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REVERSING COURSE /// learning to follow God

Lesson Objective: To help students identify what running away from God looks like, and how to move toward living out God's will in their lives.

Scripture Focus: Jonah 1:1-9; 2:4-10; 3:6-10; 4:1-10

Overview: The Book of Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophet books in the Old Testament. (It's also one of three Old Testament books that are considered short stories, the other two being Esther and Ruth.) In Jonah, we see the Lord calling out to Jonah and giving him a simple message: go tell the people of Nineveh that judgment was coming. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a cruel enemy of Israel. **Of course, you know that Jonah wasn't too excited about carrying out God's plan.** More than likely your students know this, as well. But through re-examining this familiar story, your students will discover that following God is always the most important thing, *even if the end result is not to their liking.*

Jump In

- **Title:** Opposites
- **Goal:** The goal is to help students start thinking about things that are opposites, which will lead to a discussion about following and not following God.
- **Set-Up:** Provide a copy of the Student Guide and something with which to write for each student.

FIRST, distribute one Student Guide for each student as you explain the activity. Inform students that they are to look at the words on their Student Guide. The goal is to see who can be the quickest to come up with a word for each word listed that means the exact opposite of the listed word. Make sure each student has a guide, and then start the activity.

Answers:

- BLACK ⇒ *White*
- COLD ⇒ *Hot*
- TALL ⇒ *Short*
- SUNNY ⇒ *Rainy, cloudy, snowy*
- OLD ⇒ *Young, new*
- DAY ⇒ *Night*
- HEAVEN ⇒ *Hell*
- STRANGE ⇒ *Normal*
- EXPENSIVE ⇒ *Cheap, inexpensive*
- TEXT MESSAGE ⇒ *Letter, telegraph, phone call*
- EXCULPATE (means "to clear of fault or guilt") ⇒ *Find fault*
- PEJORATIVE (means "tending to make something worse") ⇒ *Tending to make better, improve*
- ABSCOND (means "to flee or escape, especially in secret") ⇒ *Stick around, front and center*

NEXT, have students share their responses for each word. There should be a bit of silence when you reach the last three. Tell students what the words mean, then have them write down the appropriate answers on their sheets. Ask the students the following questions:

- **Why was it so easy to think of an opposite word for the first ten words on the sheet?**
 - *Answer:* The words were easy, heard them all my life, we just studiedonyms, etc.
- **Why was it so hard to think of an opposite word for the last three?**
 - *Answer:* Never heard those words before, not part of everyday language, etc.
- **Which of the last three words do you think applies to Jonah?**
 - *Answer:* Abscond means to flee or run away from and that is exactly what Jonah did when God gave him a specific job to do.

FINALLY, tell students that doing the opposite thing requires a clear understanding of the word or task at hand. Jonah knew exactly what God wanted him to do. And he ran in the opposite direction.

The Big Idea

- **Title:** Hearing, Running, Obeying, Sulking
- **Goal:** The goal is to help the students gain a better understanding of the book of Jonah and to see the consequences of not following God's direction.
- **Set-Up:** Provide a copy of the Student Guide and something with which to write for each student.

FIRST, give a little bit of context for your lesson:

- Inform students that the story of Jonah takes place around 760 BC during the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel.
- The country had been under attack from Assyria; the Hebrew people did not like the Assyrians.
- Since Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, people living in that city were especially despised.

THEN, tell students they are going to tell the story of Jonah by breaking up into four teams and summarizing their passage to the rest of the group. Divide students into four groups and assign groups the following passages, respectively:

- Group 1 (Hearing): Jonah 1:1-9
- Group 2 (Running): Jonah 2:4-10
- Group 3 (Obeying): Jonah 3:6-10
- Group 4 (Sulking): Jonah 4:1-10

Allow students five minutes or so to look over their passages. Encourage them to look at the basic facts of the story for their summaries; and if they need to, they can use the prompts on their Guides. Remind them that they need to be ready to tell the group what they've found. Explain to students they can record their summaries on their Student Guides, if they choose.

