

Excuses *to* Avoid Mission



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jonah 1–4; Nahum 1:1; 2 Kings 17:5, 6; Ps. 24:1; James 1:27; Isa. 6:1–8.*

Memory Text: “Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me’ ” (*Isaiah 6:8, NKJV*).

Not everyone called to mission was as compliant as Abraham. Jonah is an example (*read Jonah 1–4*). God called Jonah to cry out against Nineveh, capital of Assyria. This city, located in modern-day Iraq, was 560 miles from Jerusalem, a good month’s journey. Jonah not only refused to go—he ran in the opposite direction. Arriving at Joppa, he purchased passage to Tarshish, now southern Spain. Sailing the 2,000-mile trip would have taken at least a month, depending on the weather. Not wanting to confront the king of Assyria, Jonah uses the month it would have taken him to get to Nineveh to get away from it. Why would he, a man of God, have done that?

The Ninevites were notoriously wicked, a people known for their evil and cruelty and who had attacked Israel and Judah. Nevertheless, God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and to cry out against its great wickedness (*Jon. 1:2*). The wording here is very similar to the wording God used with Abraham regarding Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 18:20, 21. As we will see, however, Jonah was no Abraham.

What can we learn from Jonah’s attitude about the excuses that we can make in order not to do mission?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 4.

Our Excuses: Fear

Read Nahum 1:1; Nahum 3:1–4; and 2 Kings 17:5, 6; 2 Kings 19:32–37. What do these verses reveal about Nineveh and the relationship between Assyria and Israel? How might this relationship have impacted Jonah’s decision to go to Tarshish instead?

One of the reasons Jonah may have been unwilling to go to Nineveh was fear. The Assyrians were a formidable foe, and Nineveh served as the capital of the kingdom.

“Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm. . . . In the time of its temporal prosperity Nineveh was a center of crime and wickedness. Inspiration has characterized it as ‘the bloody city, . . . full of lies and robbery.’ In figurative language the prophet Nahum compared the Ninevites to a cruel, ravenous lion. ‘Upon whom,’ he inquired, ‘hath not thy wickedness passed continually?’ Nahum 3:1, 19.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 265.

Nineveh was a magnificent city. Historians tell us that Sennacherib greatly expanded the city, including building the huge southwestern palace that alone measured 1,650 feet by 794 feet. (503 by 242 meters) and contained at least 80 rooms. He also built 18 canals to bring water to the city from as far away as 40 miles (65 kilometers). Its size alone would have been intimidating.

But the Assyrians were also ruthless. In his account of the conquest of Babylon, Sennacherib boasted that he filled the streets with the corpses of its inhabitants, young and old, and relief carvings found during excavations depict scenes of soldiers impaling victims. These were not people you wanted to cross; they were not averse to using violence, and gratuitously cruelly, too, against those they didn’t like. Indeed, at the thought of walking among the masses of people in Nineveh, Jonah must have quaked with fear.

In spite of all of this, we often read Jonah’s story with disapproval for letting fear get in the way of carrying out God’s instructions. What we fail to realize is that we can do the same thing (i.e., allow ourselves to be controlled by our fears rather than by God).

Think back to a time when you felt strongly that God was directing you to do something that you, out of fear, really didn’t want to do. What lessons have you learned from that experience?

Our Excuses: False Views

When the storm came, Jonah blamed himself (*Jon. 1:1–12*). His attitude does reveal something about the kind of worldview and understanding of God or “gods” that many had back then. While various gods, they believed, ruled in their various lands, the sea was deemed the chaotic realm of demons. In the worldview of the mariners, sacrifice was needed to appease their wrath. Although Jonah was a Hebrew, he quite possibly had a worldview that was influenced by the traditional beliefs of his times.

Read *Jonah 2:1–3, 7–10*. What do these verses reveal about how Jonah started to understand God’s providence?

Although Jonah was running from the territory where the people claimed Jehovah as their God, he learned (the hard way) that even when he was traveling into foreign cultures, Jehovah was still sovereign. The wind and waves belonged to God. The fish, too. “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness” (*Ps. 24:1, NKJV*). Jonah’s heart was turned to the Sovereign of earth and sea, and so he confessed and was saved.

We, too, can have misunderstandings about God and what He expects of us. One common misunderstanding is that God’s desire for us is to focus on our own salvation and to remove ourselves from the wickedness of the world around us. Though we are instructed to keep ourselves “unspotted from the world” (*James 1:27, NKJV*), our focus should be on how we can bring God’s blessings and hope to those in need.

