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Q
2003

Jonah: Gospel of the Second Chance

A Devotional Bible-Study Guide
for Young Adults



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Jonah: Gospel of the Second Chance



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Welcome to *CQ's* World



The following pages represent the creative energy of a truly international group of Adventist young adults. The map above indicates the locations of the writers who have participated in *CQ's* writing program for this quarter.

In producing this unique Sabbath School Bible study guide, 400 individuals contribute to *CQ* each year. The wide variety and occasional repetition of the content reflects the great diversity of its contributors around the world as they respond individually to the subject under study.

Worldwide circulation of *CQ* is about 70,000. It is published in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Indonesian, and Finnish.

Get Interactive

Ever think about writing for *CQ*?

Why not! Each year 400 young adults from around the world participate in the *CQ* writing program. It gives Seventh-day Adventist young people aged 18 to 35 a unique opportunity to grow spiritually, to share the benefits of their Bible study, to exchange ideas, and to contribute to the mission of the Church.

You are the most important ingredient in our *CQ* formula because you can be the answer to our greatest need—the need for caring, committed, contributing authors. If you think you'd like to participate in the writing of a lesson, write us today:

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Got Questions?

Sabbath School University has answers!

Sabbath School University is a 28-minute discussion of the *Adult Bible Study Guide*. SSU discusses the lesson content and strategies to enrich your Sabbath School with fellowship, outreach, Bible study, and missions. Sabbath School leaders, don't miss this weekly broadcast on the Adventist Television Network.



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This Quarter's Illustrators



Javid and Zema Akhadovi met in Moscow, Russia, in 1992, were married, and graduated from the department of cartoon art at the State University of Moscow. Now living in Baku, Azerbaijan, they work as freelance artists in cartooning, book illustration, interior design, and stage scenery design. "Our life goal," Javid says, "is to tell others about God through the universal language of art."

Getting the Most Out of CQ

FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

CQ is based on the conviction that the Word of God offers transforming power and that group study is one important way to tap into that power. *CQ*'s purpose is to provide Seventh-day Adventist young adults with a resource for devotional study on mutual topics, which can then be discussed each week in Sabbath School. Many who use the Adult Bible Study Guide find that because *CQ* deals with the same topics, it enriches lesson study and discussion as a supplemental aid.

Four hundred Adventist young adults contribute to *CQ* each year. The wide variety and occasional repetition of the content reflects the great diversity of its contributors around the world as they respond creatively and individually to the subject.

Circulation of *CQ* is about 70,000.

POINTERS FOR STUDY

1. Through prayer, open your mind to the Holy Spirit's guidance as you study.
2. The Bible passages on which each week's lesson are based appear in bold type in the "Logos" portion of the lesson. Read these entire passages.
3. The Bible passages for the week are usually divided into sections on the "Logos" pages. When studying these sections, carefully reread the Bible passages indicated in bold headings before reading the comments beneath the headings.
4. Read the other sections for the week with the perspective you have gained from your own study of the biblical passages.
5. Keep in mind the purposes of each section of the Bible study guide:
 - "**Introduction**" is designed to stimulate your interest and focus your thinking on the week's theme.
 - "**Logos**" is a guide for direct study of the Bible passages for the week.
 - "**Testimony**" presents Ellen White's perspective on the lesson theme.
 - "**Evidence**" approaches issues raised by the lesson from a historical, scientific, philosophical, or theological perspective.
 - "**How-To**" discusses what the abstractions in the lesson mean for day-to-day living.
 - "**Opinion**" is a personal viewpoint on the lesson meant to encourage further thought and discussion.
 - "**Exploration**" provides the reader with a variety of open-ended, creative ways to explore the topic of the week's lesson.

CQ AND THE CHURCH

CQ is the General Conference-approved Bible study guide for the young-adult age group. It upholds the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. *However, its contents should not be regarded as official pronouncements of the Church.*

Lesson 1
September 27–October 4

Biblical prophets, Modern critics



“Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7, NKJV).

God Dodger

INTRODUCTION

Book of Jonah

God dodger, could that possibly describe you or me?
Of course not, we proclaim with such humility.
We should know within this story that there are lessons not all too hard to find;
one just has to be willing, the spirit will define.
For many have heard about this story of a man named Jonah, a storm, and a
big fish in the sea,
but how many of us have asked ourselves, *How does he compare to me?*
We trust there is a reason, but not all will clearly see,
for some will just dismiss it as myth or allegory.
We read he was a prophet, told by the Lord to Nineveh to go,
instead headed for Tarshish till the ship got tossed to and fro.
He was eventually discovered and cast into the sea.
Not until he repented did the Lord God set him free.
Spewed from the bowels of a fish, he came forth on dry land,
for Jonah finally got it and obeyed the Lord's command!
So Jonah started the journey, a three-day's walk to last.
He shouted to the people, "Only 40 days left to last."
The people didn't doubt as Jonah went about his task;
the warning reached the king and all began to fast.
Everybody, every beast, that resided in this land,
partook of the fast, in hopes of changing God's plan.
The people wore sackcloth, while the king did the same;
showing their remorse, caused the Lord God to refrain.
Jonah grew angry and started to complain,
he knew well of God's mercy and all would end the same.
He knew their ending from the start, for it was plain for him to see,
for this was the very reason he decided to run and flee.
The moral of this story is not captured with one line,
but we all need intervention from He who is divine.
So next time you hear Him calling, remember you can't dodge God, you see
you can try running, but God wants you to know, "You can't escape from Me."

Sunday
September 28

Servants — Special Sent Signs

LOGOS

Amos 3:7; Jonah 1; 3:4; Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32

God's servants are special (Amos 3:7).

Jonah is introduced to us in 2 Kings 14:25 as God's servant. Amos 3:7 shows us something noteworthy: "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (NKJV). Servanthood is a position of high responsibility and deep relationship with the Lord. To serve God is a special position. It is the servant of God who learns the secret of God's head, heart, and hands.

God reveals His plans.

The Hebrew word for "secret" used in this text most often appears in the context of "counsel" or "assembly" when it is used elsewhere in the Bible. God reveals His intentions as also seen in Psalm 25:14: "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant" (NASB). Jonah knew God's plans. The secret of God's desires = God's heart. The word is also used to convey a sense of intimacy.

As we compare the usage of the same Hebrew word for "secret" between translations, we gain a fuller understanding of its meaning. Proverbs 3:32 may represent that the Lord's "secret is with the righteous" (KJV), or it could also be read as saying, "But He is *intimate* with the upright" (NASB, emphasis supplied). Jonah knew God well

**God opts to pursue and
wait for repentance.**

enough to know that God desires that none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9). It was because he knew God's heart so well that Jonah's own heart found conflict over how God intended to deal with Nineveh. Read Jonah 4:1, 2.

The secret of God's ways = God's hands. God says in Isaiah 55:8, 9 that His thoughts and ways will always transcend our understanding, but notice the context in which God gives us this reminder. Read the preceding verses about repentance and pardon. The reason God highlights that His ways aren't like ours is that we have issues with God's ways of forgiveness. We, like Jonah, tend to look for God's heavy hand of judgment rather than His outstretched hands of mercy.

God's servants are sent (Jonah 1; 3:4).

As a servant, Jonah was sent on assignment as a commissioned ambassador for the Lord. Jonah took issue with the nature of the mission, but he did not for that

reason cease to be a servant of God or to be sent of God. Compare God's sent-repent-relent pattern in His dealings with His servant Jonah as well as with Nineveh.

Sent: God opts to send, rather than bend. He does not, by the force of His hand, bow His servants, or other subjects, into submission to His purposes. Jonah was not bent into going to Nineveh when his own will was bent on going to Tarshish. Neither was Nineveh bent into adopting God's principles. God sent His call of direction to both. Both had a choice in how to respond.

Repent: God opts to pursue and wait for repentance, rather than abandon His servants when they are in disagreement with Him. God did not abandon Nineveh to its own ways. Neither did He abandon Jonah. He does not abandon what is His own, but He waits for what is His own to abandon themselves in Him. As God knows the negative consequences that follow our poor choices, He actively pursues us to bring us into repentance so that He can bring us into safety. God pursued Nineveh and then waited for them. He pursued Jonah and then waited for him. When God's servant was willing to bring himself back into repentance, God was there waiting to bring him into salvation. God went to such lengths as to prepare a fish to save Jonah. He went to such lengths as to prepare a cross to save us.

Relent: God opts to relent—He shows mercy rather than punishment in His discipline. In Jonah 3:4 Jonah was back to work. God didn't fire him. God brought him back into His service. Even though Jonah may not have been fully committed, God, in His mercy, restored Jonah to his high calling of servanthood. He may have been even more effective than before. It is likely that attention was drawn to listen to someone who had been swallowed by a fish and lived to tell about it. God not only showed His mercy to Nineveh, but Jonah himself was an example of God's power to relent.

God's servants are signs (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32).

Jesus said that He was a sign to His generation, just as Jonah was a sign to Nineveh. This sign, Jesus said, would be the only sign given. The purpose of a sign is to point to something. Jonah, as God's servant, pointed to repentance and life change. Jesus came as God's servant to indicate forgiveness and new life. What we know is only as valuable as we allow it to help us grow.

To see a spectacular sign of God's power is only as useful as it serves to change us. It's all about application. God's servants are to be signs of life. God's signs and servants are sent to be special change agents. They are signs to the slow: They present God's message again and again to those who are slow of heart to believe (Luke 24:25). God's servants themselves are often the slow ones, as Jonah was. Regardless of their slowness of understanding, God's servants serve to become signs of His slowness to anger.

REACT

Jonah is called a prophet. Why would someone as close as a prophet run away from God?

Monday
September 29

The Depth of His Mercy

TESTIMONY

Matt. 12:39-41

Why was God merciful to the city of Nineveh? What were His compassion and forgiveness supposed to prove? It amazes me how merciful the Lord is. Look at some examples:

“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah” (Matt. 12:41, NRSV). “Have mercy upon me, O God . . . according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1, NKJV).

Ellen White states: “The people of the great heathen city trembled as they heard the warning from God. Kings and nobles humbled themselves; the high and the lowly together cried to the God of heaven, and His mercy was granted unto them.”¹

“When Jonah proclaimed in the streets of Nineveh that within forty days the city would be overthrown, the Lord accepted the humiliation of the Ninevites and extended their period of probation; yet the message of Jonah was sent of God, and Nineveh was tested according to His will.”²

Jonah knew the Lord was merciful. Perhaps that’s why he found it so hard to comply with God’s request. “Thus Jonah was called of God to prolong the life of

the enemy nation which was already in the process of exterminating his own nation.”³ The Lord used Jonah in spite of his anger and opposition. His response was, “ ‘Therefore now, O Lord,

**How merciful would you be if
God sent you to the Taliban
to preach the gospel?**

please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” (Jonah 4:3, NKJV). Jonah’s focus was on himself, rather than on the souls that were saved.

How merciful would you be if God sent you to the Taliban to preach the gospel? Especially since 9/11? Are you any different from Jonah? God saw the whole picture. He knew what He was doing, and He knows what He is doing now.

Meanwhile, pray “in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, *looking for the mercy* of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude 20, 21, emphasis supplied). I’m so glad we have a God who is far more merciful to us than we are to one another.

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 364.

2. *The Great Controversy*, p. 406.

3. *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, p. 363.

Fishing for Facts

EVIDENCE

Matt. 12:39-41

The historicity of Jonah as a prophet and his God-prompted fish tomb story has been questioned by scholars and therefore has created doubt. How can we address this issue as Christians and present our findings with conviction to those who lack faith and require evidence? Let's see what can be found about him.

The historicity of Jonah has been questioned by scholars.

● The name, spelling, and use of "Jonah" in the Old Testament is the Hebrew translation, meaning "dove"; whereas the Greek translation of the same name is used and referred to in the New Testament Greek writings as "Jonas."

● As a patriot and prophet, Jonah predicted the victory of Jeroboam II over Syria (2 Kings 14:25), so he was no rookie. When called upon, he knew what it took to get the job done.

● Biblically, Jesus referred to Jonas/Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). Jesus stated important facts about Jonas, thus giving him credence:

- a. He was a prophet.
- b. He used him as a comparison and as a sign of the length of His stay in the grave.
- c. He made mention of the repented city of Nineveh, after hearing Jonas's preaching.

● Historically, the capital of the Assyrian Empire was Nineveh. "The Assyrian Empire was a world empire for about 300 years (900–607 B.C.). It began its rise to world power about the time of the division of the Hebrew kingdom at the close of Solomon's reign. It gradually absorbed and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel."¹

● Archaeologically, it wasn't until 1811 that charted mounds of inscribed bricks of Babylon prompted interest by Claude James Rich, an agent of the British East India Company residing in Baghdad. In 1820 he visited Mosul and spent four months sketching a plan of the mounds just across the river, which he suspected were the ruins of Nineveh, and collected tablets and inscriptions that neither he nor anyone else could read. "Sir Austen Henry Layard, an Englishman, called 'the father of Assyriology,' discovered, 1845-51, at Nineveh and Calah, ruins of palaces of five Assyrian kings who are named in the Bible, and the great library of Assur-banipal, which is estimated to have contained 100,000 volumes."²

1. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, p. 363.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Wednesday
October 1

A World Full of Jonahs

HOW-TO

Rom. 3:23

What can I take from the story of Jonah to apply to my own life?

commotion relate to us here in the 21st century when the possibility of spending three days in the belly of a fish because we failed to follow God's instructions is next to none? It is easy to get caught

up in the specifics of the story and completely miss the big picture—the big picture that asks, *What can I take from the story of Jonah to apply to my own life?*

Point 1: Jonah was flawed. This is rather apparent from looking over the first chapter of Jonah. Just three verses in, we find Jonah already directly disobeying God's specific orders to preach in Nineveh. He ignores God's instructions and hops on a boat in Joppa going to Tarshish. Basically God spoke and Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Jonah allowed his own fears to rule his decisions, instead of trusting completely in God's power and His plan for Jonah.

Point 2: We are all flawed. Though few of us have a story as extreme as Jonah's, Paul states quite clearly in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NKJV). To put it simply: no one is perfect. Every one of us, at various times and in varying degrees, resists the work of God in our lives. We want to do things our own way and in our own time. It is all part of human nature, an innate nature that we all share in common with Jonah.

Point 3: God can use us despite our flaws. God used Jonah despite his fears and resistance to preach to the city of Nineveh, a city that was home to more than 120,000 people. As a result of Jonah's preaching, the entire city repented and begged God's forgiveness. God used an ordinary man to do extraordinary work. In the same way, God can use us, despite our flawed human nature, as instruments in His work.

REACT

1. How can Christians avoid letting personal fears prevent them from following God's plan for their lives? Be specific.
2. Jonah allowed his fears to rule his life instead of trusting God. What do you fear?
3. How can God use your fears to accomplish His purposes and for His glory?

Modern-day Warnings

OPINION

Rom. 6:23

The apostle Paul writes, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23, KJV). This warning, so clear when he wrote it, shouts to all humanity. Paul is just one example of the countless men and women who declared God's warnings to His people. These warnings are relevant today and are given to us so we sinners will not have to experience death, but have life through Christ.

Essentially, sin is a separation from God and His will. When we follow our own desires or selfish ambitions, we are sinning and walking away from God's warnings and blessings. This can be seen throughout the Bible and in society today. Terrorism, war, child abuse, murder, sexual abuse, and political and religious strain flood the news. Yet God's grace can be seen through even the worst of these tragedies.

Jonah, a prophet of God, was a sinner. The book of Jonah also shows how again and again Jonah chose to follow his own selfish ambitions and disobey God. An experienced prophet, Jonah ran away from God when asked to prophesy to the sinful city of Nineveh, yet God showed mercy on him. The book of Jonah, the only prophetic book that focuses on the prophet and not the prophecy, can teach us how to focus less on our own selfish ambitions and more on God's grace for all sinners.

We, the children of God, are all sinners. Again and again we seek our own selfish ambitions. The beauty of God, in all His grace and mercy, is that He will always give us fair warning to turn away from our sinfulness. He will never send judgment on us without a clear and precise warning. When we focus on our own selfish desires, it may be difficult for us to hear God's warning, let alone heed it. But if we can clear our minds of our selfish ambitions, for even a moment, we can hear the word of God instructing us on how best to live our lives for Him.

God's grace can be seen through even the worst of these tragedies.

Jonah did not believe that the people of Nineveh deserved God's mercy or forgiveness. How many times have we wished vengeance on those who are sinners? We all seek our selfish ambitions and we are all sinners, yet we should be thankful that we are all under God's grace and that the message of God's salvation is for *all* people. God's forgiveness and salvation through Jesus is available to all who heed the warnings, repent, and believe.

REACT

What would be Jonah's message today to London, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro?

EXPLORATION

Jonah 1–4

So we can't dodge God—at least not successfully. God calls His servants to be intimate with Him, to know His heart and plans, to get out of our comfort zone, and to be walking and talking signs that teach His truth. God commands us to help save people we don't naturally care about and may naturally even loathe for cultural, racial, class, or other reasons. God is patient when we find this difficult, but He insists that we develop in Him till we do it. Even prophets sin. Even prophets need the gospel of grace—forgiving grace, transforming grace.

CONSIDER

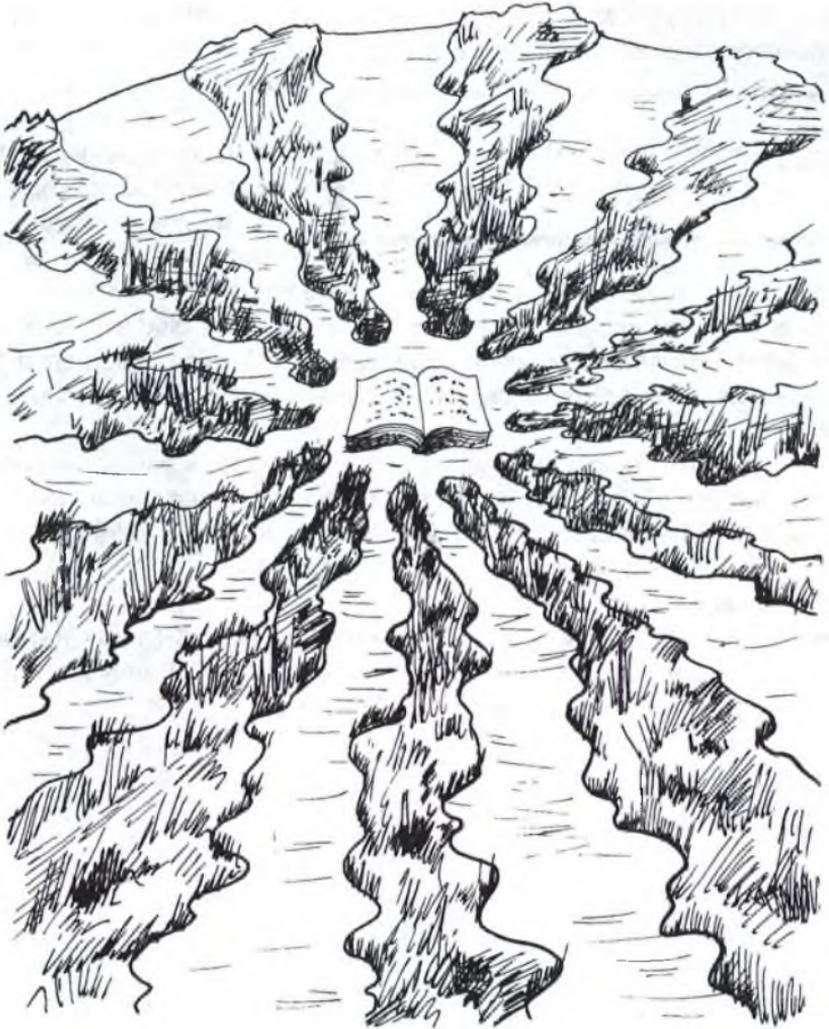
- Designing an imaginary billboard to be displayed in your environment (street, university class, workplace, etc.) that would express a message from God. Use seven words and/or one picture.
- Thinking about a song Jonah might have written about his experience in the fish (Jon. 2:1-9). Take some of his ideas and write a blues, reggae, or rap (or any other musical genre you like) as if you were Jonah.
- Exploring for yourself the debate over the validity of the story of Jonah in literature and on the Internet. How does this story help to build our faith in our Creator?
- Doing some library or Internet research on fish. Are there any big enough to hold a human? What fish-eats-man stories have been reported since? What could Jonah breathe for 72 hours? Eat? Would stomach acids begin to digest Jonah's body? What other scientific problems does this story raise, and how could they be solved?
- Using a Bible map to calculate some distances. How far was Jonah willing to sail to get away? How far did the fish take him? (See Jonah 1:3.)
- Storyboarding the book of Jonah into a textually accurate, creative, and humorous film storyboard or graphic novel/cartoon strip.
- Creating a mime or silent ballet (solo, duo, or more players) that tells the story of your relationship with God. Have you tried to dodge Him? What has He done?
- Ending the Jonah story since it doesn't really end. Write/tell the ending you wish had happened, and the one you think really would have happened.

CONNECT

Prophets and Kings, pp. 266–274.

Alister McGrath, *Bridge Building: Communicating Christianity Effectively*; Ravi Zaccharias, *Can Man Live Without God?*

People and Places



“ ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations’ ” (Jer. 1:5, NKJV).

Sabbath
October 4

Why Did He Form You?

INTRODUCTION

Jer. 1:5

"Walking aimlessly down this tunnel called life, I stopped and realized I didn't know where I was going. This person called 'I' was trapped, yet I myself was the cage, afraid to continue walking, yet wanting to run."

This is the first part of an excerpt from my journal, which was written at a time in my life when I felt like Jonah. I felt the Lord tugging at my heart, yet I refused to listen because I didn't want to go down that road. You know what I am talking about: that time, it could be right now, when God has asked you to do something and you say No. It

"This person called 'I' was trapped."

may be that it seems too difficult a task or you are afraid of the outcome.

That is when the second part comes in. It says: "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:11-13, NIV).

God loves you. It is not in His nature to deny His love for you because of your faults. Even when you think that life has swallowed you up and you are lost forever, at that moment when you realize you are helpless, you begin to let God do what He formed you for, and you are put on the right ground.

My Dearest Child,

For everywhere I have put you, there is a purpose behind it. I love you, so trust Me. I wouldn't do anything that wasn't for your own good. "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20, NIV).

Love always and forever,
Your Father

Absurdities

EVIDENCE

Jonah 1

Rare is the person who has not heard or been inspired by Corrie ten Boom's personal and dramatic experience with forgiveness. As someone from one of her audiences approached her, she recognized him as the Nazi officer who had mistreated her and her sister during their imprisonment in the concentration camp. He had assisted in the death of the other prisoners. Years later he had become a Christian, and now he was standing in front of her with an extended hand. Corrie describes how she at first resisted. She prayed for God's help, and as she stretched her hand to grab hold of the man's hand, she felt the Holy Spirit's surge through the supernatural act.

I have heard this story many times and it never ceases to amaze me. God's grace is amazing. Also awe-inspiring is how God will stop at nothing to extend forgiveness and mercy. Jonah learned this the hard way. He refused to preach to Nineveh, for fear that God would forgive the enemies of His people. (See Jonah 4:1, 2.) When one reads the account of the Ninevites' cruelty in the book of Nahum, who can blame him? What was God thinking of? Next thing you know, these people will be transformed and want to speak of God's love. They didn't deserve to know God or His peace.

**This story never ceases
to amaze me.**

What is even more absurd is that Jonah would question the God of the universe's ways and dare run the other way. We see ourselves through Jonah's narrow-mindedness and ultimately irrational behavior. The story is a powerful illustration of just how oblivious we are of our own wretchedness and need for God. God's prophet is not immune from being very human. The story of Jonah—in spite of its surprising tale of a giant whale—still touches us because it reveals God's patience not only for His erring people but also for someone who ought to have known better. The story of the reluctant prophet is not so much about our stubbornness to have it our way as it is about God's stubborn determination to show His compassion even if it would mean sending His Son, Jesus, to die in place of His enemies.

Monday
October 6

Direct Directions Yet Devious Decisions

LOGOS

1 Sam. 16:1-3; Psalm 104; Jonah 1; Matt. 10:30

Why Jonah Ran (1 Sam. 16:1-3)

Nineveh. Why Nineveh? There is a verse that we quote often concerning the birth of Christ: "When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son" (Gal. 4:4, NKJV). We can be tempted to think that this was the only moment of exquisite timing on His part, but Jonah's commission had the same quality.

Evidence suggests that at the time when Jonah was one of God's spokesmen, Nineveh experienced a religious revolution—a monotheistic one.¹ God saw this. The timing was right, but Jonah was aware only of the reputation that Nineveh

It is evident that "down" describes not only a geographic direction.

had for being a "bloody city . . . full of lies and robbery," whose "victim never departs" (Nah. 3:1, NKJV). Jonah wasn't too keen on becoming a victim, so he ran. He was so fearful that "instead of going some 500 miles

northeast to Nineveh, he set out to go 2,000 miles west to Tarshish."² His fears were exactly the same as those of Samuel. As a prophet, Jonah must have been well versed in the lives of his predecessors, but Samuel's obedience was no inspiration at this time.

Choosing Life's Direction (Jon. 1:3)

Another Bible character who had a very specific calling chose not to do what God required of him. Samson was fully aware of his calling as a Nazarene, as was Jonah of his calling as a prophet. Besides this calling, the Lord had from the time of Moses told the Israelites not to intermarry with the pagans around them. When Samson began his journey away from God, however, the Bible says that he "went down to Timnah" (Judg. 14:1, NKJV). In his flight from God, Jonah went "down to Joppa" (Jon. 1:3, NKJV). It is evident that "down" describes not only a geographic direction. Perhaps, for all who run away from God, their lives head into a downward spiral, but God is a gracious God and no matter the degree of descent, once we call on His name, He lifts us up. Jonah and Samson are only two examples, but they are enough to help us understand that He will do the same for us.

Working for Good to Those Who Don't Know the Lord (Psalm 104)

I have a friend who is always telling me, "God uses crooked pencils to draw

straight lines." At the onset of this story, Jonah was very crooked. How straight a line could God draw?

Once the terrible storm broke, the sailors called on their gods (Jon. 1:4). The Hebrew word translated "god" in this verse is *elohim*, which is a generic term for "deity."³ In verse 6, when they asked Jonah to pray to his God, they did not consider that Jonah's God would be any different from theirs and therefore they used the term *elohim*. By the time we get to verse 9, however, Jonah has explained that he is Hebrew and worships "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (NIV).

