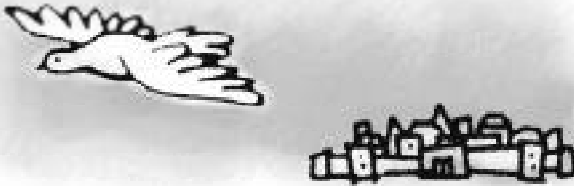


# The “Dove” Flees



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**T**HUS FAR, THE BOOK OF JONAH has portrayed a familiar pattern in the Old Testament: a prophet receiving a divine call. “Arise, go to Euphrates” (Jer. 13:4, 5), God told Jeremiah. “Arise, get thee to Zarephath” (1 Kings 17:9, 10), God told Elijah. As expected, both prophets did what they were told.

The reader is led to expect from Jonah a similar response to God’s call, “Arise, go to Nineveh.” However, the book of Jonah defies conventional ideas about God’s prophets and how they act. How dare Jonah upset the usual paradigm! Far from obeying God, he flees in the opposite direction. Hardly the best start for a prophet of God.

Why be surprised? Prophets are people, too, touched with our fears, insecurities, and doubts. Surely, we don’t expect perfection from the Lord’s prophets. Based on what example? Noah? David? John the Baptist? Peter? Hardly. Maybe we don’t expect perfection, but we certainly didn’t expect a prophet to flee from a direct command of God! This week we’ll look a little more at what happened.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How do we appraise the prophet’s disobedience? What is God’s response to Jonah’s attitude? What does this teach us about God? How does God’s grace respond to Jonah’s disobedience?

**MEMORY TEXT:** “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months” (James 5:17).

\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 25.

**“HERE AM I, DON’T SEND ME!”**

**“But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 1:3, NASB).**

**J**onah’s name means “dove,” and we find him next in an unusual “flight pattern.”

**How is Jonah’s response to his divine summons unusual? Jon. 1:3.**

Thus far, the book of Jonah has opened with a recognizable situation seen in Scripture of a prophet receiving a divine call. What happens next, however, is not the usual. The shocking surprise involves the detailed description of what Jonah did to escape his task. Though hardly the usual paradigm, this isn’t the only time we see the example of someone not exactly thrilled about his or her divine calling.

**Who else initially was not willing to accept God’s call, and why? Exod. 4:1, 10, 13.**

When Moses was enlisted by God to return to Egypt for the purpose of leading the Israelites away from slavery, he drew back in amazement and terror at the command. He even offered several reasons why he thought he should refuse the task. But, ultimately, he accepted the task. Ellen White eloquently describes this situation: “The divine command given to Moses found him self-distrustful, slow of speech, and timid. He was overwhelmed with a sense of his incapacity to be a mouthpiece for God to Israel. But having once accepted the work, he entered upon it with his whole heart, putting all his trust in the Lord. The greatness of his mission called into exercise the best powers of his mind. God blessed his ready obedience, and he became eloquent, hopeful, self-possessed, and well fitted for the greatest work ever given to man.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 255.

**What possible reasons could Jonah have had for not wanting to do what the Lord asked? Could those have even been “valid” reasons? Also, is it possible that, perhaps, the very traits that caused Jonah to want to flee from this task could be the very traits that, if rightly channeled, would have made him qualified for that task? If so, how so? What does this say to me about my own gifts and what the Lord asks me to do with them?**

## THE “DOVE” FLEES.

God gives Jonah a command, and Jonah, rather than obeying the Lord’s command, attempts to flee. It is hard to imagine a more determined antagonism than is indicated here in this one verse (Jon. 1:3). Every verb in the verse reveals what Jonah is doing in order to get away from the Lord and from what the Lord asks him to do.

Look at the verbs in Jonah 1:3. Jonah **rose up** to flee. (The verb for “arose” here comes from the same root word that was part of his divine commission, when the Lord told him to “**Arise**, go to Nineveh.”) He **went down** to Joppa, he **found** a ship, he **paid** the fare, and **went down** into the boat. All this flurry of activity for the express purpose of evading God’s command. The writer of the narrative subtly suggests the determination of Jonah to flee.

**In Jonah 1:3, what phrase is given at the beginning of the verse and then repeated at the end of the same verse? What do you think that means?**

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This single verse says two times that Jonah flees “from the presence of the Lord.” A single indication would have been enough. However, the duplication of this phrase in just one verse compels the reader to consider the irony of anyone, let alone a prophet, thinking to flee from the presence of the Lord!

Of all people—as someone who knows the Lord, who worships the God of Israel, who knows that the Lord was the Creator of the heaven and the earth and the sea (see Jon. 1:9), Jonah should have known the futility of his actions. It’s not as though he were following some local, pagan deity whose “power” ended at the border.

