

Template 2: Main Lesson, Activity and Discussion Questions | Ages 5 to 11, Read Aloud Lesson, Scripture Centered, Apologetics Rich, Christ Centered

WEEK 33 | SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2026

Jonah, God's Mercy for All

Primary Scripture: Jonah 1-4

BIBLE TIMELINE PLACEMENT

We are still in the time of Israel's kings and prophets. Last week we learned about Elisha and saw God's power and compassion. This week we meet Jonah, a prophet named in 2 Kings 14:25 during the reign of Jeroboam II.

BIG IDEA

God is holy and just, but He is also wonderfully merciful. He wants sinners everywhere to turn to Him and receive His mercy.

1 OPENING BIBLE FOUNDATION

Before we begin, let's remember what kind of book we are opening.

The Bible is not one ordinary book. It is a collection of sixty-six books written by more than forty human writers over many centuries. God used kings, prophets, shepherds, fishermen, and others. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, across different lands and times.

Yet all sixty-six books fit together as one message because God is the true Author behind His Word. Listen to 2 Timothy 3:16: 'All Scripture is God-breathed.' That means the Bible did not begin in somebody's imagination. God gave us His Word.

From Genesis all the way to Revelation, the Bible shows us who God is, what happened to us because of sin, and how God's rescue plan leads us to Jesus Christ. Today's account of Jonah is part of that one true message.

Jonah was a real prophet. Nineveh was a real city. The people in this account were real people. Hundreds of years later, Jesus Himself spoke about Jonah and the people of Nineveh. So open your ears, open your Bible, and listen carefully. God has something important to show us about His mercy.

2 MEMORY VERSE

Our memory verse comes from Jonah's prayer while he was in terrible trouble. Listen for it throughout the lesson.

MEMORY VERSE
Jonah 2:9
Salvation comes from the LORD.

Salvation means rescue. Jonah could not rescue himself from the sea, and we cannot rescue ourselves from our greatest problem, sin. God is the One who saves, and the whole Bible shows us that He saves sinners through Jesus.

Let's say it together: Salvation comes from the LORD. Again: Salvation comes from the LORD.

3 SETTING THE SCENE

Jonah was a prophet from Israel. A prophet was a person God chose to deliver His message. One day God gave Jonah a clear command.

Jonah 1:2 says, 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'

Nineveh was an important Assyrian city. Assyria was known for warfare and terrible violence toward enemies. God was not pretending Nineveh was a good place. He saw their wickedness. But instead of destroying them without warning, God sent a prophet to call them to turn. Jonah did not like that at all.

4 MAIN LESSON NARRATIVE

Imagine Jonah standing there after hearing God's command: Go to Nineveh. The command was clear. Jonah knew where God wanted him to go and what God wanted him to do. There was no confusion. But Jonah did not want to go.

Sometimes people say Jonah ran away because he was simply frightened of the Ninevites. The Ninevites certainly had a frightening reputation. But later Jonah himself tells us the deeper reason. Jonah knew God was merciful, and Jonah did not want God to show mercy to these people. We will hear Jonah admit that later.

Instead of going toward Nineveh, Jonah goes down to a port city named Joppa. A port is a place where ships arrive and leave. Jonah finds a ship going toward a place called Tarshish. The exact location of ancient Tarshish is debated today, but we do not need to know exactly where it was to understand the point. Nineveh was where God told Jonah to go. Tarshish was not.

Jonah 1:3 says, 'But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish.' Think about that sentence. Jonah was a prophet. He knew about God. He spoke God's Word. Yet Jonah behaved as though he could get far enough away that God would leave him alone.

Can anyone really run away from God? No. Psalm 139:7 asks, 'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?' You may hide something from another person, but nobody hides from God. And that is not only a serious truth. It is also comforting. There is nowhere you can go where God stops being God.

Jonah gets onto the ship. The ship heads out across the sea. Maybe Jonah thinks the problem is finished. Nineveh is behind him. But Jonah has forgotten something very important: the God who called Jonah is also the God who made the sea.

Jonah 1:4 says, 'Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.' Picture the scene. The wind howls. The waves grow higher. The ship rises and drops. Wood bends and groans. Water crashes over the sides.

These sailors were not tourists taking their first boat ride. The sea was their workplace. Yet the storm became so dangerous that even they were terrified. They began throwing cargo overboard to make the ship lighter. They cried out to the gods they worshiped. But where was Jonah? Sleeping.

