

Jonah 1-4

Aim of Lesson

To show how Jonah learned that it is impossible to run away from God, and that God forgives and saves those who repent.

Background study

2 Kings 14:23-25. Map showing Gath Hopher, Joppa, Tarshish and Nineveh. Seek information about Nineveh, early sailing ships, whales and large fish, methods of casting lots. Proverbs 16:33; Joshua 18:6; 1 Chronicles 24:31; Matthew 12:40; Luke 11:32; Acts 1:23-26.

Suggested outline of lesson

Use the theme of punishment for wrong doing as an introduction to this lesson. Discuss with the children why punishment is necessary, who administers it and how important it is that it should be just. Explore their feelings about the punishment other people have to undergo when they have done wrong. Sometimes we take pleasure in seeing that people get what they deserve. Tell the children that God is different. He is not pleased when people need punishing, but is very glad when they can be persuaded to turn from their bad ways. He is always ready to forgive. He instructs his servants to preach about his requirement and his invitation to all men to turn to him and be forgiven. One such servant was the prophet Jonah.

God instructed Jonah to take a warning message to the people of Nineveh: So great was their wickedness that he intended destroying them. Jonah was furious for he knew that if the Ninevites changed their ways God, in his great mercy, would forgive them. But Jonah wanted this threatening enemy nation to be destroyed. Deliberately disobeying God's instructions he set off in the opposite direction and went to Joppa, hoping to escape from God and avoid having to carry out his unpleasant mission. If Jonah had stopped to think he would have seen the futility of his action, for he knew that God's presence was everywhere, and that God sees and hears everything that is happening in the world.

On board ship Jonah slept soundly, still under the delusion that he had succeeded in avoiding the trip to Nineveh. But his peace of mind was soon shattered when he was roughly awakened by the captain. He heard the din of a raging sea, the howling wind, and cries of anguish. A storm had broken over the ship, so fierce that even the seasoned sailors were terrified. In their panic they offered up prayers to their false gods. These mariners did not know about the true God. But, as the storm raged around him, Jonah knew that he was in the presence of God, and must have known that the casting of lots would show that he was the one who had done wrong. He had not escaped from God, and was still required to obey his command. In addition, he had to face the questions of the angry sailors. Try to help the children imagine what it would have been like to be in Jonah's shoes; alone among strangers, in a ship which was in imminent danger of capsizing, and knowing that he had failed to carry out God's command. With great courage he not only admitted that he was to blame, but also asked that they should throw him overboard, although he knew that in such conditions he would undoubtedly drown. In their reluctance to send Jonah to his death the sailors displayed more compassion towards Jonah than Jonah had done towards Nineveh. But the power of Jonah's confession and his sure knowledge that God would calm the sea again convinced them that to get rid of Jonah was their only chance of survival. The sudden change from storm to calm confirmed that what Jonah had said was true, and the sailors knew that his God, the one true God, was in control of the elements.

As Jonah sank beneath the waves, he must have felt certain that he was to die for his disobedience. Then an unimaginable thing happened. Describe the terror that Jonah had to endure for three long and lonely days - the shock of finding himself surviving in such sinister circumstances, the darkness, the cold and the apprehension about what would happen next. The realisation of his utter helplessness finally made him acknowledge his need for God, and cry out for his help. It is possible that he died inside the fish - certainly he was close to death as he prayed. His prayer was heard and answered. Describe Jonah's relief and happiness at finding himself on dry land. He recognised that God had miraculously saved him.

God patiently repeated his original command to Jonah. How differently he responded this time. He had learned that he must obey, and he set off unhesitatingly on his mission to Nineveh. However, he still had another lesson to learn.

Describe to the children this vast, busy city, whose inhabitants behaved in a way which was so displeasing to God. As Jonah walked through the streets he, too, was horrified at the wickedness he saw and still felt that God should destroy the city. However, his fervent preaching had a profound effect on all those who heard him - you should explain their penitence. But Jonah did not share God's pleasure and acceptance of the people's repentance. He felt no compassion; he felt no joy in their change of heart. He wanted God's love and mercy to be confined to Israel.

God caused the plant to spring up (probably the shady castor oil plant) in order to make Jonah feel something of his own pity for men and women. God wanted the people of Nineveh to live in the same way as Jonah wanted the plant to live. Jonah needed to learn the extent of God's mercy. It is God's prerogative to forgive all those who are sorry for the wrong they have done. It is not right, therefore, for a man to judge others, but rather he should seek to save those who do wrong.

Relevance to the children's lives

What did Jonah have to point out to the people of Nineveh? Why did God decide not to punish these people? When a parent, teacher or neighbour points out that we are doing something wrong, how do we usually react? What would be the best thing to do? What would happen then?

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we know from the story of Jonah that you will forgive those who are truly sorry. Help us to own up when we have done wrong and ask to be forgiven. Amen.

Memory verse

“For thou, Lord, art good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on thee” (Psalm 86:5).