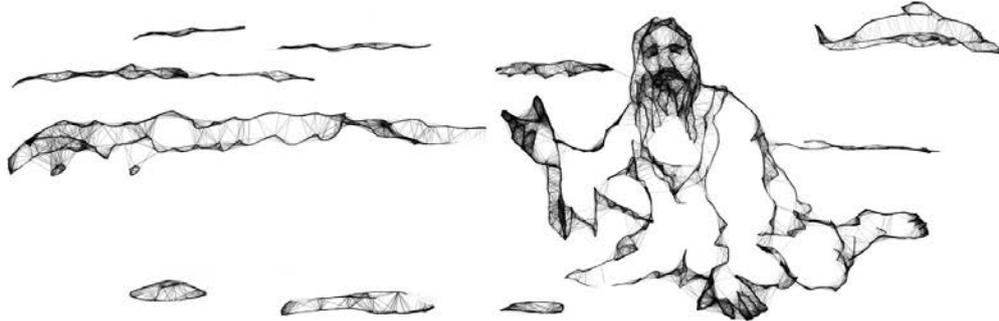


The Jonah Story



SABBATH—JULY 18

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jonah 1–4; 2 Kings 14:25; Isaiah 56:7; Isaiah 44:8; Matthew 12:40; Revelation 14:6–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘I now realize how true it is that God treats everyone the same,’ he [Peter] said. ‘He [God] accepts people from every nation. He accepts all who have respect for him and do what is right’ ” (Acts 10:34, 35, NIV).

THE JONAH STORY IS ABOUT A HEBREW PROPHET (SPECIAL MESSENGER) WHO WAS NOT COMFORTABLE WITH HIS WORK. Alive during the rule of Jeroboam II, about 750 B.C. (2 Kings 14:25), Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet whom God called to be a missionary in another country. The Creator God did not plan to limit salvation only to His chosen people. This truth is often brought up in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah and Psalms. Popular Israelite teachings at the time of Jonah did not accept that the Gentiles (non-Jews) were also in God's plan for salvation. Even in New Testament times it was a hard lesson for the Jewish believers to learn.

In the four chapters of Jonah, we read an honest story of Jonah's experience as an unwilling foreign missionary. Here a person's inner feelings about the call of God are recorded, along with the deep need for foreign missions. The book of Jonah gives us a few guidelines for foreign missionaries. It also teaches us what it means to people of other cultures. This book also points to answers for some of the issues and problems modern missionaries face.

THE FAULTY PROPHET (2 Kings 14:25)

What does 2 Kings 14:25 tell us about Jonah? What kind of information is given about him?

Outside the book of Jonah, the prophet is named in one other Old Testament verse: 2 Kings 14:25. Here Jonah is honored as a prophet who foretold Israel's recapture of territory taken by Syria.

Jonah was born in Gath Hopher (Hebrew for "winepress at the water hole"). Gath Hopher was a town in Zebulun in northern Israel, only a few miles from Nazareth. This means that both Jesus and Jonah were Galilean prophets (special messengers), separated by about seven hundred fifty years.

Read Jonah 1:1–3, 9, 12; Jonah 2:1–9; and Jonah 3:3–10. What kind of picture do these verses present about him, both the good and the bad?

Jonah was a strange mix of both strength and weakness. He was stubborn and rebellious (fought against God's plan) but also teachable and obedient. He was loyal to God, courageous, and a believer in prayer. But he was also narrow-minded and selfish, and wanted to see his enemies suffer. Jonah is described as a servant of the Lord in 2 Kings 14:25. But he reveals a somewhat sad picture of himself in the book that carries his name. It proves the honesty of the Bible that Jonah is described so truthfully. It would be natural and normal for a human writer to hide the less acceptable parts of the lives of biblical heroes. But under the Holy Spirit's leading, the Bible's authors give both the good and the bad side of the lives of people. No matter how weak and unpleasant these characters (people) may be, God is able to work through them, if they are willing.

What other Bible characters did God use, even though they had faults and weaknesses? What hope can we learn for ourselves from the fact that God uses faulty and weak people to work for Him in reaching out to others?

AN EARLY MISSIONARY (Jonah 1:3–17)

“Go to Nineveh!” was God’s command to Jonah. In the Old Testament, the usual call to the nations was “come to Zion [Jerusalem].” God’s original plan was for Israel to live their religion. They were to make the nation so attractive that other nations would come to them for advice (Isaiah 56:7).

Jonah is a forerunner (example) of the disciples in the New Testament (Matthew 28:18–20). God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, an unclean center of idol worship and cruelty. Jonah made careful plans instead to go west by sea, even though God had commanded him to go east by land. Jonah, the unwilling prophet, tried to escape in the opposite direction.

