

May 14
Lesson 11

PRESERVING

LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 116:1-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jonah 2

JONAH 2

¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said:
 “In my distress I called to the LORD,
 and he answered me.
 From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
 and you listened to my cry.
³ You hurled me into the depths,
 into the very heart of the seas,
 and the currents swirled about me;
 all your waves and breakers
 swept over me.
⁴ I said, ‘I have been banished
 from your sight;
 yet I will look again
 toward your holy temple.’
⁵ The engulfing waters threatened me,
 the deep surrounded me;
 seaweed was wrapped around my head.
⁶ To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
 the earth beneath barred me in forever.
 But you, LORD my God,
 brought my life up from the pit.
⁷ “When my life was ebbing away,
 I remembered you, LORD,
 and my prayer rose to you,
 to your holy temple.
⁸ “Those who cling to worthless idols
 turn away from God’s love for them.
⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise,
 will sacrifice to you.
 What I have vowed I will make good.
 I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”
¹⁰ And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

KEY VERSE

“I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’”—Jonah 2:9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the circumstances that prompted a change in Jonah's thinking.
2. Explain how wrong decisions and their consequences may lead ultimately to a stronger faith.
3. Make a plan for his or her prayers and praises to be a part of everyday life, not just in crises.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. *Taking Time, Not Finding Time*
- B. Lesson Background

I. Descriptions (Jonah 2:1-3)

- A. In the Fish (vv. 1, 2)
- B. In the Sea (v. 3)

The Prayingest Prayer

II. Despair (Jonah 2:4-6a)

- A. Away from God (v. 4)
- B. Covered by Water (v. 5)
- C. Down to the Lowest (v. 6a)

III. Declarations (Jonah 2:6b-10)

- A. By Jonah (vv. 6b-9)
- Hitting Rock Bottom*
- B. By the Lord (v. 10)

Conclusion

- A. Running to God
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Taking Time, Not Finding Time

In 1884, the *American Christian Review* related a prayer experience between Jacob Creath Jr. and L. B. Wilkes that took place in 1854, as recounted by Wilkes. The location was Lagrange, Missouri, where Wilkes had come to preach. After breakfast, Creath invited Wilkes to take a walk into a nearby wooded area. Stopping by a fallen tree, Creath said, "Let us pray." According to Wilkes,

My soul trembled with excitement. Brother Creath talked so to God that I voluntarily felt for the moment that if I should open my eyes I should certainly see Him upon whom no one can look and live. I never heard such a prayer before, and now thirty years have passed since that remarkable experience, and yet I have heard no such prayer since.

In today's world it is very difficult to have a quiet nook in the woods in which to pray. The important thing is to pray regardless. Busy schedules tend to squeeze prayer out of daily life. There is only one way to pray daily: *take time* to pray, for there is no such thing as "finding time." Don't be like Jonah, saving your most earnest prayer until a crisis forces it from you. Instead, "pray continually" (1 [Thessalonians 5:17](#)).

B. Lesson Background

The background for this week's lesson is the same as last week's, so that information need not be repeated here. But [lesson 10](#) may have made you wonder why—why was Jonah so determined to disobey God by not going to Nineveh, a major city in Assyria?

One definite reason is given in [Jonah 4:2](#) (see [lesson 13](#)). Some students offer the further possibility that Jonah, as a prophet, did not want to associate with idol worshippers. Furthermore, there had been military conflicts between Israel and Assyria (of which Nineveh was the capital); this may have caused Jonah to dislike the Assyrians. That is speculation, but a review of the former campaigns between the two nations provides probable cause.

During the years of Jonah's ministry in the eighth century BC, Assyria was having internal problems and was not a threat to Israel. The

actions of the past, however, were remembered. Some of the people involved in those wars could have been alive during Jonah's lifetime. The prophet's hometown of Gath Hepher was in northern Israel ([2 Kings 14:25](#)), a region more likely to have experienced conflict with the Assyrians. Jonah may have had relatives who fought against them.