While Jonah had been speaking, the storm had worsened. I imagine that these sailors were experienced men of the sea, and as far as they could tell, this storm was unusual: Maybe it was the wrong season for storms. Somehow, in their minds, what Jonah said about his God, and the fact that he was running away from Him, was connected with the life-threatening situation that they found themselves in. They had already prayed to their gods to no avail. So at the conclusion of Jonah's explanation, they incredulously inquired of him why he had been so foolish as to put their lives at risk by running away from his God. Jonah had told them that their only hope was to throw him overboard. Conviction is beginning to set in as evidenced by the sailors no longer referring to God as *elohim* but *Yahweh*, "which peculiarly designates the true God,"⁴ as they appeal for clemency. They had to throw Jonah overboard. They had tried everything they could in order to save themselves.

By the time Jonah begins his decent into the dark sea, the sailors are totally convinced that Jonah's God was the God who brought on the storm and subsequently calmed the sea, that He was *Yahweh* and that He was worthy of the sacrifices that they then made to Him. Jonah's running from the task of reaching a metropolis teeming with people ignorant of *Yahweh* occasioned the opportunity for God to reach a rag-tag group of sailors. Who knows how many? Maybe six. Maybe 20. Numbers are not as important to God as they are to us.

REACT

Why did God not send Jonah to an Israelite nation seeing that they, too, were in apostasy?

1. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 996.

2. W. A. Townend, *More Than Meets the Eye*, p. 89.

3. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 999.

4. *Ibid.*

Tuesday
October 7

God's Grace Is Not Exclusive

TESTIMONY

Jonah 1

Jonah was running, not from God, but from God's words. He was given the prophetic commission to preach the gospel of "repent and live" to his enemies and he was none too pleased.

Nineveh was the strong, notorious capital of Israel's enemy, the Assyrians, and here was the God of Israel commissioning an Israelite to prophesy against Nineveh to *prevent* its destruction. How unconventional!

God commissioned an Israelite to prophesy against Nineveh to *prevent* its destruction.

Jonah, therefore, was unwilling to yield to the command. Man of God or not,

he was saying No! He would rather die than save his archenemy. You would think that one professing to be close to God would not be so bigoted and exclusive. He forgot that God was the Creator of all humankind and sent His only Son to die so that all, friends and foes, would be saved.

Like some Christians, Jonah was practicing exclusivity. "Ye are the light of the world! The Jews thought to confine the benefits of salvation to their own nation; but Christ showed them that salvation is like the sunshine. It belongs to the whole world."¹

We are to remember that God, unlike Jonah, shows no favoritism (Acts 10:34, 35). Like the people of Nineveh, "Hundreds are waiting for the warning to escape for their lives."²

Like Jonah, "Everyone who has received the divine illumination is to brighten the pathway of those who know not the Light of life."³ No running away. God's grace, mercy, and love are for every human being.

REACT

1. How are we to tell others who blatantly and openly sin despite God's warnings?
2. How can we warn others of sin without judging them, at least to some degree?

1. *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 306, 307.

2. *Gospel Workers*, p. 29.

3. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 152.

God Knows You!

HOW-TO

Jer. 1:5; Jon. 2:1, 2, 10; Matt. 10:30

“The very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30, NKJV).

God knows every one of us by name and nature, and He sees what no human can see or know. He knows what we are capable of doing even if it has not happened. While we are constantly indulging in our sinful nature, we need to acknowledge that God is great and powerful enough to easily destroy us, but because He is kind and merciful, He spares us. Instead, He grants us a chance to change, to turn away from our wicked ways, and

**God also wants us to
take up His torch.**

to accept Him—the same message He sent with Jonah to Nineveh. God also wants us to take up His torch and run the marathon, spreading His truth that enlightens as we journey through life. God uses ordinary people like you and me who are willing to serve Him, to go out and proclaim His gospel.

No matter how many times we sin against God, He never turns His back on us. We should make a conscious decision to leave our sin behind and look up to Jesus, who will do the rest. He transforms us into a new creature and gives us a new lease on life.

REACT

1. There is a popular saying, “If you don’t like the message, shoot the messenger!” How does this expression relate, if at all, to the story of Jonah?
2. The lesson states that Jonah might have already hated Nineveh. How can we get over our prejudices and hangups and share God’s message with those who are different from us—age, color, race, socioeconomic status, educational level, professional level? Be specific.
3. Is God’s judgment on Nineveh fair, since they were not given the Ten Commandments? Explain your answer.

OPINION

Jer. 31:3; Matt. 28:19, 20; John 15:13

In times past God used ordinary people like Jonah to tell others about Himself. If we take a look at Jonah, we realize that, first, God called Jonah. He was a regular guy, yet still God called him. Second, he disobeyed God and in fact tried to run away from God, yet God forgave him and sent him once again to call the people of Nineveh to repentance. God did this because of His love for Jonah and the people of Nineveh.

God also used Peter and the rest of the apostles, and today He is using ordinary people like you and me. He is calling us. He is saying to us, " 'Go therefore and

**He is not sending us
out there alone.**

make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am

with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19, 20, NKJV). God is going to use anyone who is willing and able, but He is not sending us out there alone. He will be right there with us.

God loves His children, and because He loves us, He sent His son to die for us (John 3:16). Ellen White tells us, "Christ's love for His children is as tender as it is strong. And it is stronger than death; for He died to purchase our salvation, and to make us one with Him, mystically and eternally one. . . . Although sin has existed for ages, trying to counteract this love and obstruct its flowing earthward, it still flows in rich currents to those for whom Christ died."*

Since He loves us, He desires that none should perish but that all should come to repentance. For this reason, God calls us to go out into the world and the byways to sow a seed, tell others of His love, and to call His children to repentance.

REACT

How would you seek to bring assurance to someone who is convinced that their sin is too great for God?

**Messages to Young People*, p. 110.

Infinite Patience

EXPLORATION

Jer. 1:5; Acts 7

CONCLUDE

The story of Jonah is one of God's unfailing love and grace. In asking Jonah to go to Nineveh, God begins a train of events that cause Jonah to confront and reexamine the direction of his life. Through Jonah's experience God is able to reach out to a group of sailors and the people of Nineveh, bringing them into a saving relationship with Him. God still intervenes in human lives. He can redirect our lives and use us to reach out to others. God is infinitely patient in His efforts to recover, redirect, and save men, women, and children.

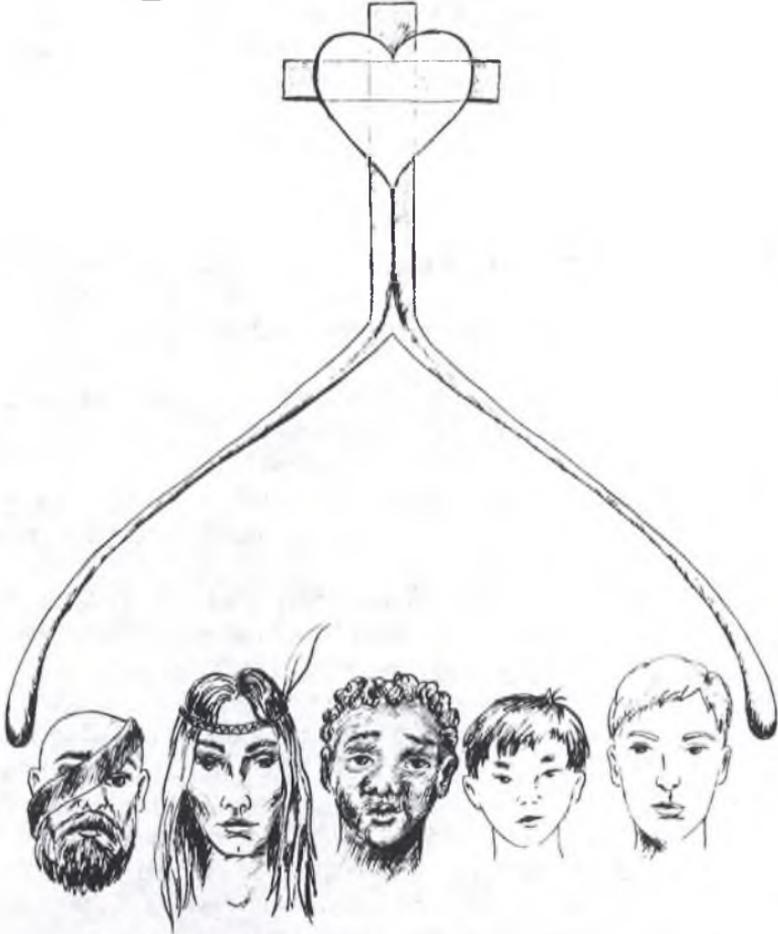
CONSIDER

- Selecting at random from a newspaper pictures of people. Look at the pictures and identify your reactions, both positive and negative. Think about this question: How do your feelings toward others affect your ability to witness?
- Noting times when you clearly saw God's intervention in your life or in that of others you know. Think about the outcomes.
- Imagining you are Jonah. Write how you might have felt if you were in the belly of the large fish or when you preached in the city. Have you ever experienced similar feelings? Would you handle them differently after studying Jonah's story?
- Taking a boat ride or walk by water. Imagine what it would be like to be trapped inside a whale. Think about how sin can trap us. How does it affect our relationship with God and those around us? What is the way to escape from sin's power?
- Rewriting Jeremiah 1:5 in your own words. Make a list of what it means to know that God knew you before you were born. Think about how choice affects life.
- Baking some fish-shaped cookies and sharing them with a friend. Tell the story of Jonah and what God means to you in your life.
- Projecting over the next six months and planning ways to share Jesus with your friends and neighbors. Present your ideas to God in prayer.
- Surveying people to find out what *repentance* means to them. What does the Bible say about repentance? Using examples from the Bible, compare and contrast how God deals with repentant and unrepentant sinners.

CONNECT

Steps to Christ, pp. 77–84.

Jonah and Judgment



**“Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ ”
(Acts 10:34, 35, NRSV).**

I Love You . . .

INTRODUCTION

Acts 10:34, 35

It was Saturday morning at the Master Guide camp. We were having group dynamics as our Sabbath School activity. The facilitator told a story that we'd discussed in each group.

There was a family who had a father who was said to be having an affair with a young woman whom he met at church. What would you do if you were the daughter and it happens that the young woman is your best friend? What would you do if you were fellow church members?

I answered: "I'd attack her for having the nerve to show her face in church after what she had done to my family, and I would tell her to her face that I hate her! I would add that I had trusted her so much but that I regret the day that we became friends!" Most of the answers were like mine, full of hatred, full of pain, full of anger.

After the lively brainstorming, the facilitator told us what had happened in the story: Unknown to the community, the young woman happened to be a victim of sexual harassment. No one would listen to her, not even her so-called best friend. Everyone hated her. Everyone accused her.

In anger she retaliated. She transferred from one place to another and used her beauty to destroy families. For years she'd been doing this until one day she met a man who changed her life. They became friends, and for the first time in her life she had someone to tell her story to. Their friendship grew into romance. When the man said, "I love you," the young woman felt accepted and loved for the first time. Although no one else would listen to her, this man did.

**Most of the answers
were like mine.**

The facilitator asked: "How would you feel if you were this young woman?"

No one answered. All was silence. *If I were the young woman, I told myself, I would have felt hurt too. I might even have done something more terrible than the young woman did in the story. I might even have killed myself because of loneliness and pain.* I felt ashamed for what I'd assumed about her. I felt ashamed for I probably wouldn't have given her the chance to talk. I wouldn't have listened.

It is easy for us to judge others without knowing who they really are. But God isn't like that. God always listens. He is always there for us. He loved us before we loved Him. When we accept Jesus, it doesn't matter what our pasts are. It doesn't matter whether other people despise us. He alone will judge us where we belong and what our works shall be.

Sunday
October 12

A Game of Hide-and-Seek

LOGOS

Jon. 1:2; 3:8; Acts 10:34, 35; Rom. 1:18-20; 2:13-16

It is not unusual for a man of his profession later to regret his calling. Jonah tried to travel to Tarshish instead of to Nineveh. Instead of being able to hide himself, however, he was caught and became hidden in the belly of a fish. Later, he became disappointed with the withered gourd.

Where Jonah Came From (2 Kings 14:25; Jon. 1:1)

We are familiar with the name *Jonah* as the prophet who was swallowed by a great fish. Fortunately for him, the Lord gave him time inside the fish's belly to reconsider His order to go to Nineveh. If not, Jonah might have been digested there.

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai" (Jon. 1:1, NKJV), a native of Gathhepher, which means "winepress of the well."¹ Located in a lower Galilee town, it is about five miles from Nazareth. In today's modern times, it has been identified as el-Meshed, which is a village on the top of a rocky hill. In modern terms, we might say that Jonah's father was a pastor and Jonah became a pastor.

Jonah may not have been the equal of Daniel or the more well-known prophets, yet he was able to restore "the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the

Imagine so much travel
on foot.

Sea of the Arabah" (2 Kings 14:25, NKJV). Described as a fortress,² it was the capital of one of the kingdoms in upper Syria in the valley of Lebanon at the northern boundary of Palestine

(Num. 13:21; 34:8), at the foot of Mount Hermon (Josh. 13:5) toward Damascus (Zech. 9:2; Jer. 49:23). It is called "Hamath the great" (Amos 6:2, KJV) and "Hamath-zobath" (2 Chron. 8:3, KJV).

Imagine so much travel on foot. If you were not an able walker, cross-country trips would have been very difficult. Even if Jonah rode a donkey, the restoration of so much territory would have necessitated much personal travel.

Jonah's Problem (Jon. 1:2, 3; 3:8; Acts 10:34, 35)

What a surprise it must have been for Jonah to be asked by the Lord God to go to the city of Nineveh! Imagine going to a city that you might have thought impenetrable by gospel or Christianity. Surely in your heart you would think, as Jonah did, *How could God forgive such a wicked and terrible city?* Jonah must have had that in his heart. Would God forgive Nineveh? This was a question in Jonah's time, and it could

also be a question about cities in the present. It will also be a question of great discussion in the future: Could God forgive?

Basically, Jonah was very sensitive to the mission that God had intended him to take. He might have already hated Nineveh, even from the start. Why focus on Nineveh's repentance when God would punish it just like Sodom and Gomorrah? A reasonable question. Here we are, happy Christians living on wicked planet Earth. We are expecting the soon return of Jesus Christ and His tens of thousands of angels, so that wicked people who make fun of us, persecute us, and demoralize our lives will finally be burned in hell.

Jonah's unsuccessful evasion of Tarshish, however, isn't a panacea. Neither he himself nor the people of Nineveh would ever benefit from his heart's purpose. God instead directed Jonah that the only solution was for him to work in behalf of Nineveh's wicked citizens.

God's Solution to Jonah's Reaction (Rom. 1:18-20; 2:13-16)

It so happened that as Jonah tried to go to Tarshish, the Lord God sent a storm to stand between Jonah and his aim of crossing the sea. Here, then, the unexpected happens: Jonah flees from the Lord. His shipmates pray to their gods for deliverance, but Jonah doesn't pray. He goes down praying to God for forgiveness inside a fish. He returns to Nineveh to complete the mission God had entrusted him to do. The city of Nineveh asks for God's forgiveness and it is granted. Jonah becomes displeased at this. Finally Jonah realizes that though God expects the penalty of the consequences made by breaching the divine law, His mercy yet extends even further.

So much for Jonah. I remember a time when a pastor said at a certain church I visited that "only the sinner who truly has been forgiven could sing praises to the Lord God." Again I remembered Nineveh. We are more judgmental than the One who is supposed to judge us all. We seem to approve or disapprove of who we think will be saved.

Jesus Christ came to provide a clear picture of the ways of the Father. "You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You" (Ps. 86:5, NKJV). "Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:4, NKJV). May we be able to contemplate the kind of love that, even as we were sinners, Jesus Christ died for us.

REACT

In what specific ways could Jonah's experience be of help to you?

1. M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1897).

2. *Ibid.*

Monday
October 13

Mingling Judgment and Mercy

TESTIMONY

Ps. 89:14

"The cross of Calvary, while it declares the law immutable, proclaims to the universe that the wages of sin is death."¹

"Justice demands that sin be not merely pardoned, but the death penalty must be executed. God, in the gift of His only-begotten Son, met both these requirements. By dying in man's stead, Christ exhausted the penalty and provided a pardon."²

"Through Jesus, God's mercy was manifested to men; but mercy does not set aside justice. The law reveals the attributes of God's character, and not a jot or tittle of it could be changed to meet man in his fallen condition. God did not change His law, but He

**" 'Righteousness and peace
have kissed each other.' "**

sacrificed Himself, in Christ, for man's redemption. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.' 2 Cor. 5:19."³

"The penalty for the least transgression of that law is death, and but for Christ, the sinner's Advocate, it would be summarily visited on every offender. Justice and mercy are blended. Christ and the law stand side by side. The law convicts the transgressor, and Christ pleads in the sinner's behalf."⁴

"God's love has been expressed in His justice no less than in His mercy. Justice is the foundation of His throne, and the fruit of His love. It had been Satan's purpose to divorce mercy from truth and justice. He sought to prove that the righteousness of God's law is an enemy to peace. But Christ shows that in God's plan they are indissolubly joined together; the one cannot exist without the other. 'Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.' Ps. 85:10."⁵

REACT

1. How do you understand God's justice and mercy as being blended together in Christ's life and death?

2. How can you explain this to people who see God as a god who enjoys punishing people?

1. *The Great Controversy*, p. 503.

2. *Selected Messages*, bk. 1, p. 340.

3. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762.

4. *This Day With God*, p. 246.

5. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762.

Who Were These Assyrians?

EVIDENCE

Jer. 18:7-10

Nineveh is described as a “great city” (Jon. 1:2, KJV). It served as the capital of ancient Assyria. Who were these Assyrians?

The Assyrians were “a Semitic-speaking people who arrived from the southwest shortly after 2000 B.C.”¹ They “lived in the upper Tigris valley, a region frequently invaded by people from nearby mountains.”² Thus they became “ruthless warriors.”³ “Assyrian rulers invaded other lands, mainly for plunder. They deliberately used terror in the lands they conquered.”⁴ Therefore, as the capital, Nineveh served as the seat of all Assyria’s wickedness. It even caused Nahum to call it “the bloody city” (Nah. 3:1, KJV). Then during the reign of Adad-Nirari III (810–782 B.C.), something happened.

“For an unknown reason, Nabu, the god of Borsippa, appears to have been proclaimed sole or at least principal god of the empire. [Ancient civilizations are known to be polytheistic.] A Nabu temple was created in 787 B.C. at Calah, and on a Nabu statue . . . appear the magnificent words ‘Trust in Nabu, do not trust in any other god!’ ”⁵

Some see this as a possible connection to the mission of Jonah, for the people “believed” (Jon. 3:5, KJV) and even caused the king to proclaim a decree! (verse 7). Now the Bible says, “God saw their works . . . and God repented” (verse 10, KJV). “Repent” is defined as to change one’s mind and regret an earlier decision. Does God really change? The Bible shows other instances (Gen. 6:6; 1 Sam. 15:11). According to *The SDA Bible Commentary*,⁶ God doesn’t change, but circumstances do (Jer. 18:7-10; Ezek. 33:13-16). These pronouncements of judgments are frequently, in effect, conditional prophecies. God speaks to humankind in their own experiences.

For a time Nineveh was spared of its destruction, for its people turned away from their evil ways. But soon enough they reverted to their old ways that eventually led to their desolation in 612 B.C.

**Nineveh served as the seat
of all Assyria’s wickedness.**

1. *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Lexicon Publications, Inc., 1989), p. 266.

2. Marvin Perry, *History of the World*, p. 57.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 60.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 1000.

HOW-TO

Isa. 11:2, 3; 1 John 1:9

The secretary was surprised.

A friend asked me if I knew a doctor who could help her out in her gastrointestinal problem. I suggested one. The only gastroenterologist I know is a pediatric gastroenterologist. I gave her the contact number. The secretary was the one who answered the call, and my friend stated her problem. The secretary was surprised and

asked my friend why, since she wasn't a pediatric patient, she was seeking that doctor's consultation.

Here are some tips on how to get an appropriate (spiritual) doctor:

1. Look at the directory. Searching the directory makes it easier to find the right doctor. The Holy Bible is our directory to the truth. It will never lead us to somewhere else but only to God, who is the truth.

2. Phone the doctor. With our sincere hearts, by phoning God through prayer, our burdens will be healed—from the outermost to the innermost parts—without hesitation or limitation.

3. Know something about the doctor. Through knowing God more, by spending quality time in searching the Scriptures, we will not be deceived by anyone, because we know God very well and we know His capabilities.

Our great God loves us all. If possible, He wants all of us to be with Him there in heaven. Right now He is calling for us, showing His unlimited love and mercy, and it extends to every individual. Our part is to approach Him, seek His consultation, and accept His divine love, then, in the end, God will show His fairness and justice. Praise God!

REACT

1. First John 1:9 offers a simple path to salvation: Confess your sins; God always forgives you and cleans up your life. If this is so simple, why is there still so much wickedness in our world? In our own lives?

2. God offers wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Why are we so reluctant to ask for these gifts and recognize God's leading in our lives?

Crossing the Bridge to Salvation

OPINION

Jon. 3:10; 4; Acts 10:34, 35

Last year my organization went to a remote village for a medical-dental mission. To get there, we had to hike for two hours and cross a wobbly hanging bridge—the kind that breaks in the middle like the ones seen in the movies. As I stepped on the bridge, my fear of heights engulfed me, and my whole body could not move. I could not breathe, and I didn't realize I was trying to keep myself from crying until I felt tears running down my face.

Similarly, crossing over from sin to salvation is not easy. It surely wasn't simple for Nineveh, which was a "center of crime and wickedness . . . full of lies and robbery."* But when the Ninevites repented, God saved them from the destruction that Jonah pronounced. Even Jonah at first couldn't comprehend why God would let such sinful people live, why He would risk being regarded as one who does not fulfill His word.

We live in a world like Nineveh. Television reports and newspapers carry news of murder, robbery, and many other crimes and sins. Standards of right and wrong are almost nonexistent; crookedness is everywhere.

The good news is that our God is merciful. He ignores our skin color, our family name, our address, even the wicked little planet we live on. God looks at our hearts. He sees how sincere we are, how willing we are to let the Holy Spirit change us.

Sometimes we feel that we're too sinful, that we cannot cross over to the side free from the darkness of sin. We decide to stay in our sinful ways because it's difficult to transfer to God's side. We fear that God might see how evil we really are and how much we don't deserve His merciful judgment. When we ask for forgiveness, however, God takes us to the other side of the bridge, where we are sure that His love will spare us from death. For we know that our God is a God of love and justice and that His mercy extends to anyone, no matter how wicked or sinful.

As I stood there on the other end of the bridge, friends rushed toward me and held me as I crossed. Friends that were already on the other side cheered me on. Soon the ordeal was over. Just like crossing a hanging bridge, crossing over to God's side is not easy, but we know that as God had forgiven the Ninevites who repented, He is just and merciful to forgive us as well. And He will be there with open arms as He welcomes us to salvation.

**We live in a world
like Nineveh.**

**Prophets and Kings*, p. 265.

EXPLORATION

John 3:16, 17; Rom. 5:8; 6:23; 2 Pet. 3:9

CONCLUDE

Christ's life on earth and His death on Calvary proved beyond reasonable doubt that God is indeed L-O-V-E, thus irrevocably declaring God's innocence and pronouncing Satan's guilt and condemnation.

Judgment, therefore, is inevitable. For as much as God is a God of love, He is also a God of justice. The foundation of His government rests upon this justice. Calvary pinpointed the immutability of God's laws and at the same time proclaimed to the universe that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23, KJV).

God metes on the wicked "eternal *punishment*" (Matt. 25:46, NIV, emphasis supplied) but not eternal *punishing*. The punishment is eternal, for when the wicked are destroyed, they will never return. The wicked will be punished, but God is not a sadist who delights in seeing people suffer. He is not interested in punishing people. He takes no pleasure whatsoever in the punishment of the wicked. That is contrary to the very nature of God. Even in His judgment, God reveals His love and mercy.

CONSIDER

- Recalling your personal reasons for accepting Jesus as your Savior.
- Singing "We Shall Behold Him" by Jennifer La Mountain. Write down the lyrics of the song and share it with someone who is feeling discouraged.
- Researching the words *judgment*, *justice*, *mercy*, and *love* on the Internet or elsewhere, as they pertain to God.
- Making puppets to represent the book of Jonah. Write a script for the story of Jonah and perform a puppet show for children in your congregation or neighborhood.
- Asking a friend to become your prayer or accountability partner and making a commitment to continue praying for each other until Jesus comes.
- Viewing the video *A Man for All Seasons* (1966). As you watch this motion picture, analyze the similarities and the differences between the prophet Jonah and Sir Thomas More as they related to their responsibilities as representatives of God.
- Interviewing a judge, a lawyer, a police officer, and/or a jailed prisoner on the process of justice where you live.

CONNECT

The Great Controversy, chaps. 28; 29.

Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . ., chaps. 7; 8; 23; 26; *Bible Readings for the Home*, pp. 46–49, 54–58, 359–362.

The "Dove" flees



“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months” (James 5:17, NKJV).

INTRODUCTION

Ezek. 36:26, 27; Jonah 1-4; Matt. 19:21, 22

A friend told me the following experience: When he was about 18 years old, one of his neighbors had a five-year-old son who had health problems and needed blood transfusions. The family began to search for volunteers from their neighborhoods. Two members of the family visited my friend's house and asked him:

"Hi. We are looking for volunteers to donate blood of type B positive to a small five-year-old child. Could you help us?"

Having type O positive blood (universal donor) my friend lied to those people because he feared the needle of the blood transfusion. My friend answered them:

My friend lied to those people because he feared the needle of the blood transfusion.

"No, I can't. My blood is type A positive. It's incompatible with type B."

"Well, thanks anyway," they said and resumed their search

for new volunteers in the other houses in the neighborhood.

Coming into the room, my friend's mother asked her son, "It seems that I heard voices here. Who were they and what did they want?"

"Our neighbors," my friend answered, "looking for volunteers to donate blood for their five-year-old child."

"Why didn't you volunteer?" his mother asked.

