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# Introduction

## Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

## A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

### • Gather (10–15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

### • Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

### • Join the Conversation (25–55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-up and prayer.

### • Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

## A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- to increase biblical fluency;
- to encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- to renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

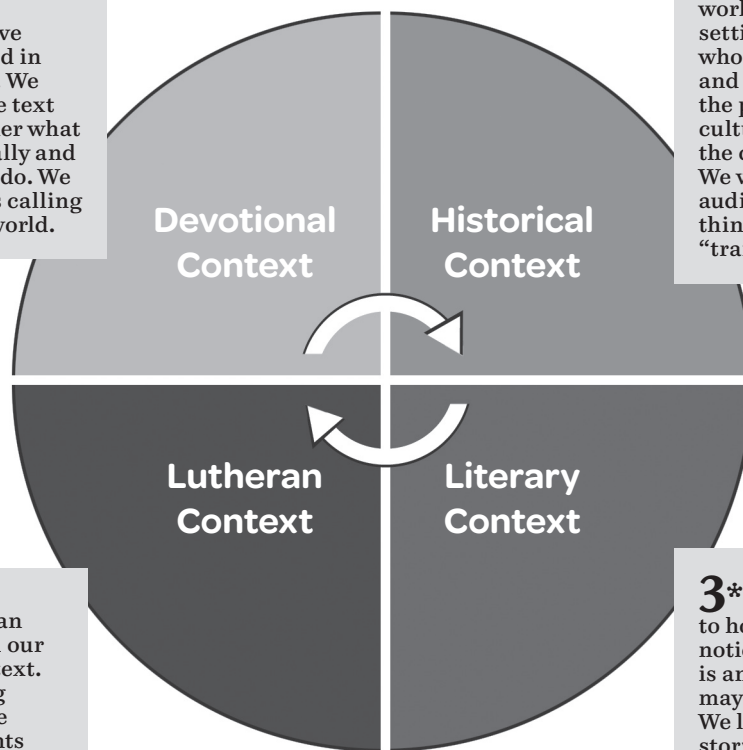
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-orientated Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

**1** We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

**5** We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

**2\*** We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



**4** We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

**3\*** We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

**\* Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on page 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

## The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

## The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview. Highlighted parts of the Session Overview provide a kind of “quick prep” for those wanting to do an initial scan of the key session themes and content.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.
- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.

- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

## Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provide the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

## Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Jonah unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes and story lines and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God’s written word for us.

## Jonah Unit Overview

The book of Jonah tells the story of a prophet who is sent to preach God's word to his people's enemies. Jonah is caught between a fish and a hard place as he struggles with God's will and his own wants. If we take into account much of the prophetic material, which seems to preach warnings and judgment, we might be surprised by Jonah's reaction; shouldn't he be excited and even joyful to go preach against Nineveh? But Jonah knows and emphasizes the core of the prophetic calling, which is to preach a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2).

When we read this story, we are invited into the questions, "Who deserves God's grace?" and "Who does God care for?" Jonah has his own ideas about how these questions should be answered, ideas that reflect both the ideas and feelings of the people of his own day and all too often the ideas and feelings that drive us. Jonah's story is meant to call these ideas and feelings into question and to suggest the possibility of a new way of thinking, feeling, and believing.

When we read Jonah's story we are reading our own story, and through it we are invited into the possibility of our own transformation—out of our self-centered faith, our narrow understanding of God's grace. Through Jonah, God is calling us to know the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of our God, and to share it.

Session 1 (Jonah 1:1-17) asks, "Where Was Jonah Going?" As Jonah runs away from God's calling, the question we have to ask is, "Who does Jonah think he is?" Jonah rejects God's calling, message, and will in favor of his own preferences. What can we learn from the direction Jonah takes his life in response to God?

Session 2 (Jonah 2:1-10) asks, "What Was Jonah Praying?" Jonah's prayer is strange because it is out of joint with the rest of the story. Jonah gives thanks even as he is suffering God's punishment. Could it be that Jonah's prayer shows the possibility and the result of a transformed heart, mind, and faith?

Session 3 (Jonah 3:1-10) asks, "What Was Jonah Saying?" In an amazingly short sermon, Jonah proclaims, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). Jonah's "sermon" doesn't sound much like good news, but it is for the people of Nineveh (and even their cattle). God's word as Jonah preaches it doesn't seem like much, but it means everything to the people of Nineveh.

