

Grown Up Sunday School Stories

by Rev. Russ Broomell

*There's more we can learn from
the Bible stories we loved as children*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1 - JOSHUA AND JERICHO	6
CHAPTER 3 - DAVID AND GOLIATH	16
CHAPTER 4 - QUEEN ESTHER	21
CHAPTER 5 - JONAH AND THE WHALE	26
CHAPTER 6 - DANIEL AND THE LION'S DEN	31

Grown Up Sunday School Stories

Introduction

What's In It For Me?

If you grew up around a church, you probably heard kid's versions of some of the stories from the Bible. If you didn't grow up around the church, you may have heard them anyway. They have broad cultural appeal and are used as references. I remember when the NY Mets met the NY Yankees in the World Series in 2000, it was touted as a David and Goliath series - except in this case Goliath won. The movie Rocky is a David and Goliath story too. When a famous person falls out of favor after having an affair, someone will inevitably describe it as being like Samson and Delilah. Books from *The Count of Monte Cristo* to 1984 echo the themes of Daniel and the Lion's Den and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* might bring to mind the story of Queen Esther. You might even have seen one of the many movies made about the stories we'll study together in this series.

But is that all there is? Is Joshua and Jericho simply a story of God taking care of business when we do what God asks? Is Jonah and the Whale basically the same story in reverse with a grumpy old prophet who wants to run away from God?

You won't be surprised that this study answers those questions with a "Welllllll, yes and no." After all, the idea of God doing great things through unlikely people is a great one to take away from that story of the young shepherd David and the giant soldier Goliath. But there's more there too, and this study will challenge us to think more about the stories, the situations, the people, the culture, and even some of the undercurrents in the stories. Those might reinforce our childhood take on the story, or give us a completely different message, or maybe both, or ... who knows? So grab a felt board or a VHS tape or a costume or just your imagination, as we look at these classic stories with fresh eyes.

How Should I Do This Study?

Each chapter has a retelling of the child's version of the story from roughly an elementary school point of view. Maybe you're familiar with them, maybe you aren't. Maybe you were told a slightly different version. Read this retelling, and feel free to go find other versions for yourself (for example gather up some of the kids in your life and watch the Veggie Tales Jonah Movie - lots of laughs and some infectious tunes too). But definitely be sure to read the Bible passage listed, and if you're feeling up to it, read the additional passages before answering the questions. Feel free to write in this study. Make some notes. It actually helps you to think if you write your answers down.

And this study is better with friends. If you're already doing it in a small group, invite a neighbor, co-worker, family member or friend to come along on the journey. If you're reading it on your own, find a few friends to read along and talk about it over coffee or meet together for dinner. It's designed to be done one chapter a week over six weeks, but adapt that schedule however it works for you and your group. But reading the Bible, and our whole life of faith, is really meant to be done in community, so as tempting as it may be, don't go it alone. As the Bible says, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NRSVUE) The Bible itself says you should be reading it with others and talking about it with one another all the time.

Yeah, But I Disagree

That's great! It means you're engaging with the text of the Bible. Billions of people have read the Scriptures over the millennia and often disagreed about what they find there. Did you read the bit just above about reading the Bible with one another and talking about it together? Part of the reason is that we can help one another interpret what we read. Another part is that we can disagree productively about it and still agree that we love one another and the Scriptures.

Remember, that the Bible does not speak. It does not explain itself. It's not a lecturer trying to make sure you get a specific lesson. The Bible is words on a page. Many people believe it's also connected to

God, and that God may use it, and opinions differ on exactly what that might mean or how it might work. But the Bible doesn't actually give us much guidance on what it is or how to read it other than those instructions mentioned above, and descriptions that Scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16), that we should "rightly divide the word of God" (2 Tim 2:15), and that we should "meditate on it day and night" (several places like Jos 1:8). Again, opinions differ on what each of those mean, and how they might work. And that's really the whole point. We don't agree on what Scripture is, but for somewhere around three thousand years, many, many people have agreed that Scripture is important. The one thing we know for sure is that we read it or hear it and process it with our brains. Your ears and your eyes are different from that person sitting next to you. Your brain is not the same as their brain. The life you've lived and the experiences you've had (including those Sunday School stories you did or didn't experience) are different from everyone around you.

Is it any wonder that we get different things out of what we read? And that sometimes we disagree on what we read? And that sometimes we hear what someone else got from the reading and say "how did they ever get that out of the story? I *really* disagree!" And that sometimes we hear what someone else got from the reading and say "wow, I never saw it that way. I *love* that!"

