



STORY 50

Big Fish, Bigger Mercy

JONAH 1–4

BEFORE THE LESSON

- Read Jonah 1–4.
- Pray for God's help. Ask for the Spirit's help in understanding the passage and for the Lord to open the children's eyes to see who he is, what he has done, and how they should respond to him.
- Study the lesson plan below. Use these sections as suggestions. Think of ways to teach it in your own voice.

1
Read

THE BIG PICTURE

Help children see how this story connects with the other lessons. Build anticipation by introducing the setting and the significance of what is about to happen in this week's story. {5 minutes}

2
Teach

Lots of the prophets, like Amos and Ezekiel, were good and godly men. They were humble, obedient, and merciful. The prophet Jonah was different. God spoke to him (like the other prophets) and said, "Get up and go to Nineveh." Nineveh was a big city, but it was also a bad city. It was the home of the evil Assyrians. God told Jonah to go there and tell them that God had seen their evil deeds and was about to judge them for the terrible things they had done.

But Jonah did the opposite. He ran "from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3). You might think Jonah fled because he was afraid to go. Nineveh was awfully wicked. But that's not why he fled. He tells us in 4:2 why he fled. He knew God was merciful, forgiving people when they repent. But Jonah wanted Nineveh to get what was coming to them. So instead of bringing God's message

to them, he boarded a boat for a city that was far, far away. Jonah was trying to get as far away from Nineveh, and as far away from the Lord, as possible. How do you think that will turn out? What will a merciful God do with disobedient Nineveh? What will a merciful God do with his disobedient prophet?

TELL THE STORY

Share the story in one of these three ways. {5–10 minutes}



Read the
Bible passage
together



Read from
The Biggest Story
Bible Storybook



Play *The*
Biggest Story
video

TEACH THE STORY

Retell the story with an emphasis on what it says about God and about us. {10 minutes}

Big Truth
God's people
should reflect
the mercy of
their God.

Can you hide from God's presence? Of course not! God is a spirit, so he can see you when you hide in your closet or at the bottom of a boat. Jonah should have known that. During his boat ride "the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea . . . so that the ship threatened to break up" (1:4). The sailors knew that this big storm was big trouble. And they soon found out that Jonah was the reason for the storm. Jonah told them he was disobeying God, and he suggested a plan. "Throw me overboard and the sea will calm down." Sure enough, once he splashed into the sea, the storm stopped. The sailors were amazed that they had been saved, and they praised the Lord for his mercy. But what about Jonah? Did he drown?

No! God sent a huge fish to swallow and save him! Jonah was amazed and praised the Lord inside the fish. When Jonah was the recipient of God's mercy, he liked it! God told the fish to spit Jonah out on the dry land. The fish obeyed God (maybe God's prophet could learn a thing or two from that fish). Once again God told Jonah, "Go to Nineveh." This time Jonah listened. When he got there, he announced, "In forty days, your city will be overthrown!" Jonah was glad the nasty Ninevites would be judged. But do you know what happened? They believed Jonah's warning, showed they were sorry for their sins, and changed

their ways. In response God was merciful on the disobedient Ninevites. Just like he'd been merciful to his disobedient prophet. Nineveh was saved!

Now that's a happy ending for the Ninevites, but it made Jonah mad! He was thankful God forgave him and saved him. But he hated that God would forgive and save his enemies. But God wanted his prophet to repent just like he wanted Nineveh to repent. So the merciful God hatched a plan. While Jonah was sitting in the hot sun, God made a huge plant grow and provide shade for him. Jonah was happy, but not for long. The next day, God destroyed the plant. Jonah was steaming mad! God asked him, "Why do you care more about one plant than the 120,000 people in Nineveh?" The Bible doesn't tell us if Jonah repented or if he learned to be merciful. But it does tell us that we worship a gracious and merciful God who is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love (see 4:2)—even to really bad people who repent.

GOSPEL CONNECTION

Show how the story points to Jesus and his rescue mission as the Snake Crusher.
{5 minutes}

Even though Jonah was the pouting prophet, Jesus used his story to point to his own death and resurrection.

The scribes and Pharisees shouted at Jesus. "Show us a sign that you are the Messiah!" Jesus had already shown lots of signs. He had cleansed a leper, healed a paralyzed man, and given sight to the blind. He had even raised the dead to life! What kind of sign were they looking for? They wanted a supernatural sign—like water turning to blood. Jesus replied to them, "Only people with no faith want a special sign like that. I will only give you one sure sign that I am the Messiah. Just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the great fish, so will I will be three days in a tomb" (see Matt. 12:39–40). What do you think he is talking about? Yes, he's talking about his death—and resurrection. On Friday he died. That night (day one) and the whole day after (day two) his body was buried. Then, on day three, he rose from the grave!

But Jesus didn't choose the story of Jonah just because the number of days matched. He chose the story because it was all about God's mercy for sinners who repent. Jesus's death and resurrection are the signs that prove he is the Son whom God sent to save us from our sins and the punishment of death. Anyone who trusts in Jesus—disobedient prophets or wicked enemies—can be saved.

3

Engage

DISCUSS THE STORY

Discuss the story in smaller groups. {10 minutes}

1. **QUESTION:** When God first asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, why didn't Jonah want to go? What did he do? Why was that a silly thing to do?

TAKEAWAY: We cannot hide from God.

