

Storyteller

JONAH

RELENTLESS PURSUIT

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THE STORYTELLER SERIES

God could've chosen to reveal Himself in any way that He desired, yet in His wisdom, He chose to reveal Himself in the context of a story. We come to know and understand this reality as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures and begin to see the entirety of Scripture as one interconnected story. By becoming familiar with the individual stories of Scripture, we train ourselves to see each as one part of God's big story.

Storyteller is a series of devotional and group Bible study experiences designed to take people through Scripture in a way that is beautiful, intuitive, and interactive. Each volume uses a book of the Bible or a portion of Scripture from within a book to examine a key theme. This theme guides the Bible study experience and gives readers handles to help understand and digest what they're reading.

At the end of each study, you should have a deeper understanding of God, His Word, the big themes of Scripture, the connectedness of God's story, and His work in your life.

Let's enter the story together.

ABOUT JONAH

AUTHOR

Though the book is formally anonymous, the author was likely Jonah or someone close to Jonah.

BACKGROUND

The book of Jonah, the fifth of the Minor Prophets, is more like the stories of the prophets found in the Historical Books in both form and content. The book gives us a brief glimpse into the life of Jonah, the “wrong-way prophet,” who ran from God and was swallowed by a fish. Throughout the book, we see evidence of God’s grace and His love for all people.

DATE

Jonah was written between the middle of the eighth and the end of the third century BC.

PURPOSE

Jonah has several big themes:

- God’s positive attitudes towards the Gentiles
- God’s grace and compassion
- God’s sovereign power over the natural world
- The futility of running from God

WHY STUDY JONAH?

Unlike the other prophetic books, Jonah tells a story—one that is well known even by people who claim to have no faith at all. We understand the big moments and major beats of the story, but the book is ultimately not about a running prophet, a big fish, or unexpected repentance. The book of Jonah is about the mercy of God to the undeserving. And Jonah defines “undeserving” as the whole world—those who know God and those who do not.

The book of Jonah shows God’s gracious concern for the whole world, His power over nature, and the futility of running from Him. Additionally, it looks forward to Jesus’s burial and resurrection. Matthew 12:38–45 and Luke 11:24–32 compare the ministry of Jesus with that of Jonah. Jesus is the true and better Jonah.

Both gospels see Jonah’s great fish as a foreshadowing of Jesus’s burial in the tomb, making Jonah a “type” of Christ. Jonah’s resuscitation further parallels the resurrection of Jesus. In this little, well-worn book near the end of the Old Testament, we find an essential portrait of God’s goodness and love.

The book of Jonah exhibits a high degree of Hebrew literary excellence. Its style is rich and varied. It is considered by many as a masterpiece of rhetoric. There is symmetry and balance in the book, and it can be divided into two sections of two chapters each. Because poetry is more prominent than prose in this historical narrative, the poetic form of 2:2–9 marks it as the peak of the first discourse. The peak in the second discourse is marked by the dialogue between Jonah and God. The Lord and Jonah are indicated as the two main characters of the story by being the only ones who are named; the other characters are anonymous.¹



OUTLINE OF JONAH

I. Jonah's Commission and Disobedience (chapters 1-2)

A. Jonah's Call and Escape (1:1-3)

B. The Storm at Sea and Jonah's Fate (1:4-17)

C. Jonah's Psalm of Deliverance (chapter 2)

II. Jonah's Second Commission and Its Results (chapters 3-4)

A. The Second Call and Obedience (3:1-4)

B. The Ninevites' Repentance and Deliverance (3:5-10)

C. Jonah's Prayer (4:1-4)

D. The Lesson for Jonah (4:5-11)²

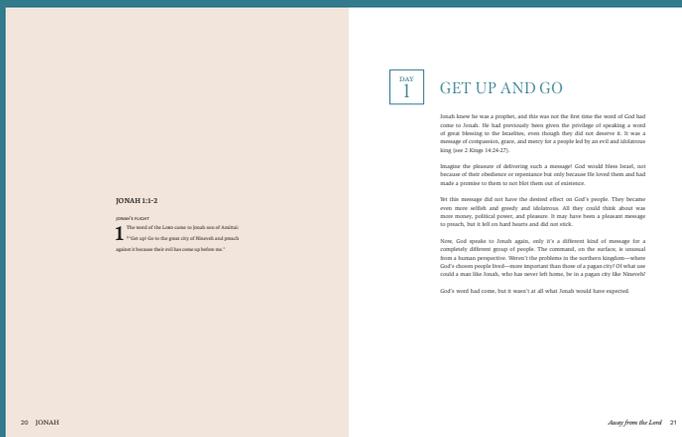
HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each week follows a repeated rhythm to guide you in your study of Jonah and was crafted with lots of white space and photographic imagery to facilitate a time of reflection on Scripture.

The week begins with an introduction to the themes of the week. Throughout each week you'll find Scripture readings, devotions, and beautiful imagery to guide your time.



WEEK 4 INTO NINEVEH



Each week includes five days of Scripture reading, along with a short devotional thought and three questions to process what you've read.

The Scripture reading is printed out for you with plenty of space for you to take notes, circle, underline, and interact with the passage.



DAY 20 PAUSE & LISTEN

As my life was fading away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.

JONAH 2:7

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Away from the Land 153

The sixth day contains no reading beyond a couple of verses to give you time to pause and listen to what God has said through the Scriptures this week. You may be tempted to skip this day altogether, but resist this temptation. Sit and be quiet with God—even if it's only for a few minutes.

The seventh day each week offers a list of open-ended questions that apply to any passage of Scripture. Use this day to reflect on your own or meet with a group to discuss what you've learned. Take intentional time to remember and reflect on what the story of Jonah is teaching you.