When he told her what had happened, she was shocked. "You must go there and donate blood for that child!"

As a result, my friend donated blood for the child. Despite his lapse, I am sure that the Lord used him to assist that child in a way somewhat similar to Jonah's assistance to the people of Nineveh.

The Lord desires to use us (despite our faults) as His agents to proclaim His message to the world. He desires to give us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:26, 27).

Will You Run and Hide?

EVIDENCE

2 Kings 14:25; Jon. 4:11

It is crucial to understand the background to the book of Jonah. God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim His judgment against it. The prophet didn't like the assignment. Who was Jonah? Where was he from? Where was Nineveh?

Jonah was a prophet and servant of the Lord. He lived in Israel and served God as His prophet. He lived at a time of external peace in Israel, so most of the people became complacent toward spiritual things. Israel actually hoped for the destruction of other nations and longed for God's darkness to fall on them. They failed to look at

**All his other assignments
had been within Israel.**

the fields of needy people in the world who were headed for destruction without a Savior. Israel, a chosen nation, blessed with many special privileges from God, refused to share their blessings and God became displeased!

I'm sure Jonah would have been happy to have another plum job like the one he had in 2 Kings 14:25, where he was preaching to the people of God about the blessings He would give them. All his other assignments had been within Israel. I'm sure he didn't like the idea of traveling to preach to the pagans. He saw his job as preaching to God's people, not to the ungodly.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, a powerful and vicious nation, and Israel's enemy. Nahum 3 profiles the Assyrians as wicked, ferocious, and brutal. Nineveh had 120,000 people, and Jonah 3:3 tells us that it took a three-day journey to cross. In fact, Nineveh had walls 100 feet high and so broad that three chariots could run around them side by side. Within its walls were gardens and fields for its many cattle.

The Assyrians were a cruel and heartless people. Ancient Assyrian engravings depict people being tortured and skulls worn around their necks to show their cruelty. When they conquered a town in battle, they would take any survivors and impale them on stakes in front of the town. Their leaders would often remove the heads of their enemies and wear them around their necks. And it's to this group of people, to this great enemy nation, to this enemy city, that God called Jonah to go.

If the people of Nineveh, the great and cruel enemy of God's people, could repent at the preaching of Jonah, how much greater would have been the acceptance for those who believe in Jesus when confronted with truth!

REACT

Why does God call us to do the seeming impossible? What lesson might He be trying to teach?

Monday
October 20

The Human Race

LOGOS

Exod. 4:1, 10, 13; Josh. 7:1-25; Job 38; Jonah 1

Bigotry does not allow others to grow; it restricts, represses, or eliminates whatever it hates. It generalizes its bias to all who fit a narrow definition of what it thinks is right. God's people are not immune to it.

Israel was not chosen in that they were a separate, isolated people. They were chosen to witness to those around them, to remind people of the true God. God wanted to save all humankind through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

Repeatedly, God called His people to recognize the deception of the devil and come back home; repeatedly, His people chose to ignore His calling and go their own way. They were content in knowing that they were the chosen (remnant) of God's people; this seemed enough to survive spiritually.

Prophets, throughout the Bible, were calling people to discover God anew. Elijah's plea at Mount Carmel was a calling of people back to God; ironically, it was calling the chosen back to God (1 Kings 18:21-39).

It was Jonah's turn.

Jonah was a bigot. He knew that if God really disliked the people of Nineveh (as Jonah himself did), He would have destroyed them. This mission wasn't about destroying

**We run what we think is
the good race, but is it
God's race?**

Nineveh; it was about rescuing Nineveh. Nineveh, according to the prophet Jonah, was not worth rescuing. The Assyrians were the enemy of Israel and therefore Jonah's enemies. In fact, Jonah probably convinced himself that

if they didn't get the warning, then God would have to destroy them.

So he ran.

He reasoned that if he could run away from this calling, God would be helpless and would have to go ahead with Plan A: destroy Nineveh.

This same multifaceted, rainbow-making, omnipotent God with just Plan A? In a world that never goes according to plan? You would think that the prophet Jonah would know his Boss a little better, wouldn't you?

You know that song "My God is so big/so strong/and so mighty"? God is so big that when you run away from Him you probably will run right into Him. That's what happened to Jonah.

Even while running, this man of God was self-absorbed. The welfare of the mariners was of no concern. While they were fighting the storm and praying for deliverance, he slept. While they inquired what to do, he was nonchalant. Disobedience is selfish (Josh. 7:1-25). This chosen prophet's sin brought about suffering to those around him, and Jonah really didn't care.

So much for being chosen.

In the 48 verses of the book of Jonah we can see ourselves. There are many things we need to do that we don't do. And things that we should not do, we do (Rom. 7:15). We are good people who sometimes do bad things for what we believe are good reasons. Sometimes we have an attitude about it.

Across the world, certain customs have been initially set up to enhance local lives. Over the years, these same innocuous customs mutated to preclude us from mingling with others; racial, ethnic, caste, class differences convince us that we are better than others. We are Christian only if it does not conflict with these biases. Such deluded thinking partially, or completely, blocks out God and His Word. Whatever keeps us from respecting people as God's children is what keeps us running from God. We run what we think is the good race, but is it God's race?

Perhaps we like to be Christians because it makes heaven seem possible; we don't like doing all a Christian has to do because it makes living here not as fun as we think it could be. Yet, we are so comfortable speaking the same dialect of "Christienglish," wrapping ourselves in our Christian productions, and being what we term *Christian*, that when God calls us to step out and do something His way, it seems easier to run.

Where are we running to?

Like Jonah, we are so blinded by what others have said that we cannot clearly hear what God is saying. The way we dress, worship, and behave have become so inbred that abnormalities are beginning to show in our spiritual genes. We've heard the same songs, the same themes, the same prayer structures (and they have always worked before) that we can't seem to want to do anything else for anyone else. When we are called out of this routine existence to reach out, we run, hoping the call will subside. Or we stand very still, hoping by just giving to missions we can avoid the call to get involved. It is easier to ignore the call and run away.

There will come a time when we will be called from our complacency, our sleep, and have the opportunity to testify. At the end of this race, what will our life choices testify? Will it be the Lord God of all people, or our bitter, self-centered, narrow definition of whom God must save? Will we obey God's call to go to all sorts of people? Or will we continue to run?

REACT

1. How does being "chosen" make you special? What are the responsibilities of being chosen? Be specific.
2. Analyze your feelings toward a country/state that is not on friendly terms with your own. To what extent, if any, should your feelings change?
3. Did God create us with intrinsic cultural differences? Explain your answer.
4. What role should culture and heritage play in Christianity? What place is there, if any, for ethnicity?

Tuesday
October 21

The God Who Will Not Let Go

TESTIMONY

Isa. 55:9; Mark 16:15

The way God operates differs from how we operate. Whenever His will is being opposed by humankind, He always has His own superior ways.

Never will He let His plans go begging if one way does not seem to turn out. He has other ways to see that His work is done. God's plans supercede all human plans.

Running away from responsibilities is a very common trend among us people. There are two kinds of responsibilities: major and minor. We should not mess up

**God's will for humanity
is good and noble.**

with any kind of responsibility, but often we do. When we study the story of Jonah, we find that he, too, muffed a responsibility. He was instructed to go to Nineveh and warn the people of

their destruction if they didn't repent. Instead of doing God's will, he did his own will; he tried to run away from God. But God is a God who will never let His will simply go unaccomplished. Thus, God taught Jonah a lesson the hard way, and ultimately he had to complete the will of God.

Oftentimes, like Jonah, we also run away from the responsibilities that have been given to us. We mess around by simply refusing them. Responsibilities set by God should never be denied. Even though we try to do so, still God has a million ways of accomplishing His sovereign plans. He allowed Jonah to learn a lesson the hard way, consequently seeing His plans accomplished through Jonah himself.

God's will for humanity is good and noble. Through the ages God always wanted us to follow rightful desires. Yet we act according to our own plans. This is not at all correct. We ought to be a shining light in order to get God's message across. "Unto all inhabitants of the earth, high and low, rich and poor, is the light of heaven to shine in clear strong rays."* We should not fear doing the will of God. We should not be afraid and run away, because in doing so we gain nothing. Mark 16:15 says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (NKJV). This is God's plan for us. We should not be cowards and run away like Jonah. We ought to be brave and complete the will of God, because His plans are for our own good.

We should cling to God's will. We should not be afraid since He is always with us. By running away, we can accomplish nothing. Rather, we should just do what God commands, and in doing so we don't have to learn things the hard way, as did the prophet Jonah. Obedience to God is better than sacrifice.

**Man of Destiny*, p. 717.

Grace or Ungrace?

HOW-TO

Jonah 1

We see the astounding grace of God in the way He deals with Jonah and the Ninevites. In spite of his unwillingness to do God's command, Jonah was still used by Him. In the same manner, the ruthless and unworthy Ninevites were given a chance to repent of their sins. Throughout the book of Jonah, the recurring theme of the magnanimous grace of God can be seen. Grace is revealed as a gift lavishly given to the undeserving. It is shown as something that extends beyond ethnic and national boundaries, and even unto one's

Grace is revealed as a gift lavishly given to the undeserving.

own religion. The God we serve is indeed the God of grace. However, we Christians are sometimes found on the side of ungrace. Our words, our actions, and our lifestyles speak louder more of ungrace than grace. So, in what ways can we be an agent of grace and not of ungrace to others, both to Christians and non-Christians?

1. Put Christ on the center stage rather than self. Ungrace is found in us when we tend to lift up self rather than Christ. In our preaching and in our teaching, there is a danger of making self as the center stage instead of God. We tend to make our witnessing so attractive that God was put aside and self gets all the credit. As we deliver the message of grace to others, we should be like John the Baptist, who said: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, KJV).

2. Know the person, not only the doctrines. In our witnessing to others through Bible study, for example, there is a tendency to make sure that the doctrines we are giving to a person are clear and intelligible. By so doing, we tend to overlook the importance of getting to know the person whom we are trying to reach because we are occupied too much in knowing the doctrines we are trying to teach. As a teacher, I am also guilty of this. I was far more concerned with knowing well the content of what I was teaching and failed to know my students personally in order to relate the subject matter to their needs.

3. Deliberately practice some acts of grace. I once asked one of my students to do some deliberate acts of grace to any person of his choice. This was his project in my religion class. He decided to wash the clothes of one of his roommates. His roommate was surprised after seeing all his clothes already washed. My student told me that he experienced the exuberance of grace as well as his roommate. Deliberately practicing some acts of grace to our fellow human beings will become a habit and will become part of our everyday lives.

Thursday
October 23

God Doesn't Require Bodybuilders!

OPINION

Jon. 1:2

Jonah was assigned a huge, unpleasant task. Admonishing 120,000 Ninevites known for their wickedness wasn't too appealing. The job required someone tough possessing the physique of Rambo, not him! So he did what any ordinary person would have done: He bolted.

Jonah doesn't stand alone in his failing. The Bible records other incidents when other chosen ones, such as Moses and Saul to name a few, didn't fall in line with God's will either.

Forget old biblical characters—we do it all the time. I've used numerous excuses to escape responsibilities. "Me? Church florist? I'm not artistic enough." Or "Help with children's choir? I'm not good with kids." Then the clincher—"No, I really couldn't get up in front of the congregation at church! I'm just not worthy enough! I mean, look at my lifestyle!"

Not realizing that in all these pretexts to avoid witnessing lies an unspoken question in the Lord's ability to work through the weakest and most flawed. The doubt may be unintentional, but the misgiving is real. Humility and modesty are fine, but complacency sucks—literally. Right into that vortex of idle contentment where it's easy to fool yourself into thinking that you're doing just fine when

**He who created me
has a plan for me.**

it comes to your relationship with God. The wonderful truth remains, however, that the Lord who reigns sovereign over nature (Amos 4:13) also holds a very insignificant "me" in His hands and can do much through me if I let Him. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13, NKJV).

He who created me has a plan for me. I may be apprehensive about it, but it will do me well to remember that God is with me every step of the way.

And with the Lord backing me, Rambo's a pussycat!

REACT

1. How active is my role in church activities?
2. Does God tailor His commands to fit our gifts and talents? Explain your answer.
3. Does God ever change His mind about what He asks us to do? Explain your answer.
4. Give a biblical example of someone who was able to dissuade God from an explicit command.

Your Way or His?

EXPLORATION

Phil. 4:13

CONCLUDE

God's basic method for accomplishing His plans on earth is through individuals who are willing and capable of carrying out the tasks. At times, though, a person who is cut out for a job may shy-off from the God-given responsibility. Jonah is one such example. Perhaps most of us can relate to Jonah, who tried to run away from God's call. This story teaches us that despite our doubts and irresponsibility, God still uses us for His mission on earth. He has also promised the help we need.

CONSIDER

- Drawing a bar graph (freehand or computer-software), identifying the types of services you personally render to church/others and the time spent for each (in hours) during one week. Reflect on the activities that seemed most effective and plan to continue with those. Consider the possibility of improvement in weak areas.
- Ranking the various skills and talents you have. First make a random list and then do the ranking.
- Writing Philippians 4:13 and placing it where you can read it often. Share with someone examples of divine guidance you have experienced.
- Composing a poem (e.g., haiku, limerick, cinquain) related to sharing God's love.
- Performing a skit composed by you (and your friends) on ways we run away from responsibilities and their consequences. Youth groups will be happy to use your skit.
- Interviewing an elderly person to find out instances of "running away" from God. Find out what brought the person back to God.
- Observing the stars on a clear night and reflecting on as many of God's promises of help as you can remember.

CONNECT

Matthew 28:19, 20.

Prophets and Kings, p. 266.

Bill Hybels, *Seven Wonders of the Spiritual World*, chap. 7.

Message to the Mariners



**“Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you established the earth, and it abides. They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants”
(Ps. 119:90, 91, NKJV).**

Not Your Usual Fish Tale

INTRODUCTION

Jon. 1:4-13

The usual fish tale is about the big one that got away. It's an incredible account—or, more likely, a fantastic fairy tale—claiming that I really did hook a big fish but it somehow got away.

Throughout the Bible fish are mentioned. The first mention of fish in the Old Testament occurs in Genesis. And the next major mention of such creatures in the Old Testament (prior to the Jonah account) is found in Job, where the Leviathan is identified as a sea creature destroyed by God.

I did not know at the time
that I was being used for
anything important.

Early on, then, we have God creating these creatures, then destroying them, and in Jonah availing himself of them to bring about God's divine plan. This is quite a tale, if only it could be told. Imagine the interview:

Fish Times: We thank you, Mr. Fish, for consenting to do this interview. We would first like to ask you how it felt to play the important role of Jonah's whale.

Mr. Fish: Well, first of all, I am a fish and not a whale. Second, I did not know at the time that I was being used for anything important at all. I learned that after the fact.

Fish Times: So how did you come to swallow the prophet Jonah?

Mr. Fish: I was just impressed to do so, with little more reflection than that.

Fish Times: And then what happened?

Mr. Fish: You know the story. Three days later I threw him up. At the time, I simply found that he was not agreeable to my digestive system.

Fish Times: So you weren't in on God's plan? God didn't explain to you the import of Jonah's mission to save the many inhabitants of Nineveh, to turn eyes and lives toward God, to save men, women, and children from utter destruction?

Mr. Fish: No, I had no idea. My actions seemed innocent and inconsequential to me at the time.

Fish Times: You say, "at the time . . ."

Mr. Fish: Yes, only afterward did I see the handiwork and fingerprints of God. Only in retrospect did it all make sense. I played my part as He led me. Little did I know that what seemed of little consequence on an otherwise uneventful weekend would bring transforming tribulation to the life of an erstwhile reluctant prophet, arming him to serve God and to make a difference.

Fish Times: So was Jonah the one that got away?

Mr. Fish: No, he was definitely caught for God.

God Never Gives Up

LOGOS

Prov. 5:21; Jon. 1:4-13; Acts 4:24; Col. 1:16, 17

This week we study not a tale about the fish that got away, but rather the meanings, ponderings, and teachings of a narrative about the fish that caught a man for God. It is a true story, not about the catch and release of a rainbow trout, but about the God who never gives up.

It is a tale that explicates the truth that the undertakings of humanity are ever under the complete scrutiny of God (Prov. 5:21). Now for those who are living happily in harmony with the will of God, this is a good thing, for the words, "thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matt. 25:21, KJV) will be uttered by Him on Judgment Day. But for those who rebel against God, there can be only distress and dissatisfaction.

In the life of Jonah we have a microcosm of how the foregoing universal principle can work, of how God must avail Himself of creature and circumstance to guide and direct, to rule and overrule if need be, in the story of the redemption of humanity.

Einstein once said, "I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world." He was right. God affords His creatures freedom—that much is clear from the

Jonah sleeps because the external squall is nothing compared to the storm raging within.

Garden of Eden. Yet God's love and concern for the welfare and ultimate salvation of humankind prevent Him from being an absent landlord. His love for us compels Him to leave nothing to chance. By nature gracious, and not a gambler, God intervenes

with divine nudges and importunings, urging course corrections on His wayward children. Yet we are still free to disobey, to run away, and to rebel. The parable of the prodigal son teaches us that God gives us the freedom to reject Him—but also to return.

In a context of genuine freedom and liberty, God uses the resources at His disposal to turn hearts and minds toward Him. In the parable, circumstances of dire and abject poverty brought the son to his senses and he returned home. With Jonah, three days in the belly of the fish made for a more willing spirit.

Here are but a few of the instructive insights from key verses from The Greatest of Fish Tales:

Jonah 1:6—Jonah has gone down into the ship's hold to rest and is found by the ship's captain fast asleep amid the storm. "How can you sleep?" asks the seasoned seafarer. The situation is uncannily similar to the one in which Christ is awakened by His disciples as He slumbers through rough waters. Unlike Christ,

Jonah is able to sleep not because of the peace in his heart from a close relationship with God. Rather, Jonah sleeps because the external squall is nothing compared to the storm raging within. He sleeps not because he is at one with the Lord but because he cares not. He is fleeing God and might actually welcome death, as is evident from his suggestion that he be thrown into the sea. He has forgotten that even in Sheol God is there, as the psalmist said.

Jonah 1:17—But when he is thrown into the water, perhaps welcoming the escape death promises, God is found to have other plans. He provides a great fish. God could have sent angels from heaven to bear him up and carry him to shore. There could have been a marvelous light-and-sound display of the Almighty's deliverance. But instead God used a then-humble means to effectuate His cause, and such is the case today. Unbeknown to us, seemingly insignificant circumstances and events are in actuality divine interventions.

Jonah 2:1—From the belly of this fish, in the darkness of that place with its stench, Jonah reaches out to God in prayer. With Paul God used dazzling light on the road to Damascus; with Jonah He used the darkness of a digestive tract to open the eyes of the wayward soul to God's plans. Here in this verse begins a prayer that ends with verse 9 and the report in verse 10 that the Lord commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. If nothing else is clear, this much is: God hears our prayers and is eager to answer. God is the God of the second chance.

Jonah 3:1-3—God commands and Jonah obeys, and preaching is commenced at Nineveh. The call to repentance is even more successful than Jonah expects, and before he knows it the entire city turns to God. Consequently, the Lord spares the city, but rather than rejoice in the success of the Lord, Jonah obsesses over his now-failed prophecy of doom and destruction. He is more concerned with his reputation as a prophet than his achievement in saving souls. Here we are reminded that success should always be defined not in our terms but in God's.

Jonah 4:5-11—God used a vine and worm to teach Jonah the magnitude of God's love. Again, the seemingly simple and mundane are utilized by the divine to do the remarkable. We see that the fish was not so much the subject of this story, but our great God is the subject. God is merciful and longsuffering, compassionate and forgiving.

God is so great that He can bring about great things even through individuals such as this on-again-off-again prophet: "He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher" (2 Kings 14:25, NIV).

REACT

After September 11, 2001, many people felt that God was totally uncaring because He watched thousands die. What would you say to someone who feels this way?

Monday
October 27

Are We Jonah?

TESTIMONY

Jon. 1:4-13

How many times have you and I been in Jonah's sandals? How often have you and I bought a one-way ticket away from God? How many times have we been afraid of what our friends would say and thus did not do what God had asked?

Jonah, the prophet of God, decided it was time to take a vacation. "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

**How many times have you
been in Jonah's sandals?**

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.' Verse 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. 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."*

Once, when I was in the third grade, I had to use the bathroom. We had been told not to run in the hallways and to make sure our shoes were tied. Now, I knew those rules, but I had to go to the bathroom. So I took off running down the hallway, with my laces untied. I was almost there when I tripped, which would not have been so bad, except for the fact that I started sliding as if I were on a Slip 'N Slide. At the end of each hallway were heavy wooden fire doors. The one at the end of that particular hallway was almost always slightly open because it was so difficult to close. Well, I smacked it head first and it popped open. When it swung back, it hit me in the head, and I was out cold. Oh, the pain, the embarrassment, and the concussion I could have been spared had I obeyed the rules.

Jonah and I are very much alike. I did not follow the rules and Jonah did not follow God's calling. Jonah ended up preaching, and I healed. Jonah and I learned a valuable lesson: Self will lead you to pain and agony, but God leads us to happiness and peace. Which would you rather have?

**Prophets and Kings*, pp. 266, 267.

Always Willing to Help Us Change

EVIDENCE

Rom. 5:20; 1 Cor. 10:11-13; 1 Tim. 1:15, 16

Jonah lived after the reign of King Solomon during a time when the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Both kingdoms, Judah and Israel, had fallen into what could be considered a pattern of behavior. Time after time the leaders of the nation had caused Israel to fall into sin. Then some calamity would come: A neighboring country would invade and carry the children of Israel off into bondage. There would be a period of repentance and as soon as the prosperity returned, Israel was quick to fall back into sin.

It is interesting that through the book of Jonah we find the same story magnified in one man. Jonah is a prophet of the Lord, so presumably he was obedient to His word. Yet from the outset we see him running away and falling into the disobedience that was so characteristic of Israel as a whole. Jonah's willful disobedience gets him into trouble, and eventually it is this trouble that instills a repentant spirit in Jonah.

In this week's study we see Jonah disobey God's instructions by deliberately choosing to travel in the opposite direction that God had commanded. He boards a ship heading to Tarshish. He doesn't stop here though. As though to seal the package, the Bible says he went down into the lowest parts of the boat (verse 5). He not only ran but he tried to hide from God.

The ship was not far out at sea before God melded Jonah's disobedience into His plan. Soon a storm came upon the ship, and Jonah found himself explaining that he was the cause of the trouble.

The time was short, but it was an opportunity to share God's supremacy. Despite their best efforts, Jonah, as well as the men on the ship, knew they had to cast him overboard. When they finally did this, the storm cleared and Jonah, of course, was swallowed by the big fish.

**God melded Jonah's
disobedience into His plan.**

Jonah was certainly not the first to try to circumvent God's will or law. It really is not a wonder when you consider the wonderful examples he had in his forefathers—Abraham, Jacob, David, and so many others. He certainly was not the last either.

This is one of the reasons Jonah's story is so amazing. It is yet one more example of a loving God who is willing constantly to point us in the right direction and get us back on track with His plan regardless of what we do to mess it up. Time after time He shows us the better way, through His love and through His grace (1 Tim. 1:15, 16).

How to Work With God

HOW-TO

Rom. 1:17; 6:17, 18; 12:9-18; Eph. 5:17; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17

Jonah was directly given a task by God. Instead of listening to Him and making it easy on himself, Jonah chose to run away in the opposite direction. Even though he tried to hide, God still used him to do His work.

Working without God is like learning to play the piano on your own.

Jonah might have run into fewer complications if he had just tried to work with God. Many of us try to go our own way and work against God, instead of trying to work with His plans and preparations.

Working without God is like learning to play the piano on your own. You can eventually learn to play by yourself if you work hard, but it is easier if you work with your teacher.

How do you learn to make beautiful music with God? Here are some useful tips:

1. Listen to your teacher. Teachers know what you need to improve yourself. Likewise, God knows exactly what you need to become a better person and work for Him. Ephesians 5:17 tells us it is wise to understand what God's will is. Listen to your heavenly Teacher, and He will guide you through.

2. Follow the music. Reading the Word of God is an excellent way to help you discover how to work with Him. The Bible supplies us with guidelines for daily living, corrections for our behaviors, and examples of people who worked with God (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

3. Correct your wrong notes. Ask forgiveness for your sins and correct your wrongdoings. You'll be able to follow God better with a cleaner heart (Rom. 6:17, 18).

4. Improve your technique to become a better player. There are other tools to help you become in tune with God besides reading the Bible. Two of the most important ones are faith and prayer, although there are many other supplements to learning to work with God (Rom. 1:17; 12:9-18).

REACT

1. How can you make it easier for God to use you? Be specific.
2. What criteria should you use to evaluate God's voices and commands?
3. What role, if any, do friends, family, and coworkers play in understanding the will of God for your life?
4. At what point does God stop chasing after us when we run from His commands? Explain your answer.

Me, Myself, and Jonah

OPINION

Jon. 1:5, 6, 10

Jonah didn't agree with the mission given to him. Nineveh was a center of wickedness, and Jonah felt it didn't deserve a chance to repent. In his opinion it deserved what it was going to get. And so Jonah makes other travel plans.

How absurd to think that one can actually run from God! His conscience doesn't bother him as he settles down to nap. But his act of defiance lands him in a drastic situation. He not only disobeys God openly but also places others' lives in danger, all because he is too selfish to let God's goodness and mercy extend to people unlike him. How much easier and less traumatic it would have been if he had listened to God in the first place. But it takes a fierce storm and a rude awakening by the crew to make him realize that God wasn't going to let him get away so easily. He owns up to being the cause of their troubles.

Why can't God do that today? Wouldn't it be easier to be a Christian if God were to put His foot (or a storm) down and say, "Marietta, quit messing around!" Instead He lets me get on my boat (to nowhere) without even a drizzle, let alone a storm.

Sometimes I think the people in the Bible had it easier because God had a direct connection to them. Then I realize that things may not be that different.

All my choices have consequences. Just as Jonah's did. Sometimes I don't care how my choices affect people around me. Sometimes my unreasonable, selfish stubbornness in a situation wears my husband. This is the way I've always been, and I don't seem to want to change. I think I'm pretty good, so why should I? Life has been comfortable this way and no one seems to be hurting. Perhaps if I wait long enough, everything will be as it should. Perhaps if I continue in this way, everything will be OK. Perhaps if I keep my head down long enough, the storm will pass.