Another misunderstanding that stops us from accepting God’s call into mission is believing that success depends on ourselves. We can no more save a soul than Jonah could save Nineveh. We can have a “savior” mentality about mission. Our call is not to do the saving but to cooperate with God in *His* saving work. We give testimony praising God for specific ways He is changing us, but only God can draw people to Himself. We can plant seeds of truth, but only God can convert the heart. We often confuse our role with God’s, which is enough to make anyone find an excuse not to witness. Yes, God used Jonah, but only God, not Jonah, turned Nineveh around.

Winning souls is hard, too hard for humans to do on their own. How can we learn, instead, to let God win souls, but through us and our life and witness?

Our Excuses: Inconvenience

Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish (*see Jonah 2*) was a dramatic show of God's love and mercy, and Jonah's prayer reveals that he didn't miss God's message of love. But just because he had had an incredible encounter with God didn't mean that his old thought habits or attitudes would easily change, even though he went to Nineveh anyway.

Read **Jonah 3.** How did the people respond to what Jonah had preached? What lessons are here for us about witnessing?

Whatever Jonah's personal feelings about the Ninevites, he preached what God told him to, and the results were astonishing. The Ninevites were moved to repentance! Yes, Jonah had to go through a lot, to do what he didn't want to do, but when he did it, God was glorified.

Thus, God's mission is carried forward on the shoulders of those who are willing to sacrifice, even if reluctantly. Our values must give way to God's priority for the lost. Like Jonah, we sometimes harbor prejudices that keep us from reaching out to a person or group.

Having to face our prejudices requires humility. Mission also requires time and emotional energy. Investing in others' lives and truly caring for them can be taxing. In an age when we are stressed keeping up with our own lives and problems, providing emotional support can seem just too exhausting.

And finally, being involved in mission often requires that we change how we feel about and use our money. Whether related to providing care for people, purchasing literature and outreach materials, or paying for services or conveniences to free up time for mission work, there are expenses related to mission. Whatever form it may take, mission work requires sacrifice.

The good news is that in spite of Jonah's inadequacies, God worked powerfully in bringing the Ninevites to repentance. Sadly, Jonah did not share in the blessing of heaven's joy.

What sacrifice is God asking you to make—or be ready to make—for the sake of sharing His love with someone else? How completely do you trust that He will fulfill His promise to enrich your life through sacrifice?

Our Excuses: Uncomfortable Confrontations

“Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm” (*Jonah 4:2, NKJV*). What a beautiful prayer on the part of Jonah. Or was it?

Read *Jonah 4*. What was wrong with this man?

Jonah had such a deep hatred for the people God sent him to that he felt it was better that he die than to lose face when the failure of his doomsday preaching against Nineveh was revealed. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be the next Sodom and Gomorrah. He was hoping for God’s judgment on these hated people. When it didn’t happen, his worldview was being shaken to the core, and Jonah would rather die than allow his world to be turned upside down.

For the second time in the story of Jonah, God confronts him, not with a sermon or a saying but with an experience. Worldviews are not formed on demand. Nor do they change because we hear something new or different. Worldviews are often formed and changed based on life experiences and how they are interpreted or explained.

The new experience God gave was to help Jonah recognize his own distorted worldview. God made a plant miraculously grow large enough in one day to offer sufficient shade to protect Jonah from the blazing sun. Jonah was grateful, not for God, who performed the miracle, but for the plant. Rather than seeing this as an unmerited miracle, he saw it as an appropriate and well-deserved blessing that followed his good works. When the plant died, it was a misfortune that caused Jonah to grow angry and insecure in his self-worth, and his thoughts grew suicidal.

The experience is followed by God’s voice of gentle correction, helping Jonah see how foolish it was for him to value a plant more than the many thousands of men, women, and children in Nineveh, as well as their animals.

The story doesn’t resolve with an ending of Jonah’s repentance. Rather, the unfinished story pivots to us. What will we do about God’s concern for the wicked, for the bullies, for the unreached across the globe?

Here Am I, Send Me

Jonah's story is more than amazing. The fact that God could save the Ninevites in spite of the poor witness of Jonah is a stark reminder that our role is merely to be a conduit for God, who alone can convict and convert hearts. It is a reminder that God seeks only willing and humble messengers who will follow His direction.

Read Isaiah 6:1–8. What is the central idea expressed in this passage?