And so if you were taught by a human that the Bible contains one and only one answer to any given question, perhaps you want to put that idea up on a shelf for a little while and read these stories with fresh eyes. That idea will be waiting for you when you get back, so don't worry.

Enjoy!

Chapter 1 - Joshua and Jericho

Main Passage: Joshua 6:1-5, 20-21 (or Joshua 5:13-6:27 for additional context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, God's people arrived in the Promised Land after forty long years of walking, which is a very, very long time to be walking. And what to they come to, but the big, scary city of Jericho. Jericho was a city with walls so big and so thick that people built houses right on top of them, and the city was shut up tight. Nobody went in, and nobody came out. God's people looked at those enormous walls and wondered how they were ever going to defeat such a powerful enemy. We didn't ask why the city of Jericho might be the enemy.

And God had a plan, and the plan was ... a parade.

God told Joshua, the leader of the good guys, to have all his soldiers march around the city once every day for six days. No fighting. No shouting. No talking at all, actually. Just marching, quiet as church mice, while seven priests carried seven trumpets in front of the ark of the Lord. (Our teacher especially loved the part where an entire army was told to be absolutely silent and actually obeyed. The teacher would look at us meaningfully. Especially at that one kid.) The people of Jericho stood up on their big walls and watched God's people march quietly around and around, and you can bet they thought it was the silliest thing they had ever seen. Nobody in our class ever asked why God's battle plan involved zero battles.

Then came the seventh day. This time, God's people marched around the city not once but seven times, that's a lot of sevens, if you're keeping track. At the very end, the priests blew a long blast on their trumpets, and Joshua shouted, "Shout! For the Lord has given you the city!" And all of God's people shouted the biggest shout that had ever been shouted, and do you know what happened? The teacher told us how those big, thick, enormous, huge, gigantic, mighty walls came tumbling down. Boom! God's people walked straight into the city, the good guys won, and the nice lady named Rahab who had helped them, the one

with the red rope in her window, was rescued along with her whole family, because God always takes care of people who help God's people.

Then we all stood up and marched around the Sunday School room seven times ourselves, blowing imaginary trumpets, and shouted on cue. The lesson ended at verse 20, right as the walls hit the ground. Verse 21 was never part of the discussion.

That Was Then. This Is Now.

That version taught us that God can bring down any wall, and that obedience sometimes looks foolish right up until it doesn't. Both are true, and both worth keeping. But there's more here than maybe we first learned about. Let's read Joshua 6:1-5, 20-21 (or Joshua 5:13-6:27 for additional context) and jot down some notes about what we see there.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - The Promised Land was already inhabited. Scholars will say that Jericho was named after the Canaanite moon god Yarikh. Why does this story happen at all?

2 - What does it mean that the decisive act of this battle wasn't swinging a sword but walking in silence for a week, trusting a plan that made no sense from ground level? What might this be saying about what sorts of things God calls us to do today?

3 - The ark of the Lord was the one place on earth where God promised to be present. And God tells the people to carry it around this strange city. What's the meaning here? Physically? Metaphorically? Spiritually? Emotionally?

4 - Put yourself in the position of the Jerichonians (if that's what they were called) looking down from the walls. What's on your mind? What's on your mind when the walls fall?

5 - Verse 21 is in the Bible whether we heard about it in second grade or not. What do we do with a victory that ends in verse 21?

6 - Why is Rahab, a Canaanite, an outsider, a woman with a complicated past, the one person in Jericho the story goes out of its way to save?

7 - Scholars have written about Rahab in the millennia since and called her a traitor to her people, the ultimate negotiator, a messiah-figure for God's people, and many more things. What do you see in her?

Some Closing Thoughts

We're treating the story of Joshua and Jericho as if it happened historically. Many historians and archaeologists think that the Exodus travelers arrived at a city that was sparsely populated or abandoned, that had ruins of walls from its ancient past. They think that the story we have today was created as a literary and theological retelling of the arrival to show how God provided for God's people as soon as they crossed the river into the Promised Land. Regardless of the level of historical accuracy (and we will never know what Jericho was like 3,200 or so years ago) the fact that we have this story should tell us something.

The Exodus itself is a story of obedience and disobedience. Of doing things that look odd to outsiders, and sometimes to the people participating in them. So, it makes complete sense that as soon as they set foot

in the Promised Land, God is asking the people to do things in a different way than they would have planned otherwise.