Perhaps Jonah was like me.

**In Jonah's opinion
Nineveh deserved what it
was going to get.**

REACT

1. Why does God call Christians when others can do the job just as well?
2. Compare the witness of the sailors with that of Jonah's.
3. What are some of the excuses we use to avoid obeying God's commands?
4. How does God feel when we choose to disobey Him?
5. If you are free to make your own choices, does God have the right to cause destruction to come upon you when you don't do what He says? Is that true freedom?

Friday
October 31

Messages From the Mariners

EXPLORATION

Jon. 1:4-13

CONCLUDE

In Jonah 1:4-13, God does but one thing: He sends a violent wind. The mariners are active while Jonah sleeps. Their captain wakes him up and enjoins him to pray, but he does not. They try to find a culprit: It's Jonah. They question him and he confesses his faith. They rebuke him. They ask him for a solution. He confesses his guilt and proposes to die to save them. They try to avoid that extreme solution. As natural human beings, they are used by God to have Jonah live as a good believer: praying, confessing his God, confessing his sin, and living (dying if necessary) to save others.

CONSIDER

- Interviewing people with the questions: Who is for you the best human being living today? What would you like to imitate from him or her?
- Listing ten persons of any faith other than yours who were God's witnesses to you at a moment of your life.
- Praying to thank God for nonbelievers you can name whom He used to make you aware of your Christian mission.
- Finding a picture in a recent newspaper showing a person or a group of persons who can be presented as models in one way or another for Adventists.
- Writing a paraphrase of Ephesians 4:11-13, in which a converted Jonah would tell his readers about the human beings that God gave him as gifts to enable him for his mission to unite all the peoples in the unique God.
- Comparing Jonah 1:4-13 with Matthew 8:23-27. List the common points and the differences between Jonah and Jesus in these episodes.
- Reading *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville. Analyze the similarities and differences between the story of this book and the story of Jonah.

CONNECT

Prophets and Kings, pp. 266–268.

Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*; Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah, The Anchor Bible 24b*; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah, Word Biblical Commentary 31*.

The Ninevites' Y2K Warning



“I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the Lord’ ” (Jon. 2:9, NIV).

A Fish Called Grace

INTRODUCTION

Jonah 1; 2

Even before the year 1999, technology experts were predicting the collapse of computers, ATMs, and all the rest as the millennium approached. The news and newspapers were all informing us of the worst that could happen, while new Y2K supply stores popped up all over to sell us whatever we thought we needed when all the electricity and power shut down.

Aside from the assurances of various technology companies that their products were capable of making it through the millennium, when midnight hit early that Sabbath morning, I remember wondering what would happen and whether I should have stocked up on water and food. Luckily nothing happened and we all went on as usual, many forgetting the previous years of warnings.

Now looking at the book of Jonah, we can begin to understand the magnitude of what was taking place. Nineveh was a large metropolis, and Jonah surely didn't want to cause an uproar if he thought God would easily forgive. Even though the people were going about their evil ways, Jonah knew God to be a forgiving God.

The hoopla over Y2K caused the more technologically involved businesses to sharpen their systems to handle the changes that Y2K would bring. Similarly, Jonah's assignment sharpened the responses of heathen sailors and the people of Nineveh.

**I wondered whether I
should have stocked up on
water and food.**

Jonah 1 and 2 assure us that there is nothing to fear when God is in charge. Heathen sailors can be converted, an

obstinate prophet can be made new, storms can be calmed in an instant, and God is eager to give His people second chances.

Consequences—whether the failure of technology or the destruction of cities—are not to be feared. The narrative in the book of Jonah shows God's willingness to save His people from their sins and the consequences of those sins.

There is no more urgent message in these two small chapters than to heed God's calling because He is a God who would rather forgive than punish. As you read through the lessons each day, jump into the water and let God envelope you with His forgiveness and grace.

Humility in a Fish's Belly

EVIDENCE

Jonah 2; John 9:38-41

As the drama of the story of Jonah continues, we find him in the middle of hiding from God. But this is where God calls Jonah back to His reality and His calling. In this story, it is not the prophet with all the evidence of God's care that shows the strength of faith; rather he is the one in the painful, distasteful process of learning faith in the belly of a great fish.

We can imagine the pagan sailors on board ship continuing to pray to the awesome God who calms the storm. Their simple, childlike faith is echoed centuries later when the blind man healed by the pool of Salome professes to Jesus in John 9:36, "Sir, if you will tell me who he is [that had healed him], I will put my faith in him." (CEV). What factor do this man and the pagan sailors have in common? What is it that Jonah must learn? Could it be that the greatest faith must come from our humility and the realization of our own inadequacies in contrast to the omnipotence of our Creator?

Scientists and theologians debate the possibility of someone surviving inside a "great fish" (Jon. 1:17, KJV), and this has been an argument against the Bible's validity. One possibility that has been suggested on some Web sites* is a sperm whale. Sperm whales are toothed and able to swallow large objects, they have some air in their stomach, their digestion does not begin if their prey is still alive, and they have been reported to eject their stomach contents when dying. God may even have created a special creature designed for this purpose. Whichever way it was, this was not a pleasant experience. A dark, acidic tomb is where Jonah finally starts to listen to and depend on the Lord. It seems that God has had to bring Jonah to a place of inhuman loneliness, shame, and dependence to get through to him.

But God doesn't leave Jonah, even in the depths of despair. This is where God's mercy and grace really begin to shine. God reaches down to Jonah just as he has with the sailors and the blind man to calm the storm of his heart. Jonah begins to have faith in God's plan and even comes to the place where he is praising God from his aquatic prison. God comes to him in his time of need, Jonah's faith is nurtured, and Jonah receives a second chance to take on the special calling God has given him.

**A dark, acidic tomb is
where Jonah finally starts
to listen to and depend on
the Lord.**

*www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t004.html and www.probe.org/docs/jonah.html

Monday
November 3

Calling All Gods!

LOGOS

Psalm 51; Jonah 1; 2; John 9

Simple Theology (John 9)

Amazing. In this story the Pharisees are actually using a miracle to build a case against Jesus! They are telling a healed blind man to praise God—not Jesus—for his healing. Jesus could not have healed him, the Pharisees reason, because Jesus is a sinner. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, which means that He broke the Sabbath, which means He is a sinner.

The healed man's logic is simple: "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25, NIV). In other words, by

**These are obviously
ethical men.**

His fruit you shall know Him. In verse 31 the healed blind man develops his theory: We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does His will. As we continue to study Jonah, let's test this man's reasoning. Does

God listen to sinners? If unbelievers are blessed, does that mean they are godly?

Pagan Prayers (Jonah 1)

Everyone on this sinking ship has prayed to every god he can think of—except the one follower of the true God. When Jonah explains his belief system, the sailors don't like it. These are obviously ethical men. It's one thing to throw cargo overboard, but to throw a man into that sea? That's murder! They row harder to solve the problem their own way. But the storm gets worse.

At last the sailors pray to this strange God to whom they have just been introduced. In their prayer (Jon. 1:14), these heathens frame this act, not as homicide or suicide, but as a human sacrifice. They ask Jonah's God not to hold them guilty of murder. The Bible records their astonishment when the storm stops, seemingly in response to throwing Jonah overboard. It is only then that they believe in Yahweh, worship God with sacrifice, and make their own covenants with Him (verse 16).

This is the opposite of the theology of the man healed of his blindness in John 9. These sailors were neither believers nor worshipers when God answered their prayers. Does God listen to the prayers of unbelievers and sinners?

Maybe the answer can be found in Christ's response to His disciples in John 9:3. God used the man and his blindness in John 9, not to punish him or his parents, but so Jesus could demonstrate God's loving healing. On a ship to Tarshish God used the blindness of pagan sailors to convert a wayward prophet. He also used that disobedient prophet to evangelize a shipload of heathens. The blind

man was healed. The ship was saved. Both stories end with God being worshiped by His true believers.

When Sinners Pray (Psalm 51; Jonah 2)

David and Jonah have a lot in common. Not only are they both believers, schooled from childhood in God's Word, but also both were called to positions of spiritual leadership. Unlike the pagan sailors or the man born blind, David's and Jonah's problems are a direct result of knowingly transgressing God's will. In the belly of the fish and the depths of despair, these men recognize that the most painful part of sin is separation from their personal Friend and Savior (Ps. 51:4; Jon. 2:4).

Yet God listens to deliberate sinners with the same love He showed pagan sailors. Praying in his seaweed-filled tomb, Jonah is confident: " 'Deliverance comes from the Lord'" (Jon. 2:9, TLB). Being vomited up by a big fish doesn't sound like something to celebrate. But feeling dry land under his feet, Jonah knows he is one saved prophet.

REACT

1. The blind man, David, Jonah, the Pharisees, the sailors; which ones are "godly men"? What makes someone a godly person?

2. Compare Jonah 2 with Psalm 51. How are David and Jonah similar? How are they different? Compare the background stories of Jonah 1 with 2 Samuel 11; 12. Does God treat both men the same way?

3. How do the stories of Jonah, the blind man, and David manifest the works of God?

4. Does God listen to sinners? How could you fit this lesson's conclusion with the statement: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened"? (Ps. 66:18, NIV). Contradictory? Flip-side truths? Talking about different things?

5. Why are the pagans more eager to pray than Jonah is? Who are you most like most days—them or him? Why?

6. One pastor dares atheists and agnostics to say, "God, if you're up there, I'm open to hearing from you." Is there any point to a prayer like that if the person saying it has little or no faith?

7. Before the sailors met Jonah, they were already caring, moral, and spiritual—just in a false religion. If they'd died like that, would God have saved them? Explain your answer.

8. If God " 'sends rain on the just and on the unjust'" (Matt. 5:45, NKJV), why should we bother to pray?

9. Why did it seemingly take less for the heathen sailors than for Jonah to recognize God's sovereignty?

10. Should you adore/praise/thank God only when you feel like it? What about if you just had a terrible day? Why praise then?

Tuesday
November 4

The One-tenth Repayment Program

TESTIMONY

Jon. 2:9

The things we borrow in this world are with conditions, generally that we repay the individual or institution who loaned us the goods, services, or financial resources. Oftentimes, we are expected to pay more than the lender has given us—interest. When it comes to worldly items, and with worldly lenders, things are not given freely.

In the case of what God gives us, it comes freely. Salvation is free if we accept it. It is only by our love for Him that we give back. God's repayment program is far more lenient on us than anything put in place by humanity. After sacrificing His Son totally, and then giving us the means to support ourselves, God asks that we return 10 percent as a tithe and that we act in a manner consistent with the values He has outlined for our lives.

"The lesson is for God's messengers today, when the cities of the nations are as verily in need of a knowledge of the attributes and purposes of the true God as were the Ninevites of old. Christ's ambassadors are to point men to the nobler world, which has largely been lost sight of. According to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the only city that will endure is the city whose builder and maker is God.

**Salvation is free
if we accept it.**

With the eye of faith man may behold the threshold of heaven, flushed with God's living glory. Through His ministering servants the Lord Jesus is calling upon men to strive with sanctified ambition to secure the immortal inheritance. He urges them to lay up treasure beside the throne of God.*

Our ambition must be sanctified, our faces directed toward the nobler world. Part of this involves returning to God what is rightfully His to begin with.

REACT

1. Is your weekly church offering more or less than the price of a movie ticket?
2. When was the last time you were given something freely—with no payback or even thanks expected? How did it feel? When was the last time you did that for someone else? How did that feel?
3. How closely is your self-esteem connected to your wallet? Do you value yourself partly by what you earn, own, and spend? Do others value you that way? Has being a Christian changed that at all?

**Prophets and Kings*, p. 274.

Prayer From Murky Places

HOW-TO

Jon. 2:9

Scot, Jim, and I are best friends. We talk about everything—the good things, the bad things, and some things that are sensitive except with the most trusted of friends. We should come to the Lord in prayer with all our emotions and in all our conditions. If in human relations all experiences are talked about, how much more so should we communicate with the One who gave His life for us and cares for us in detail. “We need the strength and grace that are born of earnest prayer. This means of grace should be diligently used in order to gain spiritual muscle. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”¹

It's kind of like a
training program for
your prayer muscles.

Jonah prayed with thanksgiving from unhappy circumstances, but with a song on his lips and obedience in his mind. Jonah's prayer life may have become murky, but in the end his prayers rose up to the temple of God, and the Lord heard his prayers.

If your prayer life is getting a bit murky, you might try this system. It's kind of like a training program for your prayer muscles.²

A—Adoration or worship. Begin prayer knowing to whom you are talking. It sets the tone for your prayer time if you begin with praise or adoration for the tremendous God that is our Father, our Abba, and to Jesus Christ, His only Son, given for us.

C—Confession. Confess your sins, one by one. Name them and confess them singly. This is a private thing, not for public prayer. Study Psalm 103; 2 Corinthians 5 beforehand.

T—Thanksgiving. Thank God for the many blessings in your life. Thank Him for the big things, such as your life; and the small things, such as the milk in your favorite breakfast cereal bowl.

S—Supplication. Ask (Matthew 7; Luke 11), knowing that your heavenly Father gives good gifts, richer than the flowers on the roadside and more lovely than the feathers of the birds.

1. *In Heavenly Places*, p. 213.

2. This prayer pattern can be found with better explanation in Bill Hybel, *Too Busy Not To Pray* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

Thursday
November 6

God of the Ridiculous

OPINION

Psalm 51; Jonah 1; 2; John 9

What an amazing conversion story: Angry heathen sailors and passengers are informed about the God of the Jews. They discover that God is very much alive and Master of the sea, the waves, and maybe the universe too. Out of their own desire, they begin their own relationship with Him. Sound like the work of a powerful prophet for God? The work of a strong Christian, solid in his relationship with the Guy upstairs? Nope. This was the work of a spineless and whiny guy on the run from God, who's rather put off that God keeps pestering him.

This is where I stand in awe of the God of the ridiculous. This is the God of Jericho, who said a city would be defeated by walking around it and hauling out the brass band. This is the God of Gideon, who had an army defeated by giving the soldiers flashlights and party horns. This is the God of Jonah, who converted a ship with a pitiful excuse for a prophet on the run from Him.

But that is just the point. We all are pitiful prophets and powerless soldiers

**We all are pitiful prophets
and powerless soldiers.**

armed with nothing more than flashlights and failure to fight the most powerful demon of hell. Not only can we never hope to defeat that demon without God, but we're not even particularly good at having a relationship with God, as Jonah proves. Yet there is something

He can do about that. He can break through the door of our hearts like Superman and rescue us, if we just cry to Him for help. We simply must be willing to be ridiculous ourselves, in full knowledge of our ineptness and inherent weakness. We must be willing to risk hauling out the brass band, strapping on the flashlight, and, like Jonah, standing up and saying, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jon. 1:9, NIV). Then stand back and watch God work, because the walls will crumble, the enemies will run, and the lost will be saved—not through the power of any human being, but unquestionably through the power of a God who is most apparent in our weakness.

Second Corinthians 12:9, 10 sums it up perfectly: "He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (NKJV).

REACT

How is it that a loving God can desire our weakness? Doesn't He want to lift us up, to make us strong and happy?

Long Hand of Salvation

EXPLORATION

Isa. 59:1

CONCLUDE

God would rather forgive than punish. He is willing to save people. Those who choose to remain in their sins He warns of dire consequences for their choice.

What does God use to give out His warning message? How does He work out His deliverance? He uses pagan sailors to convert a wayward prophet—stubborn, fearful for his life, and jealous of his reputation. At the same time God uses that disobedient prophet to evangelize a shipload—and later on, a teeming city—of heathens. God employs countless ways to reach deliberate sinners and ignorant pagans alike.

CONSIDER

- Building a Web site dedicated to introducing visitors to the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.
- Organizing a group of young singers to perform a mini-concert at a mall or in a town square.
- Studying with a friend some of the Adventist Church's distinctive beliefs (e.g., sanctuary, Sabbath) with the aim of leading that friend to a commitment to Christ.
- Giving a testimony—at school or in more unconventional places such as on the street, on a bus, or while waiting in a line—to someone about God's goodness to you and your family.
- Spending an afternoon at a beach. Meditate on the vastness of God's love for humanity as you watch the horizon.
- Researching, in a library or online, the story of John Newton, writer of "Amazing Grace." Discuss with a non-Adventist friend how God's grace transformed Newton from a slave-captain to a gospel minister.
- Inviting your friends from out of town to come on a mission trip to your neighborhood or community. Think about strategies Jesus would use to reach out if He were on this trip.

CONNECT

Acts 1:8.

Gospel Workers; Evangelism.

General Conference, *Witnessing for Christ*, pp. 43–50.

Second chances



“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away” (Ps. 139:1, 2, NRSV).

More Sin! Much More Grace!

INTRODUCTION

Rom. 5:20

"The law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20, NKJV).

Like Jonah, we have all done our own thing even when we knew it was against the will of God. Yet every time we repent, He forgives us, giving us a second chance. From his own experiences, King David knew so well the nature of humanity. He writes, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5, NKJV). How much more does the Creator God know the nature of humankind (139:1, 2), hence the need for grace. Without a second chance, there would be no hope for us.

We have often heard it said that God is the God of a second chance. How true this was in Jonah's situation because God could have allowed him to drown when he was thrown overboard or to become fish food when he was swallowed. But for Jonah God had a greater plan and didn't just save him, end of story. Jonah was saved to clear a way for God to extend grace, a second chance, to the people of Nineveh.

Like Jonah, we were saved then sent on a mission. God wants us also to clear a way so He could give a second chance "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6, NKJV).

This week we will see why we, like Jonah, have been given a second chance.

**Like Jonah, we were saved
then sent on a mission.**

Your Opportunity for Change

LOGOS

Gen. 22:1-10; 28:10-22; Jonah 3

Testing Times (Gen. 22:1-10)

In these verses we read of the test that God put Abraham through. This test was indeed an onerous task that had the potential to destroy Abraham's faith and belief system. It is not clear why God chose a potential human sacrifice as Abraham's test. However, it is clearly a test of faith. Many Christians undergo testing times that cause

Many so-called Christians expect to go through life without testing times.

much grief and pain. It is this refining of emotions that allows us to understand truly in whom we believe and why we believe. "And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (Gen. 22:10, NKJV). Just try to

envison the emotions that Abraham must have felt at this particular instant in time.

Our world today faces so many challenges that indicate that the second coming of Christ is near. The hand of time is moving toward eternity. In 2003, we see the war against terrorism, conflict between Pakistan and India, the ethnic wars in Africa, and the Middle East crisis. Humankind has been given a real opportunity to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. No matter how difficult the challenge, there is hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Many so-called Christians expect to go through life without testing times. They want the rewards without doing the work. Truly, we can learn from what Abraham went through in being better able to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Believing the Impossible (Gen. 28:10-22; John 14:1-3)

Jacob's dream shows that God emphatically states that He is the Lord of the past and future. Many people have dreams that they believe will come to pass. These dreams encompass a myriad of objects, philosophies, and ideologies. Jacob's dream presented an opportunity for change. He would move into a leadership position in his family. God made a commitment to Jacob's success. This commitment would extend to generations yet unborn. This was an impossible dream given the realities of the existence of that day. Could it really happen?

God fulfilled His promise to Jacob and offers all today that assurance that He will live up to what He has said He would do. He has prepared a place for each sinner who is saved by grace and by faith accepts the plan of salvation and Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior. This is almost an impossible dream.

How special are you to God? His love is everlasting and endures forever. No matter what you are going through, Jesus has already paid the ultimate price that you may believe that impossible dream of spending eternity with Him in a bliss of happiness that cannot be described by any mere mortal. God's plan of salvation gives us that hope that we are all in search of.

Repentance and Baptism (Jonah 3)

Jonah had an amazing story to tell, one of transformational change. His story was so important that God allowed him to be swallowed by a large fish to get His message out. God taught Jonah a lesson first, before he was able to preach to the Ninevites. His change of heart allowed him to be a minister of truth who was able to give a testimony of joy that changed the hearts of many and spared many the certain destruction that they would have faced. Likewise today, there are many who yearn for the message, but have not been able to hear it from their neighbors. Are you that neighbor, who knows the truth but will not help to set others free?

The story is told of a woman who was a committed Christian. When she got married, neither she nor her husband were Christians. After she accepted the Christian faith, her husband did not want to have anything to do with her religion. Day after day she prayed that her husband would be saved before it was too late. Unfortunately, before his death he never accepted Christ as his personal Savior. Many years went by, and the woman continued in her Christian walk with God. It was after much prayer and fasting that she was finally able to come to the realization that her challenge in life in being married to an unbeliever was not so much about her unbelieving husband's refusal to accept Christ as it was her renewal of spirit to ensure that she continued to hold strong to the faith that made her election and calling sure.

The Christian journey is not an easy road to travel, but it is one that is traveled nonetheless. We have a wonderful Savior, who has led us by example in His life on earth, so that we, too, may be able to be lights to the world. Our experience guarantees that there is a change in our lives, a change that the world recognizes. It is a change that the church mobilizes, that emphasizes that Jesus Christ is Lord and we all have the same opportunity for an eternal life with Him if we just change.

The people of Nineveh were spared certain death and destruction because they followed the will of God. We, too, can be spared if we follow the will of God.

REACT

1. Why does God give us the opportunity to transform our lives, despite our seeming unwillingness to want to?
2. What specific pattern of behavior in Jonah's life mirrors an experience you have had?
3. How can we encourage nonbelievers to accept Jesus in the midst of all the confusion today?

Monday
November 10

The Heart Searcher

TESTIMONY

Ps. 139:1, 2

Were it not for the grace of God, we should all be dead. The Bible declares, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23, NKJV) and "the wages of sin is death" (6:23, NKJV). But thank God for Jesus. Rather than condemning us, He searches our hearts and leads us to repentance and victorious life.

In appreciation for this grace, Mary walked into a dinner to which she was not invited, broke the alabaster container of oil, and anointed Jesus' feet in Simon's house.

"The Heart Searcher read the motive that led to Mary's action. . . . Mary had been looked upon as a great sinner, but Christ knew the circumstances that had shaped her

**Were it not for the grace of
God, we should all be dead.**

life. He might have extinguished every spark of hope in her soul, but He did not. . . . She knew how offensive is sin to His unsullied purity, and in His strength she had overcome.

"When to human eyes her case appeared hopeless, Christ saw in Mary capabilities for good. He saw the better traits of her character. The plan of redemption has invested humanity with great possibilities, and in Mary these possibilities were realized. Through His grace she became a partaker of divine nature. The one who had fallen, and whose mind had been a habitation of demons, was brought very near to the Saviour in fellowship and ministry."*

Mary was the first to talk with Jesus after His resurrection and the first to proclaim the message of the risen Savior. God expects that we appropriate His forgiveness and declare Him Lord of our lives. He does not see us for who we are, but for whom we can become by His grace. He gives us second (in my case, more) chances that we may fully appreciate His grace and lovingly carry out His commission to preach the gospel to the whole world. When we truly fellowship with Jesus, we will become ministers of His grace.

REACT

1. How does knowing that Christ searches and knows your heart affect how you live?

2. What difference does it make to look at those who lead sinful lives through the eyes of Christ?

3. Why was Jesus able to see in Mary capabilities for good when others could not? How can we learn to discern more readily the good in those whom we consider to be "hopeless cases"?

**The Desire of Ages*, pp. 567, 568.

For Whose Blessing?

EVIDENCE

Jon. 3:1-10; 4:1-3

At this point, Jonah is no doubt dejected from his failed attempt to escape God's preaching appointment, humiliated in the presence of the mariners, and physically traumatized by the experience of being thrown overboard. He is vomited onto a beach far away from where he should have gone the first time, and he has to walk across desert terrain to do what God had initially requested. This is a textbook for immediate obedience to God's direct commands.

The book of Jonah has a multiplicity of life lessons of contemporary Christian value. Perhaps one of the most telling of them is that apparent self-sufficiency from material possessions prevents one from an understanding of a need for God. Perhaps this contributed to Jonah's position as he considered the call of God to carry a message of warning to Nineveh. Who is going to listen?

Nineveh was characterized by power and wealth, an unlikely candidate for mass repentance. What could one man, a Jew, do to turn this massive collection of pleasure-loving city dwellers to a loving, merciful God? The answer is nothing. Jonah's job was to deliver the message, as much as it is ours to go wherever He sends us, not concerning ourselves so much with personal success and corporeal results as obedience to God's will. The power resides in the word of God, not in its sinful, flawed messenger (Rom. 1:16).

Nineveh was an unlikely candidate for mass repentance.

Within a few short days of God's warning message, genuine repentance replaced years of debauchery. Even the leaders of the city, those apparently most self-sufficient and secure, reached for that which is beyond value.

Perhaps the greatest lesson and blessing of this message was toward Jonah. We appreciate that the residents of Nineveh repented and were spared. Sometimes as we take the message to others, however, ours is the bigger blessing. Jonah was forced to confront a people toward whom he and his countrymen held a blatant disdain. To this apparently God-forsaken group he was required to proclaim the love of a God to whom he thought he had exclusive access. From this exercise, Jonah had to confront his own prejudices and gain a broader understanding of the universality of God's love.

The repentance of Nineveh should be looked at as the awakening of Jonah's understanding of God's love for all people. By extension, witnessing is an opportunity to remedy some of the shortcomings that we possess and sometimes through unpleasant and protracted tests in the crucible of divine correction. Sometimes, for our sakes, God is a God of tough love.

How to Come Back to God

HOW-TO

Jer. 18:8; Jon. 3:10

The world can offer only
temporary things.

In Jeremiah and in other parts of the Bible from the beginning to the end, God has been giving prophets and others a second chance. We note that from Genesis with Adam and Eve and their disobedience to the teachings of God through to

King David and all his wicked ways, which God forgave. David was considered to be a man after God's heart. With all his wrongdoings, David always came around and repented for

the evil he had done. In our daily lives we need to take a chapter from David and admit our wrong and go to God in prayer seeking forgiveness. We find ourselves in situations in which only God can help us out.

God has always had messengers and prophets who continuously proclaimed His message. When Adam and Eve sinned, God came to them Himself. When David messed up with Bathsheba, God sent the prophet Nathan. And He went to dramatic ends to turn Jonah around. God loves us so much that He is willing to go many extra miles for us to be saved. Anyone who can give up Their only Son in order to save you, that Person really loves you.