The captain finds him and says, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god!' The sailors know something is terribly wrong. In those days people sometimes cast lots to help make a decision, perhaps using marked stones or small objects. They cast lots, and the lot falls on Jonah.

Questions come flying at him. Who are you? Where are you from? What do you do? Why is this happening? Then Jonah tells them something remarkable. Jonah 1:9 says, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'

Did you hear that? Jonah knows exactly who God is. The God of heaven. The One who made the sea and dry land. Jonah believes true things about God, but he is not obeying the God he says he believes in. It is possible to know the right Sunday school answers and still refuse to obey God. God does not only want us to know true things about Him. He wants us to trust Him and follow Him.

The sailors become even more frightened when Jonah tells them he is running from the LORD. They ask what they should do. Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea. But notice something surprising: the sailors do not

immediately do it. They try harder to row toward land. They do not want Jonah to die. The storm only grows worse. Finally they cry out to the LORD and throw Jonah overboard. Immediately the raging sea becomes calm. Can you imagine the sudden silence? One moment the wind is screaming and the waves are crashing. Then suddenly, calm.

Jonah 1:16 says, 'At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.' Even while Jonah is running away from taking God's message to people from another nation, God is already revealing Himself to people from other nations aboard the ship. God's mercy is already bigger than Jonah's heart.

But what about Jonah? He is in the sea. The ship is moving away. The water closes around him. Jonah cannot rescue himself. Now listen carefully to Jonah 1:17: 'Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.'

Notice what the verse says: the LORD provided the fish. This was not God losing control. It was not an unlucky accident. God was at work. And the Bible says a huge fish. It does not tell us exactly what kind of sea creature it was. Sometimes people call it a whale, but God did not tell us the species, so we do not have to pretend we know something the Bible does not tell us.

Here is what we do know. God provided it. Jonah was swallowed. Jonah was in it for three days and three nights. God preserved Jonah according to His purpose. That is a miracle. A miracle is not a magic trick. A miracle is an act of God's power beyond what normally happens in the world He made. The God who created the oceans and every creature in them has authority over His creation.

Inside the fish, Jonah prays. Think about where Jonah is: darkness, water, no ship, no land, and no way to climb out. Jonah has reached a place where he cannot rescue himself. God is his only hope.

Near the end of his prayer Jonah says our memory verse. Jonah 2:9 says, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.' There it is. Say it with me: Salvation comes from the LORD. Jonah could not save himself from the sea. Jonah could not command the fish. Jonah could not swim home. God rescued Jonah.

Then Jonah 2:10 says, 'And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.' That may not sound like the nicest way to arrive on a beach, but dry land probably looked wonderful to Jonah.

Then something happens that should make us smile just a little. Jonah 3:1 says, 'Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.' A second time. God had not thrown Jonah away. Jonah had deliberately disobeyed and run, yet God corrected him, rescued him, and gave him another opportunity to obey. That is mercy too.

God says again, 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' This time Jonah goes. He enters Nineveh and begins delivering God's warning. Jonah 3:4 records the message: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' That is a serious warning.

God is holy. Sin is not a joke to Him. Violence matters. Cruelty matters. Lying matters. Hatred matters. Pride matters. God sees sin clearly. Jonah announces judgment. And then something happens Jonah did not want to happen.

Jonah 3:5 says, 'The Ninevites believed God.' They believed God. The message spreads. People begin fasting, which means going without food for a time as a sign of serious prayer, grief, or humility. They put on sackcloth, rough clothing that people in that culture sometimes wore to show mourning or deep sorrow.

Eventually the message reaches the ruler. He humbles himself too. A command goes throughout the city. The people are to call urgently on God. Listen to Jonah 3:8: 'Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.' That is important.

Repentance is not simply feeling bad because you might get into trouble. Repentance means turning. It means agreeing with God that our sin is wrong and turning away from sin toward Him. The Ninevites do not merely say, 'We are sorry judgment is coming.' They begin turning from their wicked ways.

Jonah 3:10 says, 'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.' God shows mercy.

Now, how do you think Jonah responds? Do you imagine Jonah jumping up and down and saying, 'Praise God, the whole city listened?' No. Jonah is angry. Really angry. Jonah 4:1 says, 'But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.'

