

Aim of lesson

To learn of God's desire that all people should repent and receive his compassion.

Bible background

Jonah 3; 4

Outline of lesson

Jonah's task

You could begin by asking the class about last week's lesson. In what way might the experiences Jonah had gone through have changed his attitude? Was he a different person the second time he was told to go to Nineveh? What had he learned about God? In contrast to the first time, Jonah obeyed, but it is likely that he still found it a difficult and frightening thing to do. Ask the class how they might feel.

The class can refer to Jonah 3:1-4 and then search in the first part of the workbook for the message Jonah took to Nineveh. The words 'Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown' (A.V.) or 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed' (N.I.V.) can be found in the wordsearch.

The words overlap and both letters and words can be used more than once.

The people of Nineveh

Read with the class Jonah 3:5-9. The people believed Jonah's message. They took it very seriously and changed their ways. They fasted and prayed in the hope that God would have compassion. The class may be able to find words from the second wordsearch to express the people's reaction. This is not a direct quotation but it includes the following words: 'They believed God, declared a fast and put on sackcloth. The king sat down in the dust.'

After the students have found enough words to write about what the people did, they may like to consider together why Jonah's message had such an effect. Some people think that Jonah's appearance might have been changed by his three days in the whale, and that this convinced the people. Whether that was so or not, the people of Nineveh, including the king, did know what was wrong in their city. There was no reaction of 'What do you mean?' or 'What are we doing wrong?' The king speaks of giving up evil ways and violence. They know that what went wrong in their city was wrong before God. This is the first step in repentance: seeing what is wrong in your life and acknowledging that it is wrong.

The people of Nineveh took the further steps of changing their ways and praying for God's mercy.

God's reaction

Read with the class Jonah 3:10. They can look for words which express God's reaction in the third wordsearch. The words included can form the quotation:

'God repented of the evil that he had said the he would do unto them, and he did it not' (AV);

or

'God had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (NIV).

God does not change. He is a compassionate and merciful God. His mercy is not less for people of a different age or race or place.

Jonah's reaction

The lesson of God's mercy was one Jonah still had to learn. He was not pleased at the 'success' of his preaching. Read with the class Jonah 4. It is a good chapter for reading by the different speakers – God, Jonah and the narrator. Ask the class to find the words to express Jonah's reaction in the fourth wordsearch. The words included can make the following quotation (Jonah 4:1):

'It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was very angry' (A.V.);

or

'Jonah was greatly displeased and became very angry' (N.I.V.).

The lesson for Jonah

Jonah was pleased when God saved him from death after he had disobeyed. He was glad to have another opportunity to do God's will. However, he did not want the people of Nineveh to be saved from death; he was not pleased when they had a second opportunity to do what was right. God's compassion was greater than Jonah's. This should not surprise us. God's compassion is greater than ours too.

Digging deeper

Nineveh

This section gets the students finding out what later happened to Nineveh and the Assyrians.

Relevance to our lives

Discuss with the class how we, like Jonah, might be happier to think of God forgiving us and saving us from the results of our sin than to think of forgiving others, especially those who have done things we do not like. The members of the class may like to consider how much they want God's forgiveness for everyone they meet this week.

Prayer

'Lord, help us to care about others and to be glad when they repent and are forgiven.'

The class could write a prayer Jonah might have said after learning the lesson of chapter four about compassion.

Other suggestions for activities

- The students could act out the modern day situation of a school friend who mocks them about going to Sunday School, and then one day wants to come with them.
- They could write the conversation of a family in Nineveh before, during and after Jonah's warnings.
- They could consult a map to see the country where Nineveh is today. They could consider what feelings might arise if someone had to go with Jonah's message today.
- The class could label the figure of Jonah on the time chart. Note that Jonah prophesies in the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25).