On the contrary, by his own confession, he knows the power of the God he professes to serve—and, though knowing all these things, he flees anyway!

What could he have possibly been thinking?

**Of course, it’s easy for us to look at Jonah and shake our heads in disapproval. *How could he have done something so stupid?* However, in what subtle ways do we attempt to do the same thing? Maybe we don’t flee, at least physically, from “the presence of the Lord” (for that’s impossible), but how do we openly or inadvertently “separate” ourselves from the Lord?**

**GOING DOWN.**

**T**hree times the text found in Jonah 1:3 says that Jonah is going to Tarshish. That’s three times in one verse. Notice this characteristic repetition in Hebrew narrative writing. The writer is not sloppy, nor is he stuttering. Rather, we are being alerted to an important issue the writer wants us to ponder. In this case, the thrice-mentioned city of Tarshish is important because Tarshish, in fact, is in the opposite direction of where the Lord wanted Jonah to go. Nineveh is east, Tarshish is west. Jonah’s rebellion couldn’t be made more explicit.

**What other examples can we find in the Bible of God giving someone (not necessarily a prophet) explicit instructions and he or she doing the opposite?**

**Gen. 2:16, 17 \_\_\_\_\_ Gen. 3:6**

**1 Sam. 15:3 \_\_\_\_\_ 1 Sam. 15:21-23**

**Exod. 20:4-6 \_\_\_\_\_ Ezek. 8:10**

**What other verb is used two times in Jonah 1:3?**

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Two times in this verse we are told that Jonah “went down,” along with one additional use in verse 5. Jonah “went down” to Joppa; Jonah “went down” into the ship; Jonah had “gone down” into the lowest parts of the ship. Three times in close succession the reader is told that Jonah “went down.” The writer carefully structures the narrative to focus on Jonah’s downward journey away from his divine commission. Indeed, before it’s all over, Jonah goes down much farther than even he imagines at this point, for he will go all the way to the “bottom” before the Lord is through with him.

The use of that specific verb isn’t by chance. In this context, it has negative connotations. In fact, in modern Hebrew, the same verb “go down” can carry with it a negative meaning, while the opposite, “go up,” carries a positive one.

**Are you going down or up? The answer is easy. Are you doing what God commands you to do, or are you disobeying, as Jonah did? Your answer determines your direction.**

**GOD’S PATIENT GRACE.**

**W**hen Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord, that *might* have finished everything. When Jonah pays the fare to Tarshish, that *could* have been the end of his call. When we disobey, when we try to escape what God has convicted us about, when God says one thing and we do another, that *could* be the end of us too. God is not obligated at all to keep on dealing with us, especially when we mess up, even in a big way. However, out of a love that’s too big for us to understand, He keeps working with us, despite our repeated and colossal blunders. And for this, God’s patient grace, we all should be immensely grateful. After all, imagine if all it took were one big mistake on our part for the Lord to cast us off. Who, even the most saintly among us, could ever hope for salvation if that were the case? Grace is nothing if not the chance—indeed, many chances—to start over.

**What examples from the Bible show God still working with those who have sadly and grossly failed in what the Lord had asked of them? What lesson can we learn from these stories about God’s grace with those whose faith and trust fail them, even at crucial times?**

Genesis 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Genesis 16 \_\_\_\_\_

2 Samuel 11 \_\_\_\_\_

Matt. 26:74, 75 \_\_\_\_\_

God calls Jonah, but Jonah rejects that call. It’s that simple. But what happens next? Does the Lord simply leave Jonah to his rebellion? Does He simply cast him off, because he has made this tremendous blunder? Not at all. Though Jonah, overtly and blatantly, chooses to run away, the Lord pursues him. In other words, despite Jonah’s rejection of the Lord, God doesn’t reject him, at least not yet. Here is this man, given a divine call by the Lord, and though this man rejects that call, God’s Spirit still strives with him, anyway.

**What does this fact say to us, personally, in our own walk with the Lord? However much hope it should give us, we should also be careful about being presumptuous. How can we know the difference between having hope despite our failures and being presumptuous about them?**

**THE GOD OF NATURE.**

**What is God's response to Jonah's disobedience? Jon. 1:4, 17; 2:10.**

**B**oth the Old and the New Testament are remarkable for their unflinching and continual ascription of the control of nature to God. At times, He uses nature as a means of instruction in righteousness and discipline. In contrast to some contemporary thinking, which views the universe as a closed and finite system, allowing no place for the action of God, the Bible's consistent confession is that the functioning of all nature is under God's control.

**Read Job 38. In the context of today's study, what's the crucial point made in this chapter?**

God has established laws in nature. But they do not administer themselves. The Lawgiver administers them. He has arranged a series of causes and effects. But according to Scripture, He supports, maintains, controls, and moves them at His own pleasure.

