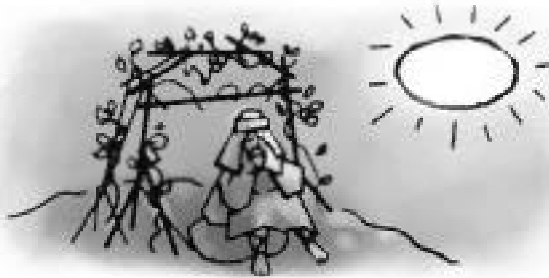


A Wind, a Worm, and a Plant



Sabbath Afternoon

HARD AS IT IS FOR US to understand (we who believe that our purpose as a people is to bring the good news of salvation to the “heathen”), the disgruntled prophet Jonah has expressed deep dissatisfaction with God’s mercy to the wicked Ninevites. He is sorry they listened to his warnings and repented. God then asks him to reconsider his sullen attitude as Jonah sits under a booth he has built for shade. Jonah and God continue their dialogue. Though some of the most profound theological concepts of the Old Testament are recorded in this final chapter of the book, what we see more than anything is a manifestation of God’s grace toward sinners. This week, keep in mind who Jonah is, the privileges he has been given, what the Lord has done for him . . . *and yet still this attitude?*

This should give us hope for ourselves, if nothing else.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What was the symbolism of the booth Jonah had built for himself? What is the irony there? Why did God grow the plant for Jonah and then take that plant away? Was Jonah facing a judgment of his own? What was the Lord teaching Jonah? How do we see here a powerful manifestation of God’s grace in the life of this prophet? In what ways can we be in danger, like Jonah, of taking God’s grace toward us for granted?

MEMORY TEXT: “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way” (Psalm 25:8, 9, NASB).

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 6.

JONAH'S BOOTH.

“Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 23:42, 43).

God now prepares an “object lesson” for Jonah (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 272). Like the “great fish” in the Mediterranean, a plant, a worm, and a strong wind become God’s instruments. And, like the “great fish,” they obey. This adds more emphasis to the recurring theme of the Lord’s control over what He Himself has created.

In Jonah 4:5, Jonah goes outside the city and makes for himself “a booth.” Look up these texts, in which the same word appears (though in the plural): Leviticus 23:39, 44 and Nehemiah 8:14-16. What is the significance in the use of that word, in Jonah, based on what it means in these other texts?

The booths were to remind the children of Israel of their miraculous deliverance from Egypt and of God’s care for them after that deliverance. Apparently for Jonah, deliverance was desirable for the Hebrews but not for the pagans. Perhaps Jonah, whose only concern now was his personal comfort, missed the irony of his act.

The Hebrew word for “booths” sukkot, the plural of sukkah (the word that appears in Jonah), is also the name for the Jewish festival of Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles. During it, even today, traditional Jews live in a hut, a sukkah, as a reminder of the temporary dwellings in which their ancestors lived after their deliverance from Egypt.

Read the last part of Jonah 4:5. What was Jonah waiting for? Did he still, perhaps, harbor some hope that the city would nevertheless be destroyed? What does this tell us about his character; more important, what does it tell us about the character of the God who endures so patiently with him? With us?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Jonah 4:6.

Teachers Aims:

1. To discern the symbolic meaning of the booth Jonah built.
2. To recognize the dangers of taking God's grace for granted.

Lesson Outline:

I. Jonah's New Nature Lesson.

- A. Jonah sits beneath a booth he built outside the walls of a repentant Nineveh.
- B. Booths served to remind Israel of the temporary dwellings they lived in when God miraculously delivered them from Egypt.
- C. Jonah sulks, because the Ninevites had the gall to humbly repent and receive God's mercy.
- D. God asks Jonah to reconsider his sullen attitude.
- E. God causes a plant to grow up over the booth to provide Jonah with soothing shade.
- F. A worm is appointed to destroy the plant, and harsh wind scours the land. In a small way, Jonah finds himself receiving a small taste of what he wished upon the Ninevites.
- G. The plant was God's grace in action for Jonah. Both its life and death were due solely to the grace of God—just as our lives are.