NEXT, bring the group back together and let each group report on their part of the story. **Call on the Hearing group to give their report first.** When they finish giving their summary, instruct the group and the rest of the students to write in the "Hearing" section of their sheets the following phrase:

- "Step 1 in following God's plan = hearing what He has to say."

Remind students that Jonah heard directly from God. And while we don't normally hear directly from God, we may very well miss hearing from His Spirit because we are too busy to take the time to be still and alone with God. Ask students to name some of the ways they can hear from God today. (*Answers: Prayer, reading the Bible, counsel of Godly mentors, and understanding spiritual gifts and abilities are just a few.*)

THEN, call on the Running group to give their report. When they finish giving their summary, instruct the group and the rest of the students to write in the "Running" section of their sheets the following phrase:

- "Step 2 in following God's plan = doing what God tells us to do."

Point out that Jonah ran away from God physically and spiritually. Jonah got on a boat headed in the opposite direction from Nineveh. He was fleeing the scene completely. He also ran away spiritually because he was hoping the people of Nineveh would not heed his words and repent because Jonah wanted the city destroyed. Ask the students to imagine doing what they believe God would want them to do then hoping the whole thing would fail!

NEXT, call on the Obeying group to give their report. The four things the King of Nineveh told his people to do in response to Jonah's message was to put on sackcloth, a sign of mourning or sorrow, pray, turn from their evil ways, and stop their violence. Explain that sometimes we get to see the results of our obeying God and sometimes we do not. Give a personal account of the result of obeying God in your life. Instruct the group and the rest of the students to write in the "Obeying" section of their sheets the following phrase:

- "Step 3 in following God's plan = learn to leave the results to God."

THEN, call on the Sulking group to give their report. Make sure the Sulking Group tells everyone the two things God used to teach Jonah about his faulty thinking. Point out the great contrast between being upset about a plant dying and losing shade versus not being upset that a city of 120,000 people might be destroyed. Instruct the group and the rest of the students to write in the "Sulking" section of their sheets the following phrase:

- "Step 4 in following God's plan = realizing the thing God may want to change is us."

FINALLY, tell the students that the story of Jonah is a vivid picture of what it looks like to run away from God. Close by pointing out, once again, the four truths this lesson reveals about following the will of God:

- 1) Hearing what God has to say
- 2) Doing what God tells us to
- 3) Leaving the results to God
- 4) Realizing the thing God may want to change is us

Wrap Up

- **Title:** Can You Hear Me Now?
- **Goal:** The goal is to help students see that running away from the call of God is really not an option.
- **Set-Up:** Before the lesson, make sure you have the cell phone numbers of as many of your students as possible. Bring your cell phone and prepare a text message with the following words: "I love you and have a wonderful plan for your life." Set up the text message to go out to some of your students.

FIRST, explain to the students that learning how to follow God begins with learning how to listen to God. Tell them that you've prepared a text message that is about to be sent to some of the students in the group.

NEXT, send your prepared text message and ask the students to respond when they receive the message.

- **Ask what would possibly keep that message from you being delivered to the students.**
 - *Answer:* Cell phone turned off, battery dead, signal too weak, wrong number
- **Ask them if they have ever ignored a message from someone.**
- **Ask what are some reasons you ignore people's calls?**

THEN, lead them to understand that when God speaks, there's never a communication problem on His end. If there is a problem, it has to be on our end. Ask something like:

- **Can you brainstorm some possible reasons we fail to hear from God?**
 - *Answer:* Unconfessed sin; too busy to take time for prayer and Bible study; ignoring God because what we hear is not what we want to do.

CLOSE, by encouraging your students to take time to not only listen to God but to be willing to follow His direction in life. Have someone read Romans 8:28— *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* Remind the students that God does have a plan and a purpose for their lives. By listening and following God to the best of their ability, they can always trust that God's direction and timing in all things is perfect.

FINALLY, as you wrap up the lesson remind students that the best way to start following God is to be obedient in the day-to-day things. Remind them to listen for God's voice in the way they relate to friends and adults each day. Encourage students to listen to God by being sensitive to the needs of others. Remind them that following God day-by-day leads to a lifetime of living out God's will.

Close the session with a time of prayer.

