

The Jonah Saga



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jonah 1–4, 2 Kings 14:25, Isa. 56:7, Isa. 44:8, Matt. 12:40, Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (*Acts 10:34, 35, NIV*).

The Jonah saga is the account of a Hebrew prophet working well beyond his comfort zone. Alive during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 750 B.C. (*2 Kings 14:25*), Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet whom we know of who was directly called to be a missionary in another country. The truth that the Creator of all races did not intend to limit salvation to only His chosen people is stated repeatedly in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah and the Psalms, even though popular Israelite theology at the time of Jonah did not accept that the Gentiles were also in God's plan to partake in 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 record of Jonah's reluctant pioneering experience as a foreign missionary, both the positive and the negative. Here a person's inner, and very human, reaction to the call of God is preserved, along with a powerful appeal for the need of foreign missionaries. A few guidelines for foreign missionaries and cross-cultural witnesses emerge from the book, which also points to solutions for some of the issues and problems modern missionaries face.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 25.

The Flawed Prophet

Read 2 Kings 14:25. What does this tell us about Jonah? In what kind of light is he presented?

Outside the book of Jonah, the prophet is mentioned in one other Old Testament passage, 2 Kings 14:25. Here he is honored as a prophet that predicted Israel’s recapture of territory taken by Syria.

Jonah was born in Gath Hopher (Hebrew for “winepress at the water hole”), a town in Zebulun in northern Israel, only a few miles from Nazareth. This means that both Jesus and Jonah were Galilean prophets, separated by about 750 years.

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

Jonah emerges from his book a strange mixture of strength and weakness: self-willed and rebellious but also teachable and obedient. He was loyal to God, courageous, and a believer in prayer, but he was also narrow-minded, selfish, and vindictive. While Jonah was described as a servant of the Lord in 2 Kings 14:25, he cut a somewhat sad and tragic figure in the book bearing his name. It is a mark of the integrity and reliability of the Bible that he was described in such a candid manner. The natural, human tendency of a writer would be to obscure and hide less-acceptable aspects of biblical heroes. But under the Spirit’s inspiration, the Bible’s authors present the valiant along with the petty in the lives of people to illustrate the truth that, no matter how weak and unpleasant these characters may be, God is able to work through them if they are willing.

What other Bible characters did God use despite their personality flaws? What hope can we draw for ourselves from the fact that God uses flawed and damaged people to work for Him in reaching out to others?

An Early Missionary

“Go to Nineveh!” was God’s command to Jonah. In the Old Testament, the usual appeal to the nations was “come to Zion.” God’s original plan was for Israel to live their religion, making the nation so attractive that other nations would come to them for guidance (*Isa. 56:7*).

Jonah, as a forerunner of the disciples in the New Testament (*Matt. 28:18–20*), is told to go to Nineveh, which to him seemed an unclean center of idolatry, brutality, and totalitarianism. Jonah made detailed preparations to go west by sea even though God had directed him to go east by land. Jonah, the unwilling prophet, fled in the opposite direction.

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

God’s response to Jonah’s flight came in the form of a mighty storm. The winds obey their Creator, even though His prophet does not (*Mark 4:41*). Jonah slept during the storm while the Gentile crew prayed (*Jon. 1:5*). In honesty, Jonah confessed that he caused the calamity, and he testified to the true God and Creator. Notice that his reply, “I am Hebrew,” referred both to his religion and his nationality. In their alarm at the ferocity of the storm, the Gentile sailors tried to save themselves and the passengers, and they showed compassion to Jonah in their reluctance to comply with his instructions to throw him overboard. (The reluctant prophet was willing to sacrifice himself to save others.) When they finally complied, the storm ceased and the sea calmed (*vs. 15*). The amazed sailors became Jonah’s first converts 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 doesn’t specify what sort of fish saved Jonah by swallowing him. Jonah in the belly of the fish is certainly the best-known episode of the story; however, it should not overshadow the book’s deeper message that God loves, cares for, and wills the salvation of all people.

In the end, there is only one God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth (see *Isa. 44:8; 45:5, 6*). Anything else anyone worships is idolatry and error. Any other “god” they pray to is imaginary, a lie. Why is this truth so important for us to realize and internalize for ourselves, especially in the context of mission?