Today, the call goes out for all of us to come to know Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. God has already done the work for us and all we have to do is repent and receive Jesus. God is so good to us that when one person comes back to Him, there is rejoicing in heaven.

The world can offer only temporary things, but God offers hope, joy, and a crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19).

Follow these steps, and you will always be with God:

1. Pray. Remember when you pray, you are talking to God, and things can change when we pray. Jonah in that big fish called on the Lord, and the Lord heard his cry. The people of Nineveh changed from their wicked ways, and God saved them. If He did it for those people back then, He can do it for you, so continue to seek the Lord in prayer and things will change.

2. Read God's Word. *The Great Controversy* calls Scripture a safeguard. When we continuously study God's Word, we are better prepared for the evil and false teachings that may come our way, so read your Bible every day. Dare to be a Daniel.

3. Surrender fully. Surrender must be complete if we are to overcome. Don't allow anything or anyone to hold you down or to hinder you from receiving that inner peace—that joy and salvation—that knowing Jesus can bring.

God of a Second Chance

OPINION

Ps. 139:1, 2

I have always wondered about Jonah. He was chosen of God to be His prophet—a high honor indeed. At times I thought that he must have had a special relationship with God for him to have been chosen to be a prophet. But the more I look at Jonah, the more I see myself. Jonah was not anybody special. He had a bad attitude—just like me. Sure, he was a prophet of God, but he wanted to be used in low-risk situations that yielded high praise. As long as he did not have to leave his comfort zone, he was pleased to serve God. But God offered Him an opportunity to do more—to be more. When he had to leave the comfortable pew and enter the realm of the unconverted, he balked.

Whether we are Christians a day or a lifetime, God has at some point invited us to leave our comfort zones. He asked us to join the campus ministry or the community services team or the prison ministry—to do some uncool, unpopular thing. And like Jonah, we have balked. We have run away, opting instead to do the easy task. We say we will let our lives testify while our mouths are silent. And symbolically, we run away from God.

Even as Jonah ran, God sent a large fish speeding his way. The Bible says the fish was prepared for him. It was not sent to destroy Jonah, but to slow him down so that he could think. It was not sent out of anger to torment Jonah; it was sent out of love as a testimony of the goodness of God. He gave him another opportunity to grow in His grace. The experience, of doing God's will helps us to grow—no, we may not become spiritual giants overnight or through one successful experience but with each chance we have hope and the promise of perfection. With each step on the path God has chosen for us, we become as gold tried in the fire—refined to be our best in Him and through Him. Thank God for second chances!

**The more I look at Jonah,
the more I see myself.**

REACT

1. How does the fact that God gave Jonah a second chance affect your relationship with Him? Be specific.
2. How does the fact that God gave Jonah a second chance affect your relationship with others?
3. Do you believe that there are still prophets in our midst today who can bring messages of doom and damnation from God, asking us to repent? Explain your answer.

EXPLORATION

Eph. 2:8

CONCLUDE

The story of Jonah is the story of every Christian. It is about transformation—from self-reliance to God-reliance. It is about a journey—from skepticism to faith. It is about a relationship—between a wretched sinner and a forgiving God. The twists and turns in the life of Jonah are not unlike the ones we experience. But no matter how difficult the challenges we face, there is hope. Hope exists because we don't journey alone. It's about God and you—together.

CONSIDER

- Drawing a time line, freehand or on a computer, of the past ten years of your spiritual life. Color code the ups and downs and twists and turns you have experienced.
- Finding ways to offer hope to groups in your community, e.g., latchkey children, the homeless, the elderly, school peers, etc.
- Planting a tree in your church yard to symbolize the spiritual growth of your Sabbath School class.
- Molding a sculpture with clay and then journaling your understanding of how this activity compares to the process of spiritual transformation.
- Running an advertisement in your local newspaper about God's offer to travel alongside us on life's journey.
- Collecting articles from this week's newspaper that affirm the need for God's amazing grace upon this sinful world.
- Exploring the Internet to find out what percentage of the world's population lives in cities. From a marketing point of view, list the challenges and opportunities of reaching city people with Christianity. Brainstorm it with your class.

CONNECT

Ephesians 2:1-9.

Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2, p. 179.

Calvin Miller, *Into the Depths of God*, chap. 9.

The Amazing evangelist



“So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it’ ” (Isa. 55:11, NASB).

Any Means Necessary

INTRODUCTION

Jon. 1:3

You do not tell someone in New York you are lost.

Living with my dad was not my favorite thing. I had just left my country, and my new home was with him and his wife. One day when I heard them discussing my going to the library after school instead of coming home and doing nothing, I was pretty upset—mainly because I was not the type to spend hours at a library. I did learn how the subway worked, or so I thought, so after school, instead of taking the train and getting off at the

library, I decided to give myself a little tour of the famous little island. On television you always heard of “The Village,” and this was my opportunity to walk those famous streets. I exited the subway station, but there was no awe. It looked pretty much like any other place I had been to. I decided to walk around a bit; after all, I had hours to kill. I actually saw a movie being made; no, I don’t know which one.

When it came time to take the train home, I couldn’t find the station. I was not lost, just confused. Now this is Manhattan, and you do not tell someone in New York you are lost. I knew how to ride the subway and connect from place to place, but now I was above ground and I realized it’s a little different. So I walked around until I finally found a station, but it was an exit, not an entrance. I ended up walking for about two hours, and as I walked I found myself praying, “Please, Lord, help me to find a station.” I finally arrived at the Canal Street station, only to discover that my school pass applied only to a certain area, and I was way out of that vicinity. With no money in my pocket, I explained my predicament to the attendant, who had mercy and allowed me on the train.

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me” (Jon. 1:2, NKJV). This was the instruction given to Jonah, but he had other plans. He decided to disobey the Lord and flee to another city. Yet God’s determination was greater than his. Jonah’s eyes were opened only after he was tossed overboard and was swallowed by a big fish. From the belly of the big fish, he found himself crying for mercy and compassion.

Like Jonah, our eyes are opened to our need for the Lord only when we are in over our heads. We desire to live life according to our own rules, the way we want to without consideration for others. Then we find ourselves in so deep that the only way out is to stretch our hands up and grab the hand of our Savior, who was always there reaching for us.

Sleeping It Off

EVIDENCE

Jon. 1:5

Jonah knew he had disobeyed the word of God to go to Nineveh. The fear and guilt was perhaps too much to bear. I really wonder whether Jonah was so worn out that it caused him to fall into a deep sleep in spite of the shaking of the boat and the shouts of the sailors. Could it have been the fear of answering the question "Where are you going?" from one of the sailors? He couldn't face the reality that he was running away from a God who he knew was watching him.

"No part of our conduct escapes observation. We cannot hide our ways from the Most High. . . . Every act, every word, every thought is as distinctly marked as though there were only one person in the whole world and the attention of heaven were centered upon him."¹ In the words of Isaac Watts, "Creatures that borrow life from Thee / Are subject to Thy care; / There's not a place where we can flee / But God is present there."²

Perhaps, unlike Jonah, we prefer to sweep our sins under the carpet and pretend the room is clean. On the contrary, the people of Nineveh realized their sins and were ready to submit to God and plead for His mercies. Christ's garment of righteousness is given only to those who see and accept their nakedness. Acknowledging our sins opens the door for repentance and forgiveness. "Make us to be what we pretend to be, / . . . From lives untrue, O Lord now set us free, / And let our words be echoed by our ways."³ This should be our prayer. Hiding the evidence does not obliterate the fact that a crime has been committed. Let us face and accept our sins and confess them while the door of mercy is still open.

"No part of our conduct escapes observation."

REACT

1. What would have been the story if Jonah had confessed his sin while he was in the boat?
2. Why did Jonah think he could outrun God?
3. In what ways do we think we can outrun God? Why?
4. How could Jonah sleep through the storm?
5. What forms of "sleep" do we employ to avoid responsibilities?

1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 217, 218.

2. *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 88.

3. *New Advent Hymnal*, no. 201.

Monday
November 17

A God of Second Chances

LOGOS

Jonah 3; Luke 18:13; 1 Cor. 15:31; Col. 2:6

All I wanted was for every student to pass the exam.

had received a “great” mark, however, began to complain, “Sir, that’s not fair, they should have studied harder, or longer; they shouldn’t have been so lazy.” While I agreed that they

should have studied harder, we needed to give them a chance to improve their marks. They failed to see my point. What were they afraid of? Was it that others would get a better mark than they? Would those who had studied so hard for the exam slip from being the “top” students in the class to number two?

I had made it clear that all I wanted was for every student to pass the exam. All I wanted was for those who had passed to show a little grace to those who hadn’t.

Isn’t that God’s desire for us too—for all to have eternal life? Isn’t that what God wanted from Jonah—to be His instrument and give the message of repentance and eternal life to those in Nineveh?

Jonah 3 begins by saying, “The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time” (verse 1, NKJV). Remember that Jonah had already hidden from God. He had gone to the local port, jumped on a boat, and headed in the other direction. Then between a storm and a fish, Jonah was back to square one on the shore of Joppa. Despite his disobedience, God still chose to use him. Surprised? God gave Jonah a second chance. That’s great news. God gave Jonah a chance to make things right, a chance to make an eternal difference in the lives of people. When God spoke, this time Jonah obeyed. He had learned that it causes pain to self and others when you disobey God.

So Jonah set out for Nineveh and began to preach that God would destroy their homes and businesses in 40 days if they did not turn from their evil practices. The people listened and began to change. There is no indication that they complained; rather, they believed God and from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth. News reached even the king, and the king—the ruler of the empire—came down from his throne, took off his robes, and repented, for he, too, recognized

his sin and the sin of his people. The king issued a decree for both man and beast to turn from their evil ways. God had given them a second chance. Rather than a nation destroyed, a nation was saved because a servant was willing to go out of his way and God was willing to demonstrate His grace. God's word certainly brought about change—it did not return empty.

God is interested not only in giving you a second chance, but He wants to see the difference He makes in your life. The Bible says that the Ninevites believed God! It was their belief in God that caused a change of lifestyle. Their stealing, their immoral behavior, their lying and cheating were replaced with a love and desire to serve God fully. The Ninevites saw their need of God, and it was their love for Him that transformed their lives.

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector: Luke 18:9. The two men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like all the sinful people he knew. He even boasted of the great things that he did; namely, paying tithe and fasting. The tax collector would not even look to heaven, but cried out to God, " 'Have mercy on me, a sinner' " (Luke 18:13, NIV). Jesus said, " 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God' " (verse 14, NIV).

Like the tax collector, the Ninevites' lives were transformed because they saw their need of God. For us, that's also where it all begins: seeing our own personal need of God. Joseph Stowell in his book *Following Christ* says this: "If Christianity is dull and boring, if it is a burden and not a blessing, then most likely we are involved in a project, not a person—a system not a Savior, rules rather than a relationship."*

Knowing Jesus causes us to change for the better. It caused Nineveh and the tax collector to change, but the question that we must ask ourselves is, Will it cause me to change? You can be sure of one thing, that no matter what, God will keep seeking you as He sought Jonah, because you are part of His plan.

And, by the way, all the students passed the test because their classmates were willing to show them grace. Are you showing others the grace that God has shown you so that they will be part of God's kingdom?

REACT

1. How does Joseph Stowell's quotation impact you?
2. How do we feel when other workers in the vineyard get paid the same for less work?
3. Why did God choose Jonah in the first place?
4. Why does God give second, third, fourth chances?
5. How could Jonah accurately expose Nineveh to a God he understood so imperfectly?

*Joseph Stowell, *Following Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998).

Tuesday
November 18

Grace Revealed Among the Heathen

TESTIMONY

Jon. 1:2, 3, 5; 3:6-10

The people of Nineveh committed many sins, and their wickedness went up before God. "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.'"¹

Concerned about the wickedness, God was now ready to pour judgment upon the sin-loving people. But just as in the days of Noah and in the time of Sodom and Gomorrah, God does not destroy without warning.

There's hope for every sinner. God sees His own image even in His disobedient children. He realizes that the acts of sin in their lives are not of their own making.

**God sees His own image
even in His disobedient
children.**

The devil persistently tempts them till they forget their Creator. God sees in His children no fault of their own. God has put in every heart of humanity space that only He can occupy. It is through

humanity's earnest desire to fill this void that people entangle themselves in idolatry and false worship. It was "perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher, and who, if granted opportunity to learn of the living God, would put away their evil deeds and worship Him."²

In God's first discourse with Jonah, He lets the prophet know his job description: Unless the Ninevites repent, judgment would fall on them.

Jonah did not trust the word of God. Fear blinded him from seeing beyond his own effort and belief that God would lead him on his mission. He was looking through his own fallible eyes. He decided that he would not risk his own life, but disobey altogether by going in the opposite direction.

When we are told to do service for the Lord, regardless of where the commission bids us go, we must remember that it is not in our power to begin and finish the work. God in His wisdom begins a good work in people's lives and will bring it to an end at the last day. Jonah planted the seed of truth, and the Holy Spirit brought forth fruit. The runaway prophet became an effective instrument in saving the wicked city from destruction.

1. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 265.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 266.

Not in My Backyard

HOW-TO

Ps. 145:9; Mark 6:2; Col. 3:12

The ancient city of Nineveh had a bad reputation. When God said go plant a church there, it probably seemed like a suicide mission. Exit Jonah, last seen heading west, followed at a distance by God. "God, if You want to save the Ninevites that's fine, but count me out." Even as a successful evangelist in Nineveh, his mind-set had not changed. He had a bad attack of NIMBY. It may have a different name where you live, but the idea of "Not in My Back Yard" is known worldwide. The main symptoms are (1) agreeing something should be done to, for, or about a group of people or a problem and (2) feeling strongly that the solution should happen as far away as possible and it should in no way involve me. As the condition approaches the final stages, the comfort zone sets like concrete, entombing the person while seemingly still alive.

Here are some approaches to overcoming this condition:

1. Exposure. Jonah had probably never met a citizen of Nineveh. He assumed they were all like the Assyrian army. As a visiting speaker, Jonah saw the citizens of Nineveh come to the Lord, but his heart wasn't in it. He went to Nineveh because of God's creative persuasion rather than out of love for the people there. The miracle of a whole city turning to God passed him by.

2. Change shoes. If you were in their shoes, would you want to hear God's words from someone who thinks of you as the enemy? If you don't like what you see in your attitude, perhaps you and God have some things to talk over. You may find a trusted counselor helpful here too.

3. Check the foundations. Think through some basic questions. What barriers does my mind-set place in the way of the task God has given me? Did God ever promise not to shake my comfort zone? Is it possible that God knows something I don't when He sends me to unlikely people? Is my faith community a safe place to bring a "Ninevite" to? How can I improve that? How much overlap is there between the abundant life and my comfort zone? If God can use a prophet with a bad attitude and a case of fish-digestive-juice-induced dermatitis, how much possibility does He see in you?

How much overlap is there
between the abundant life
and my comfort zone?

REACT

1. Who are the Ninevites in your life?
2. Why would the Assyrians listen to an emissary from their enemy?

Thursday
November 20

Murderers, Adulterers, Thieves Wanted

OPINION

1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 12:2

Have you ever seen a classified ad like this one: Murderers, Adulterers, Thieves Wanted? I can't imagine what type of job would require this kind of previous experience, but when I think of some of the most obvious characteristics of God's greatest servants, these titles come to mind.

King David lusted after Uriah's wife, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Matthew and Zacchaeus were both tax collectors, a position famous for its dishonesty and cruelty.

Saul was one of the most feared persecutors of early Christians. God does not need an impressive resume, a list of credentials, or an impeccable reputation to use you for the kingdom. He is not

Every sin that you've ever committed and will commit has been nailed to the Cross.

looking at what you've done but what you will do. There is nothing in your past that disqualifies you from His service.

Think of it this way—every sin that you've ever committed and will commit has been nailed to the Cross. It is by His blood and sacrifice that we are accepted by God, not by anything we have done.

I once heard a story of a doctor who liked to have some fun when buying cars. He drove the oldest, ugliest car to the dealership and dressed in the dirtiest clothes that he had. Virtually ignored by all the salespersons, he browsed through the sports cars at his leisure, inspecting each one. When he made his selection, he approached the salesperson and said, "I'll take the red one," while proceeding to offer the exact amount of cash needed for the car. I can just imagine the confused, embarrassed, and shocked look on the salesperson's face. As the old saying goes, "You can't judge a book by its cover."

Next time you sit in church, scan the sanctuary. Look at each person as you remember one thing: You can't tell what is in a person's heart by the way he or she looks, dresses, or smells. The Lord does not look at the things humanity looks at. Humankind looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). What sins have you committed that make you feel unable to be used by God? Where else in the Bible can you find examples of servants of God who didn't have a very impressive history? Have you ever judged a person by their appearance and later found out that you were totally wrong about them?

Them 'n' Us

EXPLORATION

Isa. 55:11

CONCLUDE

Jonah was stressed by having to go to such a large foreign city! He tried hiding from God, which sounds insane—until we realize we do it too. Luckily God is into giving us more than one chance! Jonah thought Nineveh was so sinful that God couldn't save its people—he barely believed his own gospel. And he didn't empathize with or understand those outside his religious clique—a common problem today. We need to look past the image and see as God sees.

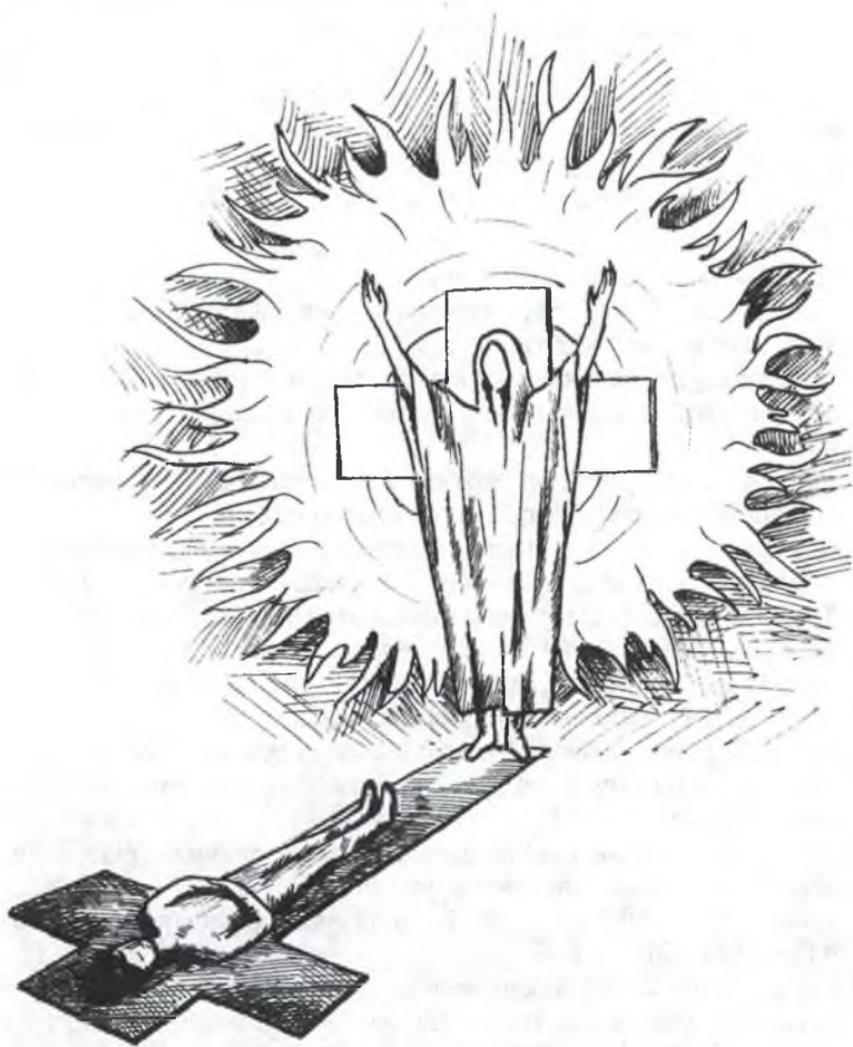
CONSIDER

- Asking yourself: Is there part of my body that I don't like? Do you dress to hide it? What aspect(s) of your character/personality do you find hardest to show to other people? To God? Why?
- Questioning whether you have ever “gotten away with it” or had a second chance? Write down your top three as a diary entry or pages from your autobiography.
- Drawing a street scene from Nineveh, rich “center of crime and wickedness” and “full of lies and robbery.” Use a period or modern style.
- Discussing with a friend what types of persons you find hardest to understand (e.g., Muslim women, neo-Nazis, pimps, drug dealers, etc.). Then arrange to meet someone representing this group and interview him or her about life—even if you're a bit scared. Tell them it's for a class and record it on videotape, audiotape, or just jot notes. Don't forget to ask their views on God. Report to your Sabbath School class.
- Talking to people waiting at a train station or bus stop and asking them what they really think about God. If they could ask God any question, what would their first one be?
- Taking your favorite food or drink today to a neighbor, classmate, or workmate whom you don't know well and use it as an excuse to begin a conversation. Do the same thing in church next Sabbath (maybe announce it from the front).
- Doing a content analysis on the book of Jonah. Log the number of times foreigners/nonbelievers (1) do, (2) say, (3) and believe the right thing, compared to the number of times for Jonah.

CONNECT

The Desire of Ages, chap. 15.

Conversing with God



“ ‘I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord God. ‘Therefore turn and live!’ ” (Ezek. 18:32, NKJV).

Breaking the Silence

INTRODUCTION

Jonah 4

“Why? I don’t understand, God! Where are You?”

The man paced about with a red face, his anger evident. “God? Are You listening? I did just as You said. I went down there, told those sinners what was up, and now, You’re backing out on what You said You’d do? You didn’t keep Your end of the bargain. Come on, God! Now I look like a fool! What will people think of me? I’m a joke—a charlatan—a loser! I just want to die, God, OK? Since You didn’t destroy them, how about just letting me die instead. I’d be better off! God? Are You there?”

Silence. Only the sound of crunching gravel under the man’s shoes, followed by the *whoosh* of dust as he flung himself to the ground.

“God? It’s hot and I’m tired and thirsty. I spent my valuable time preaching there in Nineveh, and now I look like an idiot. I didn’t want to go, did I? I didn’t ask for this job! But would You let me alone? No way! What about

Silence. And then God spoke.

me? I do all this stuff for You, and what do I get in return?”

Silence. A small plant is growing, it’s roots pushing deeper into the soil.

“Well, that’s more like it. Finally some shade. About time You did something for me. Now, if only You would do something for my image. My reputation is shot!”

Silence. Only the faintest sound of a small worm, crawling up the vine, biting off little pieces of leaf.

“God? You call this fair? My vine is gone and I am even more hot and thirsty than before. I follow Your will. I do what You say, and then how do You repay me? You make me look like a liar and let me suffer in the heat. What kind of God are You, anyway?”

Silence. And then God spoke.

“How is it that you care more about yourself than a city of people? How is it that you care more about your present comfort than the eternal comfort of others? How is it that you care more about a little vine than an entire city of people? What kind of prophet are you, anyway?”

And there was silence as Jonah hung his head and cried.

Sunday
November 23

Jonah's Amazing Ungrace

LOGOS

1 Sam. 16:1-3; Job 7:17-21; Psalm 104; Jer. 15:15-18; Jonah 1; Zech. 3:1-7;
Matt. 10:30; Rev. 12:10

God's Attentiveness to Mere Humans (Job 7:17-19)

It's just a fact: God is crazy about us! Yes, us! You and me—warts and all! How can this be? Although it's tempting to say it's too good to be true, it's more accurate to say that it's so good it's got to be true! (Maybe that's why grace is called amazing.)

From the moment God came looking for us in the Garden we were startled by the reality that He initiated the solution to the sin problem. We didn't go looking for Him—we hid. He came looking for us! And as time passed, He hovered as close to His people as He possibly could, driven farther away, at times, by our sin, but never driven completely away.

Imagine His excitement when He became one of us. No longer veiled nor invisible. No longer distanced, but able to reach out and touch. This God-Man was the continuation of a search that commenced in the Garden, and He still knocks on our heart's door.

What Job senses is a God who is deeply and intimately interested in us (7:17-19). This is no casual, obligatory interest, but an all-consuming, no-fooling kind of

**Joshua's filthy clothing is
replaced by rich garments.**

interest. This is the kind of personal interest we humans hunger for in the relationships that matter most to us. And, of all things, we find that kind of intense interest in the King of

kings, Lord of lords, Master of the universe, Creator of all things! A realization of this magnitude should leave us speechless.

Job is astounded (for very different reasons) that God makes such a big deal about us and gives us so much attention. Our God is intimately and constantly attentive to who we are and what we do. Isn't that amazing?

So it shouldn't be surprising that God is interested in and concerned about the people of Nineveh. Probably what surprises us the most is Jonah's lack of interest and concern. Aren't prophets supposed to care about what God cares about? And how does that cross over to church members today?

A Change of Clothing—A Change of Heart (Zech. 3:1-7; Rev. 12:10)

Israel has just come back from a captivity brought on by their refusal to stay away from idols and worship the true God. Their sin was grievous and cost them

dearly. In this passage Joshua (who was the first high priest after the captivity) symbolizes the people of Israel—filthy and in need of new clothes. Again we must notice that it is not the human agent seeking or initiating a solution to the sin problem. It is God. In this passage Joshua only stands there. He does not speak. He stands there like a paper doll while the accuser (Satan) is rebuked by the angel of the Lord (Jesus). Satan doesn't even speak. He gets his just reward in Revelation 12:10.

Joshua's filthy clothing is replaced by rich garments. God's gifts are never scanty. Joshua hasn't earned these garments. He isn't entitled to them. He needs them and has accepted them. And God is eager to give them to him. Israel has finally understood their error and desire to change their ways. That desire is enough and God responds.

Although this allegory is specifically related to the nation of Israel, it is also an allegory about humanity in a broader sense. We are in need of clean clothes, and God is still just as eager to reclothe us as He was to reclothe Israel of old.

Let's back up a bit. If God was eager to clean up Israel, wouldn't He have been eager to clean up a dirty group of Ninevites too? This may be easy for us to grasp, but I doubt it was easy for Jonah to grasp. We have a bit more inclusive perspective on God's desire to save people. Jonah's perspective would have been a much narrower one. In his mind, God didn't apply to those outside Israel. Why waste the time? But isn't it amazing that the Ninevites respond quickly and easily versus the hardheaded Israelites who go into captivity even after many prophets are sent to warn them? In Israel a prophet's life was often cut short by the people's dislike of the message. It would seem that working with the Ninevites would have been a joy, but the prophet finds no joy in the repentance of so many previously lost people. In this picture, who wore the filthy clothes? Who was in desperate need of a change of heart?