In 853 BC, about 75 years before Jonah began his prophetic ministry, King Shalmaneser III (not mentioned in the Old Testament) had attacked a coalition of 11 or 12 kings that included King Ahab of Israel. Assyrian records proclaim Shalmaneser to have won the resulting Battle of Qarqar; the losses he claims to have inflicted on the coalition include 2,000 chariots and 10,000 men of Israel. Actually, it appears that the battle was indecisive, with the Assyrians advancing no farther that year. It is very possible that some of Jonah's relatives of a previous generation fought the brutal Assyrians in that battle.

In 841 BC, Shalmaneser III again flexed Assyrian power against Israel. His famous black obelisk shows Jehu of Israel bowing before him (although some think it is a representative who is bowing). Another king of Assyria reigned from 811 to 783 BC. He received tribute from Jehoash (Joash), father of Jeroboam II. Jonah prophesied about events in the reign of the latter ([2 Kings 14:25](#)). Considering all these factors, it is quite plausible that Jonah and his fellow Israelites had a great disdain, even hatred, for Assyria. Jonah would rather go anywhere than to those despised people!

HOW TO SAY IT

Ahab *Ay-hab*.
 Assyria *Uh-sear-ee-uh*.
 Assyrians *Uh-sear-e-unz*.
 Gath Hepher *Gath Hee-fer*.
 Jehoash *Jeh-hoe-ash*.
 Jehu *Jay-hew*.
 Jeroboam *Jair-uh-boe-um*.
 Joash *Jo-ash*.
 Jonah *Jo-nuh*.
 Nineveh *Nin-uh-vuh*.
 Shalmaneser *Shal-mun-ee-zer*.

I. Descriptions

([JONAH 2:1-3](#))

A. In the Fish ([vv. 1, 2](#))

¹ From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.

Jonah had been invited to the sailors' prayer meeting ([Jonah 1:5, 6](#); last week's lesson), but there is no record that he participated by offering prayer himself. Also, it seems quite doubtful that Jonah prayed concerning his decision to go to Joppa to find a ship in his plan to flee from the Lord!

Therefore what we see in the verse before us is the first recorded prayer by Jonah in the book that bears his name. Jonah has had the "thrill" of being cast overboard into the raging sea, sinking into the water, and then being swallowed by a huge fish. Only after all that do we find a record of him praying.

Here and [2 Chronicles 14:11](#) are the only two places in the Old Testament where the exact Hebrew wording translated *to the Lord his God* is found. In both cases, the prayer is offered by men in situations of life and death. Dire situations often compel prayer by people who do not have prayer as an ordinary part of their lives. They anticipate positive answers, and often they almost challenge God to hear and heed their prayers.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to avoid an "act now and pray later" mind-set?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- To clarify the value of self-reliance
- To distinguish boldness from rebellion
- To better understand the power of prayer

² He said:

**“In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.**

Seeing *I called* twice may make us wonder if two prayers are involved, or if there is just one that is described twice. Behind the two translations *called* stand different Hebrew words. The two words have a lot of overlap in meaning, but the one behind the second translation of *called* is more intense. This same pairing of Hebrew words occurs in [Psalms 18:6](#); [28:1, 2](#); [119:146, 147](#); and [Isaiah 58:9](#).

In all these cases, the reader detects (even with no knowledge of Hebrew) a heightening of intensity as the thought moves forward. We see this heightening here as Jonah’s call in his *distress* is followed by his affirmation that he *called for help* from *deep in the realm of the dead*—the second phrase obviously more pointed than the first.

For its part, the Hebrew word translated *realm of the dead* occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament. “Realm of the dead” and “grave” are the translations about 40 percent of the time each. The remaining 20 percent depict the depths of the earth or various aspects of death.

The wording leads some to think that Jonah was actually dead when he uttered his prayer, and then he was resurrected when the fish expelled him ([Jonah 2:10](#), below). Most, however, see the phrasing as Jonah’s way of describing his circumstances as being very critical. The most important thing to Jonah is that God does indeed respond to the prayer.

B. In the Sea (v. 3)

3. **“You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.**

As Jonah piles up descriptions of his ordeal, we see expressions set as parallels with one another:

into the depths → *into the very heart of the seas*
currents swirled about → *waves/breakers swept over*

Not to be missed, however, is Jonah’s acknowledgment of the ultimate power behind the prophet’s ordeal: it is the Lord (*you*). The hands of the sailors had thrown Jonah overboard, but the hand of the Lord was behind theirs in doing so ([Jonah 1:12, 15](#), last week’s lesson). Jonah further affirms that the entirety of the watery environment that resulted belongs to God (*your*). To acknowledge God is a first step of repentance.