Session 4 (Jonah 4:1-11) asks, "What Was Jonah Thinking?" After everything, Jonah is still angry—angry with God's calling, angry with the response of the people of Nineveh, and angry with his own situation. What is it about the good news that is so troubling for Jonah? What is wrong with Jonah's thinking, and what kind of thinking does this make us do?

## Jonah 1:1-17

### Leader 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

#### Focus Image



Image Source / SuperStock

# Where Was Jonah Going?

## Session Preparation

### Before You Begin . . .

One of the most remarkable things about the book of Jonah is that it portrays one of God's insiders—an Israelite, and an Israelite prophet at that—as actively disobeying God. This is not unique in the Bible, of course; there are lots of examples of God's people disobeying in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New. What is unique is the way that Jonah disobeys: not by forgetting or because he is tempted by others gods or earthly issues. Rather, upon hearing God's word, Jonah looks God right in the face and says, "No!"

### Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.
4. Read the book of Jonah all the way through. In the Focus Activity, participants will be asked to recall what they remember about the story. Because the key twist in the plot comes later in the book (4:2), you will not necessarily want to do much in this first exercise but gather recollections without comment. However, having read the book through, you will be better equipped to help participants discover the wonderful twists and dramatic irony in the story. The focus of the story is often on Jonah and the big fish. But the main character is neither one!

### Session Overview

Jonah is a story built around tension. Why does Jonah run away? How could a prophet of the Lord reject his calling and God's word? This is not the kind of thing that believers do, is it? Many people, when they read Jonah, end up spending much of their time with this tension. This can be helpful, as we think about our own sin and rejection of God. But there is more to it than simply Jonah's



disobedience. The motivation behind Jonah's disobedience, when it is finally revealed in Jonah 4:1-2, is what is really at stake.

So where was Jonah going? This question can be a key to the whole book as it both amps up the tension of the story and sets the stage for all of Jonah's actions that will follow.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Israel was constantly caught in the middle, between the "superpowers" of its day. In the case of Jonah, between Egypt and Assyria. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, which ultimately destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C.E. The book is set, historically, before this fall (2 Kings 14:23-26 mentions Jonah's prophecy during the reign of Jeroboam, about 785 B.C.E.), but the book was probably written long after, sometime after the **Babylonian captivity** (586-539 B.C.E.).

#### ? **Babylonian captivity:**

Also known as the Exile. About 135 years after the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and forced many Israelites out of their land, the Babylonian Empire invaded the Southern Kingdom (Judah), destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and forced many of the people of Judah and their leaders into exile. The Old Testament and many of its prophets attributed these defeats to the lack of faith and rejection of God's laws on the part of the leaders and the people.

The tension that drives the book of Jonah has to do with, on the one hand, the hatred that Israelites felt for the Assyrians and, on the other hand, the belief that God's word was, essentially, a word of grace that offered the possibility of forgiveness. This tension is introduced in reverse in the person of Jonah, who, though a prophet of the Lord, seems to reject God's word. Receiving the word from the Lord that he is supposed to deliver, Jonah does his best not to deliver it. In fact, he tries to do exactly the opposite.

Part and parcel of Israelite religion is the liturgical act of remembering—remembering the history of what God has done for Israel, and of what Israel has experienced as a people. Numerous psalms are committed to this worshipful act of remembering (for example, see Psalms 74, 78, 105, 106, 135, 136). One of the most famous and pointed examples is Psalm 137:7-8: "Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!' O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!"

When Jonah's story was written, it is possible that Israel's religious historical memory had become too much a part of its identity, obscuring a theology true to who God is. Jonah's story, then, appeals to the past and is addressed to a present community that needs to have its theology transformed.

## LITERARY CONTEXT

For many people Jonah is one of those books that really complicates questions about the nature and authority of the text. Have you ever heard someone say, “Really, so you Christians actually believe that Jonah guy was in a whale’s stomach for three days, and lived?” The idea is that if you are willing to believe this, then you are crazy. Others, in response to this, will insist that Jonah must be literally true in order to bear the truth. Both of these positions tend to obscure the kind of literature that Jonah is and make it much more difficult to understand the primary point of the book.

Luther was aware of the difficulty that might arise when reading the story when he says in his commentary on Jonah:

Who can really comprehend how a man can survive three days and three nights within a fish, in the middle of the sea, all alone, without light and without food, and in the end return to dry land again? That must have been a strange voyage. Who would believe this story and not regard it a lie and a fairy tale if it were not recorded in Scripture?  
(*Luther’s Works* 19:68)

So care is needed when thinking about what kind of literature this is. It may be helpful to reiterate the grand bigness of the narrative. Everything is large, big, and dramatic, from Jonah’s response, to the sailors’ responses, to God’s responses, and yes, to the big fish’s response. This bigness in the story is an important insight into the **mythic**, fablelike quality of the book. It is through this bigness, these unbelievable details, that the story grabs us, the readers, and draws us in. And drawing us in, it will work to change us.