DAY 7

REFLECTION

Use these questions for personal reflection or group discussion on Jonah 1.

What stuck out to you most in this week's reading? What surprised you? Confused you?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about God and His character?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about humanity and our need for grace?

What keeps us from following what we know God has told us to do?

What steps of faith and obedience to God asking you to take through these Scriptures?

PRAY

Thank You, God, for Your mercy towards us, even though all of us are unworthy to flee from Your goodness.

44 JONAH

Away from the Land 45

Who is Jonah?

Like many of the prophets, we don't have much geographical information about Jonah. The book introduces him as "Jonah son of Amittai." Jonah means "dove" in Hebrew, and Amittai means "truth is God's."

2 Kings 14:25 also mentions Jonah. "[Jonah] returned Israel's border from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabs, according to the word the LORD, the God of Israel, had spoken through his servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher."

Jonah was a prophet of the northern kingdom from the tribe of Zebulun who lived at Gath-hepher, near Nazareth, the prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II (753–745 BC)—a period of unparalleled prosperity throughout the land of Israel.

Jeroboam II had greatly expanded Israel's borders so that Israel re-attained the size it had been during the reign of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25, 28). Zeph was called to Israel during this time, and Amittai (whose Nazareth was located) was plagued both by internal and external problems that allowed Israel to flourish.

We don't know for sure because the Bible does not tell us, but it could be that one of the reasons Jonah didn't want to see the Ninevites repent is because if God destroyed Nineveh, Israel could expand even further. Whatever the reason, God worked through Jonah despite Jonah's unbelief.

22 JONAH

Away from the Land 23

Throughout each week of study, you will notice callout boxes or supplemental pages provided to give greater context and clarity to the Scripture you're reading. These features will help you connect the story of Jonah to the bigger story of Scripture.

LEADING A GROUP

Each week of study contains a set of questions that can be used for small group meetings. These open-ended questions are meant to guide discussion of the week's Scripture passage. No matter the size of your group, here are some helpful tips for guiding discussion.

PREPARE

REVIEW the Scripture and your answers to the week's questions ahead of time.

PRAY over your group as well as the Scriptures you've been studying. Ask God's Spirit for help to lead the group deeper into God's truth and deeper in relationship with one another.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

We live in a time when our attention is increasingly divided. Try to see your group time as a space and respite from the digital clutter—from scrolling, notifications, likes, and newsfeeds. Commit to one another to give focused time and attention to the discussion at hand and minimize outside distractions. Help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE IS INCLUDED. Your goal is to foster a community where people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES. Even though you may be "leading" the group, try to see yourself as a participant steering the conversation rather than a teacher imparting information.

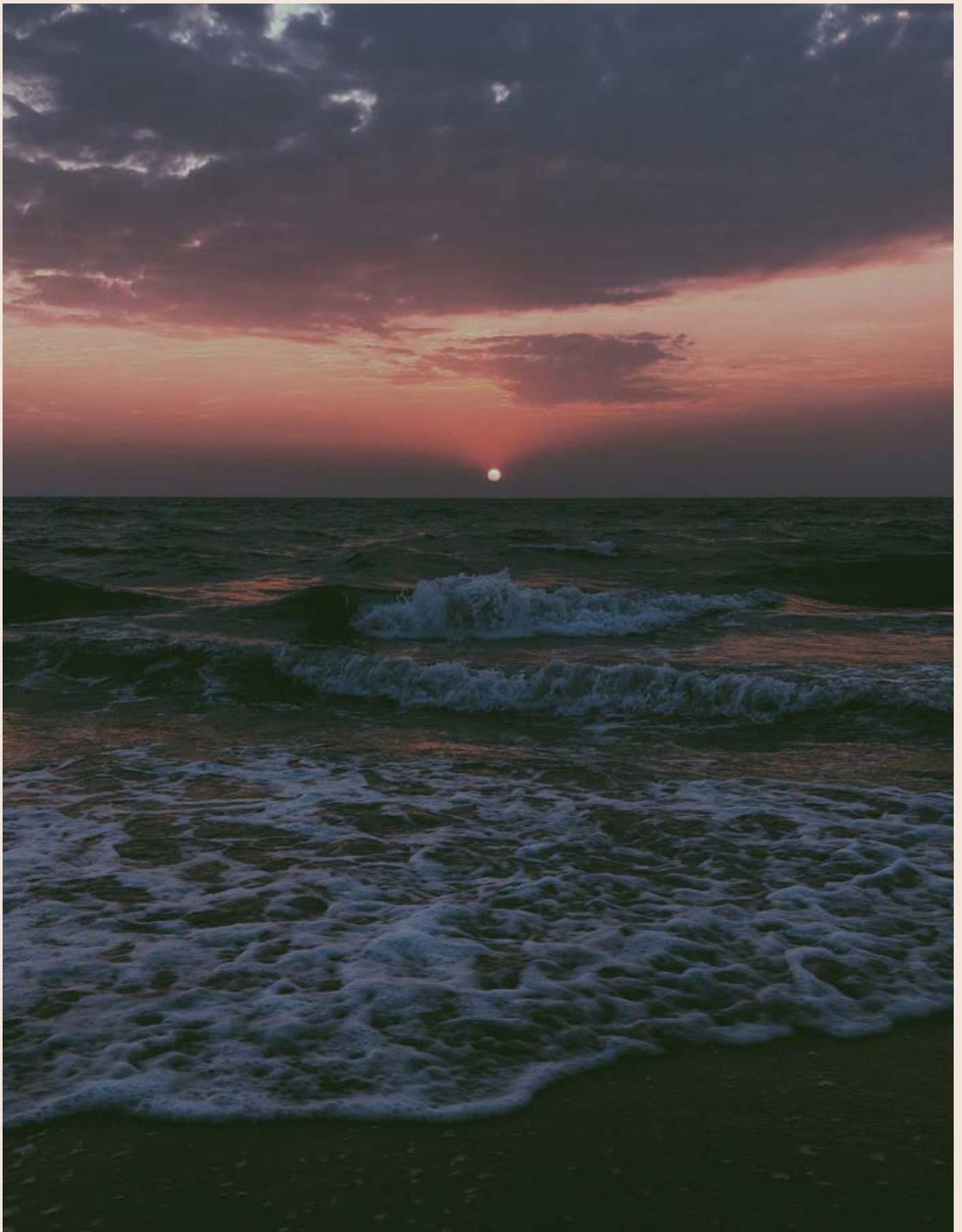
DON'T RUSH. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People may need time, and we should be glad to give it to them. Don't feel like you have to ask all the questions or stay away from questions that aren't included. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and to one another. Take your time.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking other people to share when they have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. Conversation stalls when people feel that you don't want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer. Engagement and affirmation keeps the conversation going.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. The questions in this study are meant to steer the conversation back to God, His Word, and the work of the gospel in our lives. Opinions and experiences are valuable and can be helpful, but God is the center of the Bible, the center of our story, and should be the center of our discussion. Trust Him to lead the discussion. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Spiritual growth occurs in the context of community. Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Your group will be more enjoyable the more you get to know one another through time spent outside of an official group meeting. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending. Reserve time each week to touch base with individual group members.