THE PRAYINGEST PRAYER

The poet Sam Walter Foss (1858-1911) is best known for works such as “The Coming American” and “The House by the Side of the Road.” A lesser known poem is “The Prayer of Cyrus Brown.”

In that work of 24 lines, a deacon, an elder, and two ministers give their opinions, in exalted language, regarding the best posture for prayer. The deacon advocates prayer while kneeling. A minister disagrees, contending that prayer should be offered while standing with arms outstretched and eyes lifted toward Heaven. The elder is adamant that praying with eyes closed and head bowed is the proper way. The second minister opines that prayer be offered with hands clasped in front, thumbs pointing downward.

Having heard all this, plainspoken Cyrus Brown offers an entirely different perspective: his own “prayingest prayer” occurred when he fell headfirst down a well and became stuck in that position! For both Cyrus Brown and Jonah, the desperation of their respective situations overruled issues such as posture when praying. But if situations of absolute desperation are the only times we pray ... well, what do *you* think?—C. R. B.

II. Despair

(JONAH 2:4-6A)

A. Away from God (v. 4)

4. **“I said, ‘I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.’**

Jonah is fully aware that his own rebellion has caused him to be *banished from [God’s] sight* (compare [Psalm 31:22](#); [Jeremiah 7:15](#)). As his strength fades, Jonah seems to despair, at least briefly, of ever again having fellowship with God.

Yet at some point Jonah expresses hope of someday looking *again toward [God’s] holy temple*. We wonder if this refers to the temple in

Jerusalem, even though Jonah is from the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 14:25; note that 1 Kings 12:28-30 records Israel's worship centers to be elsewhere). The reference may even be to God's presence in Heaven (compare Psalm 18:6; Hebrews 8:2; 9:11, 24).

What Do You Think?

How do God's ways of "getting the attention" of the wayward influence your service for him?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As he gets people's attention through godly people and/or holy circumstances

As he gets people's attention through ungodly people and/or unholy circumstances

B. Covered by Water (v. 5)

5. **"The engulfing waters threatened me,
the deep surrounded me;
seaweed was wrapped around my head.**

Jonah uses three vivid images to describe further the apparent hopelessness of his situation. The similarity to Psalm 69:1, 2 is noteworthy.

C. Down to the Lowest (v. 6a)

- ^{6a} **"To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
the earth beneath barred me in forever.**

Jonah's plight is described in language that reminds us of the mountain ranges and deep canyons that lie beneath the surface of the oceans. The people of Jonah's day have never seen such things, of course. So for Jonah to say to *the roots of the mountains I sank down* may reflect his assumption that the lofty heights he sees on land continue their descent below sea level.

As Jonah looks back on this recent experience, things seemed hopeless at the time. The behavior of *the earth* itself seemed to ensure his death. Finality is expressed in the time factor of *forever*. But then the impossible actually happened.

III. Declarations

(JONAH 2:6B-10)

A. By Jonah (vv. 6b-9)

- ^{6b} **"But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.**

God rescued Jonah in a way that is beyond what anyone would have imagined, since this is believed to be the point at which the fish swallowed him. Thus he has a reprieve from death.

Is it possible for a huge fish to swallow a man? Many skeptics react to this event by saying that it is not only unbelievable, but impossible. Some question whether such a fish ever existed in the Mediterranean Sea. Fake stories of "modern-day Jonahs" do not help.

For example, a story circulated several decades ago about a man named James Bartley (1870-1909) who was swallowed by a whale near the Falkland Islands and lived for 18 hours before being rescued. But a researcher debunked this story in 1991. He discovered that the ship in question had not had anyone named James Bartley as a crew member. The wife of the ship's captain said this in a letter: "There is not one word of truth in the whale story. I was with my husband all the years he was in [the ship named] *The Star of the East*. There was never a man lost overboard while my husband was in her. The sailor has told a great sea yarn."

Given the decisive evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is a very minor matter for God to have a fish swallow a man! Jesus even connects the two events (see Matthew 12:39, 40). We also note a connection with the very similar wording of Psalm 103:4: "who redeems your life from the pit."