II. The Parable of the Plant.

- A. God contrasts Jonah's anger over Nineveh to his pity over the death of the shade plant.
- B. Next, the Lord contrasts His gracious pity for Nineveh to Jonah's selfish pity for the plant.
- C. Jonah is an example to God's people of the many chances that the Lord is willing to give each one of us.

Summary: God used Nineveh as an example to other nations that He was a just and gracious God. Jonah exemplifies that God's grace and mercy exist for all, embracing even the most determined doubters and self-righteous among us.

Commentary.

I. Jonah's Booth.

The fact that Jonah 4:5 employs the same term for *booth* as that used for the structures made for the Festival of Booths suggests they were similar. The booths put up during the yearly religious festival

Monday

December 1

GOD'S APPOINTMENTS.

What verb reappears, in the opening of Jonah 4:6, that we have seen before?

Verse 6 opens with the phrase—“The Lord God *prepared*.” This is the second of four occurrences of this verb in the book of Jonah (see lesson 6); the last time it had been used was when the Lord had “prepared” the fish to swallow Jonah. Each time it is used (Jon. 1:17; 4:6-8), God is the subject of the verb, the One who is doing the preparing, or appointing. Its use highlights, again, God’s sovereign rule over all nature in the accomplishment of His purpose.

It’s clear (from what happens next) that God still has not given up on Jonah, even though the prophet was so discouraged over the Lord’s grace toward the heathen that Jonah wanted to die.

While Jonah sits in a booth he had built to await Nineveh’s outcome, God causes a plant to grow and bring extra shade (apparently the booth wasn’t enough) “to deliver him from his grief.” And, obviously, it worked.

Just as with the “great fish,” the writer doesn’t identify the species; nor does the author spend any time on the miracle that caused it to grow so quickly. It’s just assumed that the Lord can do these things.

Read Jonah 4:6-8. Summarize in your own words what happens.

Here’s Jonah, depressed over the deliverance of Nineveh from destruction but now joyous because of a plant that gives him some shade. What are we to make of this guy?

In the course of events, God “appoints” the plant, then the worm to destroy the plant, and then the vehement wind. Instead of Nineveh, Jonah himself seems to be facing some sort of divine punishment; he’s getting only a small taste of what he, apparently, wanted in a big way to happen to these Gentile pagans. The grace that brought the plant, which made him exceedingly happy, is now taken away, and he’s miserable.

Jonah is afflicted with one of the most common maladies that impacts the human race: selfishness, one of the deadliest sins. Look up these texts: Luke 9:23; Romans 6:4-7; 1 Corinthians 9:19; and Philippians 2:1-7. What do they tell us and promise us that can help us overcome the sin that made Jonah such a moral and spiritual wretch?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

consisted of branches from olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees. The prophet found an open space east of the city and constructed a flimsy structure with leafy branches for a roof. As the leaves dried up, more and more sunlight poured down upon Jonah, making him increasingly uncomfortable.

So, God “appointed” a plant that miraculously grew over the booth to provide a more protective roof. The Bible calls the plant a *qiqayon*, a word appearing only here. A number of scholars have suggested that the plant is a member of the gourd family. But as with the case of the giant fish, it most likely was a special creation just for the occasion. To try to find some special plant that can spread that fast and thus prove the truthfulness of the book of Jonah distracts us from the point of the story. God produces the plant to save Jonah from his “discomfort,” or, literally, “to deliver him from his evil/calamity.” The Hebrew word here for “deliver” is very similar to the word for “to shade.”

II. The Word and the Wind.

As Jonah sits in the shade of the plant, he experiences an object lesson of God’s grace and rejoices in it. Although he had wanted to withhold such grace from the people of Nineveh, he appreciates it for himself. Then God destroys the plant that protected the man who wanted the city and its people destroyed. Suddenly Jonah does not like the idea of destruction—at least not when it touches him.

Next, God sends a “sultry east wind” (Jon. 4:8, NRSV). A worm “attacked” the plant, its leaves withered away, and the sun “beat down” on Jonah’s head (vss. 7, 8, NRSV). Heatstroke can be a serious danger in the Middle East. But that is not why Jonah is suddenly so angry when he again explodes, “ ‘It is better for me to die than to live’ ” (vs. 8, NRSV).

