

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Running from God: Jonah and the Storm

Jonah 1:1–17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, the foundational issue in these four Jonah lessons is the reality of the account itself. Jesus treated Jonah as a real prophet and the events as real history, using “the sign of the prophet Jonah” to point to His own death, burial, and resurrection (Matthew 12:39–41). Teach the class to read Jonah as genuine history, not as myth, parable, or allegory with a moral attached. To deny its historicity is to part company with the way the Lord Himself read it. The fish is not the point of the book, but it is not a fairy tale either.

The second great theme introduced here is God’s sovereign mercy reaching beyond Israel to the nations. God cares about violent, pagan Nineveh, and even within this chapter He turns a boatload of frightened pagan sailors into worshipers who fear the Lord. This foreshadows the gospel going to all the world (Acts 1:8). It also exposes Jonah’s resistance, which will become the heart of the book in chapter 4.

This passage is not merely an adventure tale; it aims at the student’s own obedience. Jonah is a mirror for every believer who has heard God clearly and quietly headed the other way. Teach toward honest self-examination about where we run, the downward pull of disobedience, the impossibility of escaping God’s presence, and the patient God who pursues His runaways rather than discarding them.

Question 1

Student Question:

The book opens with “the word of the Lord came to Jonah,” sending him to preach against Nineveh, “that great city” (vv. 1–2). What does it tell us about God that He sends a prophet to a violent, pagan enemy city rather than writing it off, and how does this set up the central theme of the whole book?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the call itself: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me” (vv. 1–2). Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a brutal empire infamous for cruelty toward conquered peoples, including Israel. God’s decision to send a prophet there at all is the first surprise of the book.

Help the class see what this reveals about God. He is not the private deity of one nation; His concern reaches even to His people’s enemies. The phrase “their evil has come up before me”

shows God paying attention to a pagan city's wickedness, which means He is also ready to respond if they repent. The whole book turns on this divine readiness to show mercy.

Set up the tension that drives everything. The reason Jonah will run is not that the task is too hard but that he suspects God might actually forgive Nineveh (4:2). The opening verses plant the seed of the scandal of grace: God loves people we would rather He judge.

Note the missionary trajectory. Long before the Great Commission, God is shown caring about the nations. This anticipates the gospel for all the world and rebukes any narrow, tribal religion that wants God's mercy kept in-house.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's concern reaches even to violent, pagan enemies.
- God attends to the wickedness of every nation, not only Israel.
- God is ready to show mercy to those who repent.
- The book foreshadows the gospel going to all nations.
- True religion does not try to keep God's mercy for itself.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it surprising that God would send a prophet to Nineveh at all?
- What does God's concern for Nineveh reveal about His heart for the nations?
- Where might we be tempted, like Jonah, to wish God's mercy on some people and not others?

Question 2

Student Question:

Instead of obeying, Jonah "rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (v. 3). When you sense God calling you toward something hard or uncomfortable, what is your own version of buying a ticket to Tarshish?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question takes Jonah's flight and makes it personal. Note the deliberate detail: Jonah did not merely refuse; he "rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord," paid the fare, and went down into the ship. Disobedience here is active, deliberate, and costly. He spends money to run from God.

Help students name their own Tarshish tickets. We rarely announce that we are disobeying God; we just get busy, distracted, or geographically and emotionally distant from the thing He has made clear. The "ticket" might be a job change, a relationship, a calendar full of noise, or simply a hardened refusal to forgive someone.

Keep the tone gentle and self-implicating, not accusatory. The teacher who admits “I have my own Tarshish” creates room for honest reflection. The point is recognition, not shame.

Press toward the specific. Ask each person to identify one area where they sense God’s direction and have been quietly heading the other way, and what the first step back toward obedience would be.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Disobedience is often active and deliberate, not merely passive.
- Running from God usually costs us something real.
- We disguise flight from God as busyness or distance.
- Honest naming of our “Tarshish” is the first step back.
- Obedience often begins with one concrete step of return.