In the Belly of the Big Fish

The three-day experience in the belly of the big fish became a type of the death and resurrection of Christ (*Jon. 1:17–2:10, Matt. 12:40*). God provided and directed the great fish. Although there are accounts of people who survived at sea after having been swallowed by a whale, we must remember that God provided this particular great fish, as well as the miraculous power that sustained His servant while inside. In the end, this was a miraculous event that could have occurred only through the supernatural intervention of the Lord, who is revealed all through the Bible as a personal God who does indeed intervene miraculously in people's lives.

There is evidence that the phrase “three days and three nights” was an ancient figure of speech expressing the time needed for the imaginary journey to Sheol, the Hebrew name for the realm of the dead. Considering what happened to him, Jonah indeed should have been as good as dead.

In the belly of the fish, Jonah began to pray. The captain had directed Jonah in vain to “call on your God” (*Jon. 1:6, NKJV*). Now in a hopeless situation, Jonah starts to pray, and seriously too. It took something this desperate to get him finally to do what he should have been doing all along. A summary of Jonah's prayer has been preserved in the form of a psalm of thanksgiving. Such psalms typically include five parts: (1) introduction; (2) description of the distress; (3) cry to God for help; (4) report of God's action; and (5) promise to keep any vow made and to testify to God's saving action. That is, Lord, if You get me out of this, I promise to do such and such. Who hasn't prayed like that before? The question is, Did you do what you covenanted to do?

Read Matthew 12:40. How does Jesus take the story of Jonah and apply it to Himself? See also John 2:19–22.

The chapter ends with the words: “And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land” (*Jon. 2:10, NIV*). God's command to the great fish brought about what well-meaning 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 underwater adventure went to the Gentiles and became the most successful missionary in the Old Testament. Jonah's rescue witnessed to God's saving mercy. His seaweed-draped arrival on the beach testified to God's determination to save even sinful Assyrians from death.

The Nineveh Generation

Read Jonah 3. What great message is found here in the context of outreach and evangelism?

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you’ ” (*Jon. 3:1, 2, NIV*). Two verbs are important in the text. First, this is the second time God says “Go!” God does not give up. He grants failing humans a second chance. Here again we have the New Testament mission concept, which is the idea of going to the nations, as opposed to expecting the nations to come to you.

The other important verb is “proclaim.” Proclamation has always been important in the Bible. It is still the most effective way of spreading the gospel message. God emphasized to Jonah that it should be “the message I give you.” That is, the message we proclaim must be God’s, not our own, nor even a tweaked, modified, or bowdlerized version of it.

God’s message is generally threat and promise, judgment and gospel. His stark proclamation was, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (*vs. 4, NIV*). That was the judgment. Yet, there was also the promise of hope, of deliverance, of salvation (there must have been because the people heeded 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 condemnation that judgment would justly bring upon us all.

No preaching of the gospel is fully effective unless judgment is taught. “Political correctness,” which leads to a watering down of these stark elements and downplaying differences between religions or even between different Christian traditions, is risky. Though in mission we need to adapt our presentation for the people we are trying to reach (contextualization), we must never do so at the expense of the message God has given us to proclaim.

In Jonah 3:5–10, what happens? The Ninevites believed, acted on their beliefs, exercised their faith, and were saved.

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

Jonah's Lament

Jonah 4:1–11 confirms that the greatest obstacle for God to get His prophet involved in world mission was not distance, wind, sailors, fish, or Ninevites. It was the prophet himself. Ninevite faith contrasted with Jonah's unbelief and vindictive spirit. Jonah is the only person in the Scriptures who accuses God of being gracious, compassionate, and slow to anger, abounding in love and who relents from sending calamity. One would think most people would view these aspects of God with thankfulness.

“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. The compassion shown by God toward the repentant Ninevites ‘displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

Read Jonah 4:10, 11. What do these texts teach us about the character of God in contrast to sinful human nature? Why should we be glad that God, not fellow human beings, is our ultimate Judge?

Jonah showed his anger twice in chapter 4. He was angry because God changed His mind and saved Nineveh's more than one hundred twenty thousand inhabitants. He was also angry because the vine withered. In his selfishness, the prophet needed to get his priorities right.