Low Expectations and Doomsayers (Jonah 4)

Jonah gets angry because God had compassion and did not bring upon the Ninevites the destruction He had threatened (Jon. 3:10). What a strange reason to be angry—especially for a follower of God! God exhibits mercy and His prophet throws a temper tantrum. You can hear it in his pouting words: “‘Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. I knew how easily you could cancel your plans for destroying these people'” (4:2, NLT). In essence, what Jonah unwittingly does is tell us a mouthful of wonderful things about our God!

Did Jonah even consider that the people might repent? Did he, in his wildest imagination, wonder what it would be like if they did respond? The stories he could tell when he returned home! (He had stories to tell, all right, but they were about himself—and they weren't flattering.)

How do we relate to the unsaved world? Would we rejoice at their conversion or would we be disgusted at the mercy and compassion of our God?

TESTIMONY

Acts 18:9, 10

“The lesson [of Jonah] is for God’s messengers today, when the cities of the nations are as verily in need of a knowledge of the attributes and purposes of the true God as were the Ninevites of old. Christ’s ambassadors are to point men to the nobler world, which has largely been lost sight of. According to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the only city that will endure is the city whose builder and maker is God. With the eye of faith man may behold the threshold of heaven, flushed with God’s living glory. Through His ministering servants the Lord Jesus is calling upon men to strive with sanctified ambition to secure the immortal inheritance. He urges them to lay up treasure beside the throne of God.”¹

“God’s messengers in the great cities are not to become discouraged over the wickedness, the injustice, the depravity, which they are called upon to face while endeavoring to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation. The Lord would cheer every

“God’s messengers in the great cities are not to become discouraged.”

such worker with the same message that He gave to the apostle Paul in wicked Corinth: ‘Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee; for I have much

people in this city.’ Acts 18:9, 10. Let those engaged in soul-saving ministry remember that while there are many who will not heed the counsel of God in His word, the whole world will not turn from light and truth, from the invitations of a patient, forbearing Saviour. In every city, filled though it may be with violence and crime, there are many who with proper teaching may learn to become followers of Jesus. Thousands may thus be reached with saving truth and be led to receive Christ as a personal Saviour.”²

REACT

1. List specific similarities between Ninevite culture and modern culture. What is different about modern culture that hastens or deters the spreading of the love of Jesus?

2. What great city is nearest to you? What specific obstacles do you see to the spreading of the gospel there? Are the greatest obstacles the Ninevites or the Jonahs? Explain your answer.

1. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 274

2. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

A Prophet Is a Prophet Is a Prophet—or Not?

EVIDENCE

Exod. 32:32; Jonah 4:2, 3

The dictionary defines the word *prophet* as “a person who speaks for God, or as though under divine guidance.” Yet most prophets seem to have had their less-than-divine moments. Moses struck the rock in anger. Elijah turned tail and ran from Jezebel. Jonah whined about a shriveled gourd. John abandoned his best friend. All these Bible heroes struggled with needs for self-preservation, self-control, and self-glory. All lost at some point—yet all of them also won.

In Exodus 32, Moses is furious when his people worship an image of gold. He returns to God the following morning feeling beaten. What a great sin these people have committed, but now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written. This presents quite a contrast to Jonah’s prayer for death because the Ninevites

**No matter where our
personal Nineveh lies, there is
no room for self-absorption.**

lived. The love for the people of God had led Moses to the place that his life, his needs, his reputation were no longer the first priority. Jonah had an especially challenging call in that God directed him to go to a people whom he hated and feared. Most Old Testament prophets were sent to those who called themselves the children of Israel, and those who were not of that lineage were considered unworthy of life, much less worthy of grace. When Jonah sat and sulked on that blistering hillside, though he had spoken the words of God to the Ninevites, it became very evident that the words of salvation had proceeded from his head and not his heart. He was loyal to Israel—not to Assyria. He was loyal to Jonah—not to God.

For Seventh-day Adventists, who feel divinely called to finish the work, the point is very clear. No matter where our personal Nineveh lies—in a culture, a location, or just one certain person—there is no room for self-absorption. There is no one who is unworthy of our efforts, no one who does not hold the capacity for repentance. “For if Nineveh, that incarnation of evil, that symbol of all that is unrighteous, if Nineveh could turn to God, then any, then all. And never did we need to learn this truth more than in the days in which we live.”*

*Raymond Calkins, *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p. 173.

HOW-TO

Jon. 4:2; Rom. 11:5, 6; 1 Tim. 1:13, 14

One day I accompanied my husband on errands around town. Missing our turn, and hoping to shorten the distance, we decided to take a detour, but that didn't help. Impatient to get where we wanted to be, my husband opted to turn at the next opportunity. The large 20-foot arrow painted on the pavement prohibited turning left in the direction we wanted to go, and the stop sign at the intersection also reminded us that there were to be no left turns.

I protested his defiance in deciding to turn left anyway. As traffic cleared, he made a quick dart in the direction that disobeyed the postings. I smiled inwardly at his unfortunate timing. He had turned directly in front of a police officer. I knew if my husband wouldn't listen to me, he would finally get the

**I smiled inwardly at his
unfortunate timing.**

reward he deserved for doing something he knew to be wrong.

The police officer's lights flashed us over. I gloated silently at the way my husband squirmed while addressing the officer's questions waiting for the ticket to be given. The police officer stunned us both. Giving my husband a verbal warning if he would promise to drive more carefully, we were soon on our way. Feelings of annoyance welled up in me at the injustice of it all. My husband didn't deserve to go unpunished for behavior he knew was wrong. Justice would've written the ticket. Mercy pardoned it. Here are a few suggestions when tempted to side with justice instead of mercy:

1. Acknowledge our tendency toward works. In various aspects of life, we are conditioned that performance equals acceptance. Salvation is not earned but freely given to those who accept its invitation (John 3:16).

2. Look to the Cross for a sermon on grace. Its message is simple. Jesus whispers words of mercy in asking His Father to forgive those responsible for His death. Justice demands retribution on the sinner, but mercy overrules for the repentant (Rom. 6:23; 1 John 1:9).

3. Accept our own unworthiness. God's gift of grace deepens our understanding of His compassionate love for sinners and His desire to reconcile us to Him (Rom. 5:8).

REACT

1. How can we learn to celebrate when grace is extended to ourselves and to others?

2. Why do you think it is so difficult sometimes for us to accept God's gift of grace? Why do we try so hard to earn salvation when it is offered freely?

Placing the Blame

OPINION

Ezek. 18:32

I'm no psychologist, but I think people tend to define God by their own encounters with Him. Take Jonah, for example. His view of God seems totally dictated by his experience—which isn't a good picture. First, God's in his face, telling him what to do. Jonah tries to circumvent that, but God intervenes, and in the process Jonah ends up looking like a doofus in front of a bunch of pagans.

Jonah then decides to martyr himself, but God slaps down that idea, too, which disturbs Jonah for a couple reasons: First, nobody likes being forcibly shown that he or she is not really in control. And second, well, face it: That whole belly-of-the-fish thing is just plain gross.

So when Jonah finally gets around to carrying out God's orders, it's no wonder he's blindsided by the outcome: God showing mercy on Nineveh? Where did that come from? All Jonah had experienced from God was unyielding pressure and uncompromising demands. Of course he's annoyed when the Ninevites get off scot-free.

You and I can recognize that God was displaying merciful discipline. Jonah, though, is looking only at his poor, pitiful self and from that point of view—despite his perhaps less-than-totally-sincere prayer from deep inside the giant economy-size guppy—God is little more than a harsh tyrant, one who sets His subjects up for failure.

Somewhere after God's little speech about the vine that closes the book, I like to think that Jonah finally got it, and thinking that gives me a little hope for myself. I do the same thing Jonah did: I try desperately to put God in a box (based on how He's interacted with me in the past), then rail at Him when He dares to do anything outside my definition.

The problem, of course, is that He's God and I'm not. Regardless of what I think, He has the right—and the responsibility—to react to others completely differently from how He reacts to a stubborn curmudgeon like myself.

It's no wonder he's blindsided by the outcome.

Like Jonah, I look at anything that seems unfair from my perspective, and immediately blame God. Yes, I realize that God is the living definition of fairness, but I don't like to think about that, because it leads me to an awfully ugly reality: If God and I are involved in something that doesn't seem quite right, the problem isn't God. It's me.

REACT

Was God's response to Nineveh's repentance fair or unfair? Explain your answer.

Frustrated or Fulfilled?

EXPLORATION

Ezek. 18:32

CONCLUDE

Ancient Nineveh and the story of Jonah have parallels in the Western world in century 21. Godless Ninevites and postmodern humanity have much in common. Both live without reference to God. Jonah is an illustration of Israel's isolationism. The task remains the same: communicating God's saving love to those who ignore Him. God is not frustrated by human evil or His people's failure to achieve His will. Today the struggle is the same: my will versus God's will. God works in our lives to lead us to the place where, like Isaiah, we respond: "Here am I; send me" (6:8, KJV).

CONSIDER

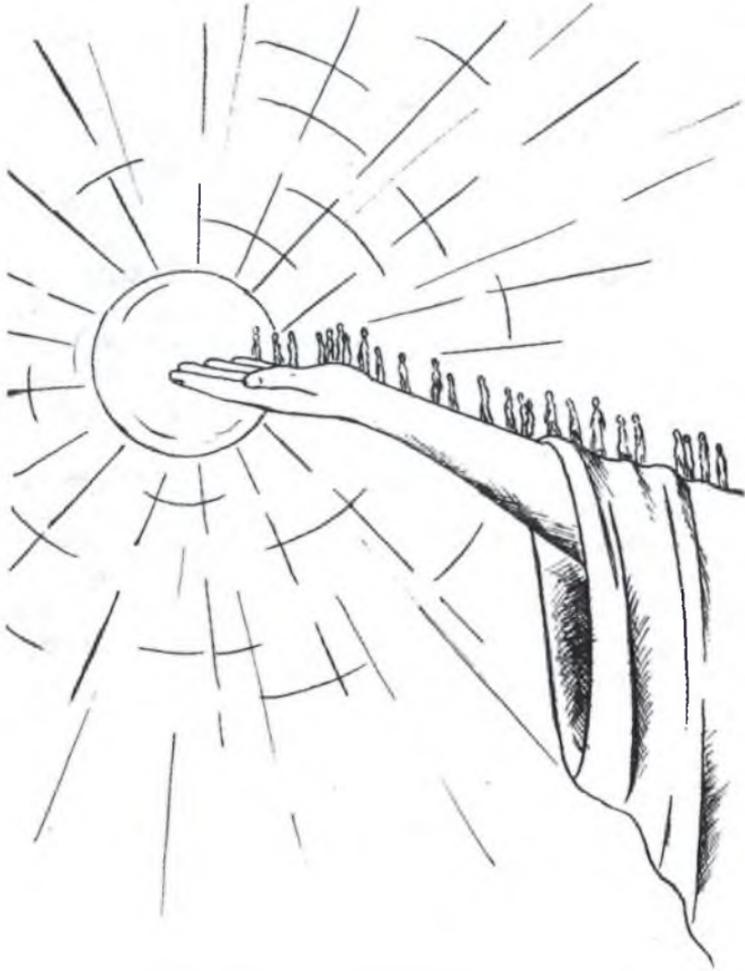
- Drawing a fish with a man inside and giving it a title. Draw yourself and the things that may constrain you from doing God's will. How do the pictures compare?
- Surveying ten people and asking them what they think constitutes success. What qualities make for effective witnessing? Was Jonah a success or a failure?
- Finding how many people live in your city. What sections of the community does your church not reach? Could you do anything to change this?
- Tuning into a local chat show on the radio. What do people's concerns and problems tell you about their relationship with God? How does this compare with the people of Nineveh? How can God break through the barriers today?
- Scanning a newspaper for references to God. What does this tell you about people's priorities?
- Thinking about Malcolm Muggeridge, a journalist in World War II, who, desperately discouraged, attempted to commit suicide. At that moment, he reportedly saw a light in a window in the shape of a cross and changed his mind. Browse through his book *Jesus Rediscovered* at <<http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/mugridge/jred/jredcont.htm>>. Meditate on this question: What do we mean by the "power of the Cross"?

CONNECT

Prophets and Kings, pp. 271–278; *The Sanctified Life*, pp. 80–96.

Michael Green, *Sharing Your Faith With a Friend; Simple Steps to Introducing Jesus*.

A **Wind**, a worm, and a **Plant**



“Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way” (Ps. 25:8, 9, NASB).

The Fair Is in August

INTRODUCTION

Ps. 25:8, 9

Have you ever felt as if you're in a catch-22 situation? As a parent, I feel that way most of the time. When my kids are pressing me from all sides, I sometimes—OK, most of the time—rise to the bait and make a decision. Then it begins, "That's not fair!" as they miraculously remember previous decisions I've forgotten about. But while they're taking a breath, I interject, "The fair is in August." (Our county fair is in August.) Then they glare at me and say, "Dad," in that rising tone of voice that lets you know you're trying their patience.

Well, I think God may have wanted to say, "The fair is in August" to Jonah (chapter 4) and many times to His chosen, Israel. To bring it closer to home, how

The wages of sin and the road to salvation are the same for everyone.

fair is it that Jesus died for you and me? The wages of sin and the road to salvation are the same for everyone. For some the Christian road is long and for some it is short, e.g., the robber on the cross. It doesn't matter

whether you have been on the road all your life or have just found the road, being on the road is all that matters.

Jonah didn't like the fact that God gave Israel's enemy, the Ninevites, a second chance and didn't destroy them. You would have thought Jonah would have been happy for the Ninevites' repentance. But instead, Jonah implied, "If You can't bless Israel by destroying its enemies, then kill me." Jonah was trying to put God in a box. He had certain expectations of God, i.e., that Israel was the one and only chosen of God. God had other plans, however—plans that included the Ninevites, and maybe even you and me. Now, that goes way beyond fair.

You Can Run, but You Can't Hide

EVIDENCE

Gen. 3:9; Jonah 4

Hide and seek! What fun it was, running through backyards, hiding behind trash cans and up trees. Such an elemental game was probably played by little Cain and Abel, by Jacob's boys, by young Moses on the palace grounds in Egypt. It's a game that belongs to childhood, but even as grown-ups we play some form of hide-and-seek. We run from responsibility. We hide from life, from one another, from God.

Like Jonah. He ran. He hid. But God searched him out and found him. David thought about running away, hiding from God. But where could he go? Where could he hide? If he goes up to heaven, God is there. If he descends to hell, God is there. David knew the folly of running from God in a way that Jonah didn't.

In Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven," God is portrayed as a great, coursing hound dogging the trail of His wayward children. He never gives up and is never discouraged by indifference or neglect or anger, but He pursues us relentlessly, even though we run and hide. The child hides behind trash cans in the alley; the grown-up hides on a larger playing field, sometimes behind trash cans of the mind. But no matter. God is forever seeking and finding the wanderer. Even if we say, "I fled Him down the nights and down the deep . . . I hid from Him,"¹ He is still there, ever the seeker.

The grown-up hides on a
larger playing field.

Now He seeks Jonah who had disobeyed Him, ignored Him, thumbed his nose and run. He finds the rebellious prophet pouting on the east side of the city, wallowing in his narcissistic grief. The man of the hour focused on his own little self, thinking, *But me, what about me? How will this make me look?*

In spite of Jonah himself, God is on his trail saying as He said to Adam and Eve in the Garden, not "What did you do?" but "Where are you?"

When God finds Jonah, He says, "Rise, clasp my hand and come. . . Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He whom thou seekest."²

REACT

1. Is my focus on myself or something bigger?
2. When have you felt that God is pursuing you? Be specific.

1. Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," in Ben Witherington III and Christopher Mead Armitage, *The Poetry of Piety* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), pp. 122–126.

2. Ibid.

Monday
December 1

Parable of a Sinful Plant

LOGOS

Isa. 55:8, 9; Jonah 4; Luke 11:9-13; Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 13:11, 12

Jonah 4 is a live performance of a parable. Much like Jesus when He drew parables from the fields around His hillside congregations, God teaches a lesson to the listener, Jonah, using a plant. If Jesus had told the parable, it might have gone like this: The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man sitting under a booth in the hot desert sun. One day a plant grows up and provides shade over this man. He is excited at the possibilities of a cool nap in the shade of his plant for which he has done no work. Then a worm attacks the plant, causing it to wither away to dry brittle sticks to be cast into the fire. The man becomes angry because his plant for which he did no work has withered away. Should not the Father be even angrier about His people for whom He has worked if they do not repent? "I tell you . . . there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7, NASB).

Jonah was upset about the repentant Ninevites because he thought he would be considered a false prophet to whom no one would listen. He would not be able to do

**Who would believe that he
heard messages from God?**

the Lord's work because his prediction had failed. Who would believe that he heard messages from God? Voices maybe, but not from God. God responds, "My thoughts are not your thoughts,

nor are your ways My ways" (Isa. 55:8, NKJV). They are as different as heaven and earth, perfection and sin, omniscience and pinpoint tunnel vision. Don't become discouraged, God says. Even you who are parents, older siblings, and babysitters know how to give a child the good things for which they ask. You don't give them a snapping cobra when they request a fish fillet. You know one egg, sunny-side up, isn't substituted by a poison-tailed scorpion. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (Luke 11:13, NKJV).

You see, Jonah, God says, I am going to send My Son, My only Son, to die for these dreadfully wicked Ninevites. I'm going to risk losing Him forever. I'm going to purchase these sinners with the blood of My very own Child (see Rom. 8:32). You liked that plant that grew from seed that wasn't yours, on land that did not belong to you, by nourishment of water and nutrients you did not provide, through a process called photosynthesis you know nothing about. I gave you that plant. Now you are angry that a worm has eaten My plant and you didn't even spray it with insecticides while you claimed it. Stop thinking as a child, Jonah. I gave you this plant. I gave you

a message for Nineveh. I called you to be a prophet. I expect you to do the tasks I have given you. The results are My responsibility. You are looking through a tinted window from the outside, but one of these days you will be able to see things clearly. Then you will understand (see 1 Cor. 13:11, 12). For now, trust Me with the outcomes.

Linda Hogan speaks of the condition that afflicted Jonah. She calls it “far-heartedness.” Far-heartedness is the unique ability of our scientifically enlightened generations to look at everything objectively, to separate ourselves from feelings and emotions and look at just the facts. We want it reproduced in the lab, proven in a court, observed under a microscope, or viewed through a telescope. Otherwise, we don’t believe it. We no longer believe in dragons and mythical beasts; we now try to prove the existence of aliens. Linda Hogan says, “This far-hearted kind of thinking . . . is one that sees life, other lives, as containers for our own uses and not as containers in a greater, holier sense.”* Jonah was selfish. We are selfish. We see black and white, cause and effect, evidence and proof, but God again reminds us that His ways are not our ways. God thinks subjectively. He doesn’t mind suggesting that Nineveh would be destroyed and then changing His mind when they repent. God thinks abstractly, creatively. Then He gives the more left-brained of us stories and parables to help us understand.

Jonah is a parable for today. A parable is a story that teaches a lesson in a non-threatening format. We look at the story of Jonah and we think, *I would never run from God or refuse to witness, and I definitely wouldn’t get angry if the people I were witnessing to repented.* But that isn’t the point of Jonah’s story. Too often we take responsibility for things that are God’s. We gloat over sinners we brought into the church. We give testimonies about how many pieces of our literature we handed out. God tells us, through the parable of Jonah, that He is the one who died for those people. The Holy Spirit softened their hearts. God leads us into contact with these people. He reminds us that the joy in heaven is over one sinner who repents, not the ninety-nine righteous. Too often we build ourselves a shelter, take credit for plants we didn’t grow, and get angry when they leave through the back door of the church. Maybe we forget to connect the branches to the vine instead of other branches. Or maybe, in the “Parable of Jonah,” we are too busy adding branches (or gloating over ones we have added) and forget to look for our worms.

REACT

1. When Moses struck the rock, was he acting like Jonah (Num. 20:2-13)? Explain your answer.
2. In what other ways have we become “far-hearted”?
3. What is the significance of the shelter that Jonah built?
4. Do we resent God saving our enemies? If so, why?
5. Whom are we comfortable seeing saved? Whom are we not?

*Linda Hogan, *Dwellings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 45.

Tuesday
December 2

Selfish Rewards, With a Twist

TESTIMONY

John 5:30

"The Lord desires us to rest in Him without a question as to our measure of reward. When Christ abides in the soul, the thought of reward is not uppermost. This is not the motive that actuates our service. It is true that in a subordinate sense we should have respect to the recompense of reward. God desires us to appreciate His promised blessings. But He would not have us eager for rewards nor feel that for every duty we must receive compensation. We should not be so anxious to gain the reward as to do what is right, irrespective of all gain. Love to God and to our fellow men should be our motive."¹

Like Jonah, we often look at the reward as essential in prompting us to believe and, even more important, when used to witness to others. The Ninevites did not have a reward offered for repentance, but they repented anyway. "Christ . . . referred

**Jonah's desire for the
reward was selfishness.**

to the good wrought by the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh, and compared the inhabitants of that heathen center with the professed people of God in His day. 'The men of Nineveh,' He

declared, 'shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.' Matthew 12:40, 41. Into the busy world, filled with the din of commerce and the altercation of trade, where men were trying to get all they could for self, Christ had come; and above the confusion His voice, like the trump of God, was heard: 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' Mark 8:36, 37."²

Jonah's desire for the reward was selfishness. The twist is that when we are selfish, we cannot receive the reward. "The Saviour could say: 'I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me.' John 5:30. 'And,' declared John, 'the Father giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.' So with the followers of Christ. We can receive of heaven's light only as we are willing to be emptied of self. We can discern the character of God, and accept Christ by faith, only as we consent to the bringing into captivity of every thought to the obedience of Christ. To all who do this, the Holy Spirit is given without measure. In Christ 'dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him.' Colossians 2:9, 10."³

1. *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 398, 399.

2. *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 273, 274.

3. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 334.

How to Avoid the Ninevite Complex

HOW-TO

Isa. 55:8; Jon. 4:2; Luke 6:3

Having grown up a Christian, I'm embarrassed to admit that I tend to relate more to the condescending attitudes of Jonah, the older brother in the story of the prodigal son, and Martha—rather than the Ninevites, the prodigal son, and Mary, respectively. I find myself, like Jonah, too eager to see justice carried out on sinners. Rather than seeing myself as an equally culpable sinner, I prefer to focus on other people's sins. And, as an attorney who wants to see justice applied fairly and equally, I grapple with God's willingness to grant forgiveness and additional chances to seemingly hopeless people.

So how do we avoid this type of an un-Christlike, judgmental attitude?

1. Acknowledge that God's thoughts and ways are not our own (Isa. 55:8, 9). Fortunately for us and everyone else, He is the only Judge who knows the absolute truth, the genuine condition of each person's heart, and the sincerity of each sinner's plea for mercy.

2. Accept God's mercy for our own sins and acknowledge His goodness in granting it to others. Jonah makes a halfhearted attempt at this in his prayer, "I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness" (Jonah 4:2, NKJV). But instead of being thrilled by this truth about God's goodness, Jonah is angered that God would apply this mercy to the Ninevites. Ellen White described Jonah's reaction as follows: "When Jonah learned of God's purpose to spare the city . . . 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."^{*}

I find myself, like Jonah,
too eager to see justice
carried out on sinners.

3. Acknowledge that we are unable to see the whole picture. This idea is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (NKJV). Because of our inability to see the whole picture clearly, Christ warns us, "'Judge not, and you shall not be judged'" (Luke 6:37, NKJV).

If we follow Christ's simple advice not to judge others, we will find more time to acknowledge our own weaknesses and accept His abundant grace and mercy.

^{*}*Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

OPINION

Jonah 4

Jonah was an extremely immature and childish prophet. This could very easily be determined by a quick read of Jonah 4. Complaining bitterly about God's compassion and full of self, he asked to die. After all his hard work and prophesying, he was going to look bad because God was merciful.

But if there were a book that told my life story, and you read those chapters,

**How often has my anger
been kindled over vines
that have withered?**

I'm certain you would be able to see the obvious immaturity in my life. I'm afraid my childishness would be just as easily discerned as Jonah's. So God gently nudges me out of my judgment seat and says quietly,

Look with clear and honest vision at how I provide for you. See the circumstances that uplift, the trials that test, the strong winds that buffet, the hot sun that scorches. When you have failed Me, have you not welcomed My forgiveness and compassion?

Now from a position not quite so superior, I listen as God asks me to reflect on Jonah's attitudes: his immaturity, his anger. And I see how closely these are paralleled in my own life. How many times have I envied God's love manifest in a life that I was tempted to think was less deserving than mine? How often has my anger been kindled over vines that have withered and left me with some discomfort, vines He provided and removed? Instead of acceptance of His providence, my reaction was childish and immature, just like Jonah's.

We need God to give us a full measure of wisdom, pressed down and running over. It is a wisdom to understand how He provides the very things we need for growth in our walk with Him. Most of all, we need to embrace His compassion, which reached out to Jonah on a hot and windy day. It also embraced 120,000 residents of Nineveh, who didn't know the difference between their right and left hands. Now that compassion embraces you and me so intensely that it will not let us go.

REACT

1. Proverbs 3:11 tells us not to despise the Lord's discipline and not to resent His rebukes because the Lord disciplines those He loves. Has God ever provided something in your life (a vine or a worm) that showed your level of Christian maturity?

2. How grateful are you that our books are clean and spotless and beautifully written, thanks to God's love and Christ's sacrifice?

My Way or God's Way?

EXPLORATION

Ps. 37:3

CONCLUDE

Jonah was like a child, quick to scream injustice. He prophesied Nineveh's destruction, and when God showed mercy, his credibility was threatened. Jonah wanted to be known as the great prophet who told of the end of Nineveh, Israel's enemy. And when his plan didn't coincide with God's, he felt it was unfair and decided it was time to give up and die. To learn from Jonah's experience we must realize that regardless of what we believe to be justice, God is all-knowing and in control. When He asks us to do something, we should do it selflessly and with complete trust in God.