Discussion Prompts

- What is your version of buying a ticket to Tarshish?
- Why do we tend to disguise disobedience rather than admit it?
- What would the first step back toward obedience look like for you this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Twice we are told Jonah was fleeing “from the presence of the Lord” (v. 3), yet the storm and the sea prove God is fully present even there. What does Scripture teach about the impossibility of escaping God’s presence, and why is that truth both sobering and comforting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 3 says twice that Jonah fled “from the presence of the Lord,” and the irony is the engine of the chapter. A prophet, of all people, should know that you cannot get away from God. Psalm 139:7–10 says it plainly: there is nowhere we can go from His Spirit, not the heavens, not the depths, not the far side of the sea, which is exactly where Jonah is headed.

Teach the doctrine of God’s omnipresence carefully. God is not located in Israel; He is everywhere, sustaining all things. Jonah’s attempt to leave God’s jurisdiction is theologically impossible, and the storm proves it. The God of the temple is also the God of the open ocean.

Draw out both edges of this truth. It is sobering: there is no hiding place from God, no private corner where disobedience goes unseen. And it is deeply comforting: there is also no place so far, so dark, or so deep that God cannot reach us there. Jonah will discover both in the belly of the fish.

Connect to the gospel. The same inescapable presence that finds the runaway also runs toward the returning child (Luke 15:20). God's pursuit of Jonah is not the cold tracking of a warden but the relentless love of One who will not let His servant be lost.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is everywhere present; we cannot flee Him (Psalm 139:7–10).
- God's omnipresence means no disobedience goes unseen.
- God's omnipresence also means no one is beyond His reach.
- God's pursuit of the runaway is loving, not merely punitive.
- There is no place too dark or deep for God to find us.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the truth that we cannot escape God both sobering and comforting?
- Where do people today imagine they can hide a part of life from God?
- How does God's pursuit of Jonah picture His pursuit of us?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jonah went “down” to Joppa, “down” into the ship, and lay “down” to sleep (vv. 3–5). Where have you noticed that running from God tends to pull a person steadily downward rather than setting them free?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question follows the chapter's vocabulary of descent. Jonah went down to Joppa (v. 3), down into the ship (v. 3), down into the inner part of the vessel, and down into sleep (v. 5), and he will soon go down into the sea. The narrator is preaching through geography: sin takes you down.

Help the class feel the pattern in their own experience. Running from God rarely feels like freedom for long. It promises escape and delivers a slow slide: numbness, isolation, hardened conscience, deepening trouble. The downward staircase is one of the most realistic things in the book.

Be honest that the descent can feel comfortable for a while. Jonah falls asleep; the runaway often grows numb rather than miserable at first. That numbness is itself part of the danger, because it quiets the alarm that should be sounding.

Move toward hope. The descent is not the end of the story; God interrupts it with a storm. Sometimes the most merciful thing God does is to disrupt our comfortable descent before it carries us all the way down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Disobedience tends to pull a life steadily downward.
- Running from God promises freedom but delivers bondage.
- Spiritual numbness can disguise how far we have drifted.
- God often mercifully interrupts our descent.
- Recognizing the downward pull early helps us turn back.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you seen running from God lead downward rather than to freedom?
- Why can the early stages of drifting feel comfortable rather than alarming?
- How might a present disruption in your life actually be a mercy?

Question 5

Student Question:

God “hurled a great wind upon the sea” (v. 4), and later we read He “appointed a great fish” (v. 17). What does Jonah teach about God’s sovereign control over wind, sea, and creature, and how does that shape the way we think about the circumstances in our own lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gathers the chapter’s repeated note of divine sovereignty. God “hurled a great wind” (v. 4) and later “appointed a great fish” (v. 17). The same verb of appointing will recur in chapters 4 with a plant, a worm, and a scorching wind. God commands wind, wave, and creature; nothing in the story is outside His control.

Teach providence here, not deism. God is not a distant clockmaker; He is actively governing creation to accomplish His purposes, even using a storm to turn a runaway around. This is not God lashing out in temper but God steering Jonah back with sovereign precision.

Apply it to the class’s circumstances with care. We should be slow to label every hardship a divine message, yet we can trust that nothing reaches us outside God’s governance, and that He is able to use even storms for our good and His glory (Romans 8:28). The God who controls the sea controls our seas.

Note the contrast with idols. The sailors cry to gods who cannot calm the sea, while the Lord raises and stills it at will. Jonah’s God is the Maker of sea and dry land (v. 9), and that confession is the theological center of the chapter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God sovereignly governs wind, sea, and creature.
- Providence means God actively steers events toward His purposes.

