

# Jonah and the Big Fish

## Lesson At-a-Glance

Scripture Reference  
**Jonah 1-4**

Lesson Focus  
**God's not fair—and that's a good thing!**

Bible Memory Verse  
**"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind . . ." Jonah 3:10a**

### Gather (10 minutes)

	Spark Resources	Supplies
<b>Arrival Activity</b> Kids will receive a snack unequally, based on perceived need.	Spark Activity Pages, Spark Coloring Pages	Small food items (fish crackers, grapes)
<b>Circle Time</b> Kids will review their week and get introduced to Jonah.	Spark Song CD, Spark Songbook	Music source
<b>Opening Prayer</b> Kids will move thumbs up and down for prayer about unfairness.	None	None

### Open the Bible (15 minutes)

	Spark Resources	Supplies
<b>Jonah and the Big Fish Story</b> Kids will hear the story of Jonah and the Big Fish.	Spark Story Bibles, Spark NRSV Bibles	None
<b>Big Fish, Big Maze</b> Kids will try to find a way out of the big fish for Jonah.	Leaflets	Pencils

## Activate Faith (15 minutes)

	Spark Resources	Supplies
<b>Let's Roll, Jonah</b> Kids will play a game by landing a token on their leaflet.	Leaflets, Spark Bible Stickers	Cardstock, scissors, markers
<b>Avoiding the Big Fish</b> Kids will play a game based on cooperation.	Leaflets	Blindfolds (optional)

## Send (5 minutes)

	Spark Resources	Supplies
<b>Closing Conversation</b> Kids will be reminded that God's grace is for everyone.	Leaflets	None
<b>Closing Prayer</b> Kids will express frustrations to God in a prayer.	Family Pages	Small object

# Introduction

## Bible Background

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Jonah was given a terrible task: to go and tell a group of really nasty people to stop their evil ways and turn to God. You could hardly blame him for trying to run in the other direction. But run he did, and sail and swim too. When Jonah was fleeing on a ship, God sent a storm. The other sailors eventually grew suspicious of their cargo and threw Jonah overboard, where a big fish swallowed him whole.

It was just the convincing Jonah needed to listen to God's directions. After three days, the fish spit him onto dry land, and Jonah trudged to Nineveh to deliver God's warning. It worked! The Ninevites repented and changed their ways. But instead of being pleased, Jonah pouted and sulked. God's mercy shown to Jonah was great, but when given to others, it made Jonah mad.

Did a man named Jonah really get swallowed by a whale or is it hyperbole? What matters is not whether this story is historically and scientifically accurate, but finding the truth within it—namely, that we are often like Jonah, wanting to limit God's mercy when it comes to applying it to others.

## Why This Story Matters

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"No fair!" is the universal cry that every kid has uttered at some point. Jonah is a very relatable character who didn't like God's unfairness even though it reflected God's grace and love. Kids (as well as adults) typically appreciate it when they are given a break, but it can be much harder to stomach when applied to someone else. Part of our challenge as people of faith is accepting that God's ways are not ours.

## Gather (10 minutes)

### Arrival Activity

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If some kids arrive earlier than others and you need a lesson-based activity, make copies of the Activity Page and Coloring Page, and set them out for kids to try.

Whisper to a few kids individually, asking them to pretend they are really hungry. When all kids are ready to start class, hand out your food item to each kid. Give more to kids who are acting the hungriest. Be vocal when handing out food, so kids are clear it is not being evenly divided. As kids eat, ask them how they feel about getting more or less than others. Then ask: **If everyone gets what they need, is it unfair to give different amounts?**

### Spark Resources

Spark Activity Pages  
Spark Coloring Pages

### Supplies

Small food item (fish crackers, grapes)

## Circle Time

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Gather your group together. **Hi, everyone! Let's hear about how your week went. If it was great, give me two thumbs up. If you had a pretty good week, one thumb up. A not-so-good week should be one thumb down. And if you had a really, truly bad week, two thumbs down.** Invite kids to display their thumbs up or down.

