



*Called to*

# obey God

It's not easy being Jonah



*A Bible study exploring the relevance  
of Jonah's story in our lives*



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## *To the leader*

The six parts of this study, each approximately 30 minutes long, can be completed in a half-day program of three hours, with a break after part 3. Or you may wish to do the study in three separate sessions, covering two parts in each session.

The entire book of Jonah—four short chapters—should be read aloud at the beginning of the study (you may read it or ask someone else in advance to be the reader). If you do the study in three separate sessions, open each session with a reading of the book so that the story will be fresh in the minds of the participants. If your group is large, divide into small groups for the discussion questions. At the close of each part of the study, invite participants to read the prayer in unison.

The more women you involve in a program, the greater the interest generated. You may enlist as many as 12 readers in these “readers’ theater” presentations. For each of the six parts, you will need a reader and a narrator. You as the leader also have a speaking role.

## *Materials needed*

A Bible and a copy of this resource for each participant

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## introduction

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The story of Jonah and the fish is found in the book of Jonah toward the end of the Old Testament. As you listen to the book being read—it's just four short chapters—use your imagination. Transport yourself into the setting. Imagine the smells of the land and the sounds of the countryside. Allow your feelings to surface as you listen to the story. (*The book of Jonah is read aloud.*)

As you listened, did you notice that Jonah is a man of faith? He knows God, and he believes in God's love, mercy, and compassion. Jonah never doubts God's love or his relationship with God. He even witnesses to the sailors with his message about who God is.

This is not a story about an unbeliever and God. This is a story about a believer who is having a deep theological debate with God. Jonah believes that God is completely wrong in wanting to save the people of Nineveh, and so he decides that he must disobey God.

But God wants us to have mercy on everyone, not just on those whom we deem worthy. The theme running throughout this story is that God's great mercy extends to all those who repent. And the story has a larger message as well: God's purpose for us is to rediscover God's vision for the whole creation and understand our own role in carrying out that vision. God's vision is that all of creation will experience the "shalom" of love, mercy, justice, and wholeness. When we are obedient to God's will, we are participating in that ultimate vision.

How do we distinguish our will from God's will? Our will may be tied up in petty personal (sometimes nationalistic) prejudices; God's will is expressed in universal compassion. As Christians, we are to seek out the will of God for our lives and follow it. The choice, however, is ours.

This is not a story about an unbeliever.

# 1

## you can run, but you can't hide *30 minutes*

### *focus*

Sometimes we don't want to accept God's purpose for our lives. Instead we give in to our own desires.

**READER 1:** *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come before me." (Jonah 1:1–2 NRSV)*

**NARRATOR 1:** A young married couple was just starting their life together. The husband had recently been released from the military, and they had just had their first child. They had good reasons to move closer to family in their hometown, but the husband received an offer to work as a public accountant with a big firm in Detroit. Instead of rejoicing that he had a job, the wife whined all the way to "Motor City." Where would they live? What type of people would they meet? After all, big cities were evil places, and they were small-town folk. "Oh, God, why here?" she questioned. The freeways with their congested traffic overwhelmed her. The headlines of the paper shouted daily about crime. And just look at the names of their sports teams—Lions and Tigers. Oh my! She felt like Dorothy entering the City of Oz. Yes, certainly they would be gobbled up by all the evil of this place.

**LEADER:** The woman in this story is not unlike Jonah, the main character of the tale we will explore. We can relate to Jonah's dilemma. He is a reluctant prophet who has quite a story to tell.

**READER 1:** Jonah was called by God to go and preach judgment against the wicked city of Nineveh. This huge city was very important to Assyria, a rising power of Jonah's day. The Assyrians were a feared and despised enemy. Even though God knew how bad that place had become, the Lord still wanted to give its people an opportunity to change. God's plan? Send Jonah to his hated enemy to warn them that judgment was coming! Jonah, however, did not like his orders. Jonah knew that God was caring and compassionate. This hated foe might actually repent and be spared God's wrath. Jonah wanted the entire population to be wiped out, so he disobeyed and ran from his mission.

## We can't outrun the Lord. God is right there with us.

**LEADER:** If we are honest, we can recall times when we have found ourselves in opposition to God's will for our lives. Pride, stubbornness, fear, or anger may have caused us to go in the opposite direction just as Jonah did. But we cannot run far from God, for God is always there. We may ignore our prayer life because we don't want to hear from God. We may leave our Bible in the drawer because we don't want to be confronted by God's Word. We may even stop going to church because the message we hear there makes us uncomfortable. But run, run as fast as we can, it is hard to get away from God. Our Lord is always with us. Even when we are disobedient, God is there calling us to return.

