

May 7
Lesson 10

SUSTAINING

LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 139:1-12

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Jonah 1

JONAH 1:7-17

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

⁹ He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

¹² “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But

they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.” ¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

¹⁷ Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.



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KEY VERSE

This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?”—Jonah 1:10a

LESSON AIMS

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

1. Describe the actions and attitudes of the sailors toward Jonah.
2. Compare and contrast the different ways that people react to someone who has confessed a wrongdoing.
3. List ways that people run from God today and write a prayer for divine help to avoid doing so personally.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Fleeing from Righteousness
- B. Lesson Background

I. Storm's Cause (Jonah 1:7-9)

- A. Revealed by Lots (vv. 7, 8)
- B. Affirmed by Jonah (v. 9)

II. Sailors' Concerns (Jonah 1:10, 11)

- A. Regarding Jonah's Sin (v. 10)
The Storms of Life
- B. Regarding a Solution (v. 11)

III. Actions' Consequences (Jonah 1:12-17)

- A. Solution (vv. 12-14)
- B. Results (vv. 15-17)
Lesser of Two Evils?

Conclusion

- A. "Jonah Syndrome"
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Fleeing from Righteousness

He was one of three sons in the family, and he seemed to have all the advantages. His dark hair was naturally curly. He had sparkling blue eyes, and he had an infectious smile that disarmed others. He also brought the most grief to his mother.

His troubles began as a teenager. He was caught stealing, and his smile did not dissuade the arresting officer. He was now more than just a boy who was liked by all the neighbors. He had a criminal record, and he was sentenced to spend time at the expense of the taxpayers.

His parents went to see him in reform school. The mother came with the tears of tender love, but the father came with bewilderment. He was upset that his son had been disobedient to what he had been taught and to what had been modeled for him by family and friends.

The pattern was repeated several times, but the combination of tender love and civil discipline finally changed the young man. His mother's sustaining love persisted through the occasions when he was "testing the system" and God.

This lesson presents God's sustaining love for a disobedient prophet whose experiences toughened and shaped him for his mission.

B. Lesson Background

This lesson and the next three are taken from the book of Jonah. These studies will provide a better understanding of the man, his motivations, the message of the book, and the miracles contained in it.

Jonah's ministry, described in the book that bears his name, is difficult to date. The closest we can get is to recognize that he prophesied about events that occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). That king ruled Israel from 793 to 753 BC. The designation Israel in this context refers to the northern kingdom after the original nation of Israel divided after King Solomon's death in about 930 BC (see 1 Kings 12). The southern nation became Judah.

The book of Jonah is probably the best known of the 12 in the section of the Old Testament designated as the Minor Prophets. The book of Jonah is different from the other 11 in that most of it is a narrative. It is therefore easier to read and to understand.

The printed text for this lesson begins at [Jonah 1:7](#), but it is important that in the background the first six verses of the book be given. The word of the Lord had come to Jonah, and he was commanded to go to the city of Nineveh and preach against it. The reason is given in [Jonah 1:2](#): its wickedness had come before the Lord.

Jonah decided to disobey the Lord's command, and he went west instead of east. He first traveled to Joppa, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. His plan was to sail in the opposite direction from what God had said. If he began his trip to Joppa from Israel's capital city, Samaria, the overland distance was about 30 miles. Jonah's hometown, however, was Gath Hepher (again, [2 Kings 14:25](#)), which was a few miles north of Nazareth. The overland distance from there to Joppa was almost 60 miles.

Jonah found a ship that was ready to sail, and it was going to Tarshish ([Jonah 1:3](#)). The location of Tarshish is uncertain. Suggestions include Tartessus (a kingdom in Spain that was over 2,000 miles from Joppa) or Carthage in northern Africa (about 1,400 miles). Evidence in the last few years, however, suggests it was Sardinia, an island just west of Italy.

