

# Eager to Forgive (Jonah)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** Jonah 1–4, Ps. 139:1–12, Isa. 42:5, Rev. 10:6, Matt. 12:39–41, 2 Chron. 36:15–17.

**Memory Text:** “ ‘But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD’ ” (*Jonah 2:9, NIV*).

**Key Thought:** The book of Jonah reveals, among other things, that God is more willing to forgive others than we often are.

The story of Jonah, this rather unusual messenger of God, is one of the best known in the Bible. The prophet had been sent by God to warn Nineveh of coming destruction. He suspected that these non-Hebrew people might repent of their sins and that God would forgive them. Being a true prophet, Jonah knew that God's plan was to save Nineveh, not to destroy it. Maybe that is why he, at first, tried to run away. Due to forces beyond his control, however, Jonah changed his mind and obeyed God's command.

In response to Jonah's preaching, the entire city believed the message and repented in a way in which, unfortunately, Israel and Judah did not. Jonah, meanwhile, had a number of important lessons to learn. The story shows how God patiently was teaching His narrow and stubborn prophet what grace, mercy, and forgiveness are all about.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 11.*

## The Disobedient Prophet (Jonah 1)

Not much is known about Jonah or his family background. Second Kings 14:25 tells that he lived in the northern part of Israel and ministered during the eighth century B.C. The same text reveals that Jonah predicted a territorial expansion of Israel's kingdom.

Nineveh was historically one of the three great cities of Assyria, an important country situated by the Tigris River. Because God is the Lord of all nations and all peoples are accountable to Him (*Amos 1–2*), He sent His servant Jonah to warn the Ninevites of impending destruction. God's command recorded in Jonah 1:2 to "preach against it" (*NIV*) also can be translated as "preach to it."

Assyrian cruelty was notorious. About a century later, the prophet Nahum called Nineveh a "bloody city . . . full of lies and robbery" (*Nah. 3:1*). Jonah was sent to deliver God's message to such people. Perhaps it was fear of the hated Assyrians, among other things, that prompted Jonah's attitude. When told by God to make a trip east to Nineveh, the prophet refused and tried to flee west by ship to Tarshish.

At first, all things appeared to work well for Jonah, but then the Lord sent a great storm against the ship in order to teach His servant the lesson that no one can hide from God.

Jonah ran from God because he did not want to do God's will. Even now people have many reasons to try to run away from God. Some do it because they do not know Him personally. Others reject even the idea of God and His Word; while their motives vary, in many cases they do so in order to not feel guilty about the way in which they live. After all, if there is no higher power to answer to, why not do whatever you want? There are even some Christians who avoid God when He calls them to do something that they do not want to do, something that goes against their inherently selfish and sinful nature.

**Read Psalm 139:1–12. What's the basic message there for us? What kind of feelings does this fundamental truth evoke in you? Or look at it this way: we believe that God not only sees all that we do but knows even our thoughts. Do we live with that constant realization, or do we tend to try and blot it out of our minds? Or, perhaps, are we just so used to the idea that we just do not pay it much attention? Whatever the reasons, how differently would you act if, at all times, you were keenly sensitive to the fact that God does know your every thought?**

## Reluctant Witness

In Jonah 1, the Lord wants to halt Jonah's escape, so He stirs up such a severe storm that it threatens to wreck the ship. The seamen call on their gods for help. Due to the severity of the storm, they feel that someone must have provoked the anger of the gods. They cast lots to decide who will be first to volunteer information about himself that might expose such an offense. For the casting of lots, each individual brings an identifiable stone or wooden marker. The markers are placed in a container that is shaken until one of the markers comes out. The lot falls on Jonah, who now confesses his sins and urges the seamen to throw him into the sea.

This story is remarkable because in it the non-Hebrew seamen act positively while Jonah is presented in a negative light. Although they worship many gods, the seamen show a great respect for the Lord to whom they pray. They are also tenderhearted toward the Lord's servant Jonah, which is why they go out of their way to try to row back to the land. Finally, they agree with Jonah that he should be thrown overboard. With this done, the storm stops and the seamen sacrifice to the Lord and praise Him.

**In** verse 9, how does Jonah describe the Lord whom he said he feared? What is significant about the way in which he described the Lord? See also Rev 14:7, Isa. 42:5, Rev. 10:6.

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Jonah's confession of faith in God as Creator of the sea and land underscores the futility of his attempts to escape from God's presence. The immediate cessation of the storm after the men throw Jonah into the sea shows them that the Lord, as Creator, has control of the sea. Because of this, the seamen worship the Lord all the more. How long their newfound fear and reverence for the Creator was to last, we are not told. There is no doubt, however, that they do learn something about Him from this experience.