Adding to the “storylike” quality of the book is the careful use of irony to drive both the plot and the message. In chapter 1, this is especially clear in the contrast between Jonah, a supposed man of God (a prophet) among God’s Hebrew people, and the sailors. When the storm hits, Jonah sleeps while the sailors pray to their gods. And after they have thrown Jonah in the sea and the storm is immediately stopped, they sacrifice to the LORD. The irony was not likely lost on faithful Jews who heard the story.

**Mythic:**

Often refers to tales or stories written or told to explain the origins or meaning of reality, often including the stories of the actions of gods. “Mythic” can also refer to a story’s “deeper” meaning. Some may be uncomfortable thinking of any story in the Bible as being “mythic.” But in a book like Jonah, this refers to its deeper truth in the same way a parable teaches a deeper truth. (See the note on parable, p. 12).



**? Law/Gospel Dialectic:**

The gospel literally means “good news.” It refers to God’s gracious love and acceptance, especially made real in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Normally, the message about God’s love would be good news, but to Jonah, who didn’t want God to forgive the wicked Ninevites, the good news functioned like bad news. The law can function like bad news when we feel dismayed by how far short we come from living up to God’s expectations. On the other hand, if the law functions to drive us to see how much we need God, or helps us treat others with greater justice, then it can have “good news” implications. That’s the dialectic, or tension, that exists in both gospel and law. It’s too simple to say that the gospel is always heard as good news, and the law is always heard as bad news.

**? Parable:**

“A story with not only a point, but a skewer. . . . In fact, the biblical parables are often pointed. You might say that they have a lance-like point—a sort of ‘gotcha’ moment in which we realize that the point of the story has, in fact, punctured us” (from *Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009], p. 212). Jonah has many of the characteristics of a good parable.

**LUTHERAN CONTEXT**

Luther makes the point that Jonah, in disobeying God, was not sinless. 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)

But is Jonah’s sin here that he lacks faith in God? In one sense this might be true; Jonah does not trust that the message God wants him to deliver to Nineveh is in Israel’s best interest. But in another sense it is precisely because Jonah is a believer, a person of faith, that he sins. See Jonah 4:2, “[Jonah] prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.’”

Jonah’s faith in God’s word—faith that God’s word is good and will be kept—is what motivates him to disobey. Jonah does not want Nineveh to repent and be spared. Jonah does not want the gospel for the Assyrians. This is very much in keeping with the **law/gospel dialectic**, and the reality that even the good news of the gospel may well be received differently. In this case the good news for Nineveh—“repent and be delivered”—is law for Jonah.

**DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT**

The focus statement of this first session of Jonah is “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.” Jonah, rejecting God’s message, runs away. We know as we read that this will have to be addressed and changed. By introducing the disconnect of a prophet who rejects God’s word, Jonah sets the reader up, as in a **parable**, to be drawn in and shown his or her own rejection of God’s word and will, and thereby to have his or her worldview and faith transformed.

You and your group will explore some ways in which we might run away from God. You may also talk about what may have caused us to stop running, turned us around, and brought us back. You’ll explore Psalm 139 as you imagine what it may be like to be in the “belly” because you have tried to escape God.

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?

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." The God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Is it at all strange, ironic, or even insane for Jonah to think that he can run away from such a God? What can we learn from Jonah about the presence of God?

### Facilitator's Prayer

*Lord of steadfast love and mercy, help us to truly hear your Word. Where your good news comes to us, may we hear it and know it joyfully. May we find our feet ready and our tongues eager to profess your Word and go proclaim it to others. Where we are unable or unwilling to do either, may you transform us by the power of your Spirit, making of us true disciples, knowing and sharing your truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Gather (10–15 minutes)

### Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another. If participants are unfamiliar with one another, you may wish to provide name tags. If appropriate, provide snacks to add to the welcome of this first session.

### 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.*

### Tip:

Numerous songs are inspired by the Jonah story. Examples include "Jonah and the Whale" by Louis Armstrong, "Jonah and the Whale" by Buddy Greene, "The Whale Swallowed Jonah" by Big Smith, and "In the Belly of the Whale" by Newsboys, just to name a few. As your group is arriving, have one of these songs playing to set the mood and provide a welcoming study environment. You might consider printing or posting the lyrics so that folks can follow along.