**DISCUSSION:**

1. Why do you think Jonah wanted to run away from God's mission for him? Why was Jonah so resistant?
2. What is God's plan or vision for the world? What part does each of us play in it?
3. Do you sometimes have difficulty discerning God's will or plan for you? Why do you think that is so?
4. What guidelines do you use in trying to determine what God has planned for you?
5. How do you avoid letting your own desires and biases influence your discernment process?
6. Do you think it is always possible to know and understand God's will?
7. Have there been times when you could see God's plan for you only in hindsight? When?
8. When you are uncertain about God's plans, what gives you comfort or reassurance?

**READER 1:** *The prophet Isaiah tells us that when we wander off the road, to the right or to the left, we will always hear God's voice calling to us, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21 NIV)*

**NARRATOR 1:** God desires us to walk on the right path. God's voice of correction is there to help us. God does not want us only to hear that voice but to obey it. The lesson is that we can't outrun the Lord. God is right there with us.

**PRAYER:** *Lord, forgive me for not responding to your call. Help me to put your will before mine. Amen*

# 2

## who's in control? *30 minutes*

**focus** God is ultimately in control.

**READER 2:** *Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:3 NRSV)*

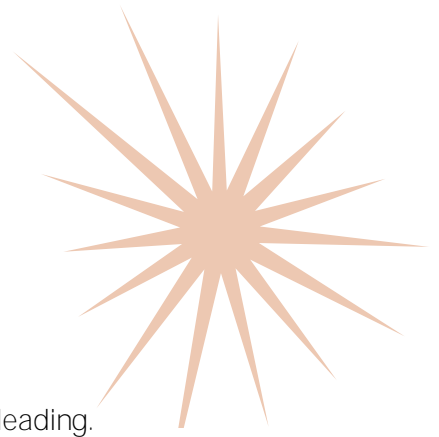
**NARRATOR 2:** Barbara Sullivan's book *The Control Trap: A Woman's Guide to Freedom from the Need to Manage People and Circumstances\** is one of those "ouch" books. We all fall into the trap of controlling at one time or another. It's amazing that our world continues to spin with so many of us trying to control it. God has given us a free will so that we can make decisions in our lives. And sometimes we make decisions that go against God's will. But the good news is that God is *ultimately* in control.

**LEADER:** In the story of Jonah, we see how this prophet fell into the control trap. Jonah's stubbornness found him unwilling to follow God's command. God's plan to save Nineveh was not what Jonah wanted. He was not about to go to Nineveh and tell its people about God. So he went to Joppa, got on a ship, and headed in the opposite direction. But Jonah's running away from God's call only got him and others into worse trouble. When we choose to control circumstances, especially without discussing with others and without praying, we often get hurt and also do harm to people around us.

**NARRATOR 2:** It took a great storm and the insistent questions of his shipmates to wake up the sleeping prophet. When the finger of responsibility was pointed at him, Jonah confessed to his part in this turmoil that now held an entire boat crew in its grip. Guilty Jonah pronounced his own sentence: "Throw me into the sea. It's my fault this storm has come on you." The sailors were more compassionate to Jonah than he had been to the Ninevites. The crew had already thrown cargo overboard to lighten the ship's load. When that didn't work, they tried to row back to the land. But to no avail. In the end, the men tossed Jonah into the sea. Immediately, the storm stopped. The pagan crew was so astounded that they began to worship Jonah's God.

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\* *The Control Trap* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1991) is available on the Web at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).



**LEADER:** How foolish we are when we seize control and disobey God's leading. How foolish we are to think that we can flee from God! Even in disobedience, Jonah knew who God was and said so. Because of his great faith, the sailors prayed to God and vowed to serve God.

- DISCUSSION:**
1. What does it mean to you that "God is in control"?
  2. What evidence of God's control do you see in your own life? In the world around you? How does God's control make your life different?
  3. Have there been times in your life when you tried to ignore God's vision and decided to follow your own desires instead? When?
  4. At what point is our desire to control wrong? When is it right?
  5. What things in your life are in God's hands? What life choices are yours?
  6. How do you know if your choices are consistent with God's will for you?
  7. Can you think of a time when you were not in control? How did you feel? How did you handle it?

**PRAYER:** *Lord, forgive me for trying to control my life and the lives of those around me. Remind me daily to let you be in control. Help me to release control in all areas of my life so that I can have peace in the storms that surround me. In your holy name I pray. Amen*

When we choose to control circumstances, we often get hurt and do harm to people around us.

