

The Restless Prophet



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Jonah 1–4, Jer. 25:5, Ezek. 14:6, Rev. 2:5, Luke 9:51–56, Jude 1–25.*

Memory Text: “ ‘And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?’ ” (*Jonah 4:11, NKJV*).

One of the most interesting stories in Scripture has to be that of Jonah. Here he was, a prophet of God, someone called of God, and yet—what? He ran away from God’s call. Then, after being persuaded in a dramatic way to change his mind and obey the Lord, he did so—but then only to do what? To complain that the people to whom he was called to witness actually repented and were spared the destruction that, otherwise, would have been theirs!

What an example of someone not at rest, not at peace—even to the point where he cried out, “ ‘Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!’ ” (*Jon. 4:3, NKJV*).

Jesus Himself referred to the story of Jonah, saying: “ ‘The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here’ ” (*Matt. 12:41, NKJV*). Greater than Jonah, indeed! If not, He couldn’t be our Savior.

This week, let’s look at Jonah and what we can learn from his restlessness and lack of peace.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 18.

Running Away

Jonah was an amazingly successful missionary. At the same time, he also was a very reluctant one, at least at first. Whatever Jonah was doing, God's call interrupted his life in a big way. Instead of taking God's yoke upon his shoulders and discovering for himself that His yoke is easy and His burden light (*Matt. 11:30*), Jonah decided to find his own "rest," and that was by running in the opposite direction from where God was calling him to go.

Where was Jonah hoping to find peace and rest from God's call? How well did it work for him? Read Jonah 1.

Jonah set off in the opposite direction from where God called him. He didn't even stop to reason with God, as had many of the other Bible prophets when called to be God's messengers (*see, for example, Exod. 4:13*).

Interestingly enough, this was not the first time that Jonah had been called to speak for God, as suggested by 2 Kings 14:25. In that case, however, Jonah appears to have done what the Lord had asked him to. Not this time, however.

Why?

Historical and archaeological records document the cruelty of the Neo-Assyrian overlords who dominated the ancient Near East during the eighth century B.C., the time that Jonah ministered in Israel. About seventy-five years later, the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Judah. Israel and Samaria already had fallen about twenty years earlier, and King Hezekiah apparently had joined a local anti-Assyrian coalition.

Now the time had come for the Assyrians to settle accounts. The Bible (*2 Kings 18, Isaiah 36*), historical Assyrian documents, and the wall reliefs of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh all tell us the cruel story about the fall of Lachish, one of the most important and well-fortified southern-border fortresses of Hezekiah. In one inscription, Sennacherib claimed to have taken more than two hundred thousand prisoners from 46 fortified cities that he claimed to have destroyed. When the Assyrian king took Lachish, hundreds or thousands of prisoners were impaled; hard-core supporters of King Hezekiah were flayed alive, while the rest were sent to Assyria as cheap slave labor.

The Assyrians could be incredibly cruel, even by the standards of the world at that time. And God was sending Jonah into the very heart of that empire?

Is it any wonder that Jonah didn't want to go?

Fleeing from God? Have you ever done that before? If so, how well did it work out for you? What lessons should you have learned from that mistake?

A Three-Day Rest

Jonah's flight from God was not without problems. His short-lived "rest" was disturbed when God miraculously intervened with the storm. Jonah was saved from a watery grave by God, who ordered a fish to save Jonah.

However, it was only when Jonah found himself in a forced three-day rest in the stomach of the big fish that he realized how very dependent he was on God. Sometimes we have to be brought to the place where we don't have anything that this world offers to lean on in order to realize that Jesus is who we really need.

Read Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish (see *Jon. 2:1-9*). What did he pray about?

Though he was there in the deep, in a very dangerous situation, Jonah, in his prayer, prayed about the sanctuary. He would look toward "Your holy temple."

What is going on here?

The temple forms a focal point of this prayer, and it should be the central point of prayer in general. There is primarily only one place in the Old Testament where God can be found. He is in the sanctuary (see *Exod. 15:17, Exod. 25:8*). The sanctuary is the central point of prayer and communion with God.

Yet, Jonah was not referencing the Jerusalem temple. Rather, he was talking about the heavenly sanctuary (*Jon. 2:7*). That's where his hope existed, because that's where God and the salvation He offers truly come from.