CONSIDER

- Reflecting on your past experiences and seeing where you have completely submitted to God's will and where you have just gone your own way. Think about the differences it would have made in your life if you had acted differently.
- Rewriting the story of Jonah in a modern setting.
- Performing a skit based on the story of Jonah.
- Celebrating God's plan for us by having a social, in which volunteers share experiences of God's leading.
- Comparing Jonah's reaction to God's plan with other instances in the Bible in which someone's idea of what should happen didn't agree with God's.
- Praying that you will learn to trust in God and do His will selflessly.
- Researching Nineveh to find out how sinful the city was before Jonah's warning. Compare Nineveh with other present-day cities.

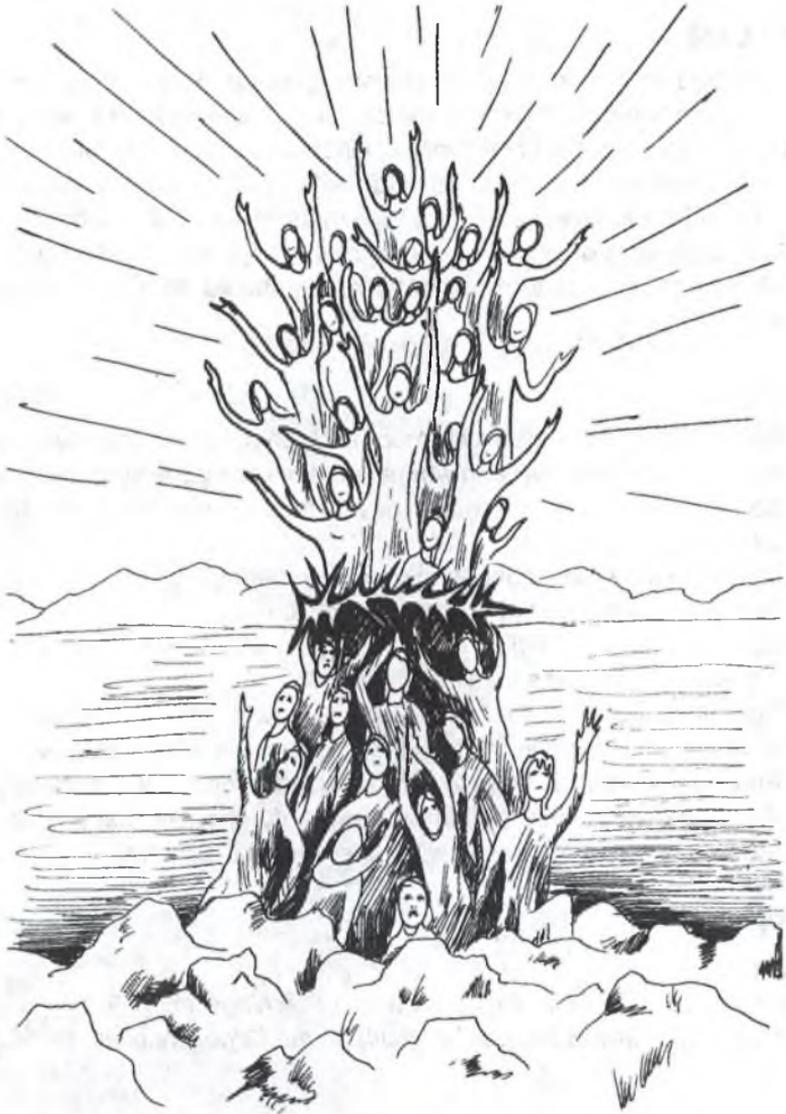
CONNECT

Jonah 4.

Ellen G. White, *Christian Experience and Teachings*, chap. 5.

Paul Tokunaga, Kevin Blue, et. al, *Faith on the Edge*, chap. 21.

The Last Word



“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now
commands all men everywhere to repent”
(Acts 17:30, NKJV).

Finally! This Is It!

INTRODUCTION

Jon. 4:3-5

Is it not interesting how we appreciate God's mercy toward us but fail to accept His compassion toward others? Now, thousands of years after God spoke to Jonah, we can rationalize and criticize God's actions versus Jonah's. If we were in Jonah's position, however, how differently would we react toward God and the people of Nineveh?

Imagine declaring to your classmates that they are not going to graduate because the head of your department has checked their records and they have been found to be cheating. Such

a message is the last thing you of all persons would want to take to the class. You know that they cheated, and you try desperately to extricate yourself from it, but

They will get just what they deserve.

the head of your department insists and assures you that they will get just what they deserve. Visualize the look on their faces as you deliver the message. They are disturbed. They become frantic. You're content. You feel satisfied—actually happy. They deserve it, don't they? They become repentant that they ever cheated and rush to the department chair's office to beg for mercy.

It's now graduation day. What happens? They graduate! They wear the same robe and receive the same award as you, though you made it clear quoting the chair's instructions, "You will not graduate."

What on earth could have caused this? After semesters of erring, they are pardoned, and their judgment reversed. How could this be? Not only has he surprised you but also embarrassed you. He has caused your words to lose their weight and effect. How could he have pulled you out of your complacency to talk against such lack of integrity just to prove you a liar? Now Jonah's actions don't seem so irrational. Jonah 4:11 makes it easier for us—maybe not to understand grace better, but easier to accept. It ends with God asking, "And should I not spare Nineveh?" We all need to see the relevance of this statement to us as modern-day Jonahs as we seek to proclaim the Lord's word to the people of our land. We need not only to see, accept, and understand God's mercy to us, but also to others. We, too, need to be merciful even in our thoughts and desire to others. This lesson has many powerful points for us in our mission to call to repentance this world so deeply sunk in sin.

LOGOS

Job 39; Jonah 4; Matt. 18:11-14; Luke 4:24-28

The Prophet's Instructions (Jon. 1:2)

Jonah received a commission to go to Nineveh, a great, wicked city, to deliver a message from God, a warning about possible destruction if the Ninevites did not repent. Undoubtedly, Jonah would have preferred to stay at home, continue his daily chores, and gone about his own business. Becoming a seer, a prophet to Nineveh, surely was not part of his program. Did he see this commission as an impossible task, or was he afraid that because of God's loving-kindness and longsuffering he would be humiliated?

Functions of prophets include speaking for God, revealing God's purpose, protesting against evils.¹ Other responsibilities include warnings that would result in certain courses of action. They reproved sin in individuals and nations; they pronounced the judgments of God as consequences of sinful practices and actions.

Prophesying Even If You Don't Feel It (Acts 18:9, 10)

Jonah ran away from his God-given commission. He forgot that God was all-seeing, that He would find him even when he was asleep in the bottom of the ship.

Jonah ran away from his God-given commission.

His complacency seemed to suggest that he felt comfortable with his actions. Yet since the message was not the prophet's own, it was not his to say what should be done with it. It was his

duty to deliver it and leave the outcome with the Lord. The sailors in the ship believed in his God (Jon. 1:14). Apparently, reports of his adventure preceded him, for when Jonah gave the warning to the Ninevites, the people believed in God even though the message didn't mention God's name (3:4, 5). Could this suggest that people will believe our message, that they will respect the God whom we serve, and will expect our prophecies to come true? Did God want to teach Jonah a lesson as He did with Peter in his vision of the sheet (Acts 10)?

Believe, Repent, Accept (Jon. 3:5)

The people of Nineveh eagerly received the message Jonah brought, and repented, beginning with the king (Jon. 3:5). "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not" (3:9) contains the last rays of hope on the part of the Assyrian king. He believed that since God granted them a time of final probation, there was still hope that God would turn and relent of the

execution of the well-deserved punishment. Without conversion there would be no hope.”² Jonah became angry over the repentance of the Ninevites. “He should have been the first to rejoice because of God’s amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell on 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.”³ God’s grace brings salvation to all (Titus 2:11).

God’s Response to Our Cry (Ps. 107:13, 14, 20)

God provided a big fish to swallow Jonah (Jon. 1:17). He also provided a vine to shade him (4:6). He provided His Son to die for our sins (Mark 15). All these and more demonstrate to us that God is willing to go to great lengths to save us from our sins.

“None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God’s requirement for a perfect life.”⁴ Much of the biblical narrative speaks to repentance, forgiveness, and God’s grace: David the king, the prodigal son, Mary of Magdala, the parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep, how He deals with His people in the parable of Hosea and Gomer, Paul of Tarsus, the thief on the cross, and the servant who owed his master.

Trying to Understand God (Job 11:7)

Can we really understand God? His thoughts and ways are not ours (Isa. 55:8). He delights in mercy (Mic. 7:18). Shouldn’t we remember that God has forgiven us our sins and trespasses, and we should do and wish the same for others? What is God’s “last word” to us? What is He asking of us? Does His concern for Nineveh with “more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock” (Jon. 4:11) have any relationship to us in the 21st century? God is interested in the salvation of all nations.

Do we, too, have a false sense of security as did Jonah while in the ship? Are we as Christians sleeping while the world is in turmoil? When we speak to the world, do we select those whom we wish or believe should be saved? Do we dictate that those whom we favor (like Jonah’s vine) should live, and others (the inhabitants of Nineveh), should die? Are we willing to have God work through us for the salvation of souls, or are we angry when God saves those whom He has sent us to warn.

1. T. Housel Jemison, *A Prophet Among You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1955), pp. 42–45.

2. Gerhard F. Hasel, *Jonah: Messenger of the Eleventh Hour* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1976), p. 60.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

4. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 62.

TESTIMONY

Isa. 43:10; Acts 5:20

Doesn't it seem strange that many of us proclaim to be Christians but find it hard to call on God to use us to further His ministry? We think that He will use us after we finish high school or college or after the passing of some important event in our lives. If the call comes before we expect, we make excuses and often become angry with God for His timing and purpose, all the while forgetting that He is always on time. To make matters worse, when we find out that where God intends for us to go isn't a bed of roses, an unwilling spirit takes residence in our hearts. Well, the Son of Amittai, who was a prophet of God, felt the same.

Jonah was a man called by God to fulfill a specific purpose—to spread the Word. When Jonah heard that his assignment was to minister to the inhabitants of Nineveh, however, he was angry. Even though he was a man of God, because of his spirit, Jonah was reluctant to go. “As the prophet thought of the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of this commission, he was tempted to question the wisdom of the call. 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.”¹

Being a Christian is much more than going to church and following guidelines. Each of us has a duty as Christians to spread the message of Christ's love for humanity. Do we live in a world filled with modern-day Ninevites, people who may be willing to listen to what we have to say about religion and repent, but are we, like Jonah, unwilling? Jonah did not believe that the citizens

**With God in your corner,
everything will be
taken care of.**

of Nineveh would turn from their evil ways. What he did not know was that God had already guaranteed him the victory. You need not be concerned about what to say or how to say it. With God in your corner, everything will be taken care of. “At last Jonah had learned that ‘salvation belongeth unto the Lord’ (Psalm 3:8).”² Just as God helped Jonah in reaching the people of Nineveh, He is more than willing to help us in our modern-day efforts. All He needs is a willing heart and soul.

1. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 266.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

Divine Forbearance

EVIDENCE

Ps. 139:7-10; Luke 11:29, 30; Acts 10; 34; 35; Gal. 3:28; 2 Pet. 3:9

The words of Jesus in Luke 11:29, 30 give credence to the story of the prophet Jonah. It indicated a significant advancement to the process and progress of God's redemption plan for this world. It is not just the story of a disobedient prophet running away from God who is providentially rescued by a great fish.

In essence, this book gives us a scope of God's plan for the salvation of humanity. Salvation was not to be regarded as the sole province of Israel, but was inclusive of Gentiles and people from all walks of life, as the apostles Peter and Paul came to realize.

Nineveh could be described as the capital of evil of Bible times, and might have rightly deserved a similar fate to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The words of Jesus, "This is a wicked generation" (verse 29, NIV), equate the attitudes of His people to that of the Ninevites, but they did not consider themselves as wicked as the heathens around them. Let us not make a similar mistake. The Bible states, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23, 24, NIV).

**Nineveh could be described
as the capital of evil.**

This story of Jonah also furnishes us with the evidence of God's unrelenting love and pursuit of His wayward children. He did not give up on His disobedient prophet, but provided for his rescue in a manner that only God can do. Like a type of the plan of salvation, there was no other possible rescue for Jonah.

The message to Nineveh seemed more like a doomsday message, but it was one of hope, indicating that destruction was not inevitable but could be averted by repentance and acceptance of God's will. The warning was needed, giving evidence that God's messages are always timely and appropriate.

Finally, we should learn from the experience of Jonah not to give up on people because we have come to regard them as wicked and beyond reconciliation and redemption. Only God has the final word.

REACT

Comment on God's approach to changing the minds of the Ninevites versus His approach to changing Jonah's mind. Was there direct intervention in either case? Did God force the decision of either subject, or did He merely present them with a situation in which any decision was possible? Explain your answers.

Wednesday
December 10

Redemption— Not Destruction

HOW-TO

Matt. 9:12, 13; Mark 2:16

Anyone can be saved
through the death of Jesus.

“The Lord, the righteous Judge” (2 Tim. 4:8, NIV) is a title that can be ascribed only to God. He is the only One who knows everything. Until you are made aware of your wrongdoing, God will not condemn you (Acts 17:30). We often see people living contrary to God’s will and write them off as destined for death and destruction. What if they are unaware of God’s laws, ignorant of the error of their ways? What if God wanted to use you as His messenger to these “Ninevites”?

Christians are called upon to be messengers for God. Like Jonah, we often lose sight of the objective (redemption—not destruction), allowing pride and prejudice to hold sway.

In order for us to be effective messengers to Nineveh, we must get a few things straight:

- “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9, NIV).
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9, NIV).
- “There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NIV).

Though the knowledge that God keeps promises, forgives sins, and views everyone equally is good, the mere knowledge of these three will not spawn change. We need to work to spark this transformation from messengers of destruction to messengers of redemption. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Remember the message. Anyone can be saved through the death of Jesus and belief in Him. This message is to be given to everyone everywhere (Matt. 28:18-20; John 3:16).

2. Remember that we are the messengers. We are the medium through which the message is transmitted. We must understand so that the message will be transmitted clearly. Take time to understand His character, become aware of any prejudices you may have and work to overcome these feelings.

3. Remember that God is the Judge. God is the ultimate Judge and the Giver of the message. It is the love and patience that emanates from His character that allows for sinners to be forgiven. He knows our thoughts and motives, so He can pass judgment.

Running to Tarshish

OPINION

1 Pet. 3:9

Tarshish was a bustling, well-established center of commerce during the time of Jonah, situated on the coast of Spain. It was notorious for its wealth—conducting trade with the city of Tyre and other lands in silver, iron, tin, and lead. In the endless excitement of this place Jonah hoped to cancel himself out of God's equation as it relates to the destiny of Nineveh (Jon. 1:3). It seems that Jonah possessed a "holy-righteous" character flaw—an inner spiritual high that causes one to esteem oneself better than another because of moral referents. Therefore, he lost sight of the people's moral ignorance and the ever-abiding mercy of God.

Yes, probation was possibly about to close for the people because of their immoral standing, but the issue centered on God's great desire that everyone gets a chance to recognize the right (1 Pet. 3:9). Jonah placed his wishes for the

Jonah hoped to cancel himself out of God's equation.

people of Nineveh above God's conditional will, thus leading to his decision to journey to Tarshish. He was God's instrument who decided to be his own player. God wanted to help Jonah embrace the nature of His merciful justice; He had important lessons of character to teach.

He wanted Jonah to realize that the treasures of grace He bestows bring salvation to all, independent of ethnic affiliation, societal class, or dogma (Acts 11:18). God desires that every human being gain the full opportunity of weighing the benefits of living in Him as opposed to living within oneself—the way of Satan. He sets before humanity the road to life and the road to death, but omnisciently advises, "Choose life."

Jesus condemned holy-righteous Jonahs (Matt. 12:41), members of the religious sects of His day, along with all others who in religious complacency and a false sense of soul security deceive themselves into thinking that they are the favored people of God, and thus assured of salvation. This was also evident in one of Satan's subtle traps for God's people: The selfishness we build within ourselves will imprison us, preventing us from finding God's salvation.

Jonah's experience is pertinent to the modern church, because many of us have the same attitude concerning God's commissions. There may be many Ninevite people around or even among us, and we are quick in passing judgment, giving ourselves false highs above them and failing to remember that all sin is sin.

God desires that everyone has an opportunity to accept His salvation through repentance. Is He calling you? Are you running to Tarshish?

EXPLORATION

Titus 2:11

CONCLUDE

The grace of God is hard to understand but easy to receive. At times it is harder to understand God's grace working on others whom we see as less deserving than we are. We have even misrepresented God's character and love to others. But God keeps giving us more chances to serve Him. Jonah's story points out to us that we are indeed saved to serve others regardless of the differences. Knowing that we, too, are sinners forgiven by a merciful God, we must reach out to others needing help.

CONSIDER

- Making a mobile with paper cut into various shapes and designs with words telling why you follow Jesus. Hang it in a convenient place to be seen.
- Viewing the video *Contact* (1997) or reading the book of the same title. As you do, think about these questions: How is Dr. Arroway's experience like that of a Christian who seeks to defend his or her belief? What kind of evidence of God's existence would be convincing to unbelievers?
- Comparing plain glass and mirrored glass. Think of ways by which one tends to see only oneself in a mirror because of the silver coating. Think about this question: What are the silver coatings in my life?
- Emailing a friend to share an exciting event in which your perception about somebody was positively changed.
- Singing John Newton's "Amazing Grace," slowly savoring the meaning of each line and stanza.
- Role-playing the part of Jonah as he was upset when God forgave the people of Nineveh. Discuss with friends about how Jonah was right or wrong.
- Writing a personal journal of opportunities to witness for God to others.

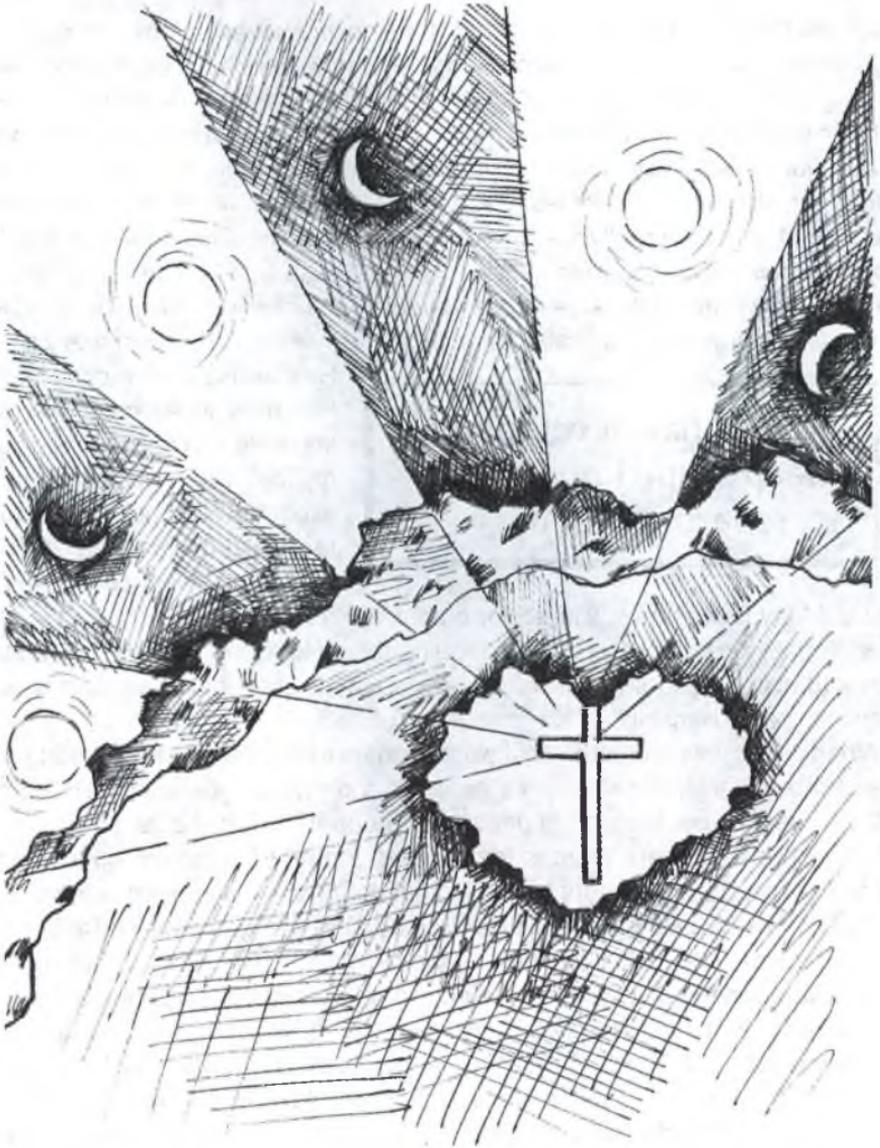
CONNECT

Deuteronomy 30:19, 20.

Testimonies for the Church, vol. 6, p. 418; *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 146.

Morris Venden, *How to Make Christianity Real*, chap. 6; Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* chap. 4.

The **Greatest** sign



“ ‘As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’ ” (Matt. 12:40, NKJV).

INTRODUCTION

Ezek. 11:19, 20

Martin, the main character in *Proof*, a little-known Australian movie, is reclusive, ill-tempered, and obsessed with photography. He takes photo after photo of his everyday surroundings—buildings, trees, people. The catch is, Martin is blind and has been so since birth. He grew up thinking that his mother was lying to him when she described the world to him. As an adult, Martin has developed a deep suspicion of those around him and asks his few friends to describe his photographs to him, as proof that the world really is as they say it is. Because of his continual need for proof, Martin is lonely and resentful.

I sometimes feel that I experience spiritually the character-stunting blindness that Martin experiences physically. I sometimes wonder whether God really is who

Martin has developed a deep suspicion of those around him.

He says He is. How can I be sure He really loves me? How do I know He can successfully guide my life? During times when I'm experiencing hardship or when faced with making difficult decisions, I want proof that God

is there. Many times I have wished for a postcard from heaven with a caption that reads: "I really do exist—God." If God, being the all-knowing Creator, loves us so much and wants us to serve Him, why does He insist on being so distant—why doesn't He prove Himself?

When Jesus was on earth, the Jewish leaders asked Him for an attesting sign. Instead of a miracle, the Pharisees received a divine tongue-lashing. "No sign shall be given . . . but the sign of Jonah the prophet" (Matt. 12:39, NASB). What kind of response is that? What is the "sign of Jonah"? During the coming week we'll look at what Jesus meant by the sign of Jonah and its relevance in your life.

The Pharisees asked Jesus to prove His divinity but received a rebuke because their attitude of self-serving arrogance clashed with Jesus' desire to glorify God. When I want God to prove Himself to me in some spectacular way, the chances are I'm motivated by the same selfish spirit that blinded the Pharisees. And if such a wish were granted, like Martin, I would never be satisfied. I would end up demanding more of God and remain in a perpetual state of spiritual dysfunction. That is not to say, however, that God never reveals Himself. The Ninevites found God, thanks to Jonah, and all were miraculously converted. In *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White explains that the sign of Jonah, the greatest sign of a loving Savior, is the miracle of transformation from a life of sin to a consistent life in Christ. The greatest sign that there is a loving God is the change in your life when you accept Him.

Border Crossing

EVIDENCE

John 10:14-16

The Queen of Sheba is mentioned only briefly in the Bible. The story is well known, though, with the queen coming to visit Solomon in search of wisdom. Even today, people are still wondering where Sheba was. A quick Internet search will show that there are two main theories. One theory places Sheba in the Yemen; the other, in Ethiopia. But wherever Sheba was, it was well beyond the borders of Solomon's kingdom.

Like the story of Jonah, the story of the Queen of Sheba is one of the few times in the Old Testament that the Word of God extends beyond the borders of Israel. So many of the ancient Middle Eastern kingdoms believed that their gods were only for their nation or kingdom. Even some of the ancient Israelites seem to have believed that God was their God alone and didn't care for anyone outside of His chosen people. So it must have come as a shock to Jonah when he was told to go and preach to the Ninevites. Not only were they Gentiles; they were also enemies.

So why did Jesus mention the queen and Jonah when asked for a sign? The example of Gentiles testifying against those who thought of themselves as God's chosen must have shocked the Pharisees and scribes. The story of Jonah included the prefiguring of Jesus' death and resurrection, but by including both these stories, I think He was also suggesting that it was time that God's message was spread farther into the world. It was time for the Jews to overcome their beliefs about Gentiles and realize that they were all part of God's plan. The experience of Jesus' resurrection and the Great Commission inspired His followers eventually to take the message of God's love, justice, and mercy to the whole world.

**God does not recognize
human borders.**

So often we allow God's message to be restricted by our human prejudices and preconceptions. Like the ancient people of the Middle East, we believe ourselves to be God's chosen people and can be tempted into believing that God cares more about us than anyone else. Like Jonah, we sometimes believe that God can't possibly love or care for anyone outside our own group. But the stories of the queen who sought out Solomon's God-given wisdom and Jonah's message of God's Word to God's enemies suggest that we should be prepared to cross our carefully constructed boundaries and realize that God's Word is for everyone, regardless of what we might think of them. God does not recognize human borders—His compassion, love, and justice are for everyone.

Monday
December 15

Making Light of the "Sign of Jonah"

LOGOS

Matt. 12:38-45; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-36

The Crowd Pleaser

Rather than use deep theological terminology to impress the scholars of the day, Jesus told simple stories that reached to the grassroots of society. Farmers, fishermen, prostitutes, and children flocked to hear His words and see His works. Jesus presented a message of timeless truth in the terminology of the common people. His preaching had power because it made sense. Jesus talked about seeds, fields, treasure chests, landowners, parties, lost coins, sheep, and sons.

When questioned by the Pharisees, He used common phrases that are used even today. When asked for a sign that He was the Messiah, Jesus replied, "Red

Jesus instead offered them a sign incognito.

sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky by morning, sailor take warning." Jesus implied, "You can look at the sky and tell the weather patterns, but you look at Me and all that I

am doing and still question who I AM!" Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead, yet they couldn't pick Him out in a lineup as the Messiah. The healed could. The cleansed could. The raised could. But the preachers and teachers of the law? No. To them He was a nuisance and a crowd pleaser.