Jonah was trying to do something that was as impossible then as it is now: hide from God. About 250 years before the time of Jonah, David had declared the impossibility of such ([Psalm 139:7-12](#)).

Jonah's trip to Joppa, from either Samaria or Gath Hepher, wearied him. He paid his fare, boarded the ship, went down into the ship, and went to sleep ([Jonah 1:5b](#)). The ship set sail from Joppa, and the Lord sent a mighty storm to intercept it. The sailors reacted in the standard ways for such a situation: they lightened the ship by throwing its wares overboard (compare [Acts 27:18](#)). This storm was more than ordinary, however, and it also caused each man to pray to his god. The master of the ship awakened Jonah so that he could join them in the prayer meeting.

I. Storm's Cause

([JONAH 1:7-9](#))

A. Revealed by Lots ([vv. 7, 8](#))

7. Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

The strength of the storm causes the sailors to conclude that someone on the ship has irritated a god. They react according to their customs: they *cast lots* to determine the guilty party. It is naturally assumed that no one will come forward to confess, so the practice of casting lots is used to determine who is guilty. This practice is frequently used in ancient times to determine guilt (compare [1 Samuel 14:41-45](#)).

In such a situation, one marked object is placed in a container with other items that are similar. The marked item may be drawn by the guilty person or by someone who is drawing for the others. [Proverbs 16:33](#) gives the view that it is the Lord who controls the outcome. In the case at hand, it is especially true that God controls the results. Jonah is correctly identified.

What Do You Think?

What should we do when we realize that a life storm of our own making is affecting others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- At home
- At work or school
- At church
- Other

B. Affirmed by Jonah ([v. 9](#))

8. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

The sailors rapidly ask a series of five questions. The first one seems unnecessary in view of the result of casting lots (and see [v. 10](#)). But a verbal confession will confirm what the casting of lots has indicated.

The other questions seek more information about Jonah himself. The sailors may believe that the answers will help identify the god involved. The ancients often associate a god with a particular nation (compare [2 Kings 23:13](#)). Therefore the first order of business for escaping the storm is to ask the questions we see here.

9. He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

These are Jonah's first spoken words in the book, and he tells the truth forthrightly. The word *Hebrew* as an identifier serves to contrast an Israelite from someone of another people group. It is used this way by both Israelites ([Jeremiah 34:14](#)) and others ([1 Samuel 4:9](#)) as a way of referring to the descendants of Jacob.

Jonah's affirmation that he serves *the Lord, the God of heaven* is followed with a jab at the fictitious gods of the sailors: Jonah's God is the

one who *made the sea and the dry land*. Logic dictates that the God who has the power to create like this also has the power to cause and calm storms.

Jonah's answer is also a confession. Although he affirms that he fears the Lord, the storm indicates that he has been disobedient in some way. This is a self-indictment, for Jonah knows that his words and his actions are not in harmony with one another.

What Do You Think?

What evidence of repentance should others see when a Christian confesses personal failings?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In cases of public confessions

In cases of private confession

II. Sailors' Concerns

(JONAH 1:10, 11)

A. Regarding Jonah's Sin (v. 10)

10. This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

Jonah has said that he fears the Lord, and that prompts an even greater fear on the part of the sailors. They cannot comprehend any type of sin that could provoke the God of Jonah to send a storm of such magnitude. Through the noise of the raging wind, they ask another question.

The last half of the verse is not an answer. Rather, it stresses information that the sailors already know: Jonah has *already told them* that he is *running away from the Lord* (compare [Jonah 1:3](#)).

THE STORMS OF LIFE

Heat waves, lengthy drought, violent tornadoes, hurricanes, and "polar express" blizzards seem more common in recent years. Some scientific data in the mid-twentieth century suggested the earth might be moving back into another ice age.

But thinking shifted in the 1980s toward the theory of global warming. Evidence was interpreted in different ways, resulting in significant debate. As a result, the terminology became that of *climate change*, which seemed (at least to some) to be a more neutral description.