God repeats His question of Jonah 4:4 but focuses it on the prophet’s reaction to the death of the plant (vs. 9). God’s question about whether Jonah has any right to be angry about the plant’s destruction is “a clever question—either answer impales Jonah. If the response is negative (as it should have been), recognizing that he is not in a position to make claims regarding God’s gift to him, then he would be admitting that he cannot make judgments concerning what God does with God’s own creatures. But if it is affirmative (as it was), then he tacitly recognizes God’s right to do what God wills regarding Nineveh, for God’s claims regarding Nineveh are much greater than Jonah’s regarding the plant.” —James L. Mays, gen. ed., “Jonah,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 729.

God is leading Jonah (and thus all His people) to see that He longs to save everyone and that humanity must not restrict divine grace. The people of God must learn to love as God loves.

III. Teaching by Experience.

God points out that Jonah “pitied,” or “cared for,” a lowly plant. In

JONAH'S RETURNING WRATH.

Jonah has demanded of God that He destroy. God does just that. He destroys but not what Jonah wanted Him to. God sends a worm, and Jonah's shade plant withers, perhaps blown away (along with his booth) by the wind the Lord brought next. Jonah has some hard things to learn; he needs hard lessons to learn them.

Jonah again wants to die; this time, though, he doesn't directly ask God to kill him (maybe he figures that such a request is futile). Nevertheless, his morbid desire to die, stated for the second time, suggests a deep spiritual malaise. These are Jonah's last words in the narrative (Jon. 4:8, 9). He continues, as he has from the beginning, opposing God. But Jonah does not have the last word. God again asks a question.

What does the Lord say to Jonah? Jon. 4:9.

Divine questions keep mild pressure on Jonah to expose his attitude. This is the second time God asks Jonah to analyze his anger, using now the issue of the wilted plant.

Notice that, in verse 4, God asks Jonah whether it is right to be angry over the act of deliverance of Nineveh. Now, in verse 9, He's asking Jonah whether it's right to be angry over the destruction of the plant. Perhaps the Lord was showing Jonah the contrast between a whole city and a plant, wanting Jonah to see just how his own perspectives were so imbalanced and his priorities so off: angry that the Lord didn't destroy a city, angry that the Lord did destroy a plant. Jonah has some problems, to be sure.

How does Jonah respond to the Lord's question? Vs. 9.

Imagine this scene. Here is this mortal, this sinner deserving of death—openly defiant of the Lord, the Creator, even after seeing all these miracles, one after another, and even himself being delivered by one of the most amazing miracles in sacred history. And, yet, the Lord still is working with him! There's no question, what we see here in Jonah is a small example of what the Lord has been doing with His people all through history: showing them more grace, more mercy, and more patience than they ever have deserved.

From our perspective, Jonah's anger seems ludicrous. Look up these texts. What are they saying that can help us put our trials into proper perspective? Isa. 55:8, 9; Luke 11:9-13; Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 13:11, 12.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

one way, it contrasts Jonah's selfishness with God's infinite love. The prophet mourns the loss of the plant, because its death increases his personal discomfort. On the other hand, God is using the experience to help Jonah understand how much God "pitied," or "cared for," the Ninevites. God sometimes allows things to happen to us so we can begin to feel, in some small measure, both the pain and love He feels. Whether we will learn love or bitterness from such experiences is up to us.

IV. God's Freedom to Save.

Because even God's people are tainted with sin and its inherent selfishness, it is hard for any of us to understand God's infinite desire

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Romans 8:32, Philippians 2:1-8, 2 Timothy 1:8-10.

1. Jonah was pleased with the vine that provided even more shade (Jon. 4:6). Apparently, the booth was not enough for him. Why was Jonah so much more concerned with his own fate than with the fate of the Ninevites?
2. Read Philippians 2:1-8. Have your class members rewrite these verses in their own words. How do we understand what it means to humble one's self?
3. Romans 8:32 says God graciously gives all things. He graciously gave Jonah the vine for shade. But does God also "graciously" (NIV) take things away from us, just as He took the vine away from Jonah? If so, why?
4. Read 2 Timothy 1:8-10. Grace has been given to us before the beginning and was revealed through Christ Jesus. We constantly receive God's grace, but do we actually recognize it when we receive it? What are the many forms God's grace can take?

