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SESSION ONE

Jonah 1:1-17

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

Jonah is not so much a story about a prophet and a whale as it is a vision of a transformed life—heart, mind, and soul.



Key Verse

But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. **Jonah 1:3**

Where Was Jonah Going?

Focus Image



Image Source / SuperStock

Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

Lord God of heaven and earth, maker of sea and dry land, as we study your Word, give us the courage to face the ways in which we are like Jonah—stubborn, shallow, self-serving, and more; and grant that where we fall short of your glory, we may be transformed, like the sailors in the storm, into right-minded believers and children of God. Conform our hearts and minds to your will. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focus Activity

What do you remember about the Jonah story? Take a few moments to jot down the highlights as you remember them. From what you recall, what would you say is the main point of the book of Jonah? What is at stake? What is it about? Keep your notes for later reference.

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Open Scripture

Read Jonah 1:1-17.

- What stands out to you in this chapter? What words, phrases, or happenings seem the most interesting or important to you?
- How would you describe Jonah? How does he come across as a person?
- How would you describe the captain and sailors on the boat? What are they like?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. As prophets go, Jonah is unprecedented. Like Elijah and Elisha, Jonah is the central character in a story. Like Micah or Amos, Jonah has his own book. In the Old Testament a prophet is usually one or the other, either part of a story or the “author” of a book. But Jonah is both. Jonah is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:23-26. Take a moment to read that passage and note that King Amaziah ruled in Judah (Southern Kingdom) and King Jeroboam reigned in Israel (Northern Kingdom). That places the action in the passage around 785 B.C.E.
 - Where is Jonah from? Find it on the map of Israel and Judah (p. 7). (Hint: It’s in the northern part of Israel.)
 - To where is Jonah sent? Find it on the map of the ancient Assyrian Empire (p. 8).
 - Where did Jonah actually want to go, and what was he trying to run away from (1:3)?
2. Now draw one imaginary line from Jonah’s hometown to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and another imaginary line to Joppa in the direction of Tarshish (believed to be in modern Spain). What might you say this shows about the direction that Jonah’s ministry and life are headed?

3. Take another look at the map of the ancient Assyrian Empire. In 721 B.C.E. Assyria crushed the northern kingdom of Israel and took many Israelites away from their homeland. Notice what another Old Testament prophet (Nahum) had to say to Nineveh:

- Read Nahum 3:1-7. List some of the charges against Nineveh.
- What do you think the relationship was between the people of Israel and the people of the city of Nineveh?

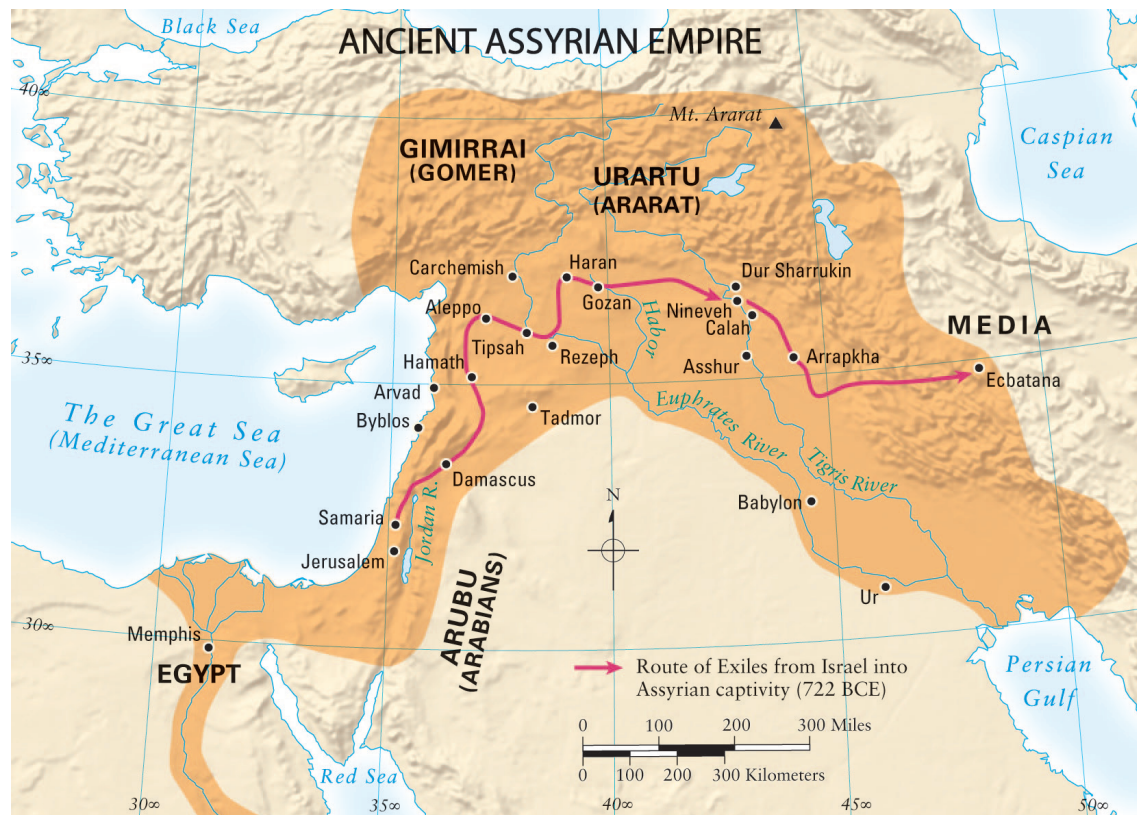
4. From what you know about prophets, what would you say is their primary role in the Bible? What would you expect from a prophet, or from prophecy? Do Jonah's actions in chapter 1 fit your expectations of a prophet? Why or why not?