### Tip:

Ask a volunteer to pray the opening prayer. Remind the participants that prayers offer times to consider how our lives are reflected in the prayers and actions of people in the biblical story.

## SESSION ONE



### Tip:

Write down some of the recollections from the group, but don't comment on or try to correct those recollections at this time. Tell the group that you will return to this list later after exploring the Bible text more carefully.



### Tip:

Provide a short timeline of biblical history for review as you begin to set the context for Jonah. On chart paper or a whiteboard write the following dates:

1050	Saul is king
960	Solomon builds the temple
928	Israel is divided into North and South
721	Fall of Israel (Northern Israel conquered by the Assyrian Empire)
587/586	Fall of Judah (Southern Israel conquered by the Babylonian Empire)
585	Solomon's Temple destroyed
530s	Return from exile

### 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.

### Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Jonah is a story made for dramatic reading. Consider reading the story once by asking volunteers to take the parts of the various characters in the story: narrator, God, Jonah, ship captain, sailors. Then consider reading 1:1-17 again, so the participants can reflect on the following questions.

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 (25–55 minutes)

#### 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 of Learner Guide). (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 of Learner Guide).
- 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?

### 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 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?

### + Bonus Activity:

For Jonah, Nineveh is the last place in the world he would want to go and preach God's word, because Jonah hated Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. Have your group list places or people who might be their "Nineveh." Imagine what preaching to those people or that place would feel like for them. Then ask them to think about a people or nation for whom we might be like Nineveh.

### Tip:

If participants have access to *Lutheran Study Bible*, they might review the brief article titled "Prophets," p. 1088. Or you may wish to summarize the definition of the biblical prophets in a Bible Dictionary.

### + Bonus Activity:

Think of Psalm 94:1-4 as a summary of Jonah's attitude. Now imagine this psalm as Jonah's own prayer. How, for Jonah, is the prayer unanswered?

### Tip:

For examples of irony, see "Literary Context" above, p. 11.



**Tip:**

Keep in mind that in your group there will probably be very different impressions of a book like Jonah. Not everyone will understand the kind of literature that it is in the same way. Try to avoid telling the group the “right answer,” and do your best to negotiate the differences. Be patient.



**Bonus Activity:**

Have participants make a list of modern stories that are “Jonah-like.” Talk about how modern storytelling is either similar to or different from Jonah. Discuss how “mythic,” fable-style stories still communicate important messages and deeper truths.



**Tip:**

Jonah runs away from God’s command and sleeps when the storm hits. The sailors know that the storm is from God and react with fear and prayer. Later, readers will discover that Jonah is running so that God’s love cannot touch his enemies. The sailors do not wish to harm Jonah, even when he tells them he is the reason for the storm. The sailors react to the calming of the storm by honoring Jonah’s God.

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

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 of the Learner Guide. 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.



### Bonus Activity:

One of the core Lutheran theological and scriptural constructs is the law/gospel distinction. How are “law” and “gospel” at work in Jonah 1? Help the group think about how people’s perspective, desires, hopes, and prejudices may shape how they hear the same message. For whom would the story of Jonah be “law,” and for whom is it “gospel”? How could we think about the story of Jesus in similar ways? For whom is Jesus’ life and death an expression of the law, and for whom is it purest good news? (See the note on **law/gospel dialectic**, p.12.)



### Tip:

Some may say that Jesus affirms the literal truth by comparing Jonah’s ordeal to what he will face in his death and resurrection. Others may read this as a metaphor. In Matthew the story acts to point to the judgment that comes upon those who do not recognize the sign of Jesus or hear the call to true repentance.



### Tip:

Take care to invite only volunteers to share stories. Some stories of running away or escaping may be very personal and painful.



## SESSION ONE

### Bonus Activity:

Looking ahead a little, when he is in the belly of the big fish, Jonah will pray. Take a couple of minutes for each member of the group to write their own short belly-of-the-beast prayer. What would you pray for if you found yourself in Jonah's situation?

### Tip:

Go back over the comparison of Jonah and the sailors as a way to think about change and transformation.

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

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.

2. What, if anything, changes in Jonah 1? Attitudes? Situations? Allegiances?

How do these changes speak to us and our own settings and situations?

### 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.*

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## 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"?
- 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?

## SESSION ONE

### For Further Reading

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

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

### Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Jonah 2:1-10.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.