PITY FOR WHAT?

“Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night” (Jon. 4:10).

Look at how the Lord answered Jonah in the above verse. God uses the verb “pity” as He describes Jonah’s sympathy for the plant (in vs. 10); He used the same word for Himself, in verse 11, regarding His attitude toward Nineveh, inviting a comparison between the two. Jonah has pity on a plant; the Lord has pity on the inhabitants of Nineveh. Could the contrast between a holy God and fallen humanity be any greater?

It is remarkable that God uses the same word, *pity*, for both His and Jonah’s attitudes, seeking to help Jonah realize what he is doing. Jonah is grieving over the plant only because he misses its shade.

Note the choice of the verb *perish* in verse 10, which brings to mind the earlier occurrences of the word in the narrative. How was it used earlier?

Jon. 1:6 _____

Jon. 1:14 _____

Jon. 3:9 _____

Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in John 3:16, where the “perishing” of the whole world is at stake. By the narrator’s careful writing, Jonah’s concern for the shade plant is trivialized when compared with all that would be at stake if God’s judgment against Nineveh were fulfilled. And, in a real sense, the issues faced by the sailors and the inhabitants of Nineveh, and even Jonah himself (most people thrown overboard in a storm die), are, of course, those faced by everyone: life or death. In fact, the issue goes even beyond life or death in this immediate existence, where life is only a vapor (James 4:14) and death only a temporary sleep (1 Cor. 15:51); rather, the real issue comes down to eternal life (John 3:15) or to eternal destruction (vs. 16).

We need to remember that every person we see is facing either eternal life or eternal damnation (John 5:29). What ways can we avoid being like Jonah; that is, getting so caught up in our concerns that we forget what really matters and what our purpose as Seventh-day Adventists is?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

to save. We are willing to let Him redeem people as long as they fit into certain acceptable categories that often reflect our requirements rather than God's. But those who try to define whom God may save do not realize that this act of judging reveals that they themselves are not safe to be saved.

Jonah angrily charges God with acting in an uncaring way toward the plant and, by implication, toward Jonah himself. But the prophet is really the uncaring one. God confronts Jonah not to punish him but to save him—and through him, countless others. The Lord wants each one of us to see our own “Jonah” nature so we will recognize our own need of His character.

WITNESSING

After boxer Mike Tyson bit off a portion of fellow contender Evander Holifield's ear, someone asked Holifield, “Do you think Tyson should be allowed to fight?” His response was that everyone deserves a second chance. According to Holifield, even though Tyson made a mistake and should pay the consequences, he still should be allowed to work.

We are called upon to treat others the way God treats us. When God looks at us, He sees our needs, not our faults. Many of us harbor grudges and treat people as though they do not deserve to be forgiven, either by us or by God. We may not *deserve* to be forgiven, but we *need* forgiveness. More than that, however, we need to forgive. We cannot be saved unless we do.

This week's lesson asks us to remember that every person we see is faced with making a decision regarding eternal life. If we have no room in our hearts for compassion and mercy, we cannot be effective witnesses. Let us not make the mistake of losing our souls because we are unforgiving, while those we do not forgive may be saved. “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12, NKJV).

“God does not deal with us as finite men deal with one another. His thoughts are thoughts of mercy, love, and tenderest compassion.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 53.

We influence others by our words, actions, and attitudes. We can draw others to Christ with a kind, forgiving spirit—a spirit of love.

A QUESTION OF GRACE.

Let's look again at what the Lord had said to Jonah in Jonah 4:10. Jonah just gets done saying, basically, *Yes, I have the right to be angry, even unto death, because You took away my plant.* But the way God responds shows Jonah the true situation: that he really didn't have any claim to that plant or any right to that plant or any authority over that plant. He didn't work for it, earn it, or even grow it. The plant, when it gave him shade, was purely the supernatural act of God in behalf of Jonah.

Something we can't earn, can't labor for, can't create ourselves, yet is totally a gift of God in our behalf? Sounds like what? See Job 4:17-21; Rom. 3:28; 4:13-16; Eph. 2:5-10.