If the Bible is indeed something that God has kept together for us for all these years, as we believe it is, the fact that this story is in there has meaning in and of itself. God asks us to do unconventional things. God has a plan. God can use people with troubled pasts to do great things. All of these are true. And there is more here as well.

What are you taking away from this lesson?

Chapter 2 - Samson and Delilah

Main Passage Judges 16:1-6, 15-19 (or read all of Judges 16 for more context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, there was a man named Samson, and Samson was the strongest man in the whole entire world. He was so strong that he once fought a lion with his bare hands and won. He was so strong that when the bad guys locked the city gates to trap him inside, he just picked up the gates and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of a hill. (The story begins with why Samson was in that city so late at night, but our teacher skipped ahead to the part with the gates.) And Samson's strength came from God, because of a special promise. As long as Samson never cut his hair, God would make him strong. So Samson's hair grew long, long, long, in thick braids, and nobody could beat him, and the bad guys, the Philistines, who we met from time to time in Sunday School stories, did not like this strong man hanging around. Of course they were scared of God's strong man, we supposed.

Samson met a woman named Delilah. The teacher skipped the bit about her background. What we heard was that Delilah was very pretty and very sneaky. The Philistines offered her a great big pile of silver if she could find out the secret of Samson's strength. So she asked him in her sweetest voice. And Samson decided to have a laugh and tell her a fib. She fell for it and the bad guys jumped out and tried to get Samson, but he beat them up. Twice more she asked, and twice more he fibbed, and twice more the bad guys got beat. Nobody in our class ever thought to ask why Samson kept taking naps at the house of a lady who kept tying him up.

Finally, Delilah asked really sweetly, and she said it again the next day, and the next, and the next, until the Bible says Samson was tired to death of hearing it. (Some of the grown-ups helping with our class chuckled at this part. We didn't know why.) And Samson told her the truth about the promise to God. Then Delilah sang Samson to sleep, and a man tiptoed in with a razor, and snip, snip, snip, off came the hair. When the Philistines jumped out this time, Samson's strength was gone, and the bad guys took him away.

And that, our teacher said, is why we always keep our promises to God, and why we're careful about the friends we choose. Then she reminded us, while passing out the crayons that Samson's hair grew back and God made him strong one last time, so it all worked out in the end. The coloring page showed Samson pushing on two big pillars. We did not ask questions about the pillars or what happened after.

That Was Then. This Is Now.

Samson is the Sunday School hero who falls apart the moment you read his actual story. The kiddy version gave us a strongman with a bad haircut and an ending that was a bit vague about how the good guys won. The Bible gives us something much more uncomfortable. Let's read Judges 16;1-6, 15-19 (or read all of Judges 16 for more context) and make a few notes about what stands out during the reading.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - Samson is the next to the last of the Judges we find in the Bible. Through the book of Judges, they get progressively worse (though Samuel, the last, will be much better in the book that bears his name). What might Samson's story suggest to us about "bad" leaders or "bad" influences we encounter in our lives?

2 - Samson is a man set apart by God, called to save Israel, who spends his whole life disobeying God. Beyond the "God uses unlikely people" conclusion we usually hear, what do you make of Samson?

3 - We reach the saddest sentence in the book of Judges in verse 21. "But he did not know that the Lord had left him." What might that feeling be like for him after losing the fight?

4 - What about that hair? Is there "hair" in your life - some promise to God made by you or others on your behalf? Is baptism a sort of "hair"? Communion? Something else in your life? And what might Samson's story say to us about those things?

5- Samson's strength blinds him long before the Philistines do (if you read the additional text, you read that awful part). Have you ever had something that God gave you cause you to ignore God? Why or why not?

6 - There's another god in the story. Dagon. The main god of the Philistines. And they offer praise to him for their victory over Samson, just like God's people did for their victories many times in the Bible. What changes in the story for you if the Philistines are not just cartoon bad guys, but good people like us fighting someone they see as an enemy?

7 - The end of the story is about a God who, shockingly, is not finished with Samson even after Samson has squandered everything he had been given and broken all of God's rules. His hair grew back. His strength returned. With prayer. What does that tell you about yourself? About a friend, family member, co-worker, or neighbor?