2. **QUESTION:** Why did God send the big storm on the boat? How did God save the sailors? How did he save Jonah? How did they both respond to God when he saved them?

TAKEAWAY: God's salvation should cause us to praise him.

3. **QUESTION:** Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh? What happened when Jonah told the Ninevites that they were going to be conquered because of their sins? Why did God save them?

TAKEAWAY: God is merciful and saves those who repent.

4. **QUESTION:** What did the Pharisees ask Jesus to give them? What sign did Jesus say he would give them? How does Jesus's death and resurrection remind you of Jonah and the big fish?

TAKEAWAY: Jesus forgives and saves even his enemies by his death and resurrection.

ACTIVITIES

Download coloring pages and activity pages from TheBiggestStory.com, or choose from the following activity suggestions. {10–15 minutes}

K–2nd

Option 1: Jonah, Jonah!

Supply List: toy fish

Before Class: Gather supplies.

Have children sit in a circle and place their hands behind their backs with palms up. Choose one person to be “Jonah,” and have him carry the fish while walking

Memory Verse
Salvation belongs
to the LORD!

JONAH 2:9

around the circle. While Jonah walks, the rest of the children say, “Jonah, Jonah disobeyed. Until inside the fish he prayed.” When the children finish, Jonah drops the fish into the hands of the child in front of him. The child with the fish stands up and chases Jonah around the circle. Jonah runs around the circle and tries to sit in that person’s empty spot. If the chaser tags Jonah before he sits down, Jonah must sit in the “belly of the whale” (middle of the circle) for one round. The chaser becomes the new Jonah. Continue play until all children have had a turn.

Option 2: Great Fish and Jonahs

Supply List: none

Have children line up on one side of the room. Choose one “great fish” and have him or her stand in the middle of the room. Tell the class they are all like Jonah, who disobeyed God and ran away from Nineveh. When the great fish yells “Overboard!” the children run to the other side of the room. The great fish tries to tag as many Jonahs as possible. Everyone tagged becomes a great fish. Continue play until one Jonah remains.

3rd–5th

Option 1: Worm Tag

Supply List: streamers (one color per team), tape

Before Class: Gather supplies. Cut streamers into 8-inch pieces (one per child with colors divided equally).

Divide the children evenly into teams. Assign each team a color, and tape streamers to children’s backs to match their team color (the streamers represent worms). On “Go” have children try to pull streamers off opposing teams’ backs. If a child’s streamer gets pulled, he or she is out. The team with the last child in play wins. Remind the children that Jonah cared more about a shade plant than the people of Nineveh. God showed Jonah his sin by sending a worm to kill the plant.

Option 2: Big Fish Tag

Supply List: none

Have children line up on one side of the room. Choose three children to be the “big fish” and to stand in the middle of the room holding hands. The remaining

children are “Jonahs.” Explain that the big fish will move together to swallow up children. To swallow someone, the two children on the ends of the trio clasp hands to complete a circle around a Jonah. Once a child is swallowed, he or she joins the big fish. Continue play until one Jonah remains. For larger groups, start with more than one big fish.

CRAFTS

Choose from the following craft suggestions depending on time, age ranges, and group size. {10–15 minutes}

K–2nd

Option 1: “God Saves” Worm

Supply List: paper, plastic cups, glue sticks, construction paper, pencils, scissors, wiggly eyes

Before Class: Gather supplies. Print the Big Truth (one per child). Make a sample craft.

Give each child a Big Truth paper, plastic cup, pencil, and scissors. Set glue sticks, construction paper, and wiggly eyes on each table. Have children trace around their cup onto construction paper to make six circles. Have them cut out the circles and glue them together (overlapping a bit) to form a worm. Glue the worm onto the Big Truth paper. Attach the wiggly eyes. Remind children God used a worm to teach Jonah that he should be merciful.

Option 2: Jonah Swallowed Up!

Supply List: cardstock, scissors, glue sticks, crayons, brass fasteners

Before Class: Gather supplies. Print a sheet of paper that includes a whale template with a simple open mouth, a separate whale mouth (same size as the one on the whale template), and a picture of Jonah that will fit inside the mouth. Make copies on cardstock (one per child). Make a sample craft.

Give each child the printed cardstock and a brass fastener. Set crayons, scissors, and glue sticks on each table. Have children color and cut out the whale pieces and Jonah, then attach the whale’s mouth to the body using the fastener. Have them glue Jonah to the inside of the mouth so that he is visible when the mouth tilts up. Remind children that God had a great fish swallow up Jonah when he was disobedient.

Option 1: Jonah and Fish Cup Game

Supply List: plastic cups, paper, scissors, balloons, string, dried beans, permanent markers, tape

Before Class: Gather supplies. Print a small picture of a whale. Cut string into 18-inch pieces. Poke holes in the bottom of the cups. Make a sample craft.

Give each child a whale picture, plastic cup, balloon, and string. Set tape, markers, and dried beans on the tables. Have children cut and tape the whale picture to the side of the cup. Have children use permanent markers to draw a stick figure man on the deflated balloon. Then have them work with a partner to put dried beans into their balloon until it is about three inches in diameter. Tie the balloon closed. Help children thread the string through the hole in the cup, using a knot and tape to secure it. Tie the other end of the string to the balloon. Challenge the children to try and catch Jonah in the whale’s “mouth.”

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