If there's also a need to forgive or be forgiven in this situation, consider asking God for wisdom and the strength to do so.



Explore!

- Do some of your own research on the story of Jonah, as suggested earlier in this lesson. While there are lots of interpretations and speculations about this book of the Bible, try to focus on God's main purpose in giving us this book. Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as you consider questions like these:
 - What does God reveal about himself in this book?
 - What role does faith play in this story?
 - What problems of faith are addressed?(Consider a biblical definition of faith from Hebrews 11:1.)
- Dig into some history on Nineveh, Assyrian culture, religion, or travel (by sea or land) in the ancient Middle East. See, for example, www.assyrians-homeland.org or www.nineveh.com—or create your own search with terms like these: ancient, Nineveh, Assyria, shipping routes, travel, commerce, Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Joppa, Tarshish, and more. Also search your local library or the Internet to learn more about the military and political climate in the Middle East between 1000-400 B.C. Share info with others when you gather again to study more of the book of Jonah.
- Investigate the idea of calling. Read and discuss books like *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* by Os Guinness (Thomas Nelson, 2003). We never know what surprises or challenges the Lord may bring into our lives—but God will always be with us, protecting our souls (see Matt. 28:20; John 10:27-30).



Break Away (at-home readings)

On your own, take some time to relax with the Bible and with God in the coming week. Find a comfortable, quiet place, and have a favorite snack handy. Ask the Lord to help you know him better and to give you insight and understanding through his Word, the Bible, given as our guide to live by. Use some devotional readings like these to help you focus, reflect, and see how God calls us to live. (If you like, use one reading for each of five days, or read a few of them in one sitting. You might also like to clip these out and put them in places at home or at work where they'll remind you to spend time with God.)

Everyone Likes a Good Story

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

—Luke 24:27

The main character in the story of Jonah is not Jonah but the Lord. The purpose of the story is to teach about the love of the Lord to undeserving sinners. It's a grand, fast-moving story with many twists and turns. It holds our attention and grips our imaginations.

It is critical not to get sidelined by unusual details and questions that may arise—for example, about the large fish, or the sheer number of miracles in the story, or speculations we can't verify about Jonah's life and ministry. The main point of the story is to focus on the mystery of the Lord's love to the disobedient and sinful, his use of miracles to accomplish his purposes, and his choices of timing and location to announce salvation to his people (see Acts 17:6-27). While the Lord chose Abraham and his descendants to make them into a nation, he did that in order to bless all nations through them (see Gen. 12:2-3). God shows this intention by including Tamar (Gen. 38), Rahab (Josh. 2), Ruth (Ruth 1-4), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), Cornelius (Acts 10:9-48), and many others.

The greatest story of all time, in fact, is the whole story of God's salvation. And at its center is the account of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven for our salvation.

In what ways do you see your life story as part of the much larger, longer story of God’s care for generations of believers since the beginning of time? Can you see yourself fitting into that long line of people in the family of God? Why or why not?

When We Know God’s Heart

“That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. . . .”
—Jonah 4:2

Did you notice that in Jonah 1 we aren’t told *why* Jonah ran away from God? To understand Jonah’s heart, we have to read the whole book—or at least jump ahead to Jonah 4:1-2. In 4:2 we learn that Jonah wants to ditch his assignment because he *knows* God is “gracious and compassionate . . . slow to anger and abounding in love.” In other words, Jonah doesn’t want to share the message of God with the people of Nineveh, his enemies, because God might have mercy on them.

Jonah has a solid understanding about the heart of God. Jonah also knows that his heart is not in the task God has given him. Thankfully for Jonah, God’s heart of love reaches out to him as well as to Nineveh.

In what ways has God reached out to you lately? Have you noticed God also reaching out to your enemies? Is that something you can engage in?

All believers are called to spread the good news of God’s love to people around them (Matt. 28:19-20). And Jesus teaches that we are to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). This is hard, but not impossible—in God’s strength (see Matt. 19:26; Phil. 4:13).

When we realize that God loves us even though we were (and sometimes still act like) his enemies (Rom. 5:8, 10), how does that affect our heart?

What is an enemy? Do you have any? Do you pray for enemies? Why or why not? (See Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 12:9-21.)





Escape

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

—Psalm 139:7-10

In the book of Jonah we find a troubled man seeking to escape responsibility. He books passage on a ship going in the opposite direction from where God calls him to go, and then goes below deck and falls asleep. He tries to turn himself off so that he cannot hear the Word of the Lord or even his own conscience.

Jonah would not be the first prophet to question the Lord about an assignment he was given. At the burning bush Moses told God that he could not lead the Israelites because he was not a good speaker, so he asked the Lord to send someone else (Ex. 4). Jeremiah told the Lord that he was too young and did not know how to speak (Jer. 1).

Have you ever brought excuses to the Lord when you were called to serve? If so, did your attempts to escape work out for you?

Desperate Choices

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God;

may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.

—Psalm 143:10

The sailors in the story are “between a rock and a hard place.” The storm is impossible, and Jonah says he is the cause of it all. He volunteers to die in the hope that the sailors can be saved. For a moment, try to imagine what the sailors might think: What if we throw him overboard and it doesn’t help? Will we later be punished by an official or troubled by a guilty conscience?

We don't know if the sailors in the story understood much about the one true God, but in some ways they showed more respect for God and for Jonah's life than Jonah did. (See also a similar contrast in Gen. 38:24-26.)

How do you react when you feel caught "between a rock and a hard place"?

James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault." Psalms and Proverbs speak about fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom and knowledge (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7).

When you have faced a tough choice, have you asked for help or wisdom? Have you struggled with a choice because you feared the wrong people or things? Is there anything in your life that requires wisdom right now? Ask God for help. The Lord loves to give us wisdom. God cares for us and wants us to live wisely.

No Other Way?

Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me? . . .

—Psalm 42:5a

Jonah sees no way out. He asks to be thrown overboard. He asks for death. For Jonah, death has become the best or only option left. Is there no other way out?

He tells the sailors that he worships "the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jon. 1:9)—in other words, the God who is in control of all things. But Jonah doesn't seem able to pray or ask the Lord for mercy. How do you pray in dark times? Can you identify with the desperation in Jonah's plan?

Hope has been defined as the opposite of despair. Hope helps people see and hold on to options of relief and restoration in dark situations. In Psalm 42:5 David, who is near despair and feeling far from God, tells his own soul, "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (see also 42:11). David's hope is in God and in a coming opportunity to praise and worship his Savior and God.





What does it mean to put our hope in God rather than to put hope in self, others, or a change of circumstances?

Read Psalms 42 and 43 and notice how David speaks to himself. How do you talk to yourself when you are frustrated, discouraged, or in despair?

Hoping in the Lord requires that we wait for God to work in a situation in his own way and time. Psalm 27:13-14 says, “I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”

Our culture seems to have little regard for the virtue of patient waiting. What strategies could you put into place to help you strengthen your ability to wait for the Lord? In what situations are you waiting for the Lord right now? When you talk to God about these things, what do you say?