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JONAH

A 4-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

WEEK 1 OF 4 • GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

Fleeing the Presence of the LORD — Jonah 1:1–17

Scripture Scope: Jonah 1:1–17 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

Jonah — 4-Week Group Bible Study (Participant Study Edition)

Week 1: Fleeing the Presence of the LORD (Jonah 1:1–17)

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- **The title:** The book opens with the word of the LORD coming to Jonah son of Amittai (1:1), a prophet from Israel who served in the days of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). Unlike most prophetic books, Jonah is mainly a story about the prophet himself.
- **The voices:** The LORD; Jonah; the sailors and their captain; the king of Nineveh. The LORD has the last word, and it is a question.
- **Its form:** A prophetic narrative in four scenes, with a psalm of thanksgiving in chapter 2.
- **The structure:**
  - Jonah flees from the LORD; a storm, the sailors, and a great fish (chapter 1).
  - Jonah prays from the belly of the fish (chapter 2).
  - Jonah preaches, and Nineveh repents (chapter 3).
  - Jonah is angry at the LORD's mercy, and the LORD asks him a question (chapter 4).
- **Why it matters:** Jonah shows a God who pursues a runaway prophet, hears prayer from the depths, and has compassion even on a violent enemy city. Its declaration, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (2:9), and its closing question challenge anyone who wants God's mercy for themselves but not for others. Jesus points to Jonah as a sign of his own death and resurrection.

How This 4-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Jonah to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, this study is four weeks rather than the series' usual eight. Jonah has 48 verses in four chapters, and each chapter is one scene: the flight, the prayer, the preaching, and the LORD's question. Four weeks follow the book's own shape without padding. Each week invites you to obedience, prayer, repentance, and the LORD's wide compassion together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's passage inside the structure of Jonah and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV.

Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Jonah:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

The 4-Week Jonah Study at a Glance

Week	Title & Passage	Movement 1 / Movement 2	Canonical Horizon
1	**Fleeing the Presence of the LORD** (1:1–17)	Arise, Go to Nineveh (1:1–6) / The Lot, the Sea, and the Fish (1:7–17)	Something greater than Jonah; the Lord of wind and sea
2	**Prayer from the Deep** (2:1–10)	Out of the Belly of Sheol (2:1–6) / Salvation Belongs to the LORD (2:7–10)	Three days and three nights; salvation belongs to the Lord
3	**Nineveh Repents** (3:1–10)	A Second Time (3:1–4) / From the Greatest to the Least (3:5–10)	Nineveh's repentance and the gospel for the nations
4	**The LORD's Pity** (4:1–11)	Jonah's Anger (4:1–5) / A Plant, a Worm, and a People (4:6–11)	A God who pities; the one who resents mercy

WEEK 1 OF 4

WEEK 1 SESSION GUIDE · JONAH 1:1–17

Week 1: Fleeing the Presence of the LORD

Scripture Scope: Jonah 1:1–17 (ESV) • Focal Passages: Jonah 1:1–4; 1:9; 1:15–17 • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

Opening: Fleeing the Presence of the LORD (Jonah 1:1–17)

Opening

The word of the LORD comes to Jonah with a clear command: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." Nineveh was a great city of Assyria, the cruel empire that threatened Israel. Jonah gets up, but he heads the opposite way, down to the port of Joppa and onto a ship bound for faraway Tarshish, "away from the presence of the LORD." But the LORD hurls a great wind on the sea.

The pagan sailors cry to their gods and throw cargo overboard while Jonah sleeps below deck. When the lot falls on him, Jonah confesses, "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land," the very God he is running from. At his own word, the sailors throw him into the sea, and it grows calm. The sailors fear the LORD and worship him, and the LORD appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah.

Week 1 At a Glance

Scripture Scope	Jonah 1:1–17 (the LORD's command to go to Nineveh, Jonah's flight toward Tarshish away from the LORD's presence, a great storm hurled by the LORD, sailors crying to their gods, a sleeping prophet, the lot, Jonah's confession of the Maker of sea and land, a man hurled into the sea, sailors who come to fear the LORD, and a great fish appointed to swallow Jonah)
Focal Passages	Jonah 1:1–4; 1:9; 1:15–17
Literary & Structural Anchor	"Away from the presence of the LORD" sounds twice in 1:3; Jonah keeps going down (to Joppa, into the ship, into the hold). The verb "hurl" binds the scene (1:4, 5, 12, 15). The sailors' fear deepens from fear (1:5) to great fear (1:10) to fearing the LORD exceedingly (1:16). "Appointed" (1:17) begins a chain that continues in chapter 4.
Big Idea	No one can flee from the presence of the LORD, who rules wind and sea, pursues his runaway servant, draws outsiders to worship him, and appoints rescue.

Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	**Know the God We Cannot Flee:** Learn how Jonah ran from the LORD's call, how the LORD pursued him through a storm, and how the sailors came to fear the LORD.
HEART	**See One Greater Than Jonah:** See that Jesus is greater than Jonah, the Lord whom wind and sea obey, who went into the deep for others.
HANDS	**Turn Toward the Call:** Take one step toward something God is calling you to do instead of running from it.