Jonah finally understood this important truth. He had experienced God's grace. He had been saved. As the big fish spit him out, he understood firsthand about God's love for him, a runaway prophet. He certainly had learned (even if not without some detours along the way) that the only safe course for any believer is to seek to be within God's will.

So, now he decided to do his duty and obey God's orders, finally heading for Nineveh, no doubt on faith, as he was heading toward an exceedingly wicked city whose citizens might not like this foreign prophet telling them just how bad they were.

Sometimes we might just need to get away from it all in order to get a fresh perspective on things. Though the story of Jonah, who miraculously survived in the belly of a fish, is a rather extreme case, how might stepping out of your normal environment allow you to look at it from a new and, perhaps, needed perspective?

Mission Accomplished

Compared to any city or town in Israel, Nineveh was a huge city. It was an “exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent” (*Jon. 3:3, NKJV*).

Read *Jonah 3:1–10*. What is the response of this wicked place? What lessons can we take from this story for ourselves in our attempts to witness to others?

While walking the city, Jonah proclaimed God’s message: “ ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ” (*Jon. 3:4, NKJV*). The message was right to the point. Though the details are not given, it becomes clear that the message fell on receptive ears, and the people of Nineveh (collectively!) believed Jonah’s words of warning.

In a typical Near Eastern manner, a decree was declared by the king of Nineveh in order to demonstrate a change of heart. Everyone—including animals—had to fast and mourn (how animals mourn, the text doesn’t say). The king stepped down from his throne and sat in the dust of the ground, a very important symbolic act.

Read *Jonah 3:6–9*. Compare it with *Jeremiah 25:5*, *Ezekiel 14:6*, and *Revelation 2:5*. What elements were involved in the king’s speech that show he understands what true repentance is all about?

The sermon was short, to the point, but filled with correct theology regarding true repentance. While Jonah had been preaching, the Holy Spirit must have been hard at work in the hearts of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites did not have the benefit of all the stories of God’s tender leading that the Israelites had, and yet, they still responded to Him in a positive manner. They were saying in effect, “Let’s throw ourselves on God’s mercy, not on our own accomplishments! Let’s rely completely on His goodness and grace.”

Strangely, Jonah, who had experienced God’s grace for himself personally, firsthand, seemed to think that God’s grace was something so exclusive that only some might have opportunity to rest in it.

Why is repentance such a crucial part of the Christian experience? What does it mean truly to repent of our sins, especially the sins that we commit again and again?

An Angry, Restless Missionary

Unfortunately, the story of Jonah doesn't end with chapter 3.

Read **Jonah 4:1–11.** What is Jonah's problem? What lesson can we learn from his rather faulty character?

Jonah 4 begins with Jonah's anger toward God because his mission outreach was so successful. Jonah was worried about looking foolish. We find God taking the time to talk to and reason with His prophet, who behaved like a toddler having a temper tantrum.

Here is evidence that true followers of God—even prophets—may have some growing and overcoming yet to do.

“When Jonah learned of God's purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God's amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

God's patience with His prophet was astounding. He seemed intent on using Jonah, and when Jonah ran away, God sent the storm and the fish to bring the runaway back. And even now, again, when Jonah was being contrary, God sought to reason with Jonah and his bad attitude, saying to him: “ ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ ” (*Jon. 4:4, NKJV*).

Read **Luke 9:51–56.** How does this account somewhat parallel what happened in the story of Jonah?

“ ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ ” (*John 3:16, NKJV*) or, as God puts it in Jonah 4:11: “ ‘Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and also much livestock?’ ” (*NKJV*). How grateful we should be that, in the end, God—and not we ourselves—is the ultimate Judge of hearts and minds and motives.

How can we learn to have the kind of compassion and patience for others that God has, or at least to learn to reflect that compassion and patience?

A Two-Way Street

Jonah seemed to be more trouble than he was worth. Nineveh was dangerous, but in the story of Jonah the Ninevites didn't seem to be the problem. They understood the message and quickly repented. Jonah, the missionary, seems to be the weak link in this mission story.

In this account, God pursued a reluctant prophet because He knew that Jonah needed the missionary trip to Nineveh as much as the Ninevites needed to hear the missionary's message.

Read the book of Jude. How can we “keep [our]selves in the love of God” (*Jude 21, NKJV*)? What does that mean?

In his short book in the New Testament, Jude tells us in Jude 21 to “keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (*NIV*).

