Jonah 1 — The Reluctant Prophet and the Pursuing God

Teaching Outline — A Study of Jonah 1 (with an overview of Jonah 1–4)
Passage: Jonah 1 | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes

> **Teacher note — 4-part option:** This lesson combines the orientation lesson and the Jonah 1 lesson of the 5-part series. Background and chapter 1 are kept; the chapter-by-chapter survey of Jonah 2–4 is reduced to a brief overview, since the following weeks cover those chapters. If time runs short, shorten the background sections marked *(optional)*.

Lesson objective

- Class will see Jonah as a **historical account**
  - Reveals God's sovereign mercy toward:
    - Rebellious servants
    - Sinful nations
- Class will understand:
  - No one can flee from God's presence
  - No one can evade His will
- Class will examine the contrast between:
  - Jonah's **disobedience**
  - God's **sovereign pursuit**
  - The mariners' **growing fear of the LORD**

Introduction — A book that ends with a question (4 min)

- "Jonah" → most picture a man and a fish
  - It's in the book, but not what the book is finally about
  - Book is about:
    - The **character of God**
    - The **condition of a servant's heart**
  - Begins: prophet refusing a mission

    - Ends: prophet sitting outside a spared city, unhappy God showed mercy
- Personal question for the class
    - Think of someone who has wronged you, frightened you, or opposes God's values
    - If they sincerely turned to the Lord…
        - Would your first response be joy?
        - Or would part of you want them to get what they deserve?
- We imagine disobedience as private
    - "It's my decision; it affects only me"
    - Jonah 1 corrects that — one man's refusal endangered an entire ship
- **Read Jonah 1 aloud**
    - Book opens with "the word of the LORD" — not Jonah's idea
    - Watch the movement:
        - Jonah goes **down**
        - The LORD **sends, reveals, controls, saves**

Background and context — A real prophet, a real city, a real crisis (10 min)

A real prophet

- Jonah is not a children's-story invention
    - 2 Kings 14:25 — "Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet… of Gath-hepher"
    - Gath-hepher: small town in Galilee, near modern Nazareth
    - Ministered under Jeroboam II, king of northern Israel
        - First half of 8th century B.C.
        - Exact dates uncertain; commonly ~780–760 B.C.
- Jonah had already given Israel a *favorable* message
    - God would restore Israel's border (2 Kings 14:25–27)
    - Then a very different assignment (1:2)
- Jonah belongs in [BLANK: history], not merely a moral tale
    - God knows names of kings, borders of nations, violence of cities, fears of His servants
    - Not a tribal deity confined to Israel's land — rules on land, at sea, in a foreign capital

A real city — Nineveh and Assyria

- God called Jonah to [BLANK: Nineveh], the great Assyrian city
  - East bank of the Tigris; northern Iraq, opposite modern Mosul
- Assyria was not harmless
  - Reputation for brutal warfare, intimidation, harsh treatment of the conquered
  - Would destroy northern Israel and deport its people in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17)
  - Jonah couldn't know the future, but knew Nineveh's reputation for violence

Chosen — but not to the exclusion of the world *(optional)*

- "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12:3)
  - God's purposes reached beyond Israel from the start
- Chosen ≠ more righteous (Deut 9:4–6)
- The danger:
  - Using privilege to look down on other peoples
  - Assuming God's justice and mercy applied differently to Israel's enemies
- God over all nations — used Assyria, then judged Assyria (Isa 10:5–19)

Why Jonah objected

- Jonah's own answer (4:2)
  - Knew God was "gracious… merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness"
  - Feared: warning → repentance → mercy
  - Problem was not ignorance of God's character
    - It was resisting that character shown to Israel's enemy
- Understandable fear never made rebellion right
  - God wasn't asking Jonah to approve Assyria's evil
  - Commanding him to announce God's judgment
- Real question: Would Jonah accept God's right to show mercy to people he'd rather see judged?