God instructed Jonah to recognize human brotherhood based on the fatherhood of God. The prophet should have accepted his common humanity with these “foreigners,” although they were wayward. Were not 120,000 people more important than a vine?

Read again the Lord's rebuke to Jonah. In what ways might the Lord be able to say something similar to us? That is, how often do we find ourselves more concerned about our own personal issues, many of which at times can really be trivial, than about the lost souls whom Christ shed His blood to save?

Further Study: “The book of Jonah is so significant for understanding the biblical basis of mission, because it treats God’s mandate to His people regarding the Gentile peoples, and thus serves as the preparatory step to the missionary mandate of the New Testament. But it is also important for catching a glimpse of the deep resistance this mandate encounters from the very servant Yahweh has chosen to discharge His worldwide work.”—Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978), p. 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 beings who are ignorant and defiled and who need your help.”—Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work*, p. 80. What is our duty to these fellow beings?
- 2 Assyria was one of the superpowers dominating the ancient near east from about 885 to 625 B.C. Israel and Judah suffered repeatedly under her harsh rule. Israel’s King Jehu was forced to pay tribute to the dominating Assyrian ruler, Shalmaneser III. Israel finally fell to Assyrian forces about 722 B.C. No wonder Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh, one of the four chief cities of Assyria, and the center for the worship of Ishtar, goddess of love and war. God had called him to visit the very spiritual heartland of enemy territory to call on the warlike Assyrians to repent. What lessons are here for us in regard to missions?
- 3 How can the remnant church avoid the assumption that the counsels and blessings of the Lord in areas such as the Sabbath, health, and education are given to them for their own benefit, rather than for the benefit of the nations? *Read Rev. 3:17, 18.*
- 4 In what ways do the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 reflect the message that Jonah had for the Ninevites?
- 5 Some people automatically reject the Jonah story, particularly the part where he is in the belly of the fish. What presuppositions would cause them to reject it out of hand? What presuppositions do you need in order to believe it?

Twice Victorious: Part 2

by NATHALIE VILLANUEVA, THE PHILIPPINES

The Villanueva teens joined the Pathfinder Club. The club scheduled an outing to Mount Kitanglad, hoping to earn their mountain-climbing honor.

James Villanueva, age 16, eagerly started the six-hour trek up the mountain with his sisters and 12 other Pathfinders. Soon he found himself ahead of the rest and decided to wait. He stepped onto a tree stump to get a better view. Three wires, similar to those strung along the trail to guide hikers, hung above his head. He reached up and grabbed one of the wires for balance. When he saw his sisters approaching, he turned to swing off the stump. As his feet left the stump, a sharp pain flashed through his hand, and he crumpled to the ground.

James's sister Nathalie saw him jump. She saw sparks shoot out from his hands as he fell. She raced to where he lay motionless. His hands and arms were so badly burned that the skin was peeling off.

"Someone get help!" she shouted. "James has been electrocuted!"

While someone ran for help, Nathalie tore off her shirt to make bandages for her brother's arms. Toto, the Pathfinder leader, raced up the slippery mountainside. He ordered some Pathfinders to climb to the summit and call for help. He sent the rest down the mountain to summon an ambulance. Toto and Nathalie remained with James, praying that help would come in time.

Three men who worked at the summit came upon the accident scene. The men rigged a stretcher from a sleeping bag and began the dangerous trip down the slippery mountain.

It was dark when they reached the bottom. They placed James in an oxcart to carry him the two and a half miles to where an ambulance waited. James arrived at the hospital 12 hours after the accident.

Nathalie stayed with her brother until their parents arrived. The doctors wanted permission to amputate both of James's arms, but Nathalie refused. When her parents arrived, she begged them to have James airlifted to Manila, where he could receive better care. But even there the doctors said that James's left arm was too badly burned to be saved.

Through the difficult months following the accident, the family could have lost their faith. But prayers and the support of the church members helped to hold their faith intact.

James is already planning to go back and conquer Mount Kitanglad to earn his mountain-climbing honor. But in the eyes of many, he has already conquered more than a mountain.

NATHALIE VILLANUEVA is the daughter of Napoleon and Lolita Villanueva and the sister of James.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jonah 4:10, 11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend the magnitude of God’s love for outsiders and the mission responsibility of insiders.

