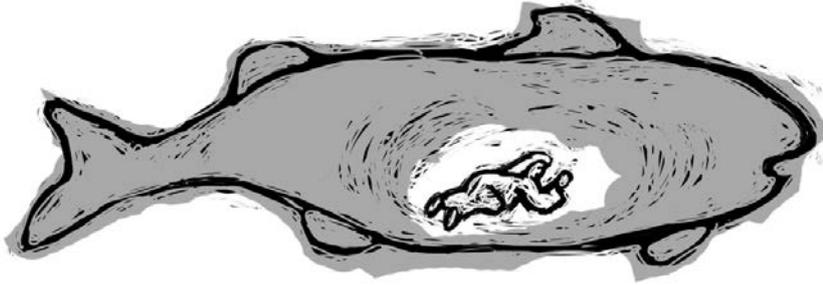


Eager to Forgive (Jonah)



SABBATH—MAY 4

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Jonah 1–4; Psalm 139:1–12; Isaiah 42:5; Revelation 10:6; Matthew 12:39–41; 2 Chronicles 36:15–17.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘But I will sacrifice a thank offering to you. And I will sing a song of thanks. I will do what I have promised. LORD, you are the one who saves’ ” (Jonah 2:9, Nlrv).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: The book of Jonah shows that God is more willing to forgive others than we often are.

THE STORY OF JONAH IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS IN THE BIBLE. The prophet (special messenger) has been sent by God to warn Nineveh that it will be destroyed. Jonah suspects that these non-Hebrew people might repent¹ of their sins and that God would forgive them. Being a true prophet, Jonah knows that God's plan is to save Nineveh, not to destroy it. Maybe that is why he tries to run away at first. But Jonah changes his mind and obeys God's command.

In answer to Jonah's preaching, the entire city (Nineveh) believes the message and repents. But Israel and Judah do not. Jonah, though, also has several important lessons to learn. The story shows how God patiently was teaching His narrow-minded and stubborn prophet what grace,² mercy, and forgiveness really mean.

1. repent—to feel sorry for sinning and to turn away from sin with the help of the Holy Spirit.

2. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sin.

SUNDAY—MAY 5**THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET
(Jonah 1)**

Not much is known about Jonah or about his family background. Second Kings 14:25 tells that he lived in the northern part of Israel and ministered (worked for God) during the eighth century B.C. The same verse says that Jonah prophesied (foretold) that the size of Israel's kingdom would grow larger.

Nineveh was one of the three great cities of Assyria. Assyria was an important country by the Tigris River. And its people were important to God, who made them. God is the Lord of all nations, and all peoples are responsible to Him (Amos 12). So, He sent His servant Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that their city would be destroyed. God's command in Jonah 1:2 to "preach against it" (NIV) also can mean "preach to it."

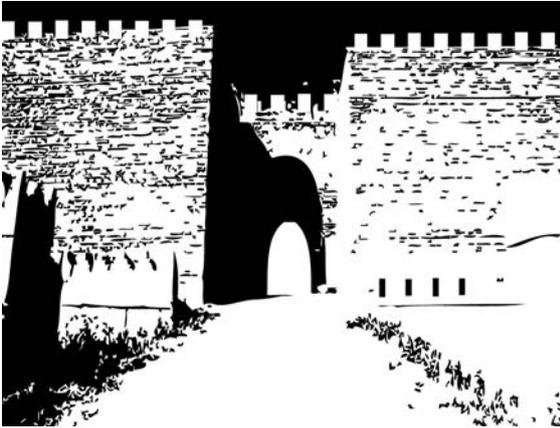
The Assyrian people's cruelty was well-known. About one hundred years later, the prophet Nahum called Nineveh a "bloody city . . . full of lies and robbery" (Nahum 3:1). But Jonah is sent to preach God's message to these cruel people. Perhaps it is fear of the hated Assyrians that influences Jonah's attitude (thoughts and feelings). When God tells Jonah to make a trip east to Nineveh, the prophet refuses and tries to flee west by ship to Tarshish.

At first, all things seem to work

well for Jonah. But then the Lord sends a great storm against the ship because He wants to teach His servant the lesson that no one can hide from God.

Jonah runs from God because he does 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 well. Others refuse to accept even the idea of God and His Word. Their reasons may be different, but they refuse to obey. Not believing in God helps to remove the feeling of guilt from their hearts and minds about the way that they live. Because if there is no God, 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. Perhaps it is something that goes against their selfish and sinful nature.

What is the basic message in Psalm 139:1–12 for us? What kind of feelings does this truth fill you with? Or think about it another way: we believe that God not only knows all that we do but knows even our thoughts. Do we live with that constant knowledge all the time? Or do we try to remove it from 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 you always were very sensitive to the fact that God truly knows your every thought?