The big picture — where the book is going

- Four short chapters; God appoints or directs something in each
  1. Jonah runs; God pursues — ch. 1 (today)
  2. Jonah prays; God delivers — ch. 2
  3. Jonah preaches; Nineveh repents — ch. 3
  4. Nineveh is spared; Jonah resents it — ch. 4

- Book ends with God's question, not Jonah's answer
  - "should not I spare Nineveh, that great city…?" (4:11)
  - The book asks whether we share God's [BLANK: compassion] for sinners
- Jesus: men of Nineveh will rise in judgment — "a greater than Jonas is here" (Matt 12:41)
  - Not only *whether* people get a warning, but *how* they respond

"From the presence of the LORD" (v. 3, repeated)

- Can't mean Jonah thought God was absent from the sea
  - Ps 139:7–10 — no place is beyond God
- Jonah fled from God's [BLANK: commission], refusing assigned service
  - Problem ≠ lack of information
  - Problem = **a resistant will**
- No place is beyond God's [BLANK: presence]
  - No distance, schedule, purchase, or chosen route removes us from it

Geography of defiance

- Nineveh: hundreds of miles east/northeast overland
- Jonah went **west** instead
  - To Joppa, Israel's Mediterranean port
  - Bought passage to Tarshish — far western Mediterranean, perhaps southern Spain
- Not mere hesitation
  - Jonah traveled in the [BLANK: opposite] direction from God's command
- Sin often has a practical side — it:
  - Buys a ticket
  - Rearranges a calendar
  - Avoids a conversation
  - Supplies reasons for delay

> **Teacher note — optional visual:** Display `./map.jpg` here.
> - Ask first: "Which direction did God tell Jonah to go, and which direction did Jonah choose?"
> - Map is a schematic: Joppa → Nineveh is east/northeast; Tarshish far west
> - Mileage labels are approximate visual aids, not from Scripture
> - Tarshish's exact location is uncertain
> - Keep focus on Jonah's deliberate flight, not exact route or distance

Main truth

- **We cannot escape God's will, but His discipline is a merciful call to return**
  - God's discipline is a merciful call to [BLANK: return]
- Resist two shallow readings
  1. Jonah = courageous man volunteering to die for shipmates
  2. Sailors = simply good; Jonah = simply bad
     - **The LORD is the central actor** — sends the word, sends the wind, exposes the fugitive, calms the sea, prepares the fish
- Roadmap: three perspectives in the storm
  1. **Jonah** — knows the command but runs
  2. **The Lord** — sovereign over the storm; discipline pursues His servant
  3. **The mariners** — from panic and idolatry to fearing the LORD

Exposition: Jonah's perspective (8 min)

The downward path

- **Down** to Joppa (v. 3)
- **Down** into the ship (v. 3)
- **Down** into its sides (v. 5) — where he slept
- His descent pictures the downward path of [BLANK: sin]
  - Promises relief, leads downward — away from fellowship, alertness, usefulness, joy
- Jonah's sleep ≠ peaceful rest of faith
  - Deadly storm raging; desperate men praying
  - God's prophet spiritually insensitive

The captain's question (v. 6)

- "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" — calls Jonah to pray
- Sad reversal: a pagan captain urges God's prophet to seek God
- Warning: familiarity with biblical truth ≠ a responsive heart

Orthodox words, inconsistent life (v. 9)

- "I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land"

- Every word magnifies the inconsistency
  - Says he fears the LORD — while fleeing the LORD
  - Calls God Maker of the sea — while using the sea to escape
- Don't use religious language as a substitute for repentance

Admitting consequences vs. submitting to God (v. 12)

- "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea"
- Don't romanticize this as full repentance
  - Never says, "Turn the ship around and I'll obey"
- Biblical repentance goes beyond "sin made life painful"
  - Turns back toward the God we resisted
- Let the scene examine us
  - Do we name sin only after it's become costly?
  - God's correction calls His servant back to [BLANK: obedience]

Hope in exposure

- God brings Jonah's hidden rebellion into the open
- A wound can't be treated while denied
- When God brings sin to light through Scripture, conscience, or a faithful brother or sister
  - → Thank Him for not leaving you asleep below deck

Exposition: God's perspective (6 min)

The storm has a Sender (v. 4)

- "But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea"
- Not random weather
- God is sovereign over winds, waves, lots, fish, plants, worms, and nations
- The LORD was [BLANK: sovereign] over the storm

Sovereignty ≠ cold fatalism

- He's actively pursuing a wayward servant
- "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Heb 12:6)

- Chastening is loving [BLANK: correction], not abandonment
- Jonah's storm was severe — but it was mercy
  - A comfortable sail to Tarshish would have left him deeper in rebellion

Apply carefully

- Not every hardship = discipline for a particular sin
  - Job's friends' error — don't be amateur judges of others' suffering
- Yet Scripture plainly teaches God disciplines His children
- Ask: "Lord, what are You teaching me? Where must I turn?"