Many factors contribute to the ongoing confusion, including the tendency of some scientists to change their minds from time to time, the news media's desire to sensationalize, and public distrust of government. "True believers" on both sides of the debate are so adamant in their views that many in the general public despair of ever knowing the truth.

Not so with the case of Jonah! Any debate about the cause of the violent storm that threatened his ship was settled when he confirmed the results of the cast lots. He was the undisputed cause of the change of weather causing them so much distress. That situation raises the possibility of a parallel: How many of life's storms are indisputably the result of our own actions? Are we as honest as Jonah in admitting as much?—C. R. B.

B. Regarding a Solution (v. 11)

11. The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

The conversation between Jonah and the sailors is coming to an end. This is their final question to Jonah.

The sailors know the following related to their plight: (1) since the intense storm is the fault of Jonah, then (2) something must be done to him. The last thing they want to do is make a move that will anger further the God who made the sea and the dry land! So they hope that Jonah has the answers, for their lives are in jeopardy.

III. Actions' Consequences

(JONAH 1:12-17)

A. Solution (vv. 12-14)

12. "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Jonah's response can be broken into four parts. The first two are what the sailors are to do. To follow Jonah's instruction *pick me up* would normally be fairly easy. But the tossing of the ship in the midst of *this great storm* makes this much more difficult.

The second part of Jonah's response is the ultimate answer to the sailors' first question ([Jonah 1:8](#)). But it presents a problem, because *throw me into the sea* involves the deliberate taking of Jonah's life (see next verse).

The third part is what the sailors really desire, that the sea *become calm*. The final section of Jonah's response reaffirms that the real cause of the storm is Jonah himself. One thing we can say about Jonah is that at least he's honest!

¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

This verse provides a very interesting bit of information. The ship seems to be not far from *the land*, for the sailors fervently desire to bring the ship to shore by rowing. It is customary at this time in history for ships to move along the coast if the captains cannot navigate by other means. This has been called "harbor hopping."

HOW TO SAY IT

Gath Hopher Gath *Hee-fer*.

Jeroboam Jair-uh-*boe*-um.

Joppa *Jop*-uh.

Nazareth *Naz*-uh-*reth*.

Nineveh *Nin*-uh-*vuh*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee*-uh.



Visual for Lesson 10. Point to this visual as you ask, "How do we avoid sinful **fight, flight, or freeze** reactions to God's ministry callings?"

We may wonder how far the ship is from Joppa, the port of embarkation, when it encounters the storm. Is that the land that is in sight, or have they traveled a considerable distance along the coast? The only answer is that “the text does not say.”

The rowing of a boat demands that oars come in contact with the water for the main stroke. It can be safely assumed that rowing is almost impossible given that the storm is tossing the ship from wave crest to wave trough then back up again.

Ancient sailors do not enjoy a good reputation for noble character and morality. But these men are honorable in their not wanting to hurl Jonah to a watery grave. They do their best to reach land, but they cannot. Their honorable effort is ultimately futile.

¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.”

The first prayer in the book is *to the Lord*, but it is not prayed by Jonah. It is by the sailors, men who worship other gods. They are fully aware that *killing an innocent man* can result in great punishment. They are already experiencing plenty of God’s wrath in the form of the storm. They do not want to experience more wrath for what they feel compelled to do: take the life of a man who has not committed any crime against them. Most religions of the ancient world have codes of law that prohibit the taking of human life without due process. The biblical restriction and mandate in this regard is given after the flood in Noah’s time ([Genesis 9:5, 6](#)), and it was for all humanity in future civilizations (compare [Acts 25:11](#); [Romans 13:4](#)).

Yet this is not their own judgment on Jonah, for this is the Lord’s decree. Even so, they do not want to risk becoming guilty by expediting it without authorization.

What Do You Think?