WEEK 1

AWAY FROM
THE LORD

The story of Jonah is
a story of mercy.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), both Jesus and the expert in the law to whom Jesus is talking equate being a good neighbor with showing mercy. What makes the Samaritan “good” in the parable is that he acts mercifully toward a man in need.

Mercy is what Christians do. When Jesus defined the qualities or attributes of His followers in the Sermon on the Mount, He chose being merciful as the demonstration of righteous living (Matthew 5:7). Followers of Jesus have their eyes up to see the needs around them. They have compassion on those in need and engage to bring them real relief, even at great cost to themselves. God is merciful, and Christians are to reflect that mercy into the world around us.

The story of Jonah is a story of mercy. It’s a story of God mercifully allowing the Ninevites, a deeply sinful people, an opportunity to repent and believe. It’s a story of God mercifully chasing after a rebellious prophet and offering him a second chance. It’s a story of a prophet wrestling with the depths of God’s mercy, feeling it’s bigger than should be allowed. The story of Jonah overflows with mercy.

What everybody needs is something only God can truly give. May your study of this mercy-rich book lead you to a place where you see and live out God’s mercy.

JONAH 1:1-2

JONAH'S FLIGHT

1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:
2 "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach
against it because their evil has come up before me."

DAY
1

GET UP AND GO

Jonah knew he was a prophet, and this was not the first time the word of God had come to Jonah. He had previously been given the privilege of speaking a word of great blessing to the Israelites, even though they did not deserve it. It was a message of compassion, grace, and mercy for a people led by an evil and idolatrous king (see 2 Kings 14:24-27).

Imagine the pleasure of delivering such a message! God would bless Israel, not because of their obedience or repentance but only because He loved them and had made a promise to them to not blot them out of existence.

Yet this message did not have the desired effect on God's people. They became even more selfish and greedy and idolatrous. All they could think about was more money, political power, and pleasure. It may have been a pleasant message to preach, but it fell on hard hearts and did not stick.

Now, God speaks to Jonah again, only it's a different kind of message for a completely different group of people. The command, on the surface, is unusual from a human perspective. Weren't the problems in the northern kingdom—where God's chosen people lived—more important than those of a pagan city? Of what use could a man like Jonah, who has never left home, be in a pagan city like Nineveh?

God's word had come, but it wasn't at all what Jonah would have expected.

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, showing numerous skyscrapers and a dense urban landscape. The image is slightly hazy, giving it a soft, atmospheric quality. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

God's word had come, but it wasn't
at all what Jonah expected.

REFLECTIONS

How does God speak to us through the pages of Scripture?

How do you take those words and apply them to your life?

How do you typically respond when God asks you to do something that doesn't make sense to you?

INSIGHT

Nineveh, a city on the east bank of the Tigris River, became the Assyrian capital after 705 BC, well after Jonah's day. Its ruins are found in the northern part of modern Iraq, opposite the city of Mosul, 220 miles northwest of Baghdad. For Jonah, Nineveh was an arduous journey of more than 500 miles to the northeast of Samaria.

JONAH 1:3

³Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's presence.
He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish.
He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to
Tarshish from the LORD's presence.

DAY
2

FLEEING

Why do we often shirk our responsibility and avoid doing what we know we're called to do? Why did Jonah do it? Jonah's choice to flee from God rather than obey God provokes some thoughtful reflection that may very well convict our own hearts.

