Jonah and the Big Fish

Sunday School Lesson for Preteens (Ages 11–12), 45–60 minutes

Main point: You can't outrun God, and He gives second chances, so obey Him the first time He speaks.
Bible passage: Jonah 1:1–3:10. Students read Jonah 1 and Jonah 3 out loud themselves.
Memory verse: "But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD." *Jonah 2:9 (KJV)* and "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here." *Matthew 12:41 (KJV)*
You need: a Bible for each student, paper or a notebook and a pen for each student, a whiteboard and a marker, and one take-home sheet for each student.
Before class: read Jonah 1–3 and Matthew 12:38–41. Write both memory verses on the board. Decide who reads which verses, or go around the room a few verses each.

1. Opening game: Easy or Hard? (5–10 minutes)

Name one side of the room "easy" and the other side "hard." Read each situation. Students walk to the side that shows how hard it would be to do the right thing right away. 1) Your parent asks you to apologize to your brother or sister first. 2) You know you should tell the truth about something you broke. 3) A teacher asks you to sit with the new student nobody talks to. 4) You want to invite a friend to church, but you're afraid they'll laugh. Ask: *When we know what's right but don't want to do it, what are the ways we "run"?* Say: "Jonah ran from God, and he ran the other way on a ship."

2. Bible story: Students Read It (15 minutes)

Read out loud: Jonah 1:1–17. Students take turns, a few verses each. Old words in this passage:

- **cry against it** (1:2): warn the city about its sin
- **from the presence of the LORD** (1:3): away from where God wanted him; **fare** (1:3): the price of the trip
- **tempest** (1:4, 1:11–12): a violent storm; **like to be broken** (1:4): about to break apart
- **mariners** (1:5): sailors; **wares** (1:5): cargo; **shipmaster** (1:6): captain
- **cast lots** (1:7): a way of choosing, a little like drawing straws
- **the sea wrought, and was tempestuous** (1:11, 1:13): the sea got wilder and stormier
- **ceased from her raging** (1:15): stopped storming; **made vows** (1:16): made promises to God
- **prepared** (1:17): God made it ready ahead of time

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Tell chapter 2 in your own words: Jonah prayed to the LORD his God out of the fish's belly (2:1). He said he cried to the LORD in his **affliction** (his trouble), and God heard him (2:2). The water closed over him, and the weeds were wrapped around his head (2:5). When his soul **fainted** within him, when he was ready to give up, he remembered the LORD (2:7). He said that people who hold on to **lying vanities**, false gods that can't help, give up the mercy God would give them (2:8). Then he said our memory verse (2:9). The LORD spoke to the fish, and it **vomited out** Jonah, threw him up, onto the dry land (2:10).

Read out loud: Jonah 3:1–10. Old words in this passage:

- **the second time** (3:1): God spoke to Jonah again with the same command
- **an exceeding great city of three days' journey** (3:3): so big it took three days to walk through
- **overthrown** (3:4): destroyed
- **proclaimed a fast** (3:5): announced that everyone would stop eating for a time; **sackcloth**: rough cloth worn to show sorrow
- **decree** (3:7): an official order from the king
- **God repented of the evil** (3:10): God showed mercy and did not bring the destruction He had warned about. It does not mean God did wrong.

3. Questions to ask (15 minutes)

1. Jonah kept going *down*: to Joppa, into the ship, deep inside the ship (1:3, 1:5). What happens when we run from God?
2. The sailors who didn't know the LORD ended up praying to Him and fearing Him (1:14–16), while Jonah slept. How can our choices affect the people around us?
3. Jonah prayed from the bottom of the sea (2:1–7). Is there any place too far from God to pray? What does Jonah 2:2 say God did?
4. "Salvation is of the LORD" (2:9). What does it mean that only God can save, and not our own efforts?
5. God spoke to Jonah "the second time" (3:1). Why does God give second chances? How should a second chance change the way we respond?
6. The whole city turned, from the king down (3:5–10). What did their turning look like? What does real repentance look like for a student today?

4. Memory verse (5 minutes)

Old words in Jonah 2:9: **sacrifice** means give to God, **vowed** means promised, **salvation** means being saved. Old words in Matthew 12:41: **Jonas** is another way to spell Jonah. **Rise in judgment** and **condemn it** mean that on judgment day, Nineveh will show that the people of Jesus' day were wrong, because Nineveh repented and they did not. **A greater than Jonas is here** means Jesus is far greater than Jonah. Read both verses together. Then students cover one phrase at a time and quiz a partner. Say Jonah 2:9 this week; keep working on Matthew 12:41 next week too.

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5. What this means for us (5–10 minutes)

Say: "Jesus pointed to Jonah when He spoke about Himself. He said that as Jonah was three days and three nights inside the sea creature, He would be three days and three nights 'in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12:40, KJV). And He said 'a greater than Jonas is here' (Matthew 12:41, KJV). Nineveh repented when Jonah preached. God loves you, and 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23, KJV). Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, God who came as a man (1 Timothy 3:16). 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3–4, KJV). We obey the gospel the way Peter preached it: 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' (Acts 2:38, KJV) We **repent**, turning from sin like Nineveh turned from its evil way, and our old self dies (Romans 6:6). We are buried with Jesus by baptism in His name, all the way under the water. **Remission** means our sins are washed away, and we rise to walk in newness of life, a brand-new life (Romans 6:4; Acts 22:16). And God fills us with the Holy Ghost, and we speak with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance, which means as He gives the words (Acts 2:4). Jesus called this being born of water and of the Spirit (John 3:5)."
Pray with the students, and encourage them to talk with their parents and pastor about being baptized in Jesus' name and filled with the Holy Ghost. Never pressure a child.

6. Activity: Journal (10 minutes)

Each student writes privately. No one has to share. Write these three prompts on the board:

1. Is there something God has asked me to do that I have been "running" from?
2. What would obeying the first time look like there this week?
3. Write a short prayer thanking God for second chances and asking Him for courage to obey.
   If there is time, invite a few volunteers to share one sentence.

This week: when you know what God wants you to do, do it the first time instead of putting it off or going the other way.

7. Prayer

"Dear God, thank You that we can never run too far from You, and that You hear us when we pray from any place. Thank You for second chances. Help us obey You the first time You speak. Thank You for loving us and making a way to save us through Jesus. In Jesus' name, amen."

If a student asks "Could a man really live inside a fish?": answer honestly. The Bible says the LORD prepared the great fish (Jonah 1:17), so it was a miracle, something only God can do. Jesus Himself spoke of Jonah's three days and three nights as true history and compared it to His own burial (Matthew 12:40).

If a student asks what happened next: the lesson stops at Jonah 3. Jonah 4 tells how Jonah was angry that God spared Nineveh, and how God taught him about His mercy. It makes a good follow-up lesson.

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