**Everyone has bad weeks sometimes. Today, we're going to hear a story in the Bible from the book of Jonah, near the end of the Old Testament. You'll never guess the main character's name! When we meet Jonah, things are going pretty well for him. But then God gives him a job to do and everything changes. He might have said it was a double-thumbs-down kind of week.**

**Tell me, what kind of jobs do you sometimes get asked to do?** Answers might include walking the dog, cleaning the litter box, setting the table, cleaning their rooms, and so on. **What would you do if a trusted adult told you to go to the meanest people you know and tell them that God wanted them to change their ways?** Accept all answers. **We'll find out how Jonah responded when given a job like that.**

### MUSIC RECOMMENDATION

Song 1: "All Night, All Day" (tracks 13 and 30 on Spark Song CD, page 70 in Spark Songbook)

Song 2: "Who Did?"

Search online for this fun call-and-response song about Jonah.

### Spark Resources

Spark Song CD  
Spark Songbook

### Supplies

Music source

## Opening Prayer

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Invite kids to make a thumbs-up sign with one hand and a thumbs-down sign with the other, then rotate them, alternating up and down as you pray.

**Dear God, sometimes we get mad when life seems unfair. Help us be thankful when you don't deal with us fairly, but deal with us with love. Amen.**

### Spark Resources

None

### Supplies

None

## Open the Bible (15 minutes)

### Jonah and the Big Fish Story

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Invite kids with Spark NRSV Bibles to each find and sit with a buddy with a Spark Story Bible.

**We're going to hear a really great story called Jonah and the Big Fish. Older kids, please open your Spark NRSV Bible to page 1008. Then please flip the page to 1010 to show your younger buddy how short this book of the Bible is.**

### Spark Resources

Spark NRSV Bibles  
Spark Story Bibles

### Supplies

None

Ask younger kids to open their Spark Story Bible to page 190. Invite older kids to read the Jonah and the Big Fish story to their buddies, or take turns reading it together for fluent readers.

When all have finished reading, ask one buddy pair to retell the story to the group. Ask another buddy pair to act out what the first buddy pair says.

Discuss the story and the following questions: **What do you think of the Jonah and the Big Fish story? What would you have done if you were Jonah? Do you think you can run away from God? Do you like to go camping? What do you think it was like camping inside a fish?**

**Now I want you to put yourself in Jonah's sandals. He decided to listen to God, and he went to Nineveh and told the people to change their ways or God would punish them. And it worked! They changed their ways. How do you think Jonah felt about that?** Accept all answers.

**Have you ever been mad at someone for doing something mean? You tell a teacher or parent so the person will stop being mean and—let's be honest—so the person will get in trouble. How would you feel if the person who had been mean got a hug instead of punishment?** Listen to kids' thoughts on this scenario.

Listen to how Jonah acted when the people of Nineveh changed their ways and God forgave them. Read Jonah 3:5a, 10; 4:1-5 to the class.

**What do you call Jonah's behavior?** Pouting. **Have you ever done something like that? Most of us have. We all have a little bit of Jonah in us!**

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## Bible Memory Verse

"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind . . ." Jonah 3:10a

Invite kids to get their bodies involved when repeating this verse aloud. They can open their eyes really wide at the beginning, turn around in circles in the middle, and move their hands around their head at the end. Encourage them to place a Spark Bible Sticker next to this verse in the NRSV Bible.

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## Big Fish, Big Maze

Distribute pencils to kids, then invite them to turn to the Big Fish, Big Maze in their leaflets. **Help! Jonah is trapped inside the fish. See if you can help him find his way out! Look at the prompts for clues.**

Older buddies can help younger buddies if they get stuck. Then they can work on unscrambling the words in the margins using the hints provided.

Invite kids to read and discuss the Bible Bits together.

**Spark Resources**  
Leaflets

**Supplies**  
Pencils

# Activate Faith (15 minutes)

## Let's Roll, Jonah

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Invite buddies to each cut a circle about the size of a quarter out of cardstock. Draw surprised faces on each side of the circle with markers.