What are appropriate ways for a Christian to respond to those who are caught in the effects of another person’s sin?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding victims who are adults

Regarding victims who are minors

B. Results (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

The situation is desperate, so the men take the drastic measure that they have been resisting—casting Jonah into the tumultuous waters. It is dangerous to be close to the edge of the deck in such weather, but they have to do it.

The resulting calm leads some to think that a raging sea immediately becomes a tranquil body of water. Others propose that the tossing waves gradually subside, with normal wave action following. Either outcome can be directed easily by the God who made the heavens, the sea, and land (see [v. 9](#)). Note that when Jesus stilled the tempest, however, seasoned fishermen were awed that the wind and the waves ceased ([Matthew 8:27](#); [Mark 4:41](#)).

For the case at hand, it is enough for us to know that when God directs, both water and wind obey. “You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them ... You founded the world and all that is in it” ([Psalm 89:9, 11](#)).

LESSER OF TWO EVILS?

Many Iranians publicly protested what they saw as a rigged 2009 presidential election in their country. The government is said to have arrested and tortured opposition leaders. Mohsen Armin was an activist whose friends were arrested and forced to make scripted courtroom “confessions” of their alleged crimes against the government.

Armin assumed he would also be arrested and tortured, so he decided to act preemptively by issuing a retraction of any future televised confession he might make under duress. He said, “If the providence of God requires that I will be jailed as my brethren have been so far, and if, in jail and under pressure, I say something against what I have said, be sure that it is not my true belief and that I recanted under pressure.”

Jonah urged his shipmates to throw him overboard. Prior to doing so, they admitted to God that they were about to kill Jonah and asked for advance forgiveness. They felt they had no other choice. Do we ever say, “God, I know what I am planning to do is a sin, but I’m going to do it anyway. Since there’s no other choice, please forgive me”? Are there any circumstances when this line of thinking is acceptable for Christians? Why, or why not?—C. R. B.

¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

The calming of the sea yields three reactions on the part of the sailors: they fear, sacrifice, and make vows. It would be interesting to know the rest of the story about these men. Do they abandon other gods? What is the nature of the vows they make? Do they keep those vows? Is the effect of their experience permanent?

God chose not to provide that information. But we can conclude that the three reactions are reasonable, given what the men have just

endured and witnessed. They have to do *something* to express gratitude and thanksgiving for the fact that they are still alive after such a harrowing ordeal!

Jonah's deliberate sin has had powerful consequences for him, the sea, and the sailors. But it even causes good things to happen, as the sailors come to a rudimentary belief in the true God.

What Do You Think?

Which Scriptures are most helpful to you for seeing that God is greater than your failures?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Passages about his love

Passages about his power

Passages about his will

Other

¹⁷ Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

It is not mere coincidence that *a huge fish* is in the area at exactly this moment. God has allocated this creature for a special task, arranging for it to be in the right place at the right time. Some have suggested that the fish may be a type of whale ([Matthew 12:40](#)) or a shark. This detail is not essential. The important thing is that it does what God has directed it to do: *swallow Jonah*.

The fact that Jonah is in the fish for *three days and three nights* is a key phrase in the book: it is cited by Jesus as the sign of the prophet Jonah that anticipates Jesus' burial for "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" ([Matthew 12:39, 40](#)).

Some have wondered about the time factor that is mentioned. How can Jonah know the time involved, since he has no wristwatch and it is dark in the fish? The following possibilities are only conjectures: (1) God revealed the information to Jonah. (2) Jonah met some of the sailors when he was expelled from the fish, and they told him. (3) The given time factor is a figure of speech for one full, 24-hour day and parts of two others.

Several things in the book of Jonah are said to be provided or prepared by God. The lists may vary somewhat, but at this point there have been these two special things: a great storm and a great fish. The fact that a ship was just ready to sail may be more than a coincidence.

One sermon humorously suggested that since the Lord was the one who provided the fish, it could have had hot and cold running water, a luxurious bed, a color television in the corner so that Jonah could watch the news from Jerusalem, and air conditioning. It is more likely that it was dark, hot, smelly, and miserable.