**We can barely comprehend many of the wonders of the world around us, much less all that is beyond the reach of our senses and even our imagination. How does the Creator speak to you through that which He has made?**

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## Jonah's Psalm

When Jonah was thrown into the sea, a big fish swallowed him at God's bidding. Jonah must have thought that death indeed was going to be the only way to escape the mission to Nineveh. But the big fish (not called a whale in the book) was an instrument of salvation for the prophet. Unlike Jonah, this creature responded promptly and obediently to God's commands (*Jon. 1:17, 2:10*).

God's providence worked in an amazing way here. However, even though some people scoff at the story, Jesus testified to its veracity (*Matt. 12:40*) and even used it in reference to His own death and bodily resurrection.

**Read** Jonah 2, often called Jonah's psalm. What is he saying there? What has he learned? What spiritual principles can we take away from this chapter?

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Jonah's psalm celebrates God's deliverance from the perilous depths of the sea. It is the only poetic part of the book. In it Jonah recalls his prayer for help as he was sinking deep into the waters and facing certain death. Becoming fully aware of his salvation, he thanked God for it. The hymn indicates that Jonah was familiar with biblical psalms of praise and thanksgiving.

Jonah's vow likely consisted of a sacrifice of thanksgiving. He was grateful that, though he deserved to die, God had shown him extraordinary mercy. In spite of his disobedience, Jonah still considered himself loyal to God because he had not succumbed to idol worship. Whatever his many character flaws, he was determined to try to be faithful to his calling.

**Sometimes it takes a terrible experience to open our heart to the Lord, and to realize that He is our only hope, our only salvation. Dwell on an experience you have had where you clearly saw the hand of the Lord working in your own life. Why is it so easy to forget the ways in which the Lord has led you, even miraculously, especially when new trials arise?**

## A Successful Mission

After such a miraculous deliverance, when commanded by God the second time to go to preach in Nineveh, Jonah obeyed immediately. In his proclamation, Jonah (3:1–4) used language reminiscent of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 19*). But in the original Hebrew, the word for “overthrown” (see *Gen. 19:21, 29; Jon. 3:4*) from Jonah’s proclamation can also have the meaning “turned around” or “transformed” (*Exod. 7:17, 20; 1 Sam. 10:6*). Jonah’s preaching of the divine message was not in vain.

The greatest achievement of Jonah’s prophetic career was the repentance of the city. After the seamen, the Ninevites were the second group of non-Hebrews in the book to turn to God, and all because of interactions with God’s flawed messenger. The results were astounding. To humble themselves before God, the people of Nineveh wore sackcloth, put ashes on their heads, and fasted. All these were external signs of sorrow and repentance.

**Read Matthew 12:39–41 and 2 Chronicles 36:15–17. What do these verses teach us about the importance of repentance?**

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The remarkable picture of a strong Assyrian monarch humbling himself in ashes before God is a sharp rebuke to many of Israel’s proud rulers and people, at least those who persistently rejected the prophetic calls to repentance. Because of the book of Jonah’s emphasis on God’s grace and forgiveness, the Jewish people read it every year at the climactic point of the Day of Atonement, which celebrates God’s forgiveness for their sins.

“Our God is a God of compassion. With long-sufferance and tender mercy he deals with the transgressors of his law. And yet, in this our day, when men and women have so many opportunities for becoming familiar with the divine law as revealed in Holy Writ, the great Ruler of the universe can not behold with any satisfaction the wicked cities, where reign violence and crime. If the people in these cities would repent, as did the inhabitants of Nineveh, many more such messages as Jonah’s would be given.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 18, 1906.

**Read Jonah 3:5–10. What do these verses reveal about the nature of true repentance? How can we apply these same principles to ourselves?**

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## Forgiven, Yet Unforgiving

**Read** Jonah 4. What important lessons did Jonah need to learn? How is his own hypocrisy revealed here?

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Jonah 4 reveals some startling things about the prophet. He seems to prefer to die rather than to witness about God's grace and forgiveness. Whereas before Jonah had rejoiced in his deliverance from death (*Jon. 2:7–9*), now that Nineveh lives, he prefers to die (*Jon. 4:2, 3*).

In contrast to Jonah, God is pictured in the Bible as someone who takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (*Ezek. 33:11, NKJV*). Jonah and many of his compatriots rejoiced in God's special mercies to Israel but wished only His wrath on their enemies. Such hardness of heart is rebuked sternly by the book's message.

**What** are some of the lessons we can learn from Jonah's mistakes? How does prejudice compromise our Christian testimony?