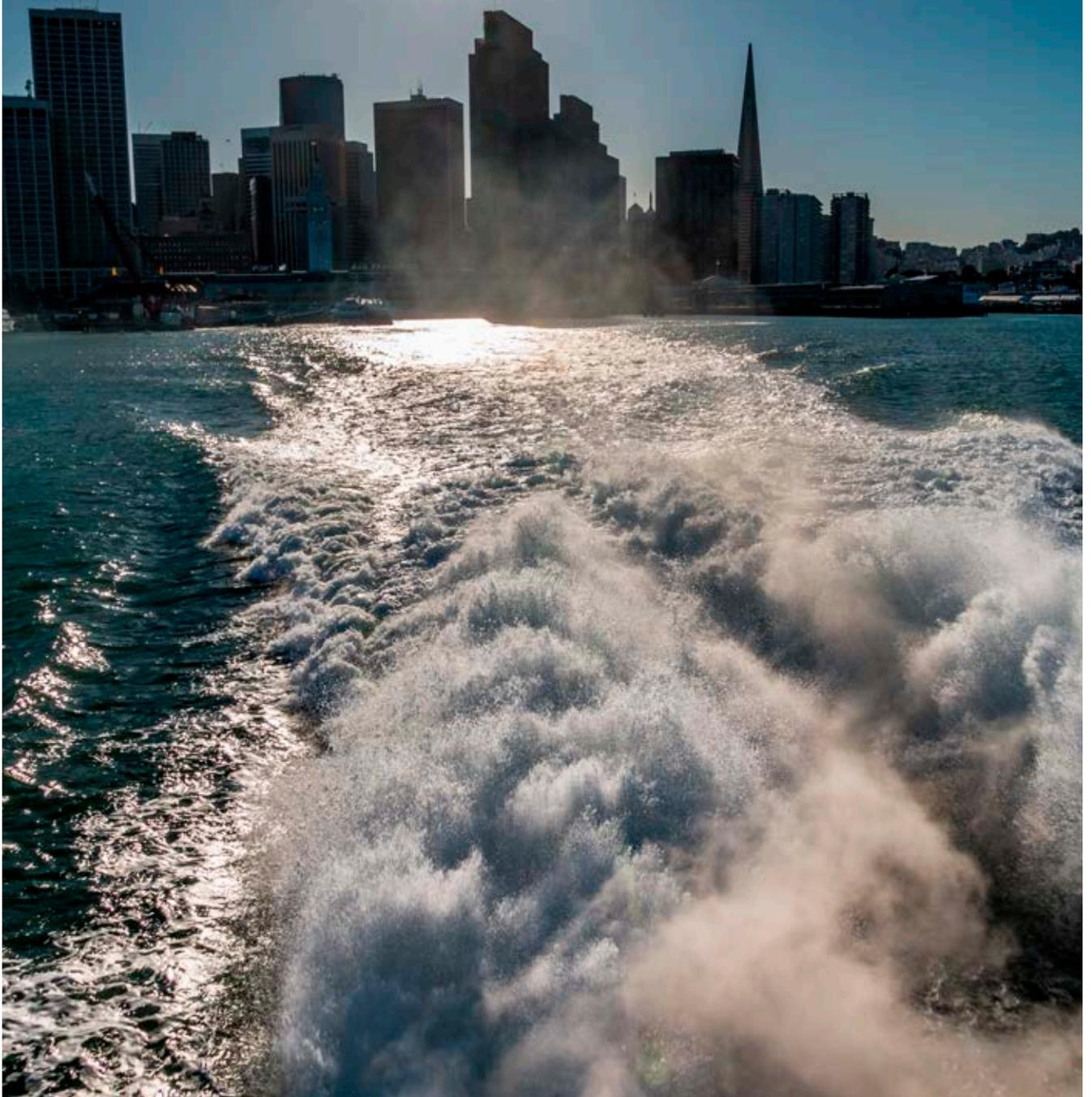
Jonah ran. Did Jonah fear the risks associated with such a long journey? Did he dread the ire of Nineveh's citizens? Did he doubt the message God had given him? We make many decisions based on fear instead of faith, trusting our own hearts rather than leaning on God's understanding. We have more in common with Jonah than we'd like to admit.

When we consider the absurdity of what Jonah sought to accomplish by fleeing in light of how it all actually appeared to be coming together, we can imagine that Jonah was likely tempted to believe God was actually all for his fleeing. It wasn't the time of year to begin sailing long distances on the Mediterranean, and ships to Tarshish from this area were extremely rare, given its distance, but a ship was ready to sail—with room for an unexpected passenger, no less!

Sometimes, when everything is going just right, we conclude that God's hand must be in it. We accept our favorable circumstances as confirmation from God.

The problem with that is, that may not be the case at all—and it is certainly not the case when we've heard Him speak one thing and we do another. We need something more concrete than circumstances to assure us of God's direction and favor. We need the word of God. We need to beware of reading providential circumstances in a way that contradicts the explicit commands of God.

God commanded Jonah to get up and go,
but Jonah chose to flee.



REFLECTIONS

Why do we often flee from God and what He wants us to do?

What dangers can come from using our circumstances or feelings as a measure of our obedience to God's commands?

How can we know that God is always at work for our good and His glory, despite what our circumstances may be at any given point and time? Read Romans 8:28-30 for insight.

JONAH 1:4-5

⁴But the LORD threw a great wind onto the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break apart. ⁵The sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his god. They threw the ship's cargo into the sea to lighten the load. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down to the lowest part of the vessel and had stretched out and fallen into a deep sleep.