Experiencing God's love and grace personally is not a one-time event. One sure way to “keep yourselves in God's love” is to reach out to others. In the next verses Jude tells us to “be merciful,” and “save” others by “snatching them from the fire” (*NIV*).

Read Jude 20–23. What is it saying here that relates to the story of Jonah, and what does this say to us as well?

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh because Jonah probably hadn't spent much time thinking about his relationship to the Assyrians before this particular call. He probably knew that he didn't like them, but he had no idea of how much he hated them or the extremes to which he would go in order to avoid them, even after he got the call. Jonah wasn't ready to have a Ninevite as a next-door neighbor in heaven. Jonah hadn't learned to love as God loves. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh because God loved the Ninevites and wanted them in His kingdom. But God also called Jonah because God loved Jonah. He wanted Jonah to grow and become more like Him as they worked together. God wanted Jonah to find the true rest that comes only by being in a saving relationship with Him and by doing God's will, which includes reaching out to others and pointing them to the faith and hope that we have.

How much time do you spend working for the salvation of others? In a spiritual sense, how does this kind of work lead us to find true rest in Jesus?

Further Thought: “In the charge given him, Jonah had been entrusted with a heavy responsibility; yet He who had bidden him go was able to sustain His servant and grant him success. Had the prophet obeyed unquestioningly, he would have been spared many bitter experiences, and would have been blessed abundantly. Yet in the hour of Jonah’s despair the Lord did not desert him. Through a series of trials and strange providences, the prophet’s confidence in God and in His infinite power to save was to be revived.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 266.

“Thousands can be reached in the most simple and humble way. The most intellectual, those who are looked upon as the world’s most gifted men and women, are often refreshed by the simple words of one who loves God, and who can speak of that love as naturally as the worldling speaks of the things that interest him most deeply.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 232.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 A “prophet of God” who was upset that the people God called him to witness to accepted salvation? How are we to understand this attitude on the part of Jonah? What a powerful example of God’s patience with His people, even when they act contrary to the light they have!
- 2 Jonah’s story seems to suggest that God not only is in the business of saving wayward people but also is very interested in transforming His followers. How can we get a “new heart” and a “new spirit,” even if we already know the Lord and the truth for this time? What is the difference between knowing truth and being transformed by it?
- 3 Read the book of Jude again. What is the essential message of the book, and why is that message relevant to us as a church today?
- 4 How does the experience of working for the salvation of others do us so much spiritual good as well?
- 5 Whatever good reasons Jonah had, or thought he had, for not wanting to go to Nineveh, God showed him how wrong he actually was. What attitude might we have toward others that could reflect the same wrong attitude that Jonah displayed?

No More Resentment

By TERRI SAELEE

Imagine being seven years old and fleeing for your life in a jungle. This was Jimmy Shwe's life in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar.

Young Jimmy developed a deep resentment toward the authorities because of his experiences. At one point, lost in the jungle, he thought he would die. He decided that if he survived, he would take up arms to get revenge.

After two years of separation, Jimmy found his father in a refugee camp in Thailand. But his father did not agree with Jimmy's plan, saying it would not help to fight. Instead, he urged Jimmy to become a pastor.

It was not easy for Jimmy to give up his anger and deep resentment. But he saw his father's peace and joy as they attended a Seventh-day Adventist church in the refugee camp. He read about the conflict between Christ and Satan in the Bible. He realized his father was right and decided to forgive.

Jimmy became a pastor and later resettled in the United States. He soon discovered that many Adventist refugee families whom he had known in refugee camps in Thailand were now scattered across North America. They were trying to find churches but did not know enough English to understand the messages or participate in the services. Many were discouraged. Jimmy longed to visit and encourage them in their faith. He wanted to help them to organize small groups so they could worship in their own language.

With much prayer, Jimmy planted three churches. But working full time to support his family, he did not have time or funds to travel to help anymore of the 2,000 Karen Adventist refugees scattered across the continent.

"But God knew my heart and my needs," said Jimmy, now a pastor in the Carolina Conference and a Karen church-planting consultant for the North American Division's Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries. "God had been leading all the time, and He already had a plan."

A Thirteenth Sabbath Offering that was collected in 2011 provided funds to reach out to refugees in North America. The funds allowed Jimmy to visit refugees scattered throughout the United States and Canada, helping them to organize congregations in their own language and to serve their communities.

Through his work, 55 Karen churches have been planted across the continent over the past decade.