The call is there. God is looking for willing volunteers. We are to answer that call by submitting to His leadership, listening to hear His voice, and then choosing to obey whatever He tells us.

The story of Jonah also reveals God's love for people who live where His love is not felt and His voice not heard. Just as God had pity on Nineveh, He has pity on the millions populating the cities today, where buildings replace trees and flowers, and constant noise makes it difficult to be still and listen. Of Nineveh God said, they "do not know their right hand from their left" (*see Jon. 4:11, ESV*). God needs messengers who are willing to take His message of hope to those overwhelmed with the busyness and ugliness of life.

Isaiah heard a voice saying, "Who will go?" What will your response be?

Challenge: On a blank sheet of paper or in your prayer journal, make a list of ten people you know are not believers. We will call them your "disciples." List them by name if possible. Keep this list close by, and for the rest of the quarter, pray daily for each of your ten disciples. Pray that God will help you become casual friends with those who are acquaintances. Pray that you can develop deeper, closer, trusting friendships with your casual friends. As you deepen your relationships, carefully watch and listen so you can identify their specific needs, hurts, and pain. Then pray that God will meet them in that area of need.

Challenge Up: Choose a city near you as well as a city in another part of the world. Begin praying for the people who live and work in each. Ask that God will raise up a strong Adventist presence that can share the truth as we know it—the truth about the soon coming of Jesus.

Further Thought: Ellen G. White has a strong warning for those who are struggling to follow the call of Jesus to witness to those around them.

“The excuses of those who fail to do this work do not relieve them of the responsibility, and if they choose not to do this work, they neglect the souls for whom Christ died, neglect their God-given responsibility, and are registered in the books of heaven as unfaithful servants. Does the minister work as did the Master, to be a strength and a blessing to others, when he shuts himself away from those who need his help? Those who neglect personal intercourse with the people, become self-centered, and need this very experience of placing themselves in communication with their brethren, that they may understand their spiritual condition, and know how to feed the flock of God, giving to each his portion of meat in due season. Those who neglect this work make it manifest that they need moral renovation, and then they will see they have not carried the burden of the work.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 30, 1892.

While these are very strong words highlighting the importance God places on mission, we are not left without hope. “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.

Just like Jonah, we may find it easier to make excuses for not participating in mission. Our motivation for these excuses could be one of many. However, our call to mission is no less specific than was Jonah’s call. The question is, How will you choose to answer?

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What excuses have you been tempted to use for not being involved in mission? What is your Nineveh?
- 2 Think about how precious the truth is that we as Seventh-day Adventists have. Think about how blessed you are to have these truths. What is holding you back from sharing with others what we love so much?
- 3 How can you learn by God’s grace to overcome any fears you might have about witnessing and mission?

Hope Amid Panic Attacks

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

As a girl, Grete had panic attacks. She woke up in the dark, scared, her heart beating rapidly. Her fear was so intense that she wondered whether she might explode. She didn't know where to find help. She didn't tell her parents. She thought her fears were bigger than people. The world scared her, even such ordinary things as school and walking on the street. She didn't think anyone in Germany, where she lived, could help.

On those sleepless nights, Grete began thinking about Annika. The two girls had grown up together, singing in a children's choir. Then Annika had been diagnosed with cancer. Still, she had been brave and put her trust in God.

"Don't be afraid," Annika had told her parents. "I know where I am going. Everything will be fine." Annika had died but without pain or fear.

Annika's faith amazed Grete. She was scared every night. Annika's words were the first time that Grete had heard about a loving God and eternal life. She wondered if there was something bigger than her and the world. *How can I get to this place where Annika planned to go?* she wondered.

Grete stopped having the nighttime panic attacks when she was 14, but she still felt afraid and lonely. Then she met her future husband, Nico. He didn't go to church regularly, but he strongly believed in God. His parents were Seventh-day Adventists, and they opened their home to Grete for the Christmas holiday. Never had Grete spent time with such a kind family. It was a new world. Overwhelmed, she ran upstairs to cry.

As Grete sensed God's presence in the home, she realized that she could receive help for her fears. She saw that God is great, powerful, and able to save anyone. She felt safe for the first time. She wanted to feel safe forever.

Grete began taking Bible studies, and later, she and Nico joined the Seventh-day Adventist church on Germany's Rügen island. They didn't know it at the time, but the church had faced closure because of declining membership. Their presence was an answer to the prayers of church members, including Nico's father, Gunthardt, the head elder. Today, Grete and Nico are active members of the thriving church, which recently constructed



a larger building to accommodate its growing membership.