BUT THE LORD

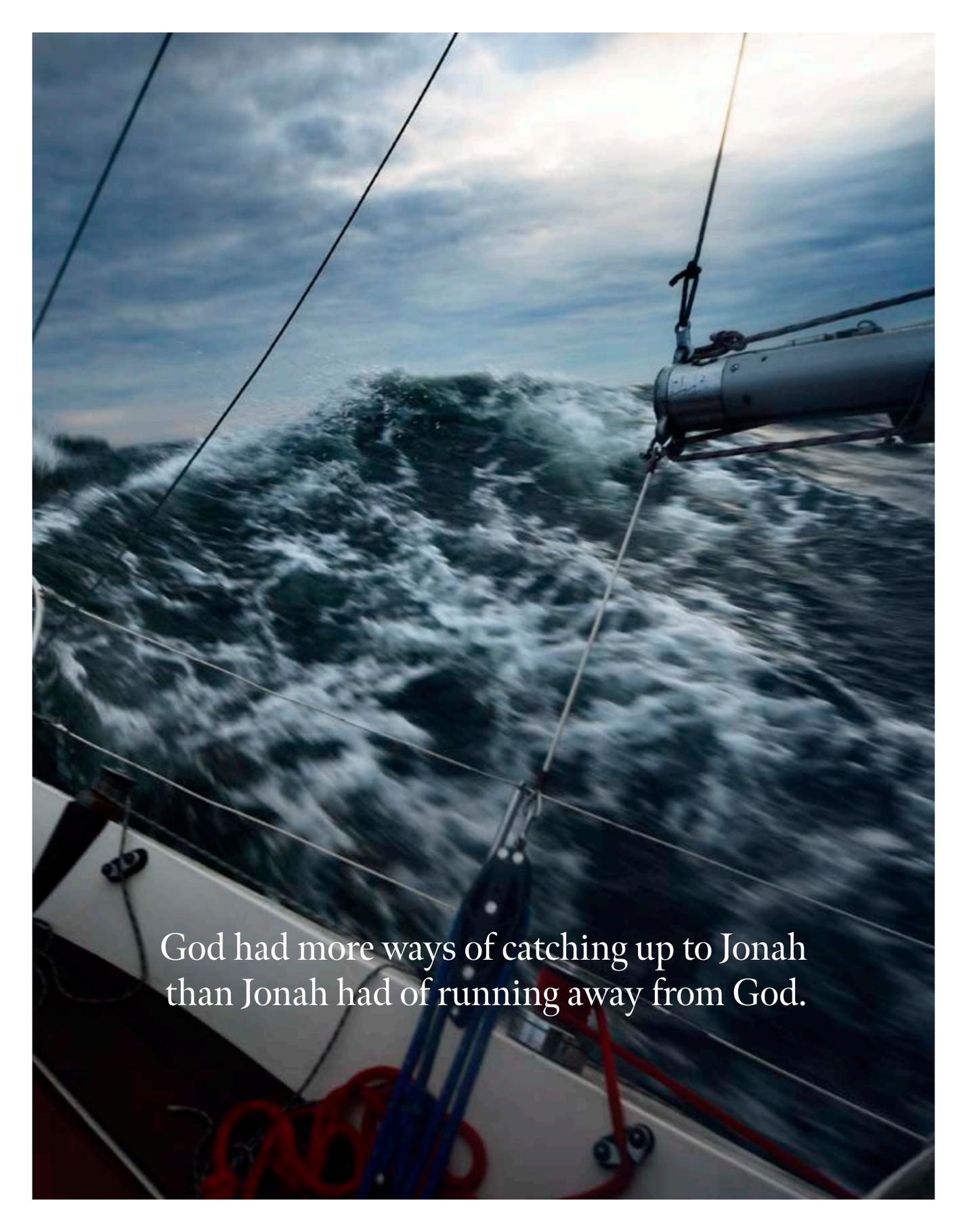
The relationship between human responsibility and God's sovereignty is a mysterious one, and Jonah's story is a prime example of how fascinating the interplay between God's will and a person's will can be.

The idea that Jonah thought he could escape to a place where God would either not find him or that was so far away that God would choose not to use him is absurd. Simultaneously, Jonah intentionally disobeys God. But even as Jonah has acted contrary to God's will for him, he has not acted outside of God's providential control.

The storm that besets the sailors is clearly under God's control, but the human responses vary. The pagan sailors take every action they can to salvage their ship and save their lives. They also pray to any and every god they can think of. They work as if everything depends on them and pray like everything depends on some god, somewhere.

Meanwhile, Jonah—for reasons that are not given—rests soundly.

God's sovereignty is a form of mercy. God had more ways of catching up to Jonah than Jonah had of running away from God. His control of the weather and the sea, as well as the lives of the men on board, demonstrates not only His immense power but His immense mercy. God does not give Jonah what he deserves for his disobedience, nor the sailors for their unbelief. Instead, He used His power to show compassion. God has more ways of catching up to us than we have of running away from Him.



God had more ways of catching up to Jonah
than Jonah had of running away from God.

REFLECTIONS

Reflect on a time when you experienced the mysterious relationship between your will and God's will.

What lies do we tell ourselves that lure us into indifference and apathy toward what God wants us to do, convincing ourselves that our way is better?

Is there something you are currently "running from" that God desires you to do? What does repentance look like in this moment?

INSIGHT

The author of Jonah uses intentional language to describe Jonah's intentional flight from God. In verse 2, God tells Jonah to "Get up!" In verse 3, Jonah goes down to Joppa, then down again into the ship. In verse 5, he has fled to the deepest part of the ship. The deepening and intensifying distance is reflective of Jonah's heart towards God.



Who is Jonah?



Like many of the prophets, we don't have much biographical information about Jonah. The book introduces him as "Jonah son of Amittai." Jonah means "dove" in Hebrew, and Amittai means "Yaweh is faithful."

2 Kings 14:25 also mentions Jonah: "[Jeroboam] restored Israel's border from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word the LORD, the God of Israel, had spoken through his servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher."

Jonah was a prophet of the northern kingdom from the tribe of Zebulun who lived at Gath-hepher near Nazareth. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC)—a period of unparalleled prosperity throughout the land of Israel.