Read Jonah 1:3–17. What lessons can we learn from this amazing story?

God’s answer to Jonah’s escape comes in a powerful storm. The winds obey their Creator, even though His prophet does not (Mark 4:41). Jonah sleeps during the storm while the Gentile crew prays (Jonah 1:5). After being awakened, Jonah honestly confesses that he has caused the storm, and he witnesses to the true God and Creator. Notice his answer, “I am Hebrew,” talking about both his religion and his nationality. In their alarm at the power of the storm, the Gentile sailors try to save themselves and the passengers. And they have mercy on Jonah by not wanting to throw him overboard. (The unwilling prophet is willing to sacrifice himself to save others.) When the sailors finally obey, the storm stops, and the sea calms (Jonah 1: 15). The surprised sailors became Jonah’s first converts (believers) to his God, who could work through Jonah, even while he fled from His call.

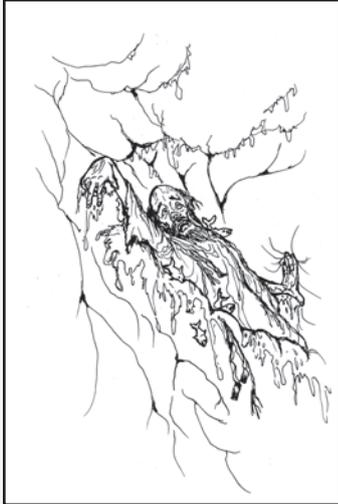
The salvation of Jonah was just as miraculous as was the salvation of the ship. God prepared “a great fish.” The original Hebrew does not say what kind of fish saved Jonah by swallowing him. Jonah in the belly (stomach) of the fish is certainly the best-known part of the story. But it should not take away from the book’s deeper message that God loves, cares for, and wants salvation for all people.

In the end, there is only one God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth (read Isaiah 44:8; Isaiah 45:5, 6). Anything else anyone worships is idol worship and error. If we are mission-minded, why is this truth so important for us to understand and study for ourselves?



The crew threw Jonah overboard, and a great fish swallowed him.

IN THE BELLY (STOMACH) OF THE BIG FISH (Matthew 12:40)



**In the belly of the fish,
Jonah began to pray.**

The three-day experience in the belly of the big fish became a symbol of the death and resurrection (return to life from the dead) of Christ (Jonah 1:17–2:10; Matthew 12:40). God gave and directed the great fish. There are stories of people who survived at sea after having been swallowed by a whale. But we must remember that God chose this special great fish and also kept Jonah alive inside it. This was a miraculous event that could have happened only through the Lord. He is shown all through the Bible as a personal God who acts miraculously in people's lives.

There is proof that the words "three days and three nights" were used in Jonah's day and age to explain the time needed for the imaginary journey (trip) to *Sheol*. *Sheol* is the Hebrew name for the place of the dead. And after what happened to him, Jonah should have been as good as dead.

In the belly of the fish, Jonah began to pray. Earlier the captain asked Jonah, "Call on your God" (Jonah 1:6, NKJV). Now in a hopeless situation, Jonah starts to pray, and seriously too. It took something this bad to get him finally to do what he should have been doing all along. A summary of Jonah's prayer has been saved in a psalm of thanksgiving. Such psalms usually have five parts: (1) introduction; (2) description of the problem; (3) cry to God for help; (4) report of God's action; and (5) promise to testify (speak to others) about God's saving action. That is, *Lord, if You get me out of this, I promise to do such and such*. Who has not prayed like that before? The question is: Did you do what you promised to do?

Read Matthew 12:40. How does Jesus take the story of Jonah and use it as an example of Himself? Read also John 2:19–22.

The chapter ends with the words, "And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land" (Jonah 2:10, NIV). God's command to the great fish brought about what the sailors failed to do for Jonah. In the same way, Christ commanded the disciples after His resurrection to go into all the world. So Jonah, after his experience with the great fish, went to the Gentiles and became the most successful missionary in the Old Testament. Jonah's rescue witnessed to God's saving mercy. His arrival on the beach teaches God's strong desire to save even sinful Assyrians from death.

THE NINEVEH GENERATION (Jonah 3)

Read Jonah 3. What great message is found here about outreach and evangelism?'

“A message came to Jonah from the LORD a second time. He said, ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce to its people the message I give you’ ” (Jonah 3:1, 2, NIV). Two verbs are important in the verses. First, this is the second time God says “Go!” God does not give up. He gives failing humans a second chance. Here again we have the New Testament mission idea. This is the idea of going to the nations, as opposed to expecting the nations to come to you.

The other important verb is “proclaim [preach; announce].” Preaching has always been important in the Bible. It is still the best way of spreading the gospel message. God told Jonah to preach the “*message I give you.*” The message we preach must be God’s, not our own.