- God can use even hardship to turn us back to Him.
- Nothing reaches us outside God's governance (Romans 8:28).
- The living God acts where idols are powerless.

Discussion Prompts

- How does God's control over the storm shape the way you view your own circumstances?
- What is the difference between trusting God's providence and reading a message into every hardship?
- How does the living God of Jonah contrast with the powerless idols of the sailors?

Question 6

Student Question:

While pagan sailors cried out to their gods and worked to save the ship, Jonah was "fast asleep" below deck (v. 5). Have you ever found yourself spiritually asleep, going through the motions, while people around you were more awake to spiritual things than you were? What woke you, or what might?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question seizes on the chapter's sharpest irony: pagan sailors are praying and laboring for their lives while the prophet of the true God is "fast asleep" in the hold (v. 5). The man who should be most awake to God is the most spiritually unconscious person on the ship.

Help students recognize spiritual sleep in themselves. It rarely looks like dramatic rebellion; it looks like going through the motions, dulled prayer, a Bible read without hunger, worship attended without attention. Disobedience and spiritual sleep often travel together, as they do in Jonah.

Note who is more awake. Sometimes the people outside the church, or newer or less-instructed believers, show a spiritual earnestness that convicts those of us who have grown comfortable. God can use an unbelieving captain to say, "Arise, call out to your god" (v. 6). The rebuke can come from unexpected places.

Ask the awakening question gently. What tends to wake us? Often it is a crisis, a storm, a confrontation, or the honest words of another person. Invite the class to consider whether God may be using something right now to rouse them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual sleep often accompanies disobedience.
- Going through the motions can mask a dull heart.
- Sometimes outsiders are more spiritually awake than insiders.

- God can use unlikely people to rouse us.
- Crises often serve as God's wake-up call.

Discussion Prompts

- What does spiritual sleep look like in a believer's ordinary week?
- Have you ever been rebuked or awakened by someone you did not expect?
- What tends to wake you up spiritually, and is God using anything now?

Question 7

Student Question:

The captain confronts Jonah, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god!" (v. 6), and the sailors' questions force Jonah to confess, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (v. 9). Why is it significant that Jonah's true confession of faith comes out of his mouth even in the middle of his disobedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question centers on Jonah's confession in verse 9: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." It is a magnificent statement of orthodox faith, and it comes out of the mouth of a man in mid-flight from that very God. Right doctrine and present disobedience can, sadly, live in the same person.

Help the class hold this tension honestly. Jonah is not an atheist or a doubter; he believes all the right things about God. His problem is not his theology but his will. This is a sobering word for those of us who can recite sound doctrine while resisting obedience in some corner of life.

Notice that the confession is also true and powerful. Jonah names God as Maker of the sea, the very sea now raging around him, and of the dry land he was trying to reach. His own words convict him: the God he is fleeing made the place he is fleeing to. Truth has a way of catching up with us even as we run.

Draw out the witness, ironic as it is. Jonah's confession begins the sailors' movement toward the true God. God can use even a disobedient servant's true words. That is grace, not an endorsement of the disobedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sound doctrine can coexist with present disobedience.
- Our problem is often the will, not the intellect.
- God is Maker of all; there is no place outside His domain.
- Truth confronts us even when we are running from it.
- God can use a flawed servant's true confession for good.

Discussion Prompts

- How can a person believe all the right things and still be running from God?
- Why is it significant that Jonah's confession names God as Maker of the very sea he fears?
- How does God still use imperfect witnesses to point others to Himself?

Question 8

Student Question:

When the sailors ask what they must do, Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea, taking responsibility so that others would be spared (v. 12). When your wrong choices have spilled over onto people around you, how do you tend to respond, and what would genuine ownership look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on verse 12, where Jonah finally takes responsibility: "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea, then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." His sin had endangered innocent people, and here he owns it.

Help the class see the spillover of sin. Jonah's private disobedience put a whole crew in mortal danger. Our wrong choices rarely stay private; they wash over spouses, children, friends, and coworkers. Acknowledging that ripple effect is part of honest repentance.