Jeroboam II had greatly expanded Israel's borders so that Israel re-attained the size it had been during the reigns of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25, 28). Syria was subject to Israel during this time, and Assyria (where Nineveh was located) was plagued both by internal and external problems that allowed Israel to flourish.³

We don't know for sure because the Bible does not tell us, but it could be that one of the reasons Jonah didn't want to see the Ninevites repent is because if God destroyed Nineveh, Israel could expand even further. Whatever the reason, God worked through Jonah despite Jonah's unfaithfulness.

JONAH 1:6

⁶The captain approached him and said, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up! Call to your god. Maybe this god will consider us, and we won't perish."

DAY
4

CALL TO YOUR GOD

In the 1984 film *The Karate Kid*, Ralph Macchio stars as Daniel Laruso, a teenager bullied by other teens who are martial arts experts. Laruso is mentored by Mr. Miyagi, played by Pat Morita, to aid him not only with self-defense but with wisdom for many other areas in his life. In an iconic scene, Laruso finds Mr. Miyagi sitting cross-legged on the floor, trying to catch a buzzing house fly with a pair of chopsticks, something he'd been trying to do for years. Laruso sits with him, picks up a pair of chopsticks, and catches the fly after only a few attempts. Mr. Miyagi, having been committed to success for years with nothing to show for it, replies with mild indignance, "Beginner's luck."

A similar spiritual dynamic is at play in the brief but informative interaction between the ship captain and Jonah. Jonah, a Hebrew and a prophet of the One True God, was sound asleep, seemingly unaware of—or at least indifferent to—the impact of his disobedience. The ship captain, a pagan zealous for any god that would save his life, was in tune with his circumstances and urging fervent prayer. The beginner in matters of faith outperformed the master.

It can be sobering for Christians to be taught lessons in matters of faith by those who don't believe, but such humbling experiences are crucial for our own faith if we are to grow in our faith and obedience to God. When someone who doesn't know God, like this ship captain, sees the gravity of certain situations that we have become numb or indifferent to, we should thank God that He saw fit to awaken us to spiritual action rather than bemoan such people's "beginner's luck."

God's lessons often come from unlikely sources.



REFLECTIONS

What lessons of faith have you learned from others who do not yet follow Jesus?

What attributes of God are on display in His aggressive pursuit of Jonah?

What thoughts or experiences lead us to become numb or apathetic to God's call on our lives?

JONAH 1:7-8

⁷“Come on!” the sailors said to each other. “Let’s cast lots. Then we’ll know who is to blame for this trouble we’re in.” So they cast lots, and the lot singled out Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us who is to blame for this trouble we’re in. What is your business, and where are you from? What is your country, and what people are you from?”