All this was possible because church members gave, and Jimmy and others like him allowed God to replace their resentment with love.



This quarter, your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will again help share the gospel with refugees in the North American Division. Thank you for planning a generous offering.

Part I: Overview

God's strategy to save lost humanity sometimes appears strange. Nineveh, a city of 120,000 people, was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian armies were some of the most vicious in the Near East. Their cruelty was well known throughout the Mediterranean basin. They not only attacked enemy strongholds, but they also destroyed them. They brutally murdered the opposition and took thousands of young people as their slaves.

Imagine Jonah's reaction when God instructed him to travel from Israel to Nineveh to preach a message of repentance in this wicked city. Rather than trusting God's power to accomplish God's command, he was overwhelmed with anxiety. He had no rest or peace of mind, so he fled in the opposite direction. One of the remarkable things about this story is God's heartfelt desire to save the inhabitants of Nineveh. God is passionate about saving lost people. He will do whatever it takes to redeem them. The story of Jonah not only is about saving Nineveh; but it also is about saving Jonah, the reluctant prophet.

Jonah probably did not realize the depth of his animosity toward the Ninevites. Running from God, he ended up in the belly of a huge fish and had three days to contemplate his relationship with God. In an act of sheer desperation, Jonah cried out to God. When the huge fish spat him up on the shore, the reluctant runaway became the agreeable missionary. But the story does not end there. Jonah preached to the people of Nineveh, and when they repented, he was angry. He thought more of his reputation than of God's honor and His love for the people of Nineveh. In this week's lesson, we discover this wonderful truth: Jonah needed the gospel as much as the people of Nineveh did, and so do we.

Part II: Commentary

Jonah was a resident of a small city called Gath-hepher, located a short distance from the seaport city of Joppa (*2 Kings 14:25*). Filled with fear because of the cruelty of the inhabitants in Nineveh, he ran from God's call to witness to them. Boarding a sailing vessel headed for Tarshish, he desired to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. Although we cannot be certain, Tarshish is thought by many Bible commentators to be

Tartessus in southern Spain near Gibraltar. The westward journey by sea from Joppa to Tartessus was approximately 2,200 miles. Nineveh, on the other hand, was located about 700 miles northeast of Joppa.

The thought of being ridiculed, rejected, or even worse, persecuted overwhelmed the prophet. The difficulties before him appeared so great that he could not face them. Commenting on Jonah's lack of faith, Ellen G. White describes Jonah's mindset: "As the prophet thought of the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of this commission, he was tempted to question the wisdom of the call. From a human viewpoint it seemed as if nothing could be gained by proclaiming such a message in that proud city. He forgot for the moment that the God whom he served was all-wise and all-powerful. While he hesitated, still doubting, Satan overwhelmed him with discouragement. The prophet was seized with a great dread, and he 'rose up to flee unto Tarshish.' Going to Joppa, and finding there a ship ready to sail, 'he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them' [*Jon. 1:3*].

"In the charge given him, Jonah had been entrusted with a heavy responsibility; yet He who had bidden him go was able to sustain His servant and grant him success. Had the prophet obeyed unquestioningly, he would have been spared many bitter experiences, and would have been blessed abundantly."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 266.

Jonah did not solve his problem by running away from it. Running only plunged him into more difficulty. The God who commissioned him to preach repentance in Nineveh was fully capable of sustaining, supporting, and strengthening him. God never gives us a task without giving us the ability to accomplish that task. "As the will of man cooperates with the will of God, it becomes omnipotent. Whatever is to be done at His command may be accomplished in His strength. All His biddings are enablings."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 333. Jonah thought more of his weakness than he did of God's strength. But God was not through with him yet.

Jonah was on his way to Tarshish, but God was on His way to Jonah. As the prophet ran from God's call, God called out to the prophet. Scripture says, "The Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up" (*Jon. 1:4, NKJV*). The storm was so fierce that it threatened to break the ship to pieces. When it appeared that the cargo and the whole crew would be lost, in his absolute despair, Jonah begged them to throw him overboard. As he sank beneath the waves, he was swallowed by a large fish. The Bible says, "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (*Jon. 1:17, NKJV*).