Some Closing Thoughts

Samson in our second-grade imagination was a strong man with long hair and an odd sense of humor. But when we read the Bible, we find a darker character. He's not a good guy. But he's also not some sort

of Batman-styled anti-hero either. He's brutal. Broken. Breaks all the rules. And if we read the chapters that come before our story, we can see just how much of a mess he is. And then, God answers his prayer and helps him to sacrifice his life in destroying the temple of a false god and killing many Philistines. Not a martyr like Stephen in the book of Acts, who died at the hands of others. Samson ends his own life as he ends the lives of others. There's nothing good in his story. There's no hero to celebrate.

The Bible is very uncomfortable at times. There is no clear winner to some stories (like Samson's). There's no clear moral lesson to this story once we set aside the childhood version and read the biblical details. Yes, God uses unlikely people, but is God OK with brutality, lying, and adultery? We can't use Samson as a moral example. So why is he here, preserved for millennia for us to read today? What might God be saying to us? Some people will skip over the book of Judges when they read the Bible. Should we? Or can we learn something from Samson (or from the whole book) about our lives today?

There just aren't a lot of clear answers in the story of Samson and Delilah, are there?

Chapter 3 - David and Goliath

Main Passage: 1 Samuel 17:19-27, 31-54 (or all of 1 Samuel 17 for additional context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, God's people were at war with the Philistines, the bad guys, again. Their champion was a big guy named Goliath, who was nine feet tall and wore a LOT of armor. Every morning, Goliath stomped down into the valley and hollered angry, mean things at God's people. "Send someone to fight me!" he yelled. "Are you all a bunch of scaredy-cats?" And every time he did, all the big, strong soldiers of Israel shook in their sandals and hid. Even King Saul, who was the tallest man in Israel, did not want to fight the giant. (Our Sunday School teacher never explained why the tallest Israelite wasn't the obvious pick to do the fighting.)

And there was a boy named David. David was the youngest of eight brothers, and he was so young that he wasn't even allowed to be in the army. He was a kid, sort of like us, but maybe as big as a middle schooler. His job was to watch the sheep and then, one day, to be a delivery boy, taking lunch to his big brothers. When David heard Goliath shouting, he was not afraid. Not even a little.

Of course, King Saul tried to dress David in the royal armor, but it was way too big, and so David took it all off. Silly King Saul! Instead, David went down to the brook and picked out five smooth stones. He knew God was on his side, that's for sure! (We said "smooth stones" a lot but ignored that David picked up four more than he needed.)

Goliath took one look at David and laughed his big mean laugh. But David stuck out his chest and yelled, "You come at me with a sword and a spear, but I come at you in the name of the Lord!" Then he put a smooth stone in his sling, whirled it around his head, and let it fly. The stone sailed through the air and bashed Goliath on his head, and he fell over like a tree, flat on his face - and we all got to make a loud clap as he did. The bad guys ran away, the good guys cheered, and we all learned that when God is on your side, even the smallest person can do important things. (Our teacher always ended the story right there.)

That Was Then. This Is Now.

It's a moving story, and nothing about the Sunday School version we learned back then is wrong. But the full, biblical version is far less straightforward. Let's read 1 Samuel 17:19-27, 31-50 (or all of 1 Samuel 17 for additional context). Jot down some notes about things that stand out to you in the reading.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - Goliath's taunting went on for forty days before anyone did anything. The whole army with the new King had come out to fight, and Goliath challenged them to fight, and yet they didn't. Why? What was going on?

2 - David heard about the reward he would get for killing Goliath and then asked again to double check. What might he have been thinking? Were his motives as straightforward as we were told in Sunday School? (If you did the additional reading, what about the stuff David's brother said to him?)

3 - What happens in verse 51-54 never made it into our classroom as kids. What does this say about David? His motivations? His state of mind?

4 - What might David picking up five smooth stones suggest? We know God only needs one. Yet the Spirit inspires the storyteller to leave in the detail about David picking up five. Does this tell us something about David? Something about ourselves?

5 - Reading the rest of 1 Samuel, we learn that the cheering crowds after that fight set in motion a jealousy that would nearly cost David his life and would cost Saul his mental health. What might this tell us about Saul, about David, about popularity, or about ourselves?

6 - The children's version taught us that God uses small people to do big things. What has this more complete biblical exploration taught you?

7 - How does this passage help you think about trusting God in today's world where the battles are real and the stakes are not just something found in children's stories?