Feel: Experience a renewed sense of personal responsibility to participate in God’s mission for the world.

Do: Show spiritual commitment to mission by supporting it through prayer, finances, and personal involvement.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Borderless and Cultureless Mercy

A Why would the nature of Jonah’s mission be so shocking to Jewish ears? What mission assignment could God give us today that would likewise offend our sensibilities?

B The book of Jonah ends somewhat ambiguously, with God posing a pointed question (*Jon. 4:11*). What does this question tell us about God’s essential nature?

II. Feel: Being “Right” With God

A What emotions do you think Jonah experienced as he was thrown overboard and sank beneath the waves, fully aware that he’d been unfaithful in his mission? Has God ever had to reach into the depths of the ocean to rescue you?

B How does it feel when you know you’re in the place God wants you to be, doing what He’s asked you to do?

III. Do: Avoiding Spiritual Detours

A What practical steps can we take to overcome a sense of spiritual self-centeredness or exclusiveness?

B How can we avoid becoming modern-day Jonahs?

► **Summary:** The book of Jonah shines a bright light on the wideness of God’s mercy and the depth of His patience, both for the pagan sinners of Nineveh and the reluctant prophet God chooses for His mission. As the drama unfolds, we’re left with no doubt that relying on our own wisdom and inclinations is a poor way to approach mission. Only through submission to God’s leading can we begin to understand the scope of His mission plan and our role within it.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jonah 1:8–10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Down through the centuries, the questions posed by the pagan sailors to God’s prophet Jonah can be addressed to all God’s followers: “ ‘What do you do? Where do you come from?’ ” (*Jon. 1:8, NIV*). What is our identity? Are we true disciples of God? Are we involved in His mission? Or are we always running away to where it’s more comfortable?

Just for Teachers: As you teach this lesson, remind your class that Jonah is more than just an interesting story of some long-ago historical event—it’s full of spiritual applications for today. Encourage the class to find parallels within their own experience and to apply lessons to our current mission as a church.

Opening Discussion: The name *Jonah* means dove, and we are told that he was the son of Ammittai, meaning faithfulness. In addition, he was a prophet of God. So, the reader is led to expect that a faithful dove will be obedient to God’s call. But instead of heading east to Nineveh, he flies in the exact opposite direction. It’s easy to criticize Jonah from a distance of nearly three thousand years. But if we had been in Jonah’s shoes, might we not have done exactly the same thing?

A few years earlier, Assyria, of which Nineveh was one of the capitals, had brutally attacked and conquered Israel—an event that was still very much alive in the memory of the Israelites. According to Nahum, Nineveh was “the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!” (*Nah. 3:1, NIV*). He asks, “Who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (*vs. 19, NIV*). No doubt Jonah was well aware that the Assyrians had finely nuanced ways of mass killing and were experts in impaling and mutilating human bodies. Perhaps he felt it wasn’t an ideal location for a public evangelist to begin a campaign. And yet God’s command was clear, and Jonah’s disobedience was flagrant.

But it wasn’t just fear that spurred Jonah’s disobedience. Historians tell us that Jonah would have felt a sense of cultural superiority and religious prejudice against the pagan Ninevites. It’s a human tendency that is alive and well today. As Christian author Anne Lamott puts it: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 22.

Consider This: What would a modern-day Jonah look like? What are the “Ninevehs” in our experience? To what extent is there an element of Jonah in each of our own lives?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: As you teach your class, bring out some of the playfulness and humor in the story of Jonah—which is full of irony and surprises. We know that Jesus rarely spoke without telling a story because He knew its power for conveying a spiritual message (*Mark 4:34*).

Bible Commentary

I. Who Are You? (*Review Jonah 1:7, 8 with your class.*)

At the height of the storm that leads to Jonah being tossed into the sea, the pagan sailors desperately ask about his identity (*Jon. 1:8*). For someone in the middle of disobeying God and doing the opposite of what he’s been asked to do, Jonah’s reply is ironic—with some dark humor, as well: “ ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ ” (*Jon. 1:9, NIV*). God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh via a dry-land route. Jonah, instead, went to sea. But the sea and the land are all God’s domain, and God reaches out through pagan sailors to remind Jonah about his true identity.

Consider This: What are some of the hints given in the narrative that the pagan sailors were more spiritually faithful than Jonah?