**What is the first action God takes in response to Jonah's cruise? Jon. 1:4.**

The storm is not attributed merely to the elements of nature but to the God of nature, to Him who is over all and above all things. But this is no mere display of power. It is for Jonah's sake that a tempest is unleashed. Verse 4 teaches us that this storm is there because of Jonah and *for* Jonah. The elements of nature and many innocent sailors are engaged in the adventure of Jonah, with him and because of him. The storm is sent to pursue a petulant prophet and, in the process, involves many others on board the ship.

**These "innocent" sailors were suffering because of someone else's sin. In what ways do we see this principle operating all the time? What does it tell us about the horrible nature of sin?**

The book of Jonah reveals the seriousness of a God-given vocation. God regards His choice of messenger as so important that He brings nature into play in order to nudge Jonah to fulfill his task. As God wrestled with Jacob, so now He begins to wrestle with Jonah, employing the elements of nature to get his attention.

**FURTHER STUDY:**

**W**hat picture do the different Bible writers give concerning God's sovereignty over His creation?

Amos 4:13;  
 Job 9:5; Amos 1:2; Mic. 1:3, 4;  
 Judg. 5:5; Pss. 18:7; 68:8; 114:4-6; Isa. 64:3; Ezek. 3:12; Hab. 3:6, 10;  
 Exod. 23:25, 26; Lev. 25:18, 19; Deuteronomy 28; 30:8-14;  
 2 Chron. 31:9, 10; Isa. 58:9-11; Amos 4:6-8; Hag. 1:9-11; 2:17.

Ellen White's graphic description of the plagues in Egypt is instructive: "Ruin and desolation marked the path of the destroying angel. The land of Goshen alone was spared. It was demonstrated to the Egyptians that the earth is under the control of the living God, that the elements obey His voice, and that the only safety is in obedience to Him."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 269.

The book of Revelation instructs us that the whole world will be so involved in a similar situation before the second coming of Christ. Ellen White draws this lesson in her chapter on Jonah in *Prophets and Kings*, p. 277:

"The time is at hand when there will be sorrow in the world that no human balm can heal. The spirit of God is being withdrawn. Disasters by sea and by land follow one another in quick succession. How frequently we hear of earthquakes and tornadoes, of destruction by fire and flood, with great loss of life and property! *Apparently these calamities are capricious outbreaks of disorganized, unregulated forces of nature, wholly beyond the control of man; but in them all, God's purpose may be read. They are among the agencies by which He seeks to arouse men and women to a sense of their danger.*"—Emphasis supplied.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1. Do you think there could have come a point when God would have finally stopped pursuing Jonah? If so, when might that point have been? Compare the situation of Judas to that of Jonah. What was the crucial difference between the two?**
- 2. How should the humanity of Jonah help us understand the humanity of all God's prophets, including Ellen White?**

**SUMMARY:** God sought to use Jonah despite the prophet's faults.



## A Young Man's Journey

Ylli Peco

I am a new believer living in Tirana, Albania. When I was about 14 years of age, I often saw my grandma going to church. Sometimes I went with her, and eventually I signed up to attend some religious classes that were being held in the church. But to be frank, I could not understand most of what they taught there.

During my second year of high school a friend invited my group of friends—there were five of us—to his church. We had never heard of this church, but we decided to go. I thought the services were weird because they were so different from my grandmother's church. But I really liked the Sabbath School class with so many people taking part in the discussion, teaching and learning together about the Bible lesson.

For awhile I attended this church occasionally, then started going every week. When I went, I felt a peace in my heart that I could not understand. I got to know everybody, and I felt as if I were part of a large Christian family.

Some church members encouraged me to take my stand for Christ and be baptized, but I was not ready yet. I did not know a lot about God's Word, and I was not sure about some things. Besides, I had problems at home.

From the beginning my family opposed my going to this church. They insisted that the only true church was the Orthodox church, and they tried every way they knew to help me find my way back to the family's religion. I knew they wanted what was best for me, but I was convinced that I had found what was best. Sometimes we argued, and they tried to convince me that I was wrong. And sometimes I tried to convince them that they were wrong. Some Sabbaths were peaceful; others were full of arguing. After some time, however, they gave up trying to change my mind.

My knowledge of God was increasing, and I felt the Holy Spirit very close to me. It was as though I were talking to Him, and I felt He was guiding me. I wish everybody could experience the same thing in his life.

When I knew I had gained sufficient knowledge about God and His Word, I was ready to be baptized. The day of baptism was really wonderful, so filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit that I wanted to share the good news with everybody.

**Ylli Peco is a young man who is studying law at a university in Tirana, Albania.**

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