"The most wonderful thing in my life is that I got to know Jesus," Grete said. "I know that this is the best thing that I could have done. My life is so happy."

Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the gospel of hope in secular countries such as Germany and elsewhere across the world.

Part I: Overview

The past several weeks have highlighted that mission is rooted in God's initiative and that God calls us to mission. This week, the focus is on the reality that some who have experienced God avoid the call to mission and the privilege to share the loving experience they have had.

At some point, all people who have had an experience with God will face the temptation to avoid sharing this experience with others. It is best to humbly admit to this reality rather than assume such a temptation happens only to others. Once we recognize that we are confronted by this temptation at some point, it is easier to take intentional steps out of this zone of avoidance and into the healthier space of sharing God's love with others.

Ultimately, excuses to avoid mission are temptations of the devil, who does not want anyone to hear or experience the goodness of God. Thus, avoiding mission is not simply a dereliction of duty; it is instead a missed opportunity to draw others into a deeper and more meaningful walk with God and toward a more abundant life. The following commentary section describes two potential ways in which excuses are used to avoid mission. These excuses do not comprise the only ways that avoidance can happen, but they are two of the more prominent ways. The first example is demonstrated through the disciples' story in the Garden of Gethsemane. The second example will draw critical points from the story of Jonah.

Part II: Commentary

Gethsemane

When Jesus was nearing His last hours of life on earth before His arrest, trial, and death, He took the disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus asked the three disciples who were closest to Him to pray with Him and stay awake while He prayed because the weight of what was happening to Him was heavy. Jesus desperately needed the comfort of friends at this time (*Matt. 26:36–45*).

Unfortunately, the disciples, who genuinely loved Jesus and considered Him a dear Friend, could not fulfill the request and fell asleep. This negligence happened twice; the disciples grew complacent and allowed their sleepiness to keep them from sharing the Lord's burdens. Before they had a chance to make it right, Jesus was arrested and taken from their midst

(*Matt. 26:47–56*). Thus, it became a missed opportunity for the disciples to serve the One whom they loved so much.

The problem in this situation was not that the disciples had never experienced Jesus' love. By this point, they had plenty of evidence demonstrating His love for them. It wasn't even that they had drifted far away from Jesus. After all, they were there with Him in the Garden. Nonetheless, a sense of complacency settled in. The disciples could not understand how critical staying awake and praying for Jesus was at that crucial time. The disciples missed the opportunity to share the Father's love with the One who had taught them so much about love.

Sad to say, we are often guilty of the same complacency and negligence today. We have beautiful experiences with Jesus. And we are openly followers of Jesus. But the reality, when we take a closer look, is that many of us have grown complacent in our faith. This complacency often happens subtly. When we reflect on our lives, we may realize that we do not love others in tangible ways. Much like the disciples, we know Jesus is good and that we want to be with Him, but we slide into a state of spiritual sleepiness, missing multiple opportunities to share the love of God with a desperate world. We need to remind each other, respectfully, to stay awake and always be ready to share the love we have experienced with a suffering world.

Jonah

The second excuse we make to avoid mission is embodied in the form of missed opportunities in the narrative of Jonah. This form of excuse differs from the negligence and complacency shown by the disciples in Gethsemane. However, the second excuse, like the first, also is prevalent. The story of Jonah exemplifies the second excuse in several instances. While the story is multifaceted, the book of Jonah, in many ways, is, at its heart, as we have just asserted, a story of missed opportunities.

Jonah knew God and prophesied on God's behalf in Israel before getting the call to go to Nineveh (*2 Kings 14:25*). But his prior prophetic work had always been among Israelites and involved encouraging things on behalf of Israel. Jonah's work did not include prophesying among Israel's enemies. When you read the whole book of Jonah, you notice that Jonah struggled a great deal with loving people who came from a non-Jewish background.

There are two significant missed opportunities found in the book of Jonah. The first missed opportunity takes place on the ship that Jonah boarded to run away from God. During the storm, Jonah was surrounded by sailors who worshiped other deities. Yet, during the storm, the sailors

begged Jonah to pray to his God in the hope that his intercession would make a difference (*Jon. 1:6*). Jonah never prayed. Jonah's solution was to commit assisted suicide (*Jon. 1:12*). At this stage in the story, Jonah did not know a whale would save his life, and so he asked the sailors to cast him overboard to his death.