DAY
5

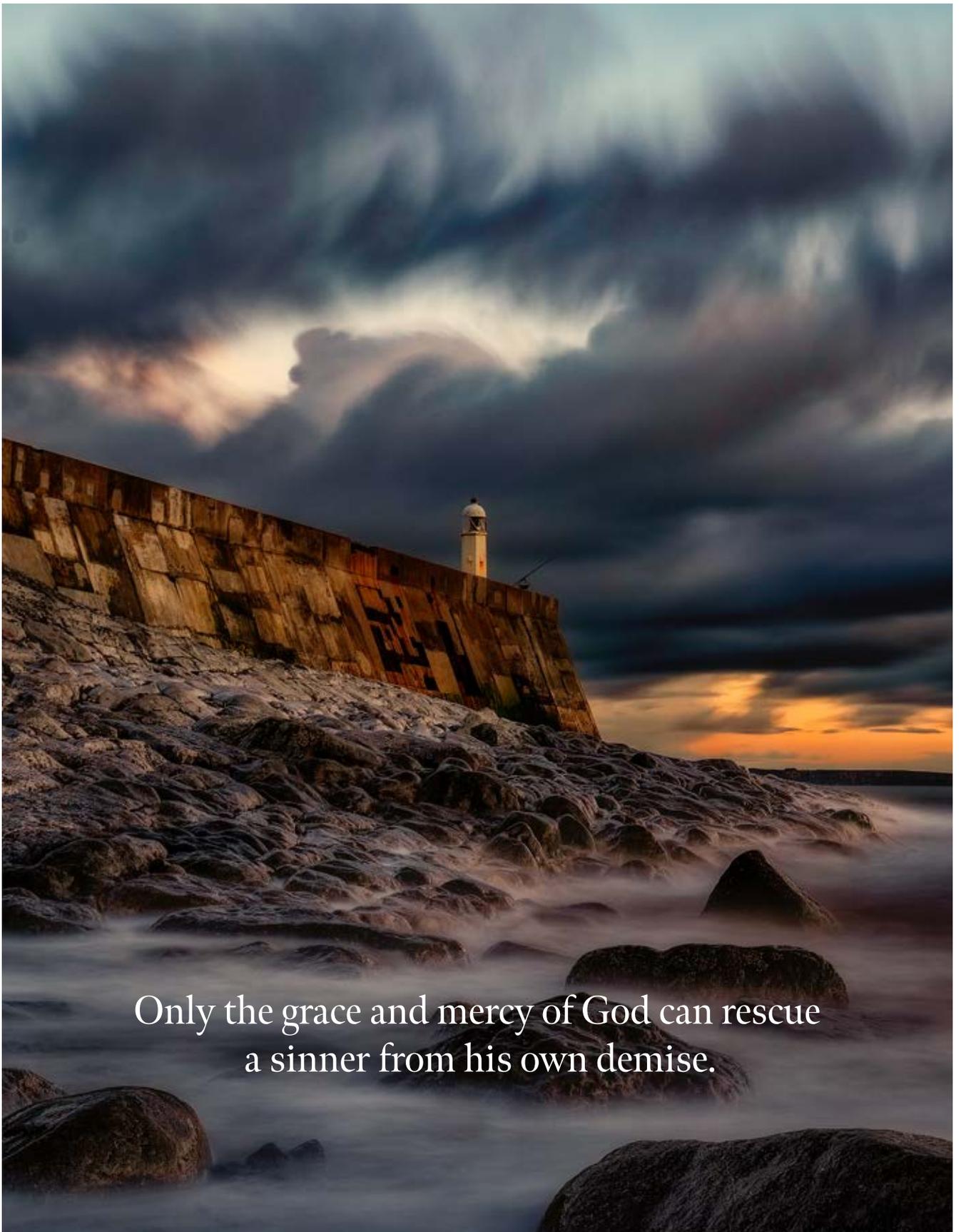
CASTING BLAME

The casting of lots was a widely used method for determining truth or gaining guidance in the ancient Near East and is therefore mentioned quite often in Scripture. Participants would toss colored stones like dice. Two dark-colored sides up usually equated with “no,” while two light-colored sides up usually meant “yes.” One of each meant “roll again.” To be clear, the ancients were not ignorant about the math behind probability. They merely believed what we should all believe: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:33).

When the sailors cast lots on a boat being tossed to and fro, Jonah is identified as the guilty party. You can imagine the scene in which all eyes turn toward Jonah as they realize he is the reason they are suffering on the precipice of death.

Things finally come to a head for Jonah. He had been unwilling to obey God and preach the need for repentance to the Ninevites. How would he respond in the face of this rebuke? Would he be just as unmerciful to these sailors? Would he deny any wrongdoing and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge what even the pagans knew to be true?

What about us? Can we become so hardened to the desired will of God that we actually prefer pain and suffering, maybe even death, to what God wants us to do? What begins easily with one step away from God, instead of one step toward God, can quickly escalate into self-destruction. Only the grace and mercy of God can rescue a sinner from his own demise.



Only the grace and mercy of God can rescue
a sinner from his own demise.

REFLECTIONS

How does recognizing that God doesn't leave anything to chance change our perspective about our lives?

What is required of us in order to repent from our sin and return to the Lord?

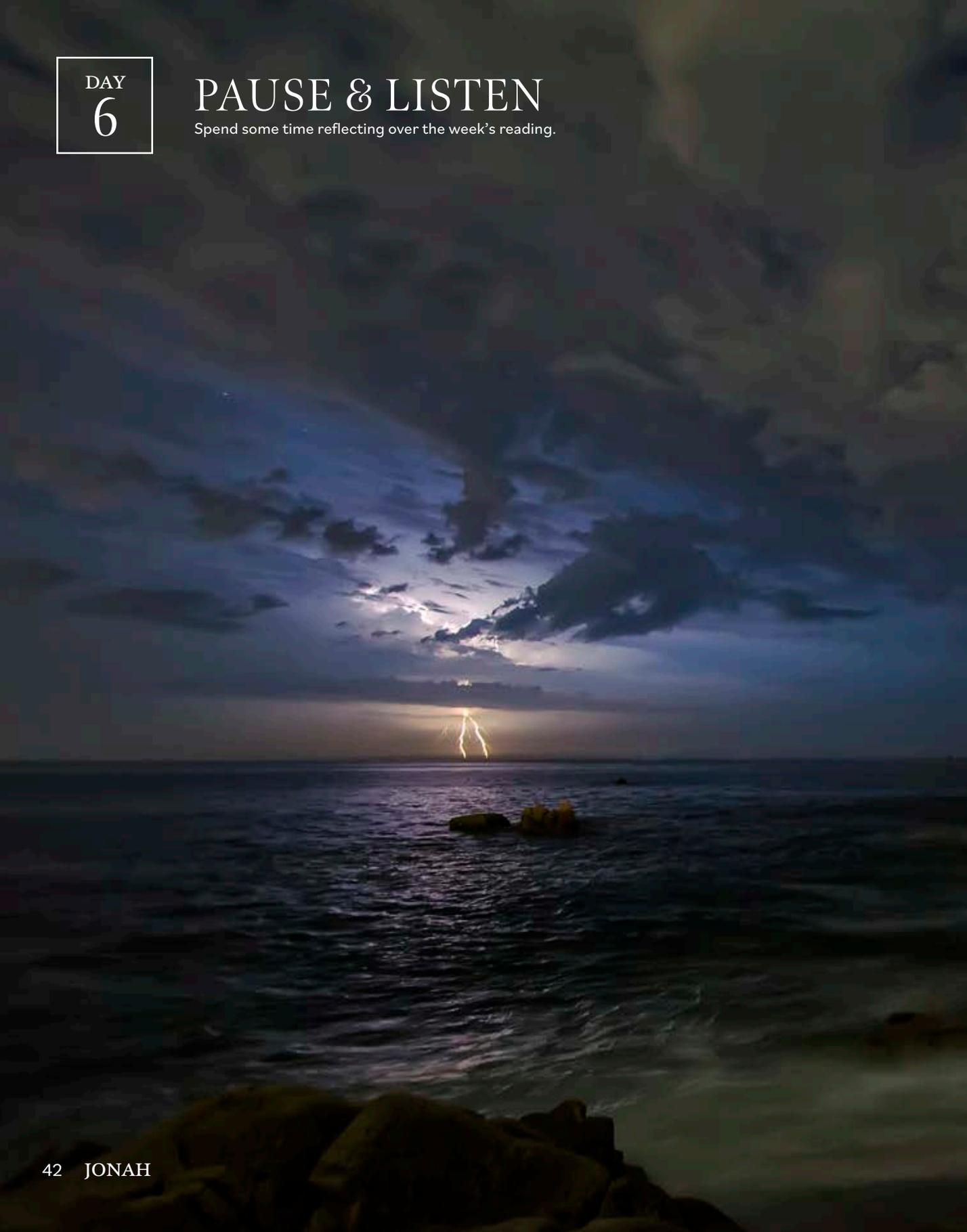
What is the best defense against the temptation to run from God?