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It rightly has been observed that Jonah's book is a handbook on how not to be a prophet. Jonah was a prophet of rebellious spirit and mistaken priorities. He could not control his desire for vengeance. He was small-minded and ill-tempered. Instead of rejoicing in the grace that God also showed to the Ninevites, Jonah allowed his selfish and sinful pride to make him resentful.

Jonah's last word is a wish for death (*Jon. 4:8, 9*) while God's last word is an affirmation of His immeasurable grace, an affirmation for life.

Jonah's book is left open-ended. Its closing verses confront the readers with one important question that remains unanswered by the author: Did the miraculous change of hearts in Nineveh eventually result in a radical change of Jonah's heart?

**There is a lot in the story of Jonah that is hard to understand, particularly about Jonah himself. Perhaps, though, the clearest lesson is that God's grace and forgiveness extend way beyond ours. How can we learn to be more graceful and forgiving to those who do not deserve it as we see God doing here with Jonah and with the Ninevites?**

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**Further Study:** Read the following quotations and discuss how they help us to understand the messages from the book of Jonah more clearly.

“Whenever they are in need the children of God have the precious privilege of appealing to Him for help. It matters not how unsuitable the place may be, God’s ear of mercy is open to their cry. However desolate and dark the place may be, it can be turned into a veritable temple by the praying child of God.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1,003.

“Confused, humiliated, and unable to understand God’s purpose in sparing Nineveh, Jonah nevertheless had fulfilled the commission given him to warn that great city; and though the event predicted did not come to pass, yet the message of warning was nonetheless from God. And it accomplished the purpose God designed it should. The glory of His grace was revealed among the heathen.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 272, 273.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The book of Jonah teaches that God is in full control of nature. Imagine that one of your friends has lost a family member because of a natural disaster. How would you explain to him or her that God is still in charge despite the presence of natural disasters that devastate parts of our world and take away many human lives?
- ❷ Read the last verse of Jonah. What does it teach us about our responsibility for mission outreach to all corners of the world?
- ❸ In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (*Matt. 18:21–35*), Jesus compared God to an angry king who revoked his forgiveness and threw the once-forgiven slave into jail. Does God really revoke His forgiveness? Some Christians argue adamantly that He does not. As a church, what position do we take on this topic, and why?
- ❹ For many people steeped in secularism, the idea of a man being swallowed alive and living inside a “big fish” is not something to be taken seriously. As we saw earlier, however, Jesus clearly testified to the truthfulness of the story. How does the story of Jonah help us to realize just how narrow and confining an anti-supernaturalist view of reality really is?

## One Single Book

I was a troublemaker. I disobeyed my parents and teachers and questioned every authority. My parents weren't religious, but they had strict standards. But I refused to follow their rules.

One day as my mother traveled by bus to another city, a man stood up and talked about a book he was selling. The book was *The Great Controversy*. He said that this book had changed thousands of lives. Mother was desperate and sacrificed to buy that book for me.

I love reading, and when Mother gave me the book, I went to my room and started reading. The book's ideas were new to me, and some things were hard to understand. But I kept reading. I looked up references to the Bible and realized that this book taught straight from the Bible.

The book mentioned the Sabbath. I'd never heard of the Sabbath before, but I knew it must be important. I asked a boy at school who worshiped on Sabbath to let me go to church with him. He took me to a charismatic church that worshiped on Sabbath. I joined that church. My parents might have objected, but they saw changes in my life, so they said nothing.

I kept reading the Bible and asking lots of questions. The church elders didn't answer some of my questions, and one elder accused me of being a Seventh-day Adventist. I didn't know about Seventh-day Adventists, but I started looking for one.

I met a Seventh-day Adventist man and peppered him with questions. He answered them all from the Bible. We had some long and heated discussions. I wasn't interested in a church; I just wanted to understand the Bible.

I finished high school and took a job teaching elementary school in a small village to save money for college. I discovered that the school was Seventh-day Adventist! I began attending the Seventh-day Adventist church in the village, and soon all doubt was gone. I wanted to be baptized.

I shudder when I think of where I would be if my mother hadn't given me that book. God used that book to turn my life around. Before I read the book, I was a nuisance to my family. After I discovered the truth in this book, I became so excited about my faith that I became a different kind of "nuisance." It's my mission to tell my family—and everyone—about God's great plan of salvation.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a huge publishing work around the world. Our mission offerings help support the publishing work so that people such as I can experience God's love. Thank you for your offerings. Thank God for His salvation!

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OLIVER ESHUN, *the author of this story, lives in Ghana, West Africa.*

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