Nineveh was full of lies and robbery.

MONDAY—MAY 6

UNWILLING WITNESS (Jonah 1:9)

In Jonah 1, the Lord wants to stop Jonah's escape. So, He stirs up such a bad storm that it is strong enough to cause a shipwreck. The seamen call on their gods for help. Due to the seriousness of the storm, they think that someone must have made the gods angry. They cast lots to decide who will be first to share information about himself that might explain what is causing the storm. For the casting of lots, each person brings a stone or wooden object that is clearly his own. The objects are placed in a jar that is shaken until one of the objects comes out. The first object to fall out belongs to Jonah. So, he confesses his sins and urges the seamen to throw him into the sea.

This story is amazing (wonderful) because the non-Hebrew seamen act positively while everything about Jonah seems negative. The seamen worship many gods. But they show

a great respect for the Lord to whom they also pray. They are also kind-hearted toward the Lord's servant, Jonah. This is why they go out of their way to try to row back to the land. But finally, they agree with Jonah that he should be thrown overboard. With this done, the storm stops, and the seamen make a sacrifice to the Lord and praise Him.



The lot falls on Jonah.

Jonah says he serves the Lord. In verse 9, how does Jonah describe the Lord? What is important about how Jonah describes the Lord? Read also Revelation 14:7; Isaiah 42:5; and Revelation 10:6.

Jonah confesses faith in God as Creator of the sea and land. This confession shows how useless it is for him to try to escape from God's presence. Then the storm quickly stops after the men throw Jonah into the sea. This shows them that the Lord, as Creator, has control of the sea. Because of this, the seamen worship the Lord all the more. We are not told how long their newfound fear and respect for the Creator lasts. But there is no doubt that they do learn something about Him from this experience.

We cannot fully understand many of the wonders of the world around us. This is especially true when they are beyond the reach of our senses and even our understanding. How does the Creator speak to you through what He has made?



Jonah urges the seamen to throw him into the sea.

TUESDAY—MAY 7

JONAH'S PSALM (Jonah 2)

When Jonah was thrown into the sea, a big fish swallowed him up at God's command. Jonah must have thought that death 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 God's tool for saving the prophet. Although Jonah did not answer God's command quickly and obediently, this fish did (Jonah 1:17; Jonah 2:10).

God's miracle worked in an amazing way here. Some people laugh at this story. But Jesus accepted it as

truth (Matthew 12:40). He even used it as an example of His own death and resurrection.³

Read Jonah 2. This passage is often called Jonah's psalm. What is he saying here? What has he learned? What spiritual principles (important rules) can we learn from this chapter?

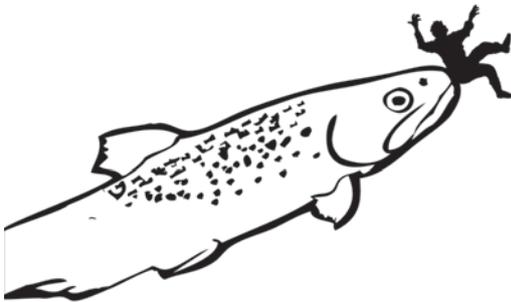
Jonah's psalm celebrates his escape from death in the deep sea. It is the part of the book that is a poem. In it Jonah remembers his prayer for help as he was sinking deep into the waters. He was facing certain death. But when Jonah was saved by God, he thanked God for it.

Jonah's promise to God after he was saved included a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Jonah was thankful because he knew he deserved to die. But God had shown him great mercy. Jonah had disobeyed God. But he still considered himself loyal to God because he had not fallen into idol worship. Jonah might have character (who he is) weaknesses. But he was determined to try and be faithful to his call as a prophet.

Sometimes we must have a terrible experience to make us open our heart up to the Lord. Then we wake up and understand that He is our only hope. He is our only salvation. Think about an experience you had where you clearly saw the hand of the Lord working in your own life. Why is it so easy

3. resurrection—return to life from the dead.

to forget the wonderful ways that the Lord has taught you? Why is it so easy to forget even when you are in trouble?



A big fish swallows Jonah at God's command.

WEDNESDAY—MAY 8

A SUCCESSFUL MISSION (Jonah 3:1–4)

After he was saved by a miracle, Jonah was commanded again by God to go to preach in Nineveh. This time Jonah quickly obeyed. And Jonah's preaching of God's message did not fail. In his preaching, Jonah used the same language in describing how God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Jonah 3:1–4; Genesis 19). But in the original Hebrew, the word that Jonah uses for "overthrown" (read Genesis 19:21, 29; Jonah 3:4) can also mean "turned around" or "transformed" (Exodus 7:17, 20; 1 Samuel 10:6).