# 3

## buried alive *30 minutes*

### *focus*

Failure to follow God's will can cause harmful repercussions for us and others. It can also lead to repentance, reflection, or reevaluation.

**READER 3:** *The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* (Jonah 1:17 NRSV)

**NARRATOR 3:** When we think of the story of Jonah, we conjure up the image of a gloomy man encased in the belly of a giant sea creature. Jonah was buried alive—for three days and three nights. The Bible tells us, however, that God sent a “large fish” to rescue Jonah. The story of Jonah’s rescue by God is a miracle. Jesus cited Jonah’s experience as an illustration of his own coming death and resurrection.

**READER 3:** *“An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights, the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.”* (Matthew 12:39–40 NRSV)

**NARRATOR 3:** But Jesus was not buried alive. Jesus was dead and in the belly of the earth. As God delivered Jonah from his tomb, so God delivered Jesus from the tomb by raising him from the dead. Both events brought salvation and hope. Jonah fought God’s will. Jesus yielded completely to God’s will. One would save a city. The other would save the whole of creation.

**LEADER:** Jonah was initially disobedient: he refused to go to Nineveh. Now, sitting inside this great fish, he had time to reflect on his actions and to pray. God has delivered us from the bondage of sin and death. God has also given us a mission—to tell all nations about God’s love and forgiveness. Many people today are buried alive in sin, ignorant of the way out. God wants us to announce deliverance to them. Remember: God provided a way out for Jonah. If God can reach out and use this stubborn man to tell others the Good News, then God’s hand can deliver us. Don’t remain buried alive. Let Jesus free you today. He is the lord of sea and earth. Let Jesus be Lord of your life.

Jonah fought God's will. Jesus yielded completely to God's will. One would save a city. The other would save the whole of creation.

- DISCUSSION:**
1. God's own believer, Jonah, does not recognize the miracle—God's sending the fish to save him. Why not?
  2. As you read Jonah 2:1–9, do you hear him repenting for his decision not to go to Nineveh? What do you hear Jonah saying?
  3. This is an "ouch" moment for Jonah. What kept him from acknowledging his mistake, from acknowledging that he was wrong?
  4. Have you ever had any "ouch" moments? Did you recognize the mistake you made? Did you learn from that experience? Did you change?
  5. Have you had any "death and resurrection" experiences in your life? If so, have they helped you to change in any way?

**PRAYER:** *Lord, I need your forgiveness. Reach out in your love and rescue me today. Raise me from this prison I feel myself confined in. Open the door to life and to living it abundantly. In your name I pray. Amen*



## the God of second chances *30 minutes*

### *focus*

Jonah thought the people of Nineveh didn't deserve a second chance. But just as God gave Jonah a second chance after he disobeyed, so also God used Jonah to provide a second chance for the people of Nineveh.

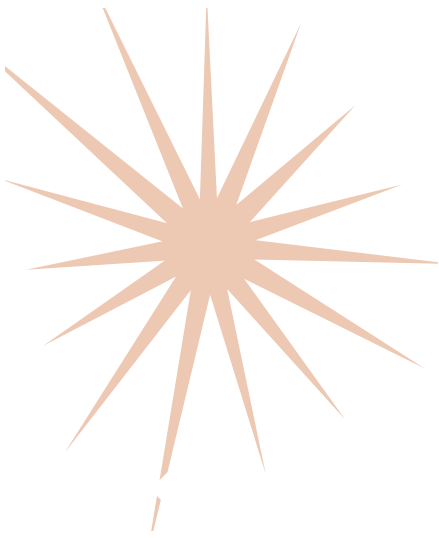
**READER 4:** *Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*  
(Jonah 2:10 NRSV)

**NARRATOR 4:** "Driving a little fast there, weren't you, buddy?" The young driver shrank into the front seat of his car as the uniformed officer tapped a pencil on his unopened ticket pad. "How long have you been driving?" the stern officer inquired. "Six weeks, sir. I'm really sorry. I was just on my way home," the young man replied politely. "Hmm . . ." The officer looked at the boy's license and handed it back. "Well, I'll let you off this time, but don't make this a habit. OK?" A sigh went up from inside the car. "Thanks, officer. I'll watch it. My parents would be furious if I got a ticket. Thanks again," the lad responded. Slowly the boy drove off, relieved at having been given a second chance.

**LEADER:** Everyone welcomes getting second chances in life. We all have had times when we have blown it. How grateful we feel when we are able to have another opportunity to make things right or learn from a past mistake.