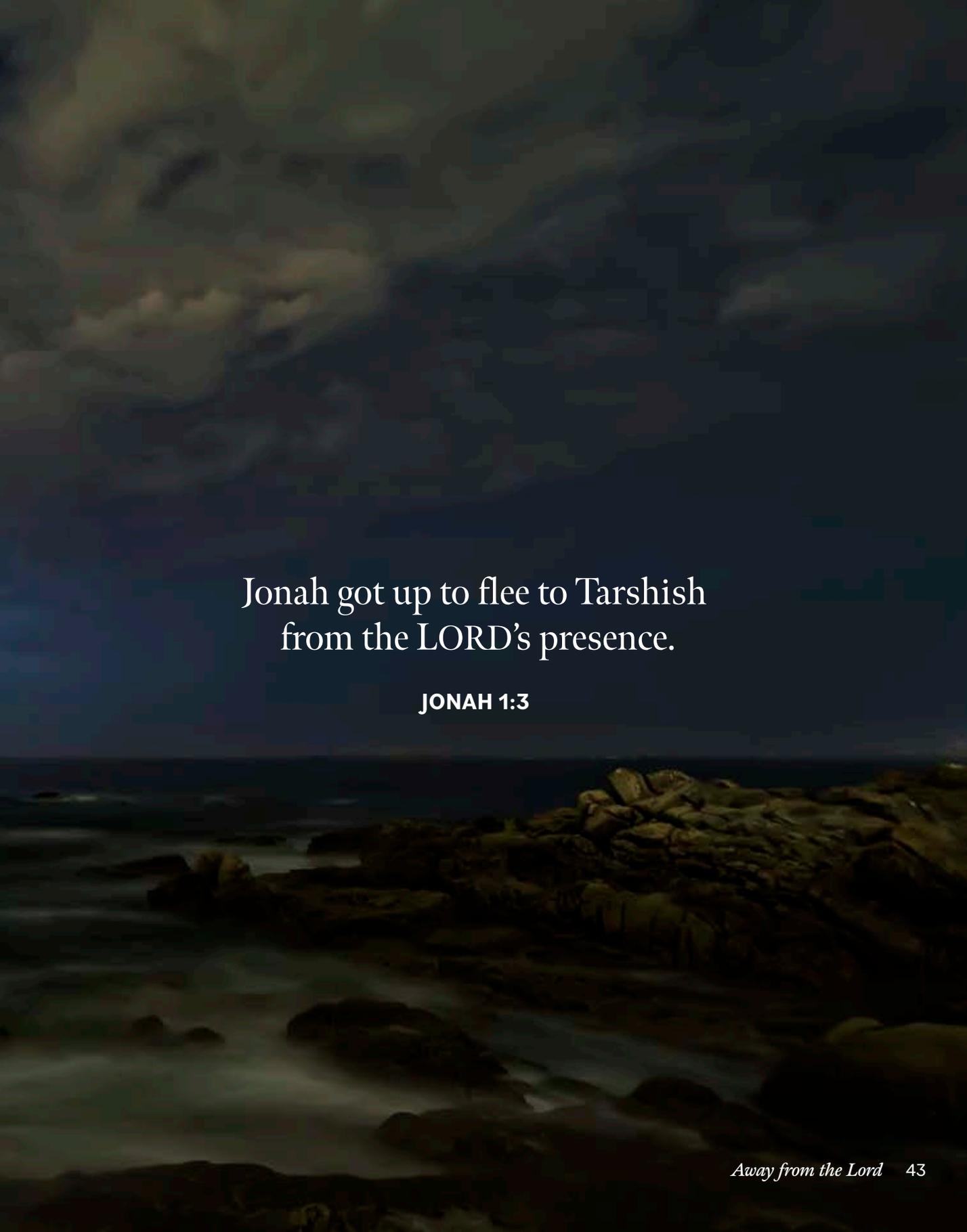
DAY

6

PAUSE & LISTEN

Spend some time reflecting over the week's reading.





Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish
from the LORD's presence.

JONAH 1:3

DAY
7

REFLECTION

Use these questions for personal reflection or group discussion on Jonah 1.

What stuck out to you most in this week's reading? What surprised you? Confused you?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about God and His character?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about humanity and our need for grace?

What keeps us from following what we know God has told us to do?

What steps of faith and obedience is God asking you to take through these Scriptures?

PRAY

Thank You, God, for Your mercy towards us, even though all of us are tempted to flee from Your presence.

God pursues us all.

Jonah is an epic tale involving a man on a mission, three days and nights in the belly of a great fish, and a city experiencing unexpected renewal. It's the story of a prophet on the run, thrown off a ship into the sea to be swallowed by a fish and deposited on dry land. From there he boldly calls a violent city to turn from its ways and follow the living God and ends the story pouting under a tree. It's an odd conclusion, but Jonah shows us a God whose relentless pursuit of us (as flawed as we may be) is at the heart of who He is.

The Storyteller Series

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