Opening Frame: Fleeing the Presence of the LORD

Obadiah closed by declaring that the kingdom belongs to the LORD. Jonah shows us what kind of King he is. The LORD sends his prophet to Nineveh, a great city of Assyria, Israel's feared and violent enemy, and the prophet runs the other way. Jonah is a short book of four chapters, and this is a 4–Week study, one chapter each week: the flight and the storm, the prayer from the fish, Nineveh's repentance, and the LORD's closing question to his angry prophet. This week Jonah heads for the sea, the LORD sends a great storm, pagan sailors end up worshiping the LORD, and a great fish swallows the runaway. The question for this week: what does it look like to run from God, and how does he pursue those who run? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question): When you were a child, what was a chore or task you tried hardest to avoid?

Section 1.2

Historical & Literary Context: A Prophet Who Ran (Jonah 1:1–17)

Entering the World of Jonah and Nineveh

1. Historical Background

Jonah son of Amittai is linked with Israel in the eighth century BC (2 Kings 14:25), though the book itself gives no date for his mission. Assyria, with Nineveh as one of its great cities and later its capital, was known for brutal warfare and would destroy Israel in 722 BC.

2. Cultural Setting

Sailors in the ancient world often believed storms came from angry gods and cast lots to find out who was to blame. Tarshish was likely a distant port at the far end of the known Mediterranean world (its exact location is uncertain).

3. Literary Structure of Jonah 1:1–17

- **The command and the flight** (1:1–3)
- **The storm and the sleeping prophet** (1:4–6)
- **The lot and Jonah's confession** (1:7–10)
- **The sailors' struggle and Jonah hurled into the sea** (1:11–15)
- **The sailors' worship** (1:16)
- **The great fish** (1:17)

4. Key Themes

God's call; disobedience; the presence of the LORD; God's sovereignty over creation; true fear of the LORD; outsiders who worship; God's appointed rescue.

5. Theological Considerations

Jonah's confession is true even while he runs; right words do not guarantee obedience. The LORD rules the sea Jonah tries to cross and uses even Jonah's flight to bring sailors to worship.

6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

The narrator uses repeated words (go down, hurl, great, fear) to build irony. The sailors' growing fear in 1:5, 1:10, and 1:16 shows them moving from terror to worship.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

1.2 Q1: Why do you think Jonah ran from God's command to go to Nineveh?

1.2 Q2: Jonah tried to flee "from the presence of the LORD." What does it mean to try to run from God, and why can't it work?

1.2 Q3: The sailors, who did not know the LORD, ended up worshiping him. What does this suggest about how God works through our failures?

Section 1.3

Movement 1: Arise, Go to Nineveh (Jonah 1:1–6)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Summary of Jonah 1:1** — The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai.
- **Reader 1: Jonah 1:2–4** (focal passage) — The LORD told Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and call out against it, for its evil had come up before him; but Jonah went down to Joppa and boarded a ship to Tarshish, away from the LORD's presence; then the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea, and the ship threatened to break apart.
- **Summary of Jonah 1:5–6** — The terrified sailors each cried out to his own god and threw the cargo overboard, while Jonah had gone down into the ship and fallen fast asleep; the captain woke him and urged him to call on his god, in case that god might spare them.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

Jonah 1:2: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”

Jonah 1:3: But Jonah rose 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 the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 1:4: But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

Teaching Narrative: Arise, Go to Nineveh

1. The Word Comes (Jonah 1:1–2)

A command to go to Nineveh.

2. Jonah Flees (Jonah 1:3)

Down to Joppa, away from the LORD's presence.

3. The LORD Hurls a Wind (Jonah 1:4)

The storm is no accident.

4. The Sailors and the Sleeper (Jonah 1:5–6)

Retold briefly. Fear on deck, sleep below.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

1.3 Q1: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (1:2). What does this command reveal about God's concern for nations far beyond Israel?

1.3 Q2: "But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (1:3). What are some ways people today "rise" and go the opposite direction from what God asks?

1.3 Q3: Jonah "paid the fare" and "went down" to Joppa and into the ship (1:3). What does running from God cost us, and where does it lead?

1.3 Q4: "But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea" (1:4). How can God use storms in our lives to turn us back toward him, without every hardship being punishment?

1.3 Q5: While the sailors prayed to their gods, Jonah slept below deck (1:5–6). What does this contrast suggest about the danger of spiritual numbness?