**Jonah's one job was to go to Nineveh. But what did he do instead?** He went the other way! **With your buddy, lay down your leaflet, decide how many steps to take away from it, then take turns rolling or throwing your Jonah game token onto your board. See who can get the most points by landing in Nineveh!** Try not to land where you're not supposed to be!

Ask for volunteers to read the Did You Know? items aloud. Invite kids to place a sticker or special mark next to the item they found the most interesting.

### Spark Resources

Leaflets  
Spark Bible Stickers

### Supplies

Cardstock  
Scissors  
Markers

## Avoiding the Big Fish

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**When you play games, do you feel happy when you lose? Do you feel happy for someone else when he or she wins? How about playing games where there isn't really a winner at all or everyone wins? Many people have a feeling we call competitiveness. That's the drive to be the best or to win.** When have you felt competitive? Listen to kids' answers about being the first in line, getting the most goals, winning a spelling bee, and so on.

**We're going to play a game where there aren't any winners unless everyone wins.**

Collect everyone's leaflets. Separate your group into two halves and move them to opposite sides of the room or a hallway with a clear, safe space between them. Invite one group to remove shoes, then stand up, and shut eyes or be blindfolded. (For very small groups, use an additional pieces of paper and have one kid giving directions to blindfolded kids.)

Take the leaflets and spread them around the space in front of the blindfolded group. **Everyone who is not blindfolded will be giving directions to the blindfolded kids to help them safely cross the ocean to avoid getting swallowed up by a big fish. They may only step on the leaflets. Before they begin, you'll need to devise a plan to work together to bring them safely across. The only catch is that you can't physically help them—no guiding them with your hand, etc.**

Give kids time to work together to create a plan and implement it. If someone "falls" in the "ocean," all the kids will return to the start to try again.

Reverse the teams, but this time, ease the rules so that everyone can get across safely. Allow kids to guide blindfolded students or arrange the leaflets in a straight line. Show grace and forgiveness when they mess up so they don't have to start over.

### Spark Resources

Leaflets

### Supplies

Blindfolds (optional)

When the activity is finished, debrief it together.

**What was the hardest part of this exercise the first time? How did you like your job? What was different about the second round after we switched teams? Which did you like better and why? Did it make you mad that the rules were changed for the second round? Why or why not?**

## Send (5 minutes)

### Closing Conversation

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**Do you ever feel like Jonah? I think all of us do sometimes. We all feel like we get jobs we don't want to do sometimes, that's for sure. Finding out that mean people aren't getting in trouble after all is a big bummer. But what if it's us who aren't getting punished when we deserve to be? Does that make us feel okay?**

**We will all be Jonah sometimes, and we will all be the Ninevites too. The key is to remember that God's grace is for everyone, everywhere.**

**Check out the Faith on the Go options for this week. Which one do you think you'll try to do? What's your second choice?**

Spark Resources  
Spark Family Pages

Supplies  
None

### Closing Prayer

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Distribute Family Page to kids and point out question #4 in particular.

**We learned that Jonah thought it was unfair when God forgave the Ninevites. The sinful ways of the Ninevites made Jonah angry. For our closing prayer, I'd like to do a little different version of an angry prayer. Let's pray around the circle and say one thing that really makes us angry. You can "pass" if you don't want to say anything aloud.**

**I'll start the prayer and say what I'm angry about, then I will pass my prayer object (hold up a random item that can be passed around) to the next person. You can say what makes you angry or simply pass it to the next person.**

**Let us pray. Dear God, you know we love you and we know that you love us. So now that we've got that all clear, let's talk about some of the things in our world that can be pretty frustrating. Today, we are angry about . . .** (mention something that angers you—poverty, racism, bullying, etc.—then pass the small object to the next person in the circle). **Thank you for hearing our frustrations. Empower us to change those things in the world for the better. Amen!**

As you say goodbye to kids, make sure they take home their leaflets and Family Pages.

Spark Resources  
Spark Family Pages

Supplies  
Small object