What Do You Think?

How do your own experiences of deliverance enable you to help others in distress?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding spiritual experiences

Regarding financial experiences

Regarding relationship experiences

7. **"When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,**

**and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.**

What are one's final thoughts just before death? Jonah recalls his thoughts to have focused on remembering *the Lord*. Those thoughts had been in the form of a prayer that ascended into God's *holy temple*! Jonah can affirm this confidently because of the flow of events that follow, in which light he pens the verse before us.

HITTING ROCK BOTTOM

We experience moments when it seems as if the whole world is conspiring against us, times when there is no relief in sight. Often, however, it's not the whole world conspiring against us, but a case of being our own worst enemy. Addictions to drugs and gambling are examples.

People with addictions may sound sincere about their desire to get on the road to recovery, but often that won't happen until they "hit rock bottom." This expression means that a person has reached the point where one's own coping mechanisms have proven insufficient. At such a point, the addict may realize that there is no hope for recovery without turning it all over to God.

At some point, Jonah realized that he had hit rock bottom. His coping mechanism of fleeing from God had failed. Stripped of the possibility of rescue, either by his own strength or by that of other people, Jonah realized there was only one source of help that remained: the God from whom he had tried to flee.

Most of us are not mired in addictions, nor are we in Jonah's predicament. But we can learn from his experience. The ironclad rule is this: *When God taps you on the shoulder for a task, turn to him for help right then and there.* Don't flee first and ask for help when things seem hopeless. To do so is to repeat Jonah's error. See [1 Corinthians 10:11, 12](#).—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways a church can help those who have "hit rock bottom"?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning Christians in such a state
- Concerning unbelievers in such a state

8. "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.

Jonah has received a great act of love from God. In the midst of such a deliverance, the thoughts of the prophet turn to others. He has learned a great lesson, and he writes to warn against clinging *to worthless idols* (compare [Psalm 31:6](#)). To walk in one's own way instead of God's way is to forfeit God's love. Jonah still has the heart of a prophet in that he has concerns for others—especially, it seems, for those who worship fictitious gods. The only true source of mercy is the only true God.

What Do You Think?

What specific steps can we take to avoid the "worthless idols" that trap so many people?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning temptations of power
- Concerning temptations of possessions
- Other

Comparisons have been made between Jonah's statement in the verse before us and the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah was a prophet in Israel before the time of Jonah. In the Mount Carmel situation, the Lord demonstrated his power over the idolatrous Baal gods. That was a great vindication for the person and the preaching of Elijah ([1 Kings 18:20-46](#)).

Both events involved water, but in entirely different ways. Elijah had water poured over the sacrifice three times, and then he prayed. "Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench" ([1 Kings 18:38](#)). The backdrop to that contest was a three-year drought ([18:1](#)). In both cases God's answers to the prayers were dramatic.

9. "But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'"

Jonah plans distinct responses in light of God's dramatic display of love toward him. The sailors had offered a sacrifice when they were delivered from the storm ([Jonah 1:16](#)), and Jonah intends to do so in light of his own deliverance, or salvation.

Sacrifices involve animals, however, and Jonah has none with him at the moment (except the great fish, which has *him* rather than the reverse!). The only material possession he likely has is the proverbial "shirt on his back." Therefore his sacrifice while inside the fish will take

the form of the next best thing: *shouts of grateful praise* (compare [Psalms 50:14](#); [69:30](#); [Hebrews 13:15](#)).

Jonah affirms also that he intends to *make good* what he has *vowed*, but we don't know exactly what that vow is. While on the verge of drowning, Jonah may have made a promise to do something should God deliver him ([Jonah 2:1-4](#)). This is not a case of "foxhole religion" that wanes as soon as the battle is won or the crisis is over, however. As a prophet, Jonah is well aware that "if you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the Lord your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin" ([Deuteronomy 23:21](#)).