Some Closing Thoughts

One thing we never got told as kids was that in the ancient world, a sling was an actual weapon that was used by soldiers. Historians say that a good slinger could whip a small stone with speed and accuracy that rivals a modern handgun. To us it seemed like a boy with a rock defeated a giant with swords and spears and armor and that was amazing! It might not have been that surprising to an ancient person hearing this story. There's a scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where Indiana Jones is confronted by a swordsman

who whirls his swords around menacingly, and Indy just pulls out his gun and shoots the man. We don't feel like Indiana Jones is incredibly brave for doing it. In fact, it's kind of a dark joke in the film. How might our reading of the story change if we saw the battle more like the Indiana Jones scene? What if we got the message that the Philistines, for all their bluster, were more of a joke? What if we saw David not as a bold hero, but as a guy who knows he has a powerful weapon that he's an expert at using, and he's got a full load of ammo in his pouch?

On another note, if you've been around church for a while, you've learned that David was a complex character. And in this story of one of the first things David does in the Bible, when we read more carefully, we can see some of that complexity. Is he the scrappy youngster doing big things, or is he the youngest boy in the family looking to show his brothers up and gain some notoriety for himself? Is he bravely following God, or is he taking irresponsible risks with the fate of the whole nation? What would have happened if David were to lose? His winning is a happy ending, but it sets in motion many other stories that don't end so happily. And maybe we can see some seeds of the later drama in David's life here in this story too.

Perhaps we like the childhood treatment of this story more than we like the more biblically accurate version? Or maybe the Bible's full telling resonates more with us than the simple kid's story did. Either way, there's a lot to learn from this one.

What will you carry with you?

Chapter 4 - Queen Esther

Main Passage: Esther 4:5-17 (or read Esther 3:8-4:17 for additional context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, in the faraway kingdom of Persia, there lived a king who needed a new queen. (There had been a queen before, but our teacher did not slow down here, and neither did we.) So the king held a great big beauty contest, and girls came from all over the kingdom, and the winner was a young woman named Esther, who was the most beautiful of all. But Esther had a secret. She was one of God's people, and her cousin Mordecai, who was more like a father to her, had told her to keep that quiet. What was not a secret, at least to us, was that she was one of the bravest people in the Bible.

Now, the king had a helper named Haman, and Haman was the baddest of bad guys. Haman was so mad about the Jewish people not doing what he wanted, that he tricked the king into signing a law to get rid of all of God's people in the whole kingdom. Every single one. And once a Persian king signed something, it could never ever be unsigned.

Mordecai sent a message to Queen Esther in the palace that she had to go tell the king and save their people! But there was the problem that nobody was allowed to visit the king without being invited. Not even the queen. If you walked in uninvited and the king didn't like it, that was the end of you.

Esther was scared, and honestly, who wouldn't be? But Mordecai sent back the most important message in the whole story. "Who knows? Maybe you became queen for such a time as this." Esther asked all of God's people to fast for her for three days, and then she squared her shoulders and said, "I will go to the king, even though it's against the law." Then she put on her royal robes, walked into the throne room without an invitation, and ... Hooray! The king welcomed her. Esther told him about Haman's plan, the king was furious, God's people were saved, and Haman got found out. (What, precisely, was going to happen to Haman was not clear in our Sunday School class.) Esther was really, really brave, the good guys won, and even today Jewish people throw a party every year to celebrate.

That Was Then. This Is Now.

The book of Esther is a great story. It's not a long read either. Maybe you want to take the time to read the whole thing? Or perhaps you just want to read Esther 4:5-17 for now (or read Esther 3:8-4:17 for additional context). Either way, make some notes here about what stands out to you from the reading.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - This story is almost Shakespearian in its telling but maybe we can see some of the people behind the drama. Put yourself in Esther's shoes - a poor girl now living in luxury in the palace, but also a sexualized object in the king's eyes. Is she more (or less or other) than we thought of her when we were children?

2 - And what about Mordecai. Why doesn't he do something himself? Or is he powerless? Reading as an adult, how do you see him?

3 - Do you have a Haman in your life? Or a Mordecai? Or an Esther? How are they like the biblical characters? How are they unlike them?

4 - It's likely that this story was written about an event that may have happened around the time that Ezra or Nehemiah were leading some people back to rebuild Jerusalem. For most Jewish people, living in a society that didn't believe what you believed was an everyday experience, and hiding your identity might be normal. What might this story say to them? What does this story say to you at the times when you hide your Christian identity?

5 - The King is a central character in the story, but we don't learn much about him. He's a "paper" character - in the middle of everything, but not very human. What might this say to the Jewish people when they were living under non-Jewish kings in other countries? What does it say to you about local, regional or national leaders and the place they may have in our culture and in your life?