Section 1.4

Movement 2: The Lot, the Sea, and the Fish (Jonah 1:7–17)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Summary of Jonah 1:7–8** — The sailors cast lots to learn who caused the disaster, the lot fell on Jonah, and they asked him who he was and where he came from.
- **Reader 1: Jonah 1:9** (focal passage) — Jonah told them he was a Hebrew who feared the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.
- **Summary of Jonah 1:10–15** — The men were terrified, knowing he was fleeing from the LORD; as the sea grew rougher, Jonah told them to throw him overboard; they rowed hard for land and could not, so they prayed to the LORD not to hold this man's life against them, threw Jonah into the sea, and the sea grew calm.
- **Reader 2: Jonah 1:16–17** (focal passage) — The men feared the LORD greatly and offered a sacrifice and made vows; and the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, who was inside it three days and three nights.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Jonah 1:9:** And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."
>
> **Jonah 1:16:** Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.
>
> **Jonah 1:17:** And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Teaching Narrative: The Lot, the Sea, and the Fish

1. The Lot Falls (Jonah 1:7–8)

Retold briefly. The runaway exposed.

2. I Fear the LORD (Jonah 1:9)

A true confession from a fleeing man.

3. Hurl Me into the Sea (Jonah 1:10–15)

Retold briefly. The sailors try to save him, then pray to the LORD.

4. The Sailors Worship (Jonah 1:16)

Outsiders fear the LORD exceedingly.

5. A Great Fish Appointed (Jonah 1:17)

Three days and three nights.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

1.4 Q1: The sailors cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah (1:7). How does God bring hidden things into the open, and why is that ultimately a mercy?

1.4 Q2: "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (1:9). How can someone say true things about God while running from him?

1.4 Q3: The sailors rowed hard to bring the ship to land rather than throw Jonah overboard (1:13). What does their effort reveal about them, compared with Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh?

1.4 Q4: "Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows" (1:16). Why is it surprising that the sailors, not the prophet, are the ones worshiping at the end of the chapter?

1.4 Q5: "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17). What does the word "appointed" teach us about God's care even for those running from him?

Section 1.5

Canonical Horizon: Something Greater Than Jonah; the Lord of Wind and Sea

Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

Jesus said that something greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:39–41). Jonah fled his calling and was thrown into the sea for his own guilt; Jesus set his face to fulfill his calling, stilled the storm as its Lord (Mark 4:35–41), and suffered once for the unrighteous to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18). Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

1. Greater Than Jonah (Matthew 12:39–41)

Jesus says the only sign given will be the sign of Jonah, and that something greater than Jonah is here. Jonah fled his sending; Jesus set his face to fulfill his.

2. The Lord Whom Wind and Sea Obey (Mark 4:35–41)

Jesus slept in a boat during a storm, and when the disciples woke him, he stilled the sea. Unlike Jonah, he was not fleeing; he is the Lord of the storm.

3. Into the Deep for Others (Romans 5:6–8; 1 Peter 3:18)

Jonah was thrown into the sea for his own guilt so that others might live. Christ, the righteous, suffered once for the unrighteous to bring us to God.

4. The God Who Pursues (Luke 15:4–7)

The LORD pursued Jonah through a storm and a fish. Jesus is the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep.

Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Jonah 1:17:** And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

1.5 Q1: Jesus said, "something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). In what ways is Jesus greater than Jonah?

1.5 Q2: After Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples asked, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). How does this connect to Jonah's confession of the God "who made the sea and the dry land"?

1.5 Q3: Peter writes, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). How is Christ's going into the deep different from Jonah's?

Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD

Jonah ran from the LORD's call, but the LORD pursued him through a storm, brought the sailors to worship, and appointed a great fish.

HEART	Jesus is greater than Jonah, the Lord whom wind and sea obey, who went into the deep for us.
HANDS	Faith stops running and turns toward the call of God, trusting the One who pursues us.

Section 1.6

Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

1.6 Q1: Is there something God has been asking of you that you have been avoiding? What is one step toward it this week?

1.6 Q2: Where might you be spiritually "asleep" while others around you are struggling? How could you wake up and pray?

1.6 Q3: How might believers show honesty about failure to people outside the faith—like Jonah's sailors—without forcing self-exposure, and what might God's patience teach observers? (Personal reflection may remain private.)

Looking Ahead to Next Week

Recap: In Week 1, we watched Jonah run from the LORD's call, saw the LORD hurl a storm and bring the sailors to worship, and heard that the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.

Transition: Next week Jonah prays from inside the fish, remembering how the LORD heard him from the depths, and declares, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

Week 2 Overview — Prayer from the Deep (Jonah 2:1–10): Movement 1, Out of the Belly of Sheol (2:1–6), covers Jonah's cry from the depths and the LORD bringing his life up from the pit. Movement 2, Salvation Belongs to the LORD (2:7–10), covers Jonah's remembered prayer, his vow of thanksgiving, and the fish releasing him onto dry land. The Canonical Horizon traces the three days and three nights and salvation in Christ.

Focal Readings to Preview

- Jonah 2:4–10

My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

Closing Group Prayer

LORD, God of heaven, you made the sea and the dry land, and nothing is hidden from you. We confess the ways we have run from your call and gone down instead of going where you sent us. We pray for those who are running from you, and for all who are caught in storms right now. Thank you for Jesus, greater than Jonah, who did not run but went into the deep for us. Give us courage to turn toward what you are calling us to do. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.