**NARRATOR 4:** The prophet Jonah was given another chance to obey God. While in the belly of the fish, Jonah seems thankful to be alive. Yet he needs to let God know that he is different from those who rely on idols when in trouble. He tells God that he relies only upon the Lord. He seems to forget that he fled, disobeying God's command, because he believed those Ninevites should *not* be saved—they were too wicked! When Jonah heard God a second time, he obeyed, though probably still believing that God was making a mistake.

**LEADER:** Even when Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh, he brought the message to only a third of the town and in as few words as possible. But his message miraculously spread, in spite of Jonah. And the people repented, in spite of Jonah. What was his message? "Judgment is coming, people!" That wasn't a popular message. Not then, not now. We prefer to



## God is the God of second chances.

think of a loving God, not a Holy Patrolman on the highway of life who judges and condemns us. The truth is that God is not a vengeful God, but a just God. God does not desire anyone to perish.

**READER 4:** *[The Lord] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)*

**NARRATOR 4:** What is the stipulation? Turn from your sins, receive God's forgiveness, and put away those things that harm others and ourselves. Just as God forgave Jonah for his pride, stubbornness, anger, and disobedience, so God will forgive us our sins when we ask in Jesus' name. God is the God of second chances.

**DISCUSSION:**

1. Jonah's foibles allow us to admit to our own. The thought of the evil Ninevites not getting what they deserved made him mad. Ever feel that way? When? What does our faith say to us at those times?
2. When have you heard God calling you to come back into relationship with God? In what ways?
3. Think of a time when you got a second chance. What did you do?
4. Have there been situations in your life when you have responded to God's will even though you didn't agree? Why do you think God used you in this way?

**LEADER:** God is always there to welcome us home. Our Lord wants us to rest in the shelter of blessing, in the arms of love. God is waiting to rescue you and bring you safely home. Stand on dry land and make your way with God in this world. Jesus offers you another chance. Take it today.

**PRAYER:** *Lord, I have often failed when I have tried to have things my own way. Forgive me. Thank you for the chance to return to you and to live in your love. Fill me with your Spirit that I may be guided in all I do. In Jesus' name. Amen*



## spot removal *30 minutes*

### *focus*

Jonah wanted to play judge and jury for the Ninevites. Yet God used Jonah to speak God's message to them. In spite of our own shortcomings and lovelessness, God can also use us to bring a message of hope to those who are living in evil ways.

**READER 5:** *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.* (Jonah 3:1–3 NRSV)

**NARRATOR 5:** "A leopard can't change its spots." Of course not. The spots are what distinguish this great cat from other animals. One of the trophy animals of Africa, the leopard is the smallest of the big cats. But unlike the other big cats, leopards don't usually roar. Their sound is more like a raspy call.

**LEADER:** After proclaiming the message to some of the Ninevites, Jonah's voice probably got raspy as he announced: "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." Jonah believed a leopard couldn't change its spots. He hoped the Ninevites would just laugh at him and continue on their path toward doom. But when they heard about the forthcoming judgment, the people repented, from the lowest citizen to the king. All gave up their evil ways and their violence to avert the coming wrath of God. They knew they were covered in spots of sin. God was good. He removed their sin when they turned to him. God averted the destruction that Jonah proclaimed. Joy came to the city and its inhabitants!

**NARRATOR 5:** But there was no joy in Jonah's heart. He was angry. These people should have gotten what they deserved. They were mean and hurtful. Jonah had grown up knowing the atrocities that these people had committed against his nation. He wanted God to rain down fire and brimstone, destroying this city. How could God forgive them?

**LEADER:** The message of God's grace comes to us in the removal of our sin by the blood of Jesus Christ.

**READER 5:** *Isaiah reminds us, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."* (Isaiah 1:18 NIV)



**NARRATOR 5:** Jesus' blood washes the stains of sin from our lives. When we enter into relationship with Christ as our Savior, we become new creatures. The old is gone. Our spotted lives are clean. Jonah wanted to keep the message of God's forgiveness "in house"—only for Israelites. He didn't want those "other folk" to hear and be saved. But God had other plans.

**DISCUSSION:** **1.** Who are people in our church, society, or world who have been used for God's purposes, even though they (like Jonah) didn't believe in God's vision?

**2.** Who might you consider to be Ninevites in today's world? What might be God's purpose or vision for them? How might you participate in that vision?

**3.** What are some "spots of sin" that need to be changed in your own life?

**LEADER:** All the people in God's entire world need to hear that they can't continue to walk in sin and disobedience. As Christians, we are called to reach out beyond the confines of our congregations to the world so that all people will find the spots of sin removed by God's love in Jesus. Leopards like you and me can change our spots.