Now Jonah finally tells us why he ran away in the first place. Jonah 4:2 says, 'I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.' There it is. Jonah knew God was gracious. Jonah knew God was compassionate. Jonah knew God was slow to anger and full of love. Jonah knew that if these enemies heard God's warning and turned from sin, God might show them mercy. Jonah did not want them to have it.

Jonah wanted mercy for Nineveh. He just did not want mercy for Nineveh. That is the heart problem God is now going to deal with. Before we become too angry with Jonah, we should ask whether we ever do the same thing. Have you ever wanted somebody to get in trouble because they hurt you? Have you ever thought, I hope they get what they deserve? Have you ever been happy when someone you did not like failed?

If someone hurts you, God does not ask you to pretend it did not hurt. If somebody does something dangerous or wrong, mercy does not mean we call evil good. The Ninevites really were wicked. God said so. God cares about justice. But Jonah wanted something more than justice. He wanted his enemies destroyed even if they turned from evil and sought mercy.

So God begins teaching Jonah. Jonah goes outside the city and sits down. God provides a leafy plant that grows and gives Jonah shade. Jonah loves that plant. Jonah 4:6 says Jonah 'was very happy about the plant.' Finally, Jonah is happy.

But the next morning God provides a worm. The worm attacks the plant. The plant withers. Then the sun rises. A hot wind blows. Jonah becomes miserable and angry again. God asks Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?' Jonah thinks it is.

Then God points directly at Jonah's heart. Jonah cared deeply about a plant he did not create, did not grow, and had only enjoyed for a short time. But Nineveh was filled with people. People God had created. People whose lives mattered to Him. People trapped in sin and confusion. People who needed mercy.

God asks in Jonah 4:11, 'And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh...?' Then the book ends. Wait. That is the ending? What did Jonah say? Did Jonah finally understand? Did he apologize? We are not told.

God ends the book with a question, and that question reaches beyond Jonah to us. Should God not care about lost people? Should God not care about people far away? People who do not look like us? People who have done terrible things? The person nobody at school likes? Your enemy? You? The answer is yes. God cares.

Now we come to the most important part. Jesus talked about Jonah. Hundreds of years later, some people asked Jesus for a sign. Jesus answered by talking about Jonah. Matthew 12:40 says, 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' Jesus was pointing toward His own death, burial, and resurrection.

Jonah went down into the sea. Jesus went willingly to the cross. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the great fish. Jesus died and was buried. Jonah came out alive. Jesus rose from the dead. But Jesus said something else in Matthew 12:41: 'And now something greater than Jonah is here.' Who was greater than Jonah? Jesus.

Jonah was a prophet sent with God's message. Jesus is God the Son who came to save us. Jonah ran away from sinful people. Jesus came toward sinful people. Jonah did not want his enemies to receive mercy. Jesus willingly died to give mercy to His enemies.

Listen to Romans 5:8: 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' A few verses later Romans 5:10 explains that we were God's enemies when Jesus made the way for us to be brought back to God.

Before we point at Nineveh and say, Those people needed mercy, we have to remember something: we need mercy too. You may never have lived in ancient Nineveh or sailed toward Tarshish, but you have sinned. So have I. Romans 3:23 says, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'

We cannot save ourselves from sin. But remember our verse. Say it with me: Salvation comes from the LORD. Again: Salvation comes from the LORD. How did the Lord provide salvation for us? Jesus.

Jesus lived the perfect life we have not lived. Jesus never sinned. Jesus willingly died on the cross and took the punishment our sin deserves. He was buried. On the third day Jesus rose from the grave. He is alive. Everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Jesus can be forgiven and receive eternal life.

That is why Jesus is our Savior. Jesus does not stop caring for us after He saves us. He is our Sanctifier, which means He keeps working in us through the Holy Spirit and helps us become more like Him. Jonah needed God to work on his heart. So do we.

Jesus is also our Healer. We can bring our hurts and sicknesses to Him in prayer because He is compassionate and powerful. We trust Him without pretending every prayer will be answered exactly the way we want. Jesus is our Coming King. He will return and judge with perfect justice. Nothing evil will be ignored forever. That means we do not have to carry revenge in our hearts.

God cared about people far beyond Israel. Later Jesus tells His followers in Matthew 28:19, 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.' All nations. Jesus did not say, Only tell people who are like you. He sends the good news everywhere.