Discipline has a goal

- Not revenge — not to destroy Jonah as an enemy, but to turn him as His servant
- Distinguish:
  - **Conviction:** "This is sin; turn to God"
  - **Condemnation:** "No mercy, no way back"
- Human choices are still real — Jonah really flees, sailors really row
  - God reveals sin without excusing it; brings good from it without calling evil good

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Exposition: the mariners' perspective (5 min)

Their language changes

- Begin: each cries to "his god" (v. 5)
- Then: ask Jonah about his God
- Then: "We beseech thee, O LORD" (v. 14)
- After calm: fear the LORD exceedingly, sacrifice, make vows (v. 16)

Their conduct contrasts with Jonah's

- Row hard for land instead of immediately throwing him over (v. 13)
- Pray not to be guilty of innocent blood before acting
- Not sinless — sailors in terror
- Yet an awakening reverence in men Jonah never intended to reach
  - The sailors showed growing [BLANK: reverence] for the true God

- Don’t claim more than the text says about their final state

Encouraging and sobering

- **Encouraging:** God can witness through weak testimony
  - Magnifies grace; never makes reluctance acceptable
- **Sobering:** Our choices affect those around us
  - A parent’s compromise
  - A leader’s hidden sin
  - A believer’s refusal to obey
  - → Needless turbulence in other lives
- Our disobedience [BLANK: affects] people around us

Christ and the gospel (4 min)

The fish and the sign

- LORD prepares a great fish (v. 17)
- The great fish was divine [BLANK: rescue]
  - Jonah deserved the sea’s judgment; God preserved him
- “As Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be…” (Matt 12:40)

The essential contrast

Jonah	Jesus
Fled a mission to hostile people	Came willingly to seek and save the lost
Entered the depths for his own sin	Entered death willingly for ours
Preserved from death	Truly died, rose bodily, saves all who trust Him
Disobedient prophet needing saving	Sinless Son who came to save

The gospel

- Holy God judges sin, yet in love gave His Son
- Jesus died for our sins, was buried, rose again

- Salvation is received by God's [BLANK: grace], not human effort
  - Not by effort, heritage, or moral improvement
- We turn from sin and trust the risen Christ

Invitation

- **Not a believer?** Don't treat God's patience as permission to delay — come to Christ now
- **A believer?** Mercy received should produce mercy displayed
  - Can't announce mercy honestly while wishing it unavailable to others

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Application (3 min)

1. **No one can outrun God — return now**
   - Where are you avoiding a clear command? Forgiveness, witness, integrity, reconciliation, service
   - Don't wait for a storm
2. **Receive God's correction as a gift**
   - When God exposes sin, don't protect it with excuses or withdraw in shame
   - Confess, receive forgiveness, obey the next clear command
3. **No one is outside the reach of God's mercy**
   - Identify one person/group you're tempted to write off
   - Pray for God's concern and an opportunity to speak of Christ
4. **Pray for those in the sailors' position**
   - Confused, afraid, spiritually uninformed
   - Ask the Lord to make your words clear and your conduct consistent

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Discussion (1 min)

- Let each answer return to the text
- Then identify one obedience the Lord is calling for this week

Discussion questions

1. What details in Jonah 1:1–3 show that Jonah's disobedience was deliberate?
2. Why would a prophet from Israel resist preaching to Nineveh?

3. What changes do you see in the mariners from verses 5 to 16?
4. Where might we be tempted to avoid a clear command of God?

Closing (1 min)

- **Restate:** We cannot escape God's will, but His discipline is a merciful call to **return**
  - God's sovereign **mercy** reaches rebellious servants and sinful nations
  - God calls His people to share His [BLANK: heart] for those needing mercy
- Preview next week
  - Jonah 2 — Jonah prays from the depths, and God delivers

> **Closing prayer suggestion:** "Father, we cannot hide from Your presence or escape Your will. Thank You for pursuing us in mercy. Make us alert, honest, and ready to obey, and give us Your heart for those who need the grace we have received through Jesus Christ. Amen."