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Literary Context

1. One of the ways good stories create meaning is through the careful use of tension in the plot. Tension in Jonah is built by suggesting unanswered questions. One big unanswered question is, “Why doesn’t Jonah want to go to Nineveh and ‘cry out against it’?”

- What other unanswered questions come to mind as you review chapter 1?
- Interestingly, many questions are asked *and* answered in the chapter as well. Find some of those questions and discuss how they are important in moving the plot along.

2. Good stories also often use irony to entertain and to reveal a deeper meaning. Where do you see examples of irony in the first chapter?

3. It would have been understandable for an Israelite to dislike, despise, and even hate Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. How do you think Israelites may have responded to Jonah’s decision to disobey God? How might the tension felt by us today be different from the tension felt by readers and hearers of Jonah in his day? How can the

historical and political reality of the day also help us to understand the literary tension in Jonah?

4. One of the striking things about Jonah is its scope—everything is larger than life, from the mighty windstorm that God throws in Jonah’s way (1:4), to the dramatic conversion of the sailors (1:14, 16) and their heroic efforts to deliver Jonah to shore alive (1:13), to the extreme response of the king of Nineveh (3:6-9), not to mention the big fish itself (1:17).

The word *big* is a big deal in Jonah, bigger than may be obvious in English translations of the story. The Hebrew word *gadol* (gah-DOLE), which means “big, large, great, exceedingly,” occurs fourteen times in Jonah. Some examples in chapter 1 are:

- Verse 2 “that great city”
- 4 “a great wind” and “such a mighty storm”
- 10 “Then the men were even more afraid,” or literally “Then the men feared a great fear”
- 12 “this great storm”
- 16 “Then the men feared the LORD even more,” or literally “Then the men feared a great fear”
- 17 “a large fish”

- Why do you think that all this bigness is such a big deal in Jonah? Does the bigness of Jonah’s style change the way we might think of this material? After reading chapter 1, what word would you choose to characterize the book? Why?

Lutheran Context

1. One of the key lessons that Luther took from the story of Jonah was the need to trust fully in the power of God’s grace:

[W]e must learn [from Jonah] to know God’s mercy well and not depend on our works, whether good or bad, but know that sin does not condemn us nor good works save us, but that only God’s grace preserves us. (*Luther’s Works* 19:46)

In the first chapter of Jonah, there is tension and contrast between the way that Jonah responds to God’s word and the way that the foreign sailors respond. Reread Jonah 1 and make a list of the differences.

Jonah

The Sailors



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Who seems to trust that God knows what God is doing more, Jonah or the foreign sailors? Have there been times in your own life when you were more like one or the other? When is it (or when has it been) difficult to trust that God knows what God is doing?