Commend Jonah's ownership while noting its limits. He does take responsibility and seeks to spare the others, which is genuinely admirable. Yet his solution is still partly an escape, choosing the sea over the harder road of turning back to obey. Even our repentance can be mixed.

Point toward the better pattern in Christ. Where Jonah is thrown into the storm because of his own sin, Jesus willingly entered the storm of God's judgment for sins not His own, that others might be spared (1 Peter 3:18). Jonah's self-sacrifice is a dim and broken picture of a greater, sinless substitution.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our sin often spills over and harms others.
- Honest repentance owns the damage we have caused.
- Taking responsibility is right even when our motives are mixed.
- Jonah's offer faintly foreshadows substitution.
- Christ entered the storm of judgment for sins not His own (1 Peter 3:18).

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen one person's choices spill over onto others?

- What does genuine ownership of our wrongs look like, beyond merely feeling bad?
- How does Jonah's offer point, however dimly, to the substitution of Christ?

Question 9

Student Question:

By the end of the chapter the pagan sailors "feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (v. 16), while God "appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (v. 17), which Jesus later calls a true sign of His own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). How does this chapter already display God's mercy reaching the nations, and how does the great fish point us forward to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, holding together two truths: the conversion of the sailors and the appointing of the fish as a sign of Christ. After Jonah is thrown overboard, the sea grows calm, and "the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (v. 16). Pagan sailors become worshipers of the living God. Even through a disobedient prophet, God's mercy reaches the nations.

Make the missionary point clear. The book that seems to be about Jonah's failure is, underneath, about God's relentless mercy spilling out to outsiders. The sailors are the first Gentiles in the story to turn to the Lord, foreshadowing the gospel that will go to all the world (Acts 10; Acts 1:8). God's heart for the nations is on display from the first chapter.

Now address the fish and the historicity directly. "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (v. 17). Jesus took this as a real event and a true sign: "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). We therefore read it as genuine history, not myth or allegory. To treat Jonah as a mere fable is to undercut the very sign Jesus chose to point to His resurrection.

Let Christ be the loudest note. The fish is not the marvel to dwell on; the empty tomb is. Jonah's three days in the deep prefigure Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. The God who can preserve a prophet in the depths and bring him out alive is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and that resurrection is the ground of our hope.

Hold justice and mercy together. God's mercy to the sailors and His preservation of Jonah do not deny His judgment; rather, they show a God who judges sin and yet delights to rescue. That balance will carry through the rest of the book and into the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's mercy reaches the nations, even through a disobedient prophet.

- The sailors' conversion foreshadows the gospel for all the world.
- Jonah is real history, as Jesus Himself treated it (Matthew 12:40).
- Reading Jonah as mere myth undercuts the sign Jesus chose.
- The three days in the fish prefigure Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.
- God both judges sin and delights to rescue.
- Christ's resurrection, not the fish, is the loudest note.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the sailors' conversion show God's heart for the nations?
- Why does it matter that Jesus treated Jonah as real history rather than a fable?
- How does Jonah's time in the fish point us to the death and resurrection of Christ?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole chapter, from God's call to the swallowing fish. Name one specific way Jesus is using Jonah's runaway story to call you back, to wake you up, or to make you more willing to go where He sends you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question asks the student to look back over the whole chapter and name one specific way Christ is using Jonah's runaway story in their life. Press for something concrete and personal rather than a general lesson learned.

Gather the threads: the call we are tempted to flee, the downward pull of disobedience, the God we cannot escape, the spiritual sleep that dulls us, and the patient God who pursues and rescues His runaways. Each is a place the Spirit may be working.

Help different people land differently. For one, the lesson is turning back toward a specific obedience they have avoided. For another, it is waking up from spiritual numbness. For another, it is taking comfort that God's pursuit is love, not condemnation.

Close in prayer that moves from running to returning, asking God to make the class willing to go where He sends, and grateful that even when we run, He does not let us go.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformation is specific and personal, not vague.
- Willingness to obey is the chief fruit this chapter seeks.
- God's pursuit of runaways is an expression of His love.
- The same text meets different hearts in different ways.
- Self-examination should lead to prayer and concrete return.

Discussion Prompts

- Name one specific way Christ is calling you back or sending you out through this chapter.
- Which theme strikes you most: the flight, the descent, the pursuit, or the rescue?
- What concrete step of obedience will you take this week?