B. By the Lord (v. 10)

¹⁰. And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

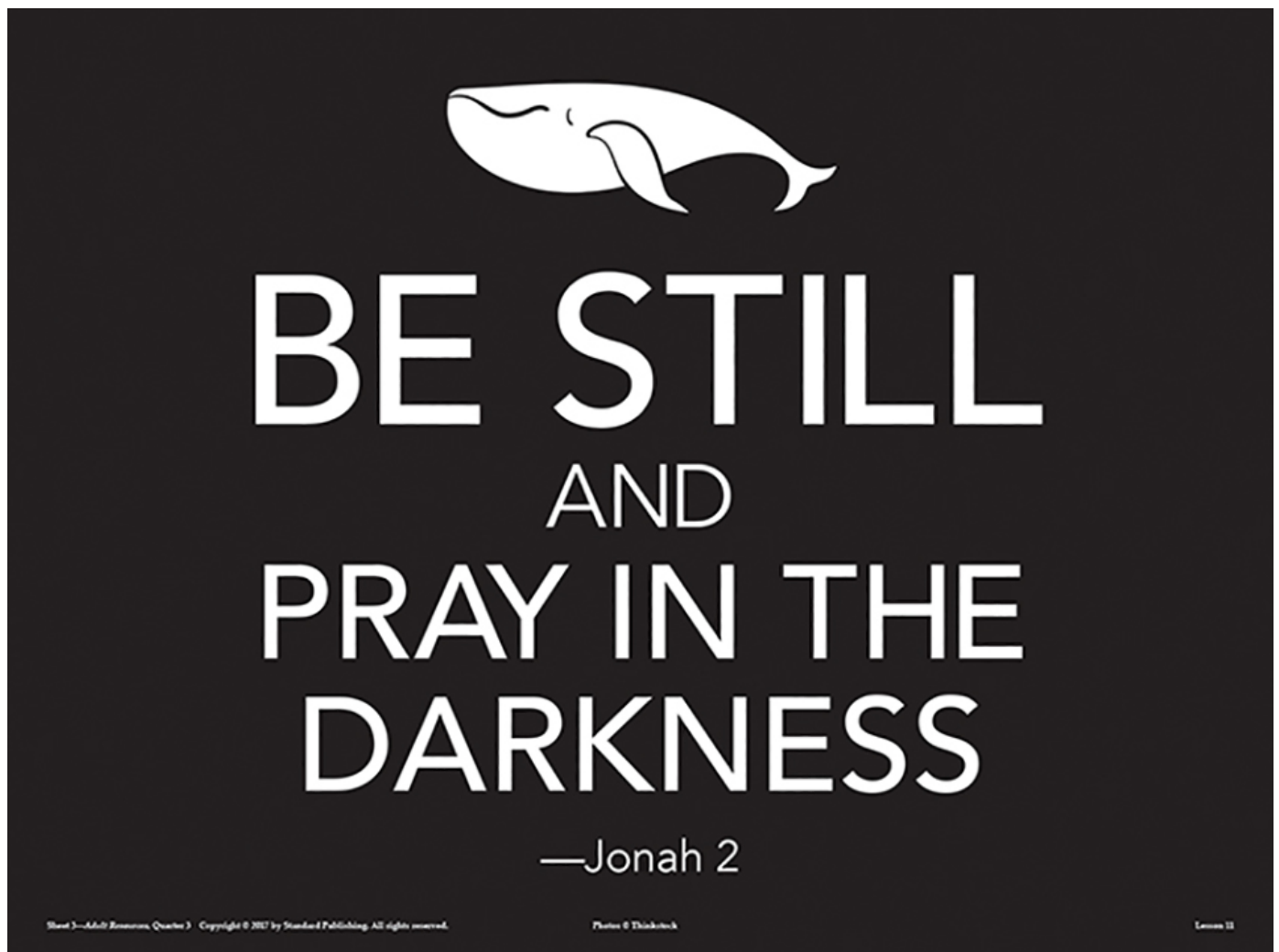
The book of Jonah is different from other prophetic books in that it is largely a narrative. Most of [Jonah 2](#) breaks this pattern, with the narrative resuming here at [2:10](#).

We are to understand that what *the fish* does is by God's control and direction. There is a certain irony here. When the Lord instructed Jonah to go to Nineveh, the prophet disobeyed and went in the opposite direction ([Jonah 1:1-3](#)); by contrast, the fish obeys God.