The sailors, who had more compassionate hearts than did Jonah, refused, at first, until they had no other options (*Jon. 1:13*). (Remember the previous lesson about being open to receiving a blessing from those whom you meet.) The storm stopped when Jonah was thrown overboard. As a result, the sailors had a newfound respect for Jonah's God. The problem was that Jonah missed the opportunity to pray to God rather than proposing a human solution. This opportunity would have given the sailors a more complete and better understanding of who God is.

The second missed opportunity came after Jonah preached in Nineveh. The people accepted Jonah's message and repented. But Jonah was nowhere to be found. Instead, he climbed a nearby hill, hoping to see the destruction of Nineveh (*Jon. 4:5*). When that failed to take place, Jonah got angry at God (*Jon. 4:1*). Jonah reveals the real reason for his excuses to avoid God's mission. Jonah says to God that he knew that God was a loving and compassionate Being and, thus, would likely forgive the Ninevites (*Jon. 4:2*). Recognizing this Bible truth, Jonah didn't want to go out in mission to people he didn't like because he didn't want them to experience the goodness of God.

The book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible that ends with a question (*Jon. 4:11*). The question is straightforward. God asks Jonah, "Why can't you love people the way I do?" Because Jonah refused to love his enemies, he was outside the city when he should have been inside, helping the people of Nineveh take the next steps in their relationship with God. Jonah's refusal turned into a missed opportunity.

The excuses of Jonah were wrapped up in what we today call ethnocentrism, prejudice, and racism. Jonah experienced the love of God in his life and knew God was compassionate. But Jonah couldn't get past his feelings of national pride. Because he believed that he was better than others, he was unwilling to go in mission the way that God desired. What a sad story. Yet, we can continue to learn from it today.

The question at the end of the book of Jonah is one for us to ask ourselves and our churches. Do we demonstrate a love for the communities around us, especially for its members who look different from us or come from other parts of the world? All too often, I have heard conversations in church or in Sabbath School that reveal prejudices and harmful

ethnocentric attitudes. These attitudes are often accompanied by excuses for why certain groups of people fall outside our mission. Such thinking is no different from the mindset of Jonah.

Jonah failed to grasp that when God shows love and compassion to others, His divine manifestation of mercy should serve as a reminder that God has done the same for us. When you go out in mission and share the love of God and watch as it transforms people's lives, such an experience also can enhance your journey with God. This experience also can draw you into new human relationships with people who may be very different from you but who share a relationship with Jesus. Jonah could have made new friends on the ship with whom to share his faith. The same goes for Nineveh. Unfortunately, those opportunities were missed because Jonah opted for excuses rooted in his selfish pride and ethnocentrism.

Part III: Life Application

We should all be thankful for the beautiful experiences we have with Jesus. Over time, though, we often become complacent in our journey with God. With this complacency often comes a tendency to make excuses for not sharing the love of God with others. Complacency can happen subtly, and before we know it, we are asleep when we should be awake. As individuals and as churches, we need to take an honest look at our daily lives and hold ourselves accountable. If we are not actively pursuing relationships with people who are suffering or need help in bearing their burdens, we have grown complacent. Accountability requires getting together with a small group of trusted friends from your local church who are willing to be open about their complacency and are ready to help each other come up with ways to rekindle experiences with God by creatively sharing Him with the broader world around us.

For others, the reality is grimmer; they have developed excuses to avoid mission to specific groups of people, such as Muslims or Catholics, because they feel that these people are unworthy of God's love. Such excuses reveal that an attitude of superiority and ethnocentrism is at work among them; in which case, there is a need to ask God to help them love all people. We can achieve this goal by asking ourselves what we think about certain people. If we are afraid of certain groups or think they are not worth saving, then it is a sign something is wrong with us, not the group in question. Honest assessment takes a level of self-scrutiny and truthfulness that is hard to achieve, but a church willing to grapple with these realities is a church the Holy Spirit can influence.

MORE MISSION!



A major challenge in the *Adult Bible Study Guide* for the week of December 23-29, 2023, is to invite someone to church.

That week's mission story in the youth and adult *Mission* quarterly features Susana, a 22-year-old student in Ghana who only gave her heart to Jesus after being invited to church.

Want to get more out of this quarter's *Adult Bible Study Guide* on "God's Mission – My

Mission"? Read it together with the *Mission* quarterly.

The Bible lessons were written by the directors of the Global Mission study centers (globalmissioncenters.org), which are part of Adventist Mission, the same General Conference entity that produces the *Mission* quarterly.

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