6 - Mordecai's note (4:13-14) and Esther's response (4:15-16) can be read in many ways if you use a different tone of voice or assumptions about the speakers. How do you read them? And why does it matter?

7 - One of the strangest things about the book of Esther, is something almost nobody notices as a child. God is never mentioned. Not once, in the entire book. Did you notice that? What might it mean?

Some Closing Thoughts

As children, we listened to the story of Queen Esther, absolutely certain God was the main character, and yet God's name appears nowhere in it. Mordecai calls on Esther to remember that she is Jewish and that the Jewish people will be saved with or without her. He doesn't say by whom. Esther asks the people to fast, but not to pray. Nobody mentions the Temple or Jerusalem, or any of the things that we find in every other Old Testament story. And yet this "omission" has helped the story resonate across cultures where a story mentioning God in every other paragraph might not have.

The grown-up version also returns us Esther's famous line the way she actually said it. The paper cut-out version of the queen was fearless. The queen we read about as adults in chapter 4 is frightened,

bargaining for time. “If I perish, I perish” might not be the sound of confidence, but instead the sound of courage, and those are not the same thing at all. Even Mordecai's great line is humbler than we remember. “Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Maybe that's not a prophecy of Esther's divine mandate. Maybe it's an honest, troubled question asked by a man who thinks he might be saying goodbye to the young woman he's always thought of as his daughter.

The grown-up questions we might take with us are many. How do we act faithfully when God is silent? How do we find courage to confront injustice when it might cost us everything? Our preacher tells us to tell other people about Jesus, but might God also use the times when we hide our Christian identity to prepare us for something more? What do we do with the position, the influence, the timing, the “coincidences” of our own lives? And when did we last fast for three days before doing something?

What questions are you taking with you?

And what answers have you found in this passage?

Chapter 5 - Jonah and the Whale

Main Passage: Jonah 1:1-3, 11-17 (or read Jonah 1 for additional context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, God spoke to a man named Jonah and gave him a job. “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and tell the people there to stop being bad.” Simple. Now, every other time in the Bible that God gives somebody a job, that somebody says yes. But not Jonah. Nineveh was that way, and Jonah bought a ticket for a boat going the other way. Jonah, our teacher explained, was trying to run away from God, and then he paused so we could all agree that this was a very silly plan. You cannot run away from God. Jonah was a prophet. He should have known this. Silly Johnah.

Jonah got on a boat, went down below deck, and fell asleep. And while he was sleeping, God sent a great big, terrible storm, with waves as tall as houses, so bad that even the tough sailors were scared. The sailors all started praying as hard as they could and throwing the cargo overboard, and the captain had to go downstairs and found that Jonah was still napping. (Nobody in our class pointed out that the man of God was the only one on the boat not praying.) Then the sailors drew straws to figure out whose fault the storm was, because there was no weatherman in those days, and the short straw went to Jonah, obviously. Jonah confessed that he was running away from God. And weirdly (or maybe bravely, the teacher didn’t say which) he said that they should throw him in the ocean and save themselves. The sailors were so kind that they didn’t want to do it. They rowed and rowed with all their might to try to save the boat. Only when they absolutely couldn’t, they said sorry, and ... one, two, three, heave ... overboard went Jonah, and the sea went still, just like that.

But God wasn’t finished with Jonah. God sent a great big fish. Our teacher was careful to say fish, the song we sang said whale, and we all said whale anyway. And we sort of zoomed through the rest of the story. The whale (ok, fish) spit Jonah out onto the dry land after a few days, and Jonah walked straight into Nineveh, preached God’s message, and the whole city, even the cows, said sorry, and God forgave them, and everyone lived happily ever after. The end.

That Was Then. This Is Now.

Jonah takes a lot less time to read than the VeggieTales version takes to watch. Maybe you want to take the time to read the whole thing? If not, that's OK. Let's read Jonah 1:1-3, 11-17 (or read all of Jonah 1 for additional context) and jot down some notes here about what stands out to you from the reading.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - What are some other explanations other than sheer stubbornness for Jonah's heading toward Tarshish?

2 - Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14 where he's prophesying in Israel about Israel on behalf of Israel's God. Here we see him taking a trip to preach to the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and call them to repent to a God who is not their god. What context might Jonah's history, Nineveh's status, and the mission itself give us to help us interpret the Scriptures?

3 - The fish, like the calming of the storm, shows God's power over the sea, which in ancient times was a source of fear as well as of food. Thinking about question 2 again, what else do the fish and the storm help us see?