2. Arguing that Jonah was certainly not without sin in disobeying God, Luther wrote:

[U]nless we can protect [Jonah] with the same principle, that he did his deed full of faith, it is very sure that he sinned by lacking faith, and we must admit that he sinned very grievously by obviously treading underfoot the order of the God who was sending him, as the events which followed show. (LW 19:6)

One of the more familiar (and confusing) things that Luther said about sin is, “Be a sinner and *sin boldly*, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world.”

- Sin boldly? Was Jonah’s sin in keeping with this idea?
- What is the difference between sinning boldly and sinning badly?

3. “Scripture interprets Scripture” is a principle Lutherans and others use to read and understand the Bible. The New Testament seems to take Jonah 1:17 in a particular way. For example, read Matthew 12:38-42. How is Matthew reading Jonah 1:17? What does the “sign of Jonah” have to do with Jesus and the grave?

Devotional Context

1. Jonah’s story starts with the prophet running away. Look at the Focus Image on p. 5. What comes to mind when you look at the image?

2. The Bible describes Jonah’s attempt to escape by saying he ran “from the presence of the LORD.” What are some ways in which we might run away from God? If you are able, share a time when you have run from God. What stopped you, turned you around, or brought you back?

3. Imagine yourself in Jonah’s place, there in the belly of the big fish. What thoughts are going through your head? Then read or pray Psalm 139:1-12.

4. Jonah’s story takes its first major turn when God pursues Jonah, hurling a storm to block his path and to get him going in the right direction. What are some ways in which God pursues people? What has God done in your life that you see as God pursuing you?

5. Jonah confesses both his faith and his identity in the following way: “I am a Hebrew. . . . I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (1:9). What is strange, ironic, or even insane about Jonah thinking that he can run away from such a God? What can we learn from Jonah about the presence of God?

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

Gracious and merciful God, pursue us, your wandering, running, fleeing people. Slow your anger with us, though we are often weak and lost. May your steadfast love abound for us, even us, who are so rarely steadfast; help us both to know and to share your grace and forgiveness. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session’s Bible text: Jonah 2:1-10. Pay special attention to the change in tone and type of writing in this chapter.
2. Read or pray Psalms 139 and 23. Both psalms say something about God pursuing us. What is similar and what is different about them? Using these two psalms and the story of Jonah, sketch (or collage or describe) three different pictures of “pursuit by God.”

Enrichment

1. Here is some additional Bible reading you might do this week:
 - the book of Nahum
 - the book of Zephaniah (particularly 2:13b-15)
 - Psalm 138 (a psalm of thanksgiving, like Jonah 2)
2. Luther’s understanding of Jonah was that it painted a picture of God’s control—God is in charge from the beginning to the end. For Luther, this was how the book spoke clearly to him and to the church. With this in mind, think about the following:
 - Consider how Jonah 1 speaks to you. Who are you in the story? With whom do you most identify?
 - Put yourself in Jonah’s shoes. How do you think you would respond to God’s call to go and preach the gospel to an “enemy”?



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- Put yourself in the place of the ship's captain or sailors. How would you have responded to Jonah's admission that he was running away from God? What would you have done about it?

3. Explore the Web site <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/jonah/jonah.html>. Note especially the many styles of art that describe the story.

4. Here is some Jonah-related humor:

Q. What does the story of Jonah and the whale teach us?

A. To have a positive mental attitude, because even though Jonah was down in the mouth, he came out all right.

Q: Why is the Jonah story hard to believe?

A: Because there's something fishy about it.

Q: How was it possible for Jonah to be eaten by a fish (no matter how big)?

A: He was one of the *minor* prophets.

5. Have participants listen to a recording of "Jonah and the Whale" by Louis Armstrong, or other songs about Jonah. Have them listen to the lyrics and report on what they find.

For example, how does Armstrong do in his retelling of the Jonah story? How does hearing the song influence, shape, change, or challenge your understanding of the story? What, for Armstrong, is the goal of knowing the Jonah story? Do you agree with his emphasis?

For Further Reading

Introduction to Jonah in *Lutheran Study Bible*, p. 1496 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

Jonah, by James Limburg, Old Testament Library (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993).