Maybe someday you will tell someone about Jesus who grew up on the other side of the world. Maybe you will tell a child at school or a neighbor. Maybe God will ask you to show kindness to someone you find difficult right now. When He does, remember Jonah. Do not run toward Tarshish. Remember that God's mercy came looking for you too.

Say our verse one last time: Salvation comes from the LORD. That is Jonah's lesson. That is Nineveh's hope. That is our hope. And that hope has a name: Jesus.

5 WHY WE CAN TRUST GOD'S WORD

A child may hear this account and think, A man inside a huge fish for three days? Did that really happen? That is a fair question. We should never be afraid of honest questions about the Bible.

First, we begin with Scripture. Jonah is not introduced as an imaginary character. Second Kings 14:25 identifies Jonah son of Amittai during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jonah is placed in Israel's history.

Nineveh was also a real ancient Assyrian city. Its ruins and many Assyrian objects, inscriptions, and palace reliefs have been excavated and studied. Archaeology supports the real historical setting. It does not prove the miracle, and we should never pretend it does.

Jonah 1:17 says God provided the great fish. The Bible does not say this normally happens. It describes a miracle. The God who created the sea and every creature in it has authority over His creation.

Most importantly for Christians, Jesus Himself spoke of Jonah's three days in the great fish and the repentance of Nineveh in Matthew 12:39-41. Jesus connected Jonah directly to His own death, burial, and resurrection. We believe this account because God tells us in His trustworthy Word.

6 WHAT THIS SHOWS US ABOUT JESUS

Jonah points to Jesus, but Jesus is far greater than Jonah. Jesus said, 'Something greater than Jonah is here' (Matthew 12:41).

Jonah was sent to sinful people and ran away. Jesus came willingly to save sinful people. Jonah became angry when enemies received mercy. Jesus gave His life so His enemies could receive mercy. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the great fish. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day.

Jonah could say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.' Jesus shows us how that salvation comes. Through Him. Jesus is our Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King.

7 GOD REVEALED AS TRINITY

Jonah repeatedly teaches us that there is one true God. Jonah tells the sailors, 'I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1:9). The whole Bible later helps us understand more fully who this one God is.

God is one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus the Son personally speaks about Jonah in Matthew 12. Jesus also commands baptism 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19). One name. Three Persons.

Let's say it together: God is one God in three Persons. We do not use an egg, clover, water, or a person changing roles to explain the Trinity. We simply believe what God has revealed about Himself.

8 LIFE APPLICATION

Jonah gives us several questions to carry into our week. Am I obeying God or running the other direction? Do I only want God's mercy for people I like? Is there someone I have decided is not worth kindness? Do I know things about God without letting those truths change how I live? When I sin, will I hide, or will I turn back to God?

This lesson is not telling children to remain close to someone who is hurting or abusing them. God cares about justice and safety. Children should tell a trusted adult when somebody hurts, threatens, touches, or frightens them in a wrong way. Mercy does not mean pretending evil is acceptable.

When we discover our own hearts are wrong, remember Jonah's words: Salvation comes from the LORD. Run toward Jesus, not away from Him.

9 DEFENDING THE TRUTH

Question a child might hear: 'My friend says nobody could live inside a fish for three days, so the Bible must be made up.'

Simple biblical answer: The Bible does not say this normally happens. It says God 'provided a huge fish' (Jonah 1:17). Jonah's rescue was a miracle. God created the sea and every creature in it, so a great fish is not beyond His authority. Jesus Himself later spoke about Jonah's time in the fish (Matthew 12:40).

How to say it kindly: 'I understand why that sounds impossible. Christians do not believe Jonah survived because that normally happens. We believe God performed a miracle, and Jesus Himself talked about Jonah.' Remember 1 Peter 3:15: give an answer with gentleness and respect.

10 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh?

Because Nineveh was wicked, and God sent Jonah to warn the people so they had an opportunity to turn from sin.

Could Jonah really run away from God?

No. God is everywhere and Jonah could not escape His presence or authority.

Who provided the great fish?

The LORD provided it.

What is our memory verse?

Jonah 2:9: Salvation comes from the LORD.

What did Nineveh do when they heard God's warning?

They believed God, humbled themselves, and turned from their evil ways.

Why was Jonah angry?