Again, how much different is Jonah from the rest of humanity? How often do we take the gifts of God for granted? God shows us mercy and grace, and we almost can get used to them, as though they were our due. We forget that not only are they gifts of grace (How can grace be anything other than a gift?) but what it cost for us to have that grace granted to us. All of us, every moment of our lives, are recipients of God's grace, probably in more ways than we realize. And, perhaps, that's the problem: Like Jonah, we don't realize it.

Look at 2 Timothy 1:8-10. Notice what it says about what had been given us in Christ "before the world began." If something were given to us before the world began, it was given to us before we asked for it or even before we could earn it. That's why it has to be grace.

Summarize 2 Timothy 1:8-10, paralleling it with what we can here in God's dealing with Jonah. What are those verses saying? List the things that, according to those verses, God has done for us solely by His grace. Why does Paul specify that it's not of works?

A young family ate out every Sunday night. One Sunday, for whatever reason, they decided not to go. One of their children, age six, upon hearing the news, exclaimed, "Well, I *expected* to go out to eat!" In what ways are we in danger of doing the same thing with God's grace: Because it has been given so freely to us, and in abundance, we assume that we have it coming or that it's owed us?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: William Lee said that it is not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they are; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they be; nor the music of our prayers, how sweet our voice may be; nor the logic of our prayers, how argumentative they may be; nor the method of our prayers, how orderly they may be—which God cares for. Fervency of spirit is that which availeth much.

Share an example of when the right attitude is equally important, if not more important, than words.

Thought Questions:

1. Jonah knew all about God's saving grace, in theory; however, when it came to practice, his righteous indignation locked horns with theory. In fury, Jonah carried out a one-man protest against God's saving grace toward the Ninevites. How can we keep our opinions and judgments from interfering with the gospel message of salvation?
2. The title of this week's lesson is almost comical: "A Wind, a Worm, and a Plant." God creatively uses unexpected object lessons to teach us His will. Glean through the Bible, making a list of some of the object lessons you can find. Why do you think God uses object les-

sons as a method of revealing His will to us?

3. Discouragement can fuel inappropriate actions—actions that you may be sorry about later. What other emotions spark words and actions that are not Christlike? What can you do to cope with human emotions that are detrimental to both you and to those around you? How did Jonah cope with his emotions? What should he have done differently?

Application Questions:

1. One of Jonah's major weaknesses was that he was blind to his own spiritual condition. It is easy to become blind to our own spiritual condition, as well. So, how can we guard against such blindness?
2. Ellen White comments (see Friday's section of the Standard Edition) that every moment of life everyone is the beneficiary of God's grace, whether or not he or she is converted. How should this truth affect the way we treat new church members? Why is discipling the new member so important in the context of spiritual growth and of God's grace? What role do you see yourself playing in the spiritual development of new members joining your home church?

FURTHER STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 329–335; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 390–404.

Nineveh finally *was* reduced to ruins in 612 B.C. But the generation that heard Jonah preach experienced a wonderful deliverance, and the God of the Hebrews “was exalted and honored throughout the heathen world, and His law was revered.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271. And the book of Jonah records one of the grandest events in the history of redemption!

“The Son of God gave all—life and love and suffering—for our redemption. And can it be that we, the unworthy objects of so great love, will withhold our hearts from Him? Every moment of our lives we have been partakers of the blessings of His grace, and for this very reason we cannot fully realize the depths of ignorance and misery from which we have been saved.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 185.

“It was God’s purpose that His grace should be revealed among the Gentiles as well as among the Israelites. This had been plainly outlined in Old Testament prophecies. The apostle uses some of these prophecies in his argument. ‘Hath not the potter power over the clay,’ he inquires, ‘of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? What if God, willing to show His wrath, and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom He hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 376.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What other prophet wanted to die over discouragement? (1 Kings 19). Are there any parallels between Jonah’s situation and that of Elijah’s? If so, what? What are the differences?**
- 2. Ellen White, in one of the above quotes, said that every moment of our lives we have been partakers of God’s grace. Even while we were unconverted or unbelievers or in open rebellion? How do you understand what that statement means? In what ways are even the unconverted partakers of this grace?**

SUMMARY: God loves us, despite our hypocrisy.