4 - Along the way we meet some pagans who seem more godly than Jonah does, even if they follow the wrong gods. What might this hint to ancient Jewish readers? In the context of the story, what does it say to you?

5 - By verse 14 the pagans have become believers. In verse 16, they're offering sacrifices to God and making vows. The text explicitly names YHWH, the personal name of God, so there's no confusion. So why do we skip over these miracles and focus on problematic Jonah instead?

6 - Do you or someone you know ever have a "pick me up and throw me into the sea" moment? Thinking back to the end of Samson's story, do you see any parallels? Is this an act of virtue? Giving up? Something else?

7 - Thinking ahead, Jesus offers "the sign of Jonah" as a foreshadowing of his burial and resurrection, and points to the repentance of Nineveh as a model to the Jewish people he teaches. Now that we've read about Jonah, how do you feel about Jesus using him as an example? How might our reading here help you think about Jesus' words?

Some Closing Thoughts

As children, the big fish was a core part of the story, but when we read it with adult eyes, the fish is almost a prop. It appears without fanfare at the very end of chapter one, it's the backdrop for most of chapter two, until it spits Jonah up on the beach at the very end of the chapter and then disappears. Big fish, or sea monsters, are just one of the dangers of the ocean to ancient people (and to modern ones as well). Storms on the sea were deadly to sailors, and not great for those along the shore either. Ships sailing away and

never coming back was fairly common. And so God calming the storm and controlling the fish like a puppet are giant signs to ancient people that God is in control and brings order to a chaotic world. Sometimes we, as modern readers who can read this story flying in comfort at 40,000 feet above the ocean, might miss this.

Also, Jonah and Daniel are the only prophets in the Bible who have their own book and get mentioned elsewhere. Jonah's got a brief mention in 2 Kings 14:25-27, where he's prophesying about expanding the borders of the northern kingdom of Israel, and about God preserving God's people. Nineveh is far from his normal working environment. And we shouldn't underestimate how the city and the empire that it governs (much of modern-day Syria and Iraq) might look to Jonah. Yet Assyria is struggling as well in Jonah's day. Because Assyria was temporarily weak, neighboring nations like Israel and Judah experienced a rare window of opportunity, allowing Jeroboam II to reclaim land as we see in 2 Kings 14. And Jonah is called to go to this same neighbor and call them to turn to a God who is not among the gods they worship. There's no Temple in Nineveh. No priests. No support structure for the mission. Jonah might expect to be treated as an enemy if he shows his face in the city. Maybe he's not the grumpy old prophet we imagined as children?

Where our own tickets to Tarshish are booked? Would we rather drown than go to whatever "Nineveh" God's calling us toward? Might we see the "big fish" in our life as a distraction from our goals, rather than the rescue they truly can be?

And can Jonah's story give us even more lessons?

What are you going to carry with you from this passage?

Chapter 6 - Daniel and the Lion's Den

Main Passage: Daniel 6:16-24 (or read all of Daniel 6 for additional context)

What We Learned As Kids

Once upon a time, in the kingdom of Babylon, there lived a man named Daniel, and Daniel loved God more than anything. Daniel was also so honest and so wise and so good at his job and so faithful to God that King Darius decided to put him in charge of the whole kingdom. This made the other royal helpers (the bad guys) turn green with jealousy. They went looking for something bad on Daniel. And found nothing. Not one thing. The only way to trap Daniel was to make his daily prayers to God against the law.

So, the bad guys tricked the king into signing a law that nobody could pray to anyone except the king, and anybody who broke the law would be thrown into a den of hungry lions. Once the king signed it, not even the king could unsign it. Daniel heard about the new law, went straight home, opened his windows toward Jerusalem just like always, and prayed. The bad guys, who were of course watching, ran to the king, who realized too late that he'd been tricked and felt awful about it. But rules were rules, even for kings. So down into the lions' den went Daniel and a big stone was rolled over the mouth of the den and sealed up tight.

That night, nobody in the palace slept a wink. The king tossed and turned all night long. Meanwhile, down in the den, Daniel was doing just fine, thank you very much, because God had sent an angel to shut the mouths of the lions. The coloring page showed Daniel with his hand resting on a lion's mane like it was a big warm house cat. At the first light of dawn, the king ran to the den and up from the dark came Daniel's voice. And they lifted Daniel up out of the den, and there was not one scratch on him, because he had trusted in his God. The king was overjoyed, the bad guys got what was coming to them, and the king wrote a letter to the whole kingdom saying everyone should honor the God of Daniel, who rescues and saves. Pretty cool, huh?