One thing is certain: Jonah's experiences with the storm, the sailors, and the fish persuade him that when God says he should go to Nineveh, it is better to obey God.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church prepare itself to be God's "great fish" in rescuing those whom he may send your way?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With regard to spiritual healing

With regard to physical need

With regard to confidentiality

With regard to remediation

Other

Conclusion

A. "Jonah Syndrome"

Slightly over 200 years ago, a certain man sensed a call to become a minister of the gospel. He felt that his first attempts at preaching were failures, so he gave up the idea. A lady heard of his decision and called him "a Jonah."

Her words were just the challenge that he needed to hear. He returned to his original goals, and he became an effective minister who influenced thousands for Christ.

Many today still repeat Jonah's error. Perhaps we can say they suffer from self-inflicted "Jonah Syndrome": they know full well what God expects in one or more areas of life, but they deliberately go in the opposite direction. How much better it is to heed God!

B. Prayer

O God, deliver us from “Jonah Syndrome”! May we be repentant when the storms of life are self-inflicted. Strengthen us to heed your calls. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought for Today

Learn from Jonah, but imitate Jesus.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

To begin class, read this famous news story:

On April 26, 2005, John Mason notified police that his fiancée was missing. Jennifer Wilbanks of Duluth, Georgia, did not return from her evening jog that night.

During the next few days, about 250 people searched for the missing woman, costing the city between \$40,000 and \$60,000. Police received many leads, all of which were false. The FBI joined the search, and Wilbanks’s relatives offered a \$100,000 reward for her return. The story dominated national news.

On April 29, Wilbanks called Mason from a pay phone, telling him that she had been kidnapped but was released. After she was found in New Mexico, Wilbanks admitted that she was not kidnapped, but had run away due to pressures of her upcoming wedding. A number of lawsuits were filed, and to this day, Wilbanks is best known as “the runaway bride.”

Ask the class how much they remember about this story. Say, “Let’s make a list of other reasons why people might run away from a person or situation.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Why Run Away?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Ask students to complete it individually, and then discuss it as a class.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study saying, “History is full of stories of famous runaways. There is probably no more well-known fugitive than the one we will study today.”

Into the Word

Ask for a volunteer to be Jonah, give him or her a copy of the lesson text, and direct your Jonah to a seat in the front of the room.

Ask the rest of the class to open their Bibles to [Jonah 1:7-17](#). Say, “Read today’s text and find questions that the sailors asked Jonah.” Have the class play the part of the sailors and take turns asking your Jonah questions from the text. Jonah can find answers in the text, in [Jonah 1](#), and in [2 Kings 14:25](#).

If your Jonah has trouble with a question, feel free to help him or her answer. After all questions are answered, summarize any other important aspects of the text, using the commentary.

Questions will be found in [Jonah 1:8](#), [10](#), [11](#). The questions, loosely paraphrased are (1) Who are you/what is your name? (2) What is your occupation? (3) Where have you come from? (4) What is your native country? (5) Who are your native people? (6) Why did you disobey your God? (7) What can we do to you to appease your God and calm our seas?

Into Life

Bring a pair of running shoes for display. Say, “In the church’s history, such items as hair shirts have been adopted to physically discourage one from yielding to temptation to do wrong and as penance for doing wrong. Think for a moment and tell me, how could we design these running shoes in such a way as to deter the temptation to run away from God?”

Suggest such strategies as painting “GOD” with an arrow pointing straight ahead on each toe. Or perhaps—to make running uncomfortable enough to deter it—put a rock in each shoe. Though you may have some fun with these responses, you will ultimately want to ask, “What specifically can you and I do to discourage any thought of running from God?”

To encourage response, ask these questions: “How do people try to run away from God today?” and “Why do people try to run away from God?”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “A Servant of God with Flaws” activity from the reproducible page. Have students choose the flaws in the list that they might need to ask God to help them correct.