Jonah wanted judgment for his enemies instead of mercy. Jonah 4:2 shows he knew God was gracious and compassionate.

How is Jesus greater than Jonah?

Jonah reluctantly went to enemies. Jesus willingly came to save sinners. Jonah spent three days in the fish; Jesus died, was buried, and rose again.

Does forgiving someone mean what they did was okay?

No. Forgiveness never makes evil good. We can tell the truth, ask adults for help, keep safe boundaries, and trust God with justice.

Who needs God's mercy?

Everyone. Romans 3:23 says all have sinned.

11 HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Activity Name: Nineveh or Tarshish?

Purpose: Help children recognize the difference between obeying God and running from what He says, while remembering that our hope is God's mercy rather than our perfect behavior.

Supplies: Two pieces of paper, marker, tape if available. Write NINEVEH: OBEY GOD on one sign and TARSHISH: RUN AWAY on the other. Place them on opposite sides of the room.

Directions: Tell the children you will describe everyday choices. They move toward the Nineveh sign if the choice shows obedience to God and toward the Tarshish sign if it shows running from what God says. After each choice, briefly explain why.

You accidentally break something and tell the truth even though you are afraid. Answer: Nineveh.

You hurt your brother or sister but pretend you did nothing wrong. Answer: Tarshish.

A new child is sitting alone and you invite that child to join you. Answer: Nineveh.

Someone embarrasses you, so you plan how to embarrass that person back. Answer: Tarshish.

Someone is being mean or unsafe toward you, so you tell a trusted adult. Answer: Nineveh. Obedience does not mean staying silent when someone is hurting you.

You do something wrong and instead of hiding it, you admit it to God and ask forgiveness. Answer: Nineveh.

Someone you do not like wants to learn about Jesus, and you hope that person comes to know Him. Answer: Nineveh.

You think, That person has done too many bad things. I hope they never get forgiven. Answer: Tarshish.

Gospel close: Bring everyone back to the center. Ask, 'Did anyone choose perfectly every time?' Explain that none of us obeys perfectly. Then recite together: Salvation comes from the LORD. Jesus saves sinners, forgives us when we turn to Him, and helps us learn to obey.

Adaptation: For younger children use only four clear examples. For older children, let them suggest real-life situations where obedience is hard and explain their reasoning.

12 OPTIONAL REVIEW GAME**Game Name: Who Provided It?**

Tell the children: 'I will name something from Jonah. If God provided it or commanded it, point upward and say, The LORD!'

Who sent the great wind onto the sea? The LORD.

Who provided the huge fish? The LORD.

Who commanded the fish to put Jonah on dry land? The LORD.

Who gave Jonah a second opportunity to go to Nineveh? The LORD.

Who showed mercy when Nineveh turned from evil? The LORD.

Who provided the leafy plant, the worm, and the hot wind? The LORD.

Who provides salvation? The LORD.

Finish by reciting: Salvation comes from the LORD.

13 TEACHER CLOSING

Today we learned about a prophet who tried to run away from God. We watched God rule over a storm, a great fish, a plant, a worm, and the wind. But the biggest thing God was working on was a human heart.

Jonah knew God was merciful. Jonah just did not want God to be merciful to his enemies. God showed Jonah that people matter to Him. Then, hundreds of years later, God showed us His mercy in the greatest way possible. He sent Jesus.

Jesus did not run away from sinners. Jesus came for sinners. He willingly went to the cross, died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. Jesus is greater than Jonah.

Maybe you have been running from God in some part of your life. Maybe you have done something wrong and tried to hide it. Maybe there is someone you find very hard to love. Remember Jonah. God is holy. God is just. God is merciful.

Let's say our memory verse one last time: Salvation comes from the LORD. Our salvation does not come from being good enough or knowing every Sunday school answer. Salvation comes from God through Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for Your mercy. Thank You that You cared about Jonah, the sailors, and the people of Nineveh. Forgive us when we run from You or refuse mercy to others. Thank You for sending Jesus to die for our sins and rise again. Holy Spirit, help us obey You and make our hearts more like Jesus. Help us care about people who need Your love. We trust Your care for those who are sick, hurting, afraid, or lonely, and we remember that Jesus is coming again and will make everything right. In Jesus' name, amen.

14 TAKEAWAY TRUTH

God's mercy reaches sinners everywhere, and salvation comes from the LORD through Jesus Christ.