That Was Then. This Is Now.

Is Daniel's story as simple as we pictured it as kids, or is there something more here? The Bible gives us some things to chew on. Let's read Daniel 6:16-24 (or read all of Daniel 6 for more context) and make a few notes about what you notice during our reading.

Some Things For Grown Ups To Think About

1 - Our coloring sheets in Sunday School were wrong. Daniel was not a strapping young man. Based on what the Bible tells us, he was likely 80 or 90 years old. Does that change the way you see Daniel or others or the story in general?

2 - If you read the additional context, you see competition among government leaders, and a group of them ganging up on Daniel behind the scenes. We could write this off as being overly dramatic and just bad guys being bad guys. But there are two sides to every story. Why might the other leaders think they are doing the right thing by getting rid of Daniel?

3 - And what might the governmental goings on be teaching ancient people or us about those who govern or seek power and influence? Or about ourselves when we get into a position of influence or authority?

4 - Like Jonah, Daniel gets mentioned outside of his book. The prophet Ezekiel's two mentions of him (in Ezekiel 14 and 28) speak about Daniel's faithfulness, character, and wisdom. His name's not mentioned in Hebrews 11 but shutting the mouths of lions is. Are you a Dan fan too? Or would he have been wiser to do something differently? Or maybe some of both?

5 - As kids we assumed that Daniel just curled up with the lions to sleep and all was well the whole time, while the King paced the floor all night long. But put yourself in the King's place and in Daniel's for a moment and think about some hard nights in your life. What might that night have been like? Why does it matter to us today?

6 - You've probably noticed the parallels with Esther's story. What patterns do you recognize with Esther or other stories? Why might that matter to ancient people who were taken out of their homeland, or to us?

7 - Daniel doesn't know the end of the story when he opens the window and begins to pray, knowing it's a crime with the death penalty attached. How might this influence how you react when it's uncomfortable to (metaphorically) open the windows in your life?

Some Closing Thoughts

Back in our younger days, we didn't ask about how the worst thing his enemies could find on Daniel was that he prayed too reliably. Maybe your teacher said we should all hope to be accused of something like that someday. But Daniel probably wasn't praying because his Sunday School teacher convinced him

it was a good idea (or gave him a guilt trip). He had lived a faithful life. The King uses the word “continually” when talking about Daniel’s faithfulness to God. And by the end of the story, the King ends up praising Daniel’s God himself. That’s probably not just because the lions didn’t have Daniel burgers for dinner. It’s at least a little bit because of seeing Daniel’s life over the years and trusting him. We sometimes look for the lion’s den moments when it’s the faithful prayer every day for decades that makes the real difference. Even if it’s not as dramatic.

And that idea about Daniel being an old man? The Bible says he was carried away from Jerusalem as a young man and this story happens at the end of or after the 70-year exile. Daniel has been around the royal court for decades at this point and yet seems unchanged by the culture around him. That pattern can get lost in the sensational story of the lion’s den, but it probably matters far more to we who live in a post-Christian culture.

Verse 24 is another example (like we saw with Joshua, David, and Samson, or if you read the rest of the book of Esther or Jonah) where the children’s version of the story and the actual biblical version end very differently. The end of the story is not always happy. Sometimes it’s brutal and bloody. Often someone (or even everyone) are not satisfied with the ending. In the Bible, God punishes God’s enemies and the enemies of the people of God. Sometimes at the hands of the people of God, sometimes by their own plans backfiring on them, but in any case, God’s punishment is a normal occurrence. It’s good for us to read all of the Bible, and not just the bits that are comfortable. God is not a teddy bear or a tame lion. Even though we might not like to think about it, the Bible says that we are natural enemies of God. So is your neighbor, your friend, your family member. And we’re called to live in that reality, not to ignore it. And it should make us cherish our relationship with Jesus even more.

And one last thought as we end this study. Daniel was put in a cave at sunset, and a stone was rolled in front of the entrance. Everyone expected he was dead. He expected something else. Early in the morning the stone was rolled away and he came out. Remind you of anybody?

See you in Sunday School!

**This Bible Study is part of the One Story series at
Crestwood United Methodist Church.
We're reading through the Bible during 2026,
because it's God's story, your story, my story, and our story.**

It's One Story of God's Amazing Grace!

For more information, visit <https://crestwoodmethodist.com/one-story>