II. There Are No Outsiders (*Review Revelation 14:6 with your class.*)

In Matthew 28:19, 20, Jesus’ disciples are commissioned to go into all the world, to make disciples of “all nations.” The Greek for this is *panta ta ethne*, which literally means “people groups.” No country, language, tribe, cultural group, or person is outside the scope of God’s love and grace (*see Rev. 14:6*).

Early Adventists had no conception of taking the gospel to every nation, let alone every people group. According to their understanding, or perhaps rationalization, the people groups of the world were coming to

America—and so they could be reached right there, especially in places with many immigrants such as New York City. And even today, there’s a tendency among some Adventists to put certain religious and people groups into the “too hard” basket.

Perhaps the key theme in Jonah is God’s saving love for people we might consider outsiders, even nasty, cruel, barbaric people such as the Assyrians. The story is a corrective to exclusiveness, which the Israelites too often demonstrated. Clearly, God is in the business of redeeming His creation, and we have no right to simply sit back, enjoy our salvation, and forget the spiritual needs of the rest of the world.

Consider This: What remedy does the apostle John suggest to a church that has lost its first love (*Rev. 2:4, 5*)?

III. “Should I Not Be Concerned?” (*Review Jonah 4:1–11 with your class.*)

Jonah’s lack of empathy is perhaps his greatest sin. Throughout the book of Jonah, the writer often uses the literary device of satire. One way he does this is by setting up a series of contrasts. For example, he pictures Jonah being angry at God for forgiving Nineveh and sparing its inhabitants (*Jon. 4:1–3*). And then a few verses later, Jonah’s angry again—this time because his favorite shady plant dies (*vs. 7–9*). It’s another darkly humorous contrast. Jonah is upset about a plant but not about the deaths of more than one hundred and twenty thousand people. The writer then goes on to make a further contrast—this time between Jonah’s lack of empathy and God’s all-encompassing compassion. God asks Jonah, “Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?” (*vs. 11, NIV*). And it’s with this question hanging in the air that the writer of Jonah finishes his story.

Consider This: When was the last time we were genuinely upset at the thought of millions of people not knowing Jesus? How can we learn to see these people through God’s eyes?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: In this lesson, we meet a character full of contradictions. On the one hand, he’s a missionary dwarf—he runs away from his mission assignment. On the other hand, when he finally fronts up to the job, he ends up leading an entire pagan city to conversion! Although Jonah was unfaithful,

he was willing to die to save the heathen sailors. He was a poet and grew emotionally attached to a plant; but he could also be callous in the face of the potential destruction of a city.

Invite the class to discuss what they think and feel about Jonah. Is he somebody they can relate to, despite the gap of centuries? Why, or why not?

Life Application: If Sabbath School mission offering trends are any indicator, then the grand narrative of global outreach has indeed lost a great deal of its shine for Seventh-day Adventists. In 1932, during the Great Depression, per capita giving to the church's Sabbath School mission offerings was \$5.83 per member for that year. More than eighty years later, with wages exponentially higher, the per capita mission giving was actually lower, with an average of \$4.81 per member in 2010. (See Gina Wahlen, "100 Years of Mission Giving," *Adventist World*, Nov. 1, 2012, pp. 16–19.)

What attitudes do you think are driving this trend? Which of our own attitudes toward the worldwide mission of the church do we need to reexamine?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The church in Ephesus was reproved because it had lost its first love (*Rev. 2:4*). Consider with your class the extent to which we may have lost some of our missionary spirit as Seventh-day Adventists. Witnessing isn't always easy. Remind your class that even the apostle Paul, after all he had done for the gospel, wrote from prison: "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. . . . Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (*Eph. 6:19, 20, NIV*).

Activity: With your class, map out an evangelistic strategy for Jonah. The task given by God is clear: " 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you' " (*Jon. 3:2, NIV*). But how should Jonah deliver the message? What methodology should he use? Door knocking? A public meeting? Literature distribution? Discuss what approaches would and wouldn't be appropriate. Make sure to discuss content as well as methodology. How should the message be shaped in a way that the people will understand? After all, like the sailors on Jonah's boat, they are pagan and have probably never even heard of Yahweh. And remember, at the end you want to get out of the city alive if at all possible.