There are those who believe the story of Jonah is too fanciful to be true. They think it is a mythical tale of fiction rather than a historical narrative. The evidence of Scripture, history, and archaeology is against

that view, however. Among other reasons for believing that Jonah's story is a real-life event is that, according to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was a historical character. The Jews regarded the book of Jonah as historical. Archaeological finds at Nineveh confirm the size of the city as described in the Bible. Jesus Himself refers to Nineveh and the story of Jonah (*Matt. 12:39, 40; Luke 11:29, 30*). One of the major issues revolves around whether a fish could ever swallow someone and if that person could survive.

John D. Morris, PhD, a scientist with the Institute for Creation Research, explains the possibility of Jonah's being swallowed by a large fish this way: "There are several species of whale and of sharks alive today with gullets large enough to swallow a man whole. Among extinct animals like the plesiosaurs, the same could be said, and perhaps this was a heretofore unknown fish of large size. The point is, the story is not impossible. However, most important, the Bible says that 'the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah' (*Jon. 1:17*). Clearly this event was miraculous and not a naturalistic phenomenon. Thus, we don't have to give it an explanation limited by modern experience or knowledge.

"Could a man survive in a fish's belly? The Hebrew idiom 'three days and three nights' has been clearly shown both from Scripture and other sources to mean a period beginning on one day and ending on the day after the one following. It doesn't necessarily mean three full days and nights. Furthermore, there have been several reported cases of modern sailors or other individuals swallowed by such an animal, only to be recovered many hours later" (John D. Morris, "Did Jonah Really Get Swallowed by a Whale?" Institute for Creation Research, December 1, 1993, <http://icr.org/article/did-jonah-really-get-swallowed-by-whale>). Morris goes on to say that as Christians, we believe in the miraculous, so we accept the Word of God as the story reads in the book of Jonah.

There, in the belly of that large fish, Jonah was able to do some serious thinking. Filled with hopeless despair, he cried out to God. " 'When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple' " (*Jon. 2:7, NKJV*). Jonah looked beyond the darkness to the bright light shining from heaven's sanctuary. He focused his attention on the eternal. The psalmist Asaph declares, "Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary. . . . You are the God who does wonders; You have declared Your strength among the peoples. You have with Your arm redeemed Your people" (*Ps. 77:13-15, NKJV*). Jonah discovered the God who does wonders. Whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, as we look to the sanctuary and behold the glory of God, like Jonah, our confidence in God and His infinite power will increase. Commenting on Jonah's experience, Ellen G.

White states: “Yet in the hour of Jonah’s despair the Lord did not desert him. Through a series of trials and strange providences, the prophet’s confidence in God and in His infinite power to save was to be revived.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 266.

When Jonah’s faith revived, God worked a miracle, and the large fish spat Jonah out onto the shore. Jonah traveled to Nineveh and preached that God was going to destroy the wicked city. To his surprise, the people repented. There was a great spiritual revival. The king issued a decree in harmony with Eastern custom, and the entire nation fasted, confessed their sin, and repented. Amazingly enough, Jonah was incredibly disappointed. He had fulfilled God’s command, but the terrible consequences did not follow.

In prophecy, there is a category known as conditional prophecy. This concept is expressed well in Jonah 3:10: “Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (*NKJV*). The fulfillment of the prophecy was based on their response. When they repented, God “relented.” Jonah’s preaching had been a success, but the reluctant prophet did not recognize it. He felt like a failure, but centuries later, Jesus cited Jonah as an example of faithfulness for his preaching to Nineveh. Here is incredibly good news: God does not give up on us easily. Jonah needed the gospel as much as the Ninevites did. God pursued him, would not let him go, and held on to him until Jonah recognized His mighty hand.

Part III: Life Application

Have you ever sensed that God was leading you to do something, but you were reluctant to do it? Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit’s working on your heart, convicting you to make a decision, and you have been hesitant because of the perceived consequences? Maybe like Jonah, you have been a reluctant missionary. You have heard God’s call to take an office in the church, witness to a neighbor or work colleague, or share the gospel with an unbelieving family member. At the same time, you are worried that you may not be qualified to do it. Or in your witness, you are afraid you might say the wrong thing. You are fearful that they might not accept what you have to say. Even worse, you are afraid they might reject you. Here are a couple things to remember. First, God does not call the qualified; He qualifies those whom He calls. Second, when God impresses you to do something and you accept His assignment, He takes upon Himself the responsibility for the results. God does not call us to “success.” He calls us to faithfulness. If we are faithful to the task He assigns us to do, one

day He will say, “ ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your lord’ ” (*Matt. 25:21, NKJV*).

Notes