God’s message is usually threat and promise, judgment and gospel. His bold message was: “In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed” (Jonah 3:4, NIV). That was the judgment. But there was also the promise of hope and salvation. (This must be true because the people listened to the message and were saved.)

Even with the “everlasting gospel” at the heart of it, Revelation 14:6–12 also warns about judgment. Gospel and judgment go hand in hand. The gospel offers us God’s way to avoid the punishment that judgment would bring upon us all.

No preaching works well if these important parts—gospel and judgment—are not included. Leaving either part out is risky. In mission we need to fit our preaching to the needs of the people we are trying to reach. But we must never do so at the expense of the message God has given us to preach.

What happens in Jonah 3:5–10? The people of Nineveh believed, acted on their beliefs, lived out their faith, and were saved.

God has given us some wonderful promises, and serious warnings too. What should this story teach us about the seriousness of these promises and warnings?



Jonah preached God’s message of doom and mercy to Nineveh.

DEFINITIONS

1. evangelism—the act of going from place to place to spread the gospel.

JONAH'S SORROW (Jonah 4:10, 11)



Jonah grew angry when God saved Nineveh and when the vine that gave him shade died.

Jonah 4:1–11 reveals that God's greatest problem in getting His prophet involved in world mission was not distance, wind, sailors, fish, or the people of Nineveh. It was the prophet himself. The Ninevites' faith was different from Jonah's unbelief and cruel spirit. Jonah is the only person in the Holy Bible who blames God for being too kind, merciful, and slow to anger. He blames God for being too full of love and for not giving punishment. One would think most people would look at these parts of God with thankfulness.

"Jonah learned of God's purpose to save the city in spite of its wickedness. At that point, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God's wonderful grace [mercy; forgiveness]. But instead Jonah let his mind worry about being a false prophet who said things that did not come true. Jealous of his reputation, Jonah forgot the greater value of the souls in that wretched city. The mercy shown by God toward the repentant [sorry for sins] Ninevites 'displeased Jonah exceedingly [very much], and he was very angry.'"—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 271.

Read Jonah 4:10, 11. What do these verses teach us about the difference between the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of God and sinful human nature? Why should we be glad that God, not fellow human beings, is our final judge?

Jonah showed his anger two times in chapter 4. He was angry because God changed His mind and saved Nineveh's more than one hundred twenty thousand people. Jonah was also angry because the vine died. In his selfishness, the prophet could not put the most important things first.

God taught Jonah to recognize human brotherhood based on the fatherhood of God. The prophet should accept his human tie with these "foreigners," even though they were sinful. Were not 120,000 people more important than a vine?

Read again the Lord's scolding of Jonah. In what ways might the Lord be able to say something like this to us? How often do we find ourselves more concerned over our "little" personal problems than over the lost souls whom Christ shed His blood to save?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “The book of Jonah is very important for understanding the Bible’s teaching of mission. This is because it deals with God’s command to His people about the Gentile peoples. This command also serves as the beginning step in the missionary command in the New Testament. But it is also important for us to see in Jonah’s example of rebellion [disobeying God’s command] the rebellion of other believers against doing God’s worldwide work.”—Adapted from Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary [Today’s] Missiology*² (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), page 96.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① “In the history of Nineveh there is a lesson which you should study carefully. . . . You must know your duty to your fellow humans who are sinners and do not know of God’s grace and who need your help.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work*, page 80. What is our duty to these fellow beings?
- ② Assyria was one of the superpowers controlling the Near East from about 885 to 625 B.C. Israel and Judah often suffered under her cruel rule. Israel’s King Jehu was forced to pay tax to the conquering Assyrian ruler, Shalmaneser III. Israel finally fell to Assyrian forces about 722 B.C. No wonder Jonah was unwilling to go to Nineveh, one of the four chief cities of Assyria. And Nineveh was the center for the worship of Ishtar, goddess of love and war. God had called Jonah to visit the very spiritual heartland of enemy territory to tell the warlike Assyrians to repent. What lessons are here for us about missions?
- ③ How can the remnant church avoid thinking that the counsels and blessings of the Lord (the Sabbath, health, and education) are given to them for their own benefit, rather than for the benefit of people of other nations? Read Revelation 3:17, 18.
- ④ In what ways do the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 reveal the message that Jonah had for the Ninevites?
- ⑤ Some people automatically refuse to accept the Jonah story. Especially true is their difficulty in believing the part where Jonah is in the belly of the fish. What thoughts would lead them to not accept it? What thoughts do you need in order to believe it?

DEFINITIONS

2. missiology—the study of the mission of the church, both its nature and its purpose.