**PRAYER:** *Jesus, thank you for the gift of your life that cleanses my soul. As you live in me, my life is transformed. Help me to love you more so that I can love others. In your name I pray. Amen*

Thanks to God's grace, leopards like you and  
me can change our spots.

# 6

## stop huffing and puffing *30 minutes*

### *focus*

Jonah still didn't completely get it. He still wasn't happy with the work God had called him to do. But God continued to offer love and support to Jonah and to Nineveh.

**READER 6:** *Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. (Jonah 4:5 NRSV)*

**NARRATOR 6:** In the story "The Three Little Pigs," the big bad wolf huffed and puffed and blew the house down. How often do we get upset with something that doesn't go our way? Have you ever just gone off somewhere—the backyard, the golf course, a lake, your room—just to spout off?

**LEADER:** Angela hits the road. She takes her dog, Boris, and walks to the football field, passes the park, makes her way around Burger King, and heads down Carpenter Avenue. By the time she reaches her church at the corner of Kimberly and H streets, she has "huffed and puffed" herself out. That's when she goes in and kneels at the altar, submitting her will to God's and asking for help in accepting God's plan for her and for the world.

**NARRATOR 6:** In the final chapter of Jonah, we find Jonah doing much the same. He was huffing and puffing because God had stayed the hand of judgment on a people he thought should have been punished. As Jonah sat in his pit of despondency, he let his complaints be known to the Almighty. But God was still at work in this prophet's life. Jonah had one more lesson to learn. You would think that after all the events of the first three chapters—the running away, the storm, the great fish, the hike across part of a metropolis, the repentance of the people, the joy that filled their lives—Jonah would just want to pack his bags and go home, with his mission accomplished. But here Jonah sat, on the east side of the city, waiting to see what would happen, and huffing and puffing. When God caused a vine to grow up next to Jonah, he was pleased with its shade. When God caused the plant to die, Jonah got mad all over again. In fact, he stated, "I am angry enough to die." How foolish! This prophet of God was more concerned about the death of a vine than he was about the 120,000 people who might have died because of their wickedness had God not extended mercy.





## God calls us not to judge others but to love them.

**LEADER:** Let us learn from our stubborn prophet that God's love is for the entire world. Our prayer each day should be for those who are lost. Instead of huffing and puffing about how we think God should be running the universe, let us submit our wills to God's and ask to be used to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus. God calls us not to judge others but to love them. When we personally experience God's great mercy and compassion as the Ninevites did, we should desire to share that grace with others. May God use these lessons from Jonah to help us hear and obey the call as we go out into the world.

- DISCUSSION:**
1. Again, Jonah fails to recognize the miracle God sends, a plant to shade him. Why?
  2. What do you think is the message that Jonah couldn't quite get?
  3. Do we sometimes "not get" the message of God's vision or plan for us and our world? Give examples.
  4. Give examples of times when you believe you followed God's vision for you.
  5. Can you think of situations in the church, in your community, or in the world in which the leaders don't understand God's plan for all creation to experience mercy and grace?
  6. Can you think of situations where leaders have acted in ways that are consistent with God's will?
  7. What do you think is the main message in the book of Jonah?

**PRAYER:** *Lord, you are calling me to paths I am unsure of. Help me to put behind me any prejudice I may have toward others. Empower me with your love to see all people as your children. In Christ's name I pray. Amen*

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### RECOMMENDED READING

Fretheim, Terence E. *The Message of Jonah*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977. Reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002.

Fretheim calls his book a "theological commentary," but it is a reader-friendly commentary. He opens by saying, "More often than not the big fish has gotten all the attention. Ask Christians or Jews, or any person on the street for that matter, what the book of Jonah is all about. The fish will figure prominently in most replies." This answer misses the point of the entire four-chapter book of Jonah. Jonah is a believer—a man of faith; he knows what God can accomplish. The focus of the book of Jonah is a theological conflict between Jonah and God.



*Called to Obey God* is one program in the Listen, God Is Calling series produced by the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to help women's groups explore together what God is calling them to be and do.

#### credits

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**Cynthia E. Cowen** is an ELCA associate in ministry, a licensed lay minister, and a frequent contributor to *Christ in Our Home* and *The Word in Season*, devotionals published by Augsburg Fortress. She participated in the Women of the ELCA global advocacy study tour to East Africa in 2000 and served for six years on the churchwide executive board of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**A note from the writer:** Members of the churchwide board of directors of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have made Bible study a priority in their lives and have been reading the Old and New Testament together over the last six years. While studying the book of Jonah, I was inspired to write this resource for use in our organization. I hope that those who use it will grow in faith as they explore the Bible together.



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