We normally associate vomiting with the body's natural rejection of something due to being sick, perhaps with a stomach flu or having consumed something indigestible or in excess (compare [Proverbs 25:16](#); [Isaiah 19:14](#)). A long-standing humorous observation is that a fish can stomach a backslider for only three days before it becomes sick! However, the expulsion of *Jonah onto dry land* is by the Lord's direction, not natural bodily reactions of the fish.

Anyone who has experienced a storm on a lake or an ocean recalls the great sense of relief when reaching land safely. How much more Jonah must be relieved given the extreme nature of his experiences! Our sanctified imaginations tell us that this is the time for the prophet to offer his "sacrifice" with "shouts of grateful praise" ([Jonah 2:9](#), above).

Jonah's water tests are now behind him. The remainder of his tests will be on land.



Visual for Lesson 11. Point to this as you compare and contrast Jonah's situation with the "be still" imperative of [Psalm 46:10](#).

Conclusion

A. Running to God

One outline of the book of Jonah is offered this way:

Chapter 1: Running from God

Chapter 2: Running to God

Chapter 3: Running with God

Chapter 4: Running Ahead of God

When we see this sequence in the life of Jonah, it can cause us to reflect on which of the four states we are in right now. At the midpoint in our four lessons from Jonah, we see that the prophet has learned the hard way that it's better to run *to* God than *from* him.

It's been said that there are two ways to learn things: either by wisdom or by experience. The former is learning from the mistakes of others; the latter is learning from our own mistakes. So which will it be? Shall we in wisdom learn from Jonah's error, or shall we by experience learn the same lesson the hard way?

B. Prayer

Almighty God, keep us attuned to your Word so that when you call, we will respond! We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Run *to* God, not *from* him.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Many churches have signs on which new messages may be posted regularly. Sometimes those signs have clever messages to draw a passing motorist's attention.

Begin class by asking students if they remember any messages on church signs (or one that may be on your church's sign at the moment). Here are a few of those quips, just to get your conversation going:

7 days without prayer makes one weak.

The Bible prevents truth decay.

Can't sleep? Come hear a sermon.

Free life insurance! Details inside. Great benefits!

Sin burn is prevented by Son screen.

Discuss the effectiveness of such messages. Ask, "What does it take to get *your* attention?"

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "For a Reason" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, "There are a number of ways to attract attention. Signs, sounds, and any variety of banners and billboards are calls to stop and receive a message. Last week we saw that God did something remarkable to get Jonah's attention. Today we will see if that message was received."

Into the Word

Say, "Prayers typically contain three primary elements: (1) praise to God for who he is and what he does, (2) penitence, as expressions of sorrow for sin, both one's own and that of others, and (3) petitions for pressing personal needs and the needs of others."

Have learners write these three elements of prayer on the top of a sheet of paper. Ask the learners to look at Jonah's prayer in [Jonah 2](#) and write elements of the prayer into the appropriate columns. For example: [verse 1](#), the fact that "God hears and answers prayer," is an element of praise; or one could put it in the petition column. One might use [verse 2](#) in the petition column since it speaks of calling to God because of

Jonah's "distress." [Verse 4](#) may be considered an element of penitence, as Jonah speaks of being cast out of God's sight; separation from God—a sense of guilt—is the key factor in motivating repentance. The end of [verse 9](#) is another good example of praise, as it affirms the Lord is the one who saves. Allow five or six minutes for this activity. Have students share their placement choices and reasons with the class.

Ask, "Which verse or phrase in today's text best justifies the title of today's study, "Preserving Love"? Learners may offer several choices. [Verse 6b](#), "You ... brought my life up from the pit," is one legitimate response.

Into Life

Write the phrase *Occasional Prayer* on the board. Say, "This does not refer to the frequency (or infrequency!) of prayer." Ask, "What then do you assume it indicates?" You are looking for a response indicating that occasions (or events) often elicit our prayers. Say, "Such prayers, all too often, become heavy on or even limited to petitions for help." Ask, "How do you keep your prayer life from falling into the "Jonah Syndrome," waiting for times of crisis to pray?" Allow learners to respond.

Suggest a one-week prayer journal in which each student notes the various occasions he or she "felt the urge" to pray. At the end of the week, suggest that they analyze their lists for occasions, motives, and elements of the prayers offered.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "A Common Christian Resolution" activity page. It would make an effective homework assignment designed to elicit thought about different occasions for personal prayer.