The greatest success of Jonah's work as a prophet was when the people of the city repented. After the seamen, the people of Nineveh were

the second group of non-Hebrews in the book to turn to God. This is all because of their experience with God's flawed (not perfect) messenger. And the result was very surprising. To humble themselves before God, the people of Nineveh wore sackcloth, put ashes on their heads, and fasted. They seemed to want to show that they were sorrowful and wanted to repent of their sins.

Read Matthew 12:39–41 and 2 Chronicles 36:15–17. What do these verses teach us about how important it is that people repent of their sins?

Imagine a strong Assyrian king humbling himself in ashes before God. This is a sharp rebuke (insult) to Israel's proud rulers and people who refuse to accept the calls to repentance given by God's prophets. With this ending, the book of Jonah points to God's grace and forgiveness.

"Our God is a God of mercy. With patience and mercy he forgives people who break his law. But, in this our day, when men and women have so many opportunities to become familiar with God's law by reading the Holy Bible, God cannot be pleased with the wicked cities where violence and crime rule. If the people in these cities would repent, as the people of Nineveh did, many more of Jonah's messages would be preached."
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 18, 1906.

Read Jonah 3:5–10. What do these verses show about true repentance? How can we use these same principles in our lives?

THURSDAY—MAY 9

FORGIVEN, YET UNFORGIVING (Jonah 4)

Read Jonah 4. What important lessons did Jonah need to learn? How is his own hypocrisy⁴ shown here?

Jonah 4 shows some surprising things about the prophet. He seems to want to die rather than to witness about God's grace and forgiveness. Earlier, Jonah celebrated his rescue from death (Jonah 2:7–9). But now that Nineveh lives, he wants to die (Jonah 4:2, 3).

Unlike Jonah, God is pictured in the Bible as Someone who takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11, NKJV). Jonah and many of his countrymen are glad when God shows His mercy to Israel. But they wish that God would be angry with their enemies. However, the Bible's message does not encourage this kind of hardness of heart.

What are some of the lessons we can learn from Jonah's mistakes? How do personal feelings influence our Christian walk with God?

Jonah's book is a handbook that

teaches us how not to be a prophet. Jonah had a rebellious (disobedient) spirit and was wrongly directed. He could not control his desire to get even with his enemies. Jonah was small-minded and ill-tempered. He should have been glad that God also showed mercy to the people of Nineveh. Instead, Jonah let his selfish and sinful pride make him angry with God.

Jonah's last word is a wish for death (Jonah 4:8, 9). But God's last word is a statement about His unlimited grace. This is a statement that favors life over death.

Jonah's book is left open-ended. Its final verses leave its readers one important question that is not answered by the author. Did the miraculous change of hearts in Nineveh lead Jonah to have a great change of heart?

There is a lot in the story of Jonah that is hard to understand, especially about Jonah himself. But maybe the clearest lesson is that God's grace and forgiveness go much farther than ours. How can we learn to be more graceful and forgiving to people who do not deserve it in the same way that God did with Jonah and with the people of Nineveh?

FRIDAY—MAY 10

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read the quotes below and discuss how they help us

4. hypocrisy—preaching one way but doing or living another way; showing two faces.

to understand more clearly the messages from the book of Jonah.

“Whenever they need, the children of God can ask God for help. It is not important how terrible Nineveh may be. What is important is that God’s mercy is open to their cry. No matter how terrible and dark Nineveh may be, it can be turned into a temple by a believer who prays for it.”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 4, page 1003.

“Jonah was confused and not able to understand God’s purpose in saving Nineveh. But Jonah had obeyed and done God’s command to warn Nineveh. The prophecy [special message from God] might not succeed, but the message of warning was sent from God. And it succeeded, just as God planned. The glory of His grace was shown among the people of Nineveh.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pages 272, 273.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① 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 terrible disaster (sudden misfortune). How would you explain to him or her that God is still in charge even though disasters can take away many human lives?

② Read the last verse of Jonah. What does it teach us about how mission outreach should be done all over the world?

③ Read the parable (a very short story that teaches a lesson) of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35). Jesus compared⁵ God to an angry king who threw the slave he once forgave into jail. Does God really remove His forgiveness? Some Christians strongly argue that He does not. As a church, what should we think, and why?

④ Many worldly people do not believe that a man could be swallowed alive by a “big fish” and live inside it. But Jesus clearly accepted the story as true. How does the story of Jonah help us to understand just how narrow-minded it is not to accept a belief in God’s power to work miracles?

5. compared—showed how two or more things are the same or different.