Signs for Seekers

Signs were often given to those honestly searching for God's will. Gideon's fleece was moistened and dried as a sign; the sun went backward for Hezekiah; a pillar of fire and cloud led the children of Israel through the desert. Although all three of these recipients of signs failed to obey God at one point or another, they were sincere in their searching for His guidance. The scribes and Pharisees were not.

A demon-possessed, blind mute was brought to Jesus. Coming to Jesus sightless, speechless, and spirit possessed, he left his Savior seeing, shouting for joy, and demon free. The people who saw the healing exclaimed, "Could this be the Son of David?" And the Pharisees interrupted the rejoicing and thwarted the recognition of the Messiah by suggesting that Jesus was receiving His mighty powers from the devil himself! After hearing Jesus' passionate reply, they responded, "Teacher . . . show us a miraculous sign" (Matt 21:38, NLT). It was an insult. They called Him "Teacher" to harass Him rather than honor Him. Had they been sincerely

seeking signs of Jesus' divine identity, they would have already recognized Him. There were walking-talking-seeing signs all around them.

Jesus instead offered them a sign incognito. The sign of Jonah. Jonah was entombed in the belly of a large fish for three days. Likewise, Jesus was swallowed by the tomb of Joseph from Friday until Sunday. This part of the sign of Jonah would be recognized only after Jesus rose from the dead. Another aspect of Jonah's ministry was already being mirrored by the Messiah. Jonah's message was heeded by the people of Nineveh. Many people had already begun to believe in Jesus and follow His teachings. The Pharisees, however, rejected Jesus and sought to kill Him. They were, according to Jesus, worse off than the Ninevites because while Nineveh repented and received mercy, the scribes and Pharisees hardened their hearts and brought judgment upon themselves.

Sign on the Dotted Line

The Gospels draw something more out of the sign of Jonah than the two already mentioned aspects. In both Matthew and Luke, the sign of Jonah passage is followed by a challenge to the reader.

Matthew refers to the demon-possessed man healed by Jesus just prior to the Pharisees' questioning. The message is clear: "If Jesus casts a demon out of you and then you are unwilling to invite Him into the place vacated by the demon, that demon will round up some demonic friends and repossess you with a vengeance."

The opposite end of the spectrum is described in Luke. Jesus chides, "Who lights a candle and then sticks it under a bowl?" "Instead," Jesus continues, "when you have a light you put it on a high place so that it is visible to all and provides vision to all those around it." Then Jesus challenges the listener: "Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness."

What do these two endings have to do with the sign of Jonah? Everything really. They beg the reader to declare allegiance. What has your encounter with Jesus eventuated? Are you enlightened and shining brightly? Or are you swept clean but left empty because you continue to power along on your own steam?

The people in Nineveh heard Jonah's message, and his words spread like wildfire. Within the day the entire city had come to its knees before the Lord and, at the king's command, even the animals were left unfed until every man and his dog (literally!) repented. Have you experienced the plea for repentance from the Savior? Has the sign of Jonah impacted you? If you have repented and been filled with the Holy Spirit, then you are enlisted in the light-bearer's brigade! What has the sign of Jonah done in your community? Is it spreading to the four corners of the earth or being snuffed out by one bowl or another? Take Jesus' challenge: "Make sure that the light you think you have is not really darkness." Jesus died and rose again; the message of the Messiah is yours to share. Will you place your candle on a lampstand for all to see? Imagine if we all placed our burning lights up high what effect it would have on the world. Red sky at night, Savior's delight, red sky by morning, Savior sent warning.

“Show Us a Sign!”

TESTIMONY

Matt. 12:40

A deputation of Pharisees and scholars came to Jesus and demanded a sign. “Teacher, we want to see your credentials. “How about a miracle?”

Jesus said, “You’re looking for proof, but you’re looking for the wrong kind. All you want is something to titillate your curiosity, satisfy your lust for miracles” (Matt. 12:38, *The Message*).

But there had already been many signs: “the song of the angels to the shepherds . . . the dove and the voice from heaven at His baptism,” while “every miracle that Christ performed was a sign of His divinity.”¹ The most powerful sign was the conviction of sin and offered salvation that Christ’s own words provoked in their minds.

**“A far greater preacher than
Jonah is here, and you
squabble about ‘proofs.’ ”**

Jesus said, “The only proof you’re going to get is what looks like the absence of proof: Jonah-evidence. Like Jonah, three days and nights in the fish’s belly, the Son of Man will be gone three days and nights in a deep grave”

(verses 39, 40, *The Message*).

Jonah’s preaching was a sign to the Ninevites, and Christ’s preaching was a sign to His generation.

Jesus warned the deputation that “on Judgment Day, the Ninevites will stand up and give evidence that will condemn this generation, because when Jonah preached to them they changed their lives. A far greater preacher than Jonah is here, and you squabble about ‘proofs’ ” (verse 41, *The Message*).

“When the message of truth is presented in our day, there are many who, like the Jews, cry, Show us a sign. Work us a miracle. Christ wrought no miracle . . . in the wilderness in answer to Satan’s insinuations. He does not impart to us power to vindicate ourselves or to satisfy the demands of unbelief and pride. But the gospel is not without a sign of its divine origin.”²

“The change in human hearts, the transformation of human characters, is a miracle that reveals an ever-living Saviour, working to rescue souls. A consistent life in Christ is a great miracle. In the preaching of the word of God, the sign that should be manifest now and always is the presence of the Holy Spirit, to make the word a regenerating power to those that hear. This is God’s witness before the world to the divine mission of His Son.”³

1. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 406.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

3. *Ibid.*

Looking for a Sign?

HOW-TO

1 Cor. 1:22-24

A friend and I have a running joke whenever we are having trouble making a decision. We say we are waiting for our “clear sign” from God. Unfortunately, we never seem to receive it. What about you? Have you asked God for a miraculous sign lately? How do you keep your faith strong if you don’t receive the sign you asked for?

1. Look for the evidence you already have. The Pharisees asked for a sign that Jesus was from God, yet they didn’t need any more proof than they already had. Jesus’ birth and ministry fulfilled numerous prophecies of the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 61:1, 2; Mic. 5:2). Though He doesn’t completely remove the possibility of doubt, God will always provide enough evidence to believe in Him if you choose. Before you ask Him for a sign, check out the evidence you already have.

2. Ask the right questions. When we ask for a sign, we usually want to know what to do, where God is leading us, or how He is going to work in a particular situation. God doesn’t always answer these questions directly. Oswald Chambers writes, “God does not tell you what He is going to do; He reveals to you Who He is.”* The story of Jonah reveals to us God’s incredible love, mercy, and forgiveness to the Ninevites, and points ahead to these qualities manifest in Jesus’ sacrifice for us. Seek to know more of the character of God, and let Him reveal what He wants in His time.

3. Be open. Jonah had definite ideas about how he wanted God to work and was most upset when God didn’t follow his plan. We often expect God to work in a particular way, but He chooses to amaze us in totally different ways. Don’t try to manipulate God into a particular course of action. Enjoy the surprises He has in store for you.

4. Act on what you do know. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees when they asked for a sign but

hadn’t acted on what they already knew to be true. Make sure you are obedient to all God has revealed to you. God has promised that all will eventually be revealed (1 Cor. 13:12). In the meantime, He asks you to trust Him. This trust is to be based on the ultimate sign—the death and resurrection of Jesus to pay for your sins and make you right with God. This act declares that the God who created the universe loves you infinitely, He has a plan for your life, and He wants you to be with Him forever. What greater miracle could you ask for?

Have you asked God for a miraculous sign lately?

*Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1963), January 2.

Signs of Mercy or Condemnation?

OPINION

Matt. 12:38-42

Is the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:38-42) a sign of condemnation? It appears that it was to the generation of Christ's day. But perhaps it is also a sign of mercy, grace, and compassion.

Many Christians know of the wrathful judgments of God. Some may even have a mistaken theological notion that God is willing or able to save only a few—perhaps only a small and privileged remnant. Like Jonah, some may feel robbed of meaning or a sense of fairness when God shows His mercy and love to a wicked people who, like those in Nineveh, repented unconditionally. Would it be fair if multitudes were given the same opportunities today in a similar outpouring of mercy? Can such a life-changing transformation take place in such a short space of time—even as short as the repentant and forgiven criminal who hung with Christ on the cross was assured of salvation (Luke 23:38-43)?

What about those Christians who have faithfully served a lifetime in religious devotion? Is this fair? These feelings may be natural to the sinful human condition, but

What about those Christians who have faithfully served a lifetime?

the One who is "greater than Jonah" (Matt. 12:41, NKJV) and who reads the hearts of all people, can and will surprise us with how far and wide His mercy extends. We gain a glimpse of this from Elijah's

experience when, in despondency, he cried, "I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:10, NKJV). He was mistaken. God had preserved thousands, "all whose knees have not bowed to Baal" (verse 18, NKJV). We should not dismiss any as beyond redemption. Even Christ Himself said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold" (John 10:16, NKJV).

The conversion and repentance of Nineveh were arguably far more miraculous signs than Jonah's big-fish experience. Unfortunately, the Pharisees and teachers of the law could not see this. They sought external signs in the heavens that would have little effect on their inner condition.

"God's grace, patience and compassion are not only designed for His people Israel but for all men, even the most wicked! This is Israel's need; this is Israel's problem; this is the problem of God's people. . . . This is what seems too much for many—God's mercy for all nations and all people."*

*Gerhard Hasel, *Jonah: Messenger of the Eleventh Hour* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1976), p.77.

A Sign for Marveling

EXPLORATION

Matt. 12:38-42; 16:1-4; Luke 11:16, 29-31

CONCLUDE

When asked for a sign, Jesus refused to comply. His life was the sign of God's mercy for hurting sinners of all kinds and an opportunity of marveling for the witnesses. But some, with a wicked pharisaic spirit, saw Him as a threat. Feeling worthy of God's covenant, they considered sinners and foreigners unworthy. Like Jonah they refused to extend God's mercy to them. But God showed mercy to the Ninevites and to Jonah. Jesus' death and resurrection were to be the greatest signs of marveling to all who would recognize their sin and accept God's grace.

CONSIDER

- Discussing with a friend about human groups you feel are the farthest away from your religion and analyzing what prevents you from thinking they are close to God's grace.
- Listing what you think are the ten biggest walls between people and God's mercy.
- Finding in a park, zoo, or other natural setting, one or two examples of how vastly different species build bridges of partnership for the benefit of both.
- Paraphrasing Ephesians 2:11-19 for terrorists or whatever group you feel very distant from.
- Praying and thanking God for what marvels you find in His deeds of mercy in your life and experience. Marveling will help you see God's signs every day.
- Browsing the Internet to explore a culture that is radically different from your own. As you do, compose a list of similarities between the two cultures.
- Building with pieces of wood or other materials a small fence and a small bridge. Bring them next Sabbath to your class and use them to share part of what you learned this week.

CONNECT

Prophets and Kings, pp. 273-278; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 406-408.

The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 5, pp. 397, 398.

William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary. Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, pp. 532-541.

A Picture of God



“ ‘Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins’ ”
(Isa. 40:1, 2, NASB).

If I Were God . . .

INTRODUCTION

Jonah 4; Matt. 20:1-16; Luke 15:11-32

One of the things that at times I still find hard to fathom is God's love. From a purely human perspective, I've often asked myself, Who in His right mind would send His only Son to be tortured and killed to save people who hate and despise Him? Logical? I don't think so, not by our standards anyway.

If I were God, I would have wiped all the humans out and started again with a clean slate. Thank God that our Creator and Father is not bound by our logic and is graceful enough to accept us for who we are.

This quarter we have studied Jonah, a strange paradox: a prophet of God yet a runaway from God; a man drowned yet alive; a preacher of repentance yet resents repentance. Yet Jonah, saved from the jaws of death himself on repentance, was the fittest to give a hope to Nineveh, doomed though it was. The patience and pity of God stand in striking contrast with the selfishness and hard-heartedness of people.

Jonah seems to be your archetypical angry young man. How many of us, though, have at one time or another been resentful for something good that has happened to another? That naughty kid whose parents just bought him a new toy, or that girl who copied your homework and got a higher mark than you. Or, in biblical terms, that prodigal brother of yours whom your father just threw a party for, or those tardy workers who received the same pay as you even though you started many hours before. James reminds us that "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (1:20, NASB).

**Jonah seems to be your
archetypical angry
young man.**

Did Jonah have a right to be angry? He was going to be ridiculed because his prophecy and message of doom would not eventuate; his reputation as a prophet was on the line. His pride was going to be dented, as God was too gracious and compassionate, much too slow to anger, too abundant in loving-kindness and much too relenting concerning calamities!

As there is joy in heaven and earth for the conversion of sinners, so there is grief for the follies and infirmities of saints. In all the Bible we scarcely find a servant of the Lord so very much out of temper as Jonah. Human badness and God's goodness serve as a stark contrast, that the former may appear the more exceedingly sinful and the latter the more exceedingly gracious.

"Our God is a God of mercy. With long-sufferance and tender compassion He deals with the transgressors of His law."*

**Prophets and Kings*, p. 275.

And Jonah . . . Became Angry

LOGOS

Gen. 3:1-7; Ezek. 18:4; Jonah 4; Matt. 7:7-11; 20:1-16; 27:46; Luke 15:11-32;
John 11:49-52

It is interesting that the first time Jonah remarks on God's character, it is with certainty of his omnipotence: "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jon. 1:9, NIV). Yet he is quite perturbed by this very same God when he says that He is "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2, NIV).

Ellen White states: "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."¹

Although Jonah made lovely theologically orthodox statements (with his head), in his heart he seemed to have a very different view of God. We see in Jonah's death wish a parody of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Having proclaimed the truth of God for a number of years, the prophet was tired of being ignored and hunted for death. If

In a way, Jonah was a false prophet himself.

he could not do the will of God and spread the news effectively, there was no point in his going on. Jonah, though theologically sound, was not so hopeless in his reasons for death, yet he wished to die. In a way, Jonah was a false prophet himself, for he did not truly care for prophesy hope and the God of love. Like other false prophets in the Old Testament, he was more concerned about his own life than that of God's own people.

In Jonah 4:6-8 Jonah is taught using an object lesson through the vine and the worm, and he became even angrier with God for having given him the shade only to take it away. The compassionate side of God that Jonah had complained about was now the side of God that he wanted expressed. Jonah did not care about what happened to others, but was very concerned about himself (if only in regards to his earthly life). How do you feel about others? Are you a self-preservationist like Jonah? What was God's view on non-Jews, and how does that relate to us as Christians and Adventists today?

It is truly sad that Jonah was more concerned about the shade of a vine than the lives of the 120,000+ people in the city. Christ would later say, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36, 37, NKJV).

God was compassionate to the Ninevites and perhaps not so to Jonah in those final few verses. Perhaps in its most simplistic form, God was showing that no matter what it may look like to us, He is in control and He is the only One with the right over life (and death). One of the greatest desires of humankind is to live forever, whether through reincarnation or some eternal paradise. The extension of life and its good qualities is what makes our race as a whole so self-centered. It is up to Christians to fight this mold and strive for what God would have us be, to think of others above our own lives and reputations. What is it that stops you from acting on God's love for others, and how can you combat that?

Jonah was not all bad, however. In the end, it was his testimony that caused his shipmates to worship the Lord, and the Ninevites to repent and be saved. It is a shame that such good deeds are worthless when the heart is not in concert with the love, grace, and compassion of God.

Perhaps Jonah was not so much the prophet as he was the one being prophesied to, and perhaps we Christians are too.

"The lesson is for God's messengers today, when the cities of the nations are as verily in need of a knowledge of the attributes and purposes of the true God as were the Ninevites of old. Christ's ambassadors are to point men to the nobler world, which has largely been lost sight of. According to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the only city that will endure is the city whose builder and maker is God."²

Jonah's ultimate reaction is not given in the story, and perhaps there is a reason for this. Perhaps we are to put ourselves in Jonah's shoes and take the story from there. What will you learn? How will you apply the truths of God's complete character to the way you live your Christian walk and how you treat those around you?

REACT

1. Jonah worried more about his tree than about thousands of people's (eternal) lives. Compare or contrast this attitude to our own.

2. Read the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9). Did Jesus pray for Himself or others first? Why? Is that like the in-flight instructions to fit your own oxygen mask first? Explain your answer.

3. Was Jonah's faith and theology a private security blanket for himself, a lifeline to throw to others, both, or neither? What about yours? Your local church's generally? What should it be?

4. Is it possible to care for nonbelievers as friends without becoming relativistic, or feeling you have to say "Their belief is right for them"? How can you respect others while wanting them to change their minds?

5. Is it possible to be too jealous of your reputation to do Christian outreach? Explain your answer.

1. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

2. *Ibid*, p. 274.

TESTIMONY

Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36

The Israelites probably had about as much love for Assyrians as the Americans have for al Qaeda (and vice versa), yet it was to the Assyrians that God sent Jonah on a mission of mercy.

"The Saviour said to His disciples: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you.' We are to love our enemies with the same love that Christ manifested toward His enemies by giving His life to save them. Many may say, 'This is a hard commandment; for I want to keep just as far as I can from my enemies.' But acting in accordance with your own inclination would not be carrying out the principles that our Saviour has given. 'Do good,' He says, 'to them that hate you, and

"While we were yet enemies of God, Christ gave His life for us."

pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' This scripture illustrates one phase of Christian perfection. While we were yet enemies of God, Christ gave His life for us. We are to follow His example.

"I must write still more of the scripture, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' I have been deeply impressed by these words. We must understand their real meaning. If we would represent Christ's character by obeying this requirement, there would be a great change in evildoers. Many souls would be convicted of their sinfulness and converted through the impressions made upon them by our refusal to resent the evil actions of those controlled by satanic agencies. We must prayerfully and determinedly work on the Lord's side. In all the issues that provoke the soul we should resist the evil and refuse to abuse the evildoer."¹

"That which selfish hearts would regard as humiliating service, ministering to those who are wretched and in every way inferior in character and rank, is the work of sinless angels. The spirit of Christ's self-sacrificing love is the spirit that pervades heaven and is the very essence of its bliss. This is the spirit that Christ's followers will possess, the work that they will do."²

1. *Medical Ministry*, pp. 253, 254.

2. *Steps to Christ*, p. 77.

History, Humor, Evil, and Grace

EVIDENCE

Jonah 4:2

Jonah, one of the 12 minor prophets, is a book of history, humor, evil, and grace. Jonah is identified as a historical character (2 Kings 14:25), originating near Nazareth, around 800–700 B.C. Jesus Himself referred to him (Matt. 12:39). The Assyrian kingdom (of which Nineveh became the capital) was infamous for its cruelty. It inflicted inhuman tortures on victims in order to instill fear in their vassals and enemies.¹ When God says He will lead away the Assyrian king by putting a hook through his nose in 2 Kings 19:28, He is referring to an actual Assyrian practice.² How could God possibly love such a people?

For someone whose name means “dove,” Jonah adopted a rather hawkish attitude. Ironically, it is only when God showed attributes of tenderness and mercy that Jonah was resentful. Before this, his “dovelikeness” came to the fore—with his cowardice in fleeing the task set before him.

Jonah—the book and the man—may not appeal to some. He is not the courageous Paul of the New Testament or the Jezebel-defying Elijah of the Old. Yet, the Jonah narrative presents God’s unbelievable favor to undeserving humanity.

The last chapter humorously shows us Jonah’s honesty and humanity. He knew God was a merciful God. He did not want this cruel, proud nation to have a share in that mercy, but to get what was coming to them. But, isn’t that what we all deserve?

Looking around us today, we might be forgiven if we judge some more harshly than others. With September 11, 2001, vivid in our memories, the bombing of

Afghanistan may be deemed justified. According to radical Islam, however, attacking America was right. As Jonah wished God would destroy the hated Ninevites, both the

terrorists and the U.S. have plotted the other’s demise with righteous anger. However justified Jonah’s/our hate may have been/is, God had/has other plans.

We should be careful before we condemn others, however despicable they seem. We have all fallen “short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, NIV). Thank goodness that God is a lot more merciful than we are!

Jonah adopted a rather hawkish attitude.

1. Evidence of the pride and cruelty of the Assyrians is recorded in their own cuneiform inscriptions, which can be seen in various museums around the world. See for example, the translation of King Ashurbanipal II’s annals: <<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ASSYRIA/INSCRA02.HTM>>

2. See 2 Chronicles 33:11; *The SDA Bible Commentary* on 2 Kings 19:28.

My Right or God's Right

HOW-TO

Jon. 4:1-11

Jonah was greatly displeased and angry (Jon. 4:1); he wanted the worst for the people of Nineveh, his enemies. They didn't deserve to live, so he wasn't pleased with God when he was chosen to go and witness to them. It's good that God is not like Jonah! Rather, God is a gracious God who enjoys giving to those who deserve nothing.

If things had been left to Jonah, he would have made the decision himself. He would have decided that the people in Nineveh ought to die and it was not worth

All too often we feel that
it is our responsibility
to be God.

wasting any time or energy over them. The reality is that Jonah did not have the right to decide anything, but it is God's right to decide who receives His forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

All too often we feel that it is

our responsibility to be God, when what God asks of us is to *be like* Him.

So, how can one be more forgiving and gracious to others? Here are some ideas:

1. Recognize and accept that you have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). You are helpless and can do nothing without God's loving grace. You are a dirty sinner. You deserve nothing, yet God sent His Son to die in your place!

2. Write out your testimony of how God has been gracious to you. What has He done for you that you could not do for yourself?

3. Show grace to someone who, in your mind, doesn't deserve it. Forgive him or her for having wronged you. Show love and compassion to another sinner just like you.

REACT

1. What was Jonah's biggest problem? Was it prejudice, pride, selfishness, jealousy, burnout, anger, depression, or something else? Explain your answer.

2. In what ways can we be more loving, kind, and considerate to those around us, as God is to us? Be specific.

3. If you're giving gifts for Christmas, how will you honestly feel if you receive one from someone you haven't given to? How will you feel if you gave one to someone who didn't give to you? What do these questions suggest about God and the gospel of free grace?

4. Is it OK to be happy when our enemies get what they deserve from life? Explain your answer.

5. Why do polite, educated, tax-paying, basically good and moral people still need grace?

Reluctant Preacher to the Ninevites

OPINION

Jon. 1:10

Have you ever been asked to do a little task and then forgotten about it? How about shirking a responsibility? What would you do if you were asked by God to go to a great city and single-handedly preach His Word and bring them back to God? Would you do it without any hesitation? Or would you run as far away from the city as you could?

At times, as humans, we can be scared of responsibility, of being given tasks to do, as it could mean a lot of hard work, on top of other things that we do. Or we can fear what would happen if we fail. No one likes to fail; the word *failure* means “lack of success.” Who wants to be labeled a failure?

This is what I suspect happened to Jonah. Faced with the task of going to the great city of Nineveh and telling them what God would do if they didn't repent of their wicked ways, he got scared and ran. At the prospect of what they might say or do to him when he proclaimed the message he was given, he did what I suspect we would do: run.

We could laugh and call him a chicken, but what happened on the ship during the storm? When faced with a trip to the bottom of the deep, along with his traveling companions, he realized that their impending doom was his fault and told them to throw him overboard, sacrificing his life, for the sailors.

A byproduct of Jonah's attempt to run away was that he was able to witness to the sailors (1:10), and after the storm was calmed—once they were rid of Jonah—they offered a sacrifice to God!

By now Jonah was probably pretty fed up, even more so when snapped up by a passing fish, but realizing he couldn't get away, he repents.

God forgives him, and he gets another chance, and he is successful at his task.

We all have inner strengths that come out only under a challenge. God doesn't want to see us suffer (He sent a fish) or fail (the Ninevites repented), so we need to put our faith in Him, not us.

Sometimes God chooses the people to do His work who think they are the least suitable for the job because only He knows what they are capable of doing. And, more important, He forgives us if we struggle to accept the task that He has given! Do our earthly task givers do the same?

**By now Jonah was probably
pretty fed up.**

Love Unlimited and Steadfast

EXPLORATION

Ps. 86:5

CONCLUDE

Gracious and compassionate. Slow to anger. Abundant in loving-kindness. Relenting concerning calamities. God—unlike us selfish, hard-hearted humans—delights in seeing something good happening to people—even to a city full of sinners, as was Nineveh. He dispenses His salvation to undeserving humanity.

That's who God is. He is gracious not only to His promised people but also to the heathen world—even if some of His messengers do not want heathens to have a share in that mercy, but to get what was coming to them.

You, too, can be a recipient of God's mercy and grace. Ask Him.

CONSIDER

- Writing your own version of Jonah 4:2, including a commentary that reflects God's gracious deeds done on your behalf during the past month.
- Going house-to-house in your neighborhood and placing on each doorstep a tract about God's love.
- Listening to and then memorizing any song that tells about God's love for humanity.
- Celebrating your birthday (or any significant event in your life) together with street children, homeless, or shut-ins.
- Listing the names of people whom you need to forgive, and then truly forgiving them.
- Drawing or painting a picture of the World Trade Center in flames, then praying that the living comrades and family of the Al-Qaeda terrorists who wrought the 9/11 havoc might somehow get to know and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

CONNECT

Titus 2:11, 12.

Prophets and Kings, chap. 22.

Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Next Quarter's Lessons

John: The Beloved Gospel

If you have not received a copy of *CQ* for first quarter 2004, here is a summary of the first two lessons:

Lesson 1: THE UNIQUE PURPOSE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Logos: Luke 1:1-4; John 15:1-8; 17:20; 20:24-31; 21:20-25

Key Thought: The Gospel of John tells us that the absence of physical contact with Jesus is no disadvantage to those seeking a relationship with Him today. Jesus' word is as powerful as His touch.

Have you ever wished you could have known Jesus in the flesh, as His disciples did? Have you ever wished He lived at your house? Wouldn't it be great to take your problems directly to Him? To go to Him and share what's on your heart and then see Him go to His knees and pray earnestly to His Father for you? Wouldn't it be easier to have a relationship with Jesus if He lived, breathed, walked, and talked at your house?

But that privilege has not been ours. Yet, the good news is that the Gospel of John helps assure us that we don't need physical contact with Jesus in order to have a relationship with Him.

Lesson 2: JESUS IS THE BEST

Logos: John 1:1-18

Key Thought: At the beginning of his Gospel, John describes Jesus as the Word who was God from eternity, yet who became flesh. Thus, He alone is worthy of our worship.

Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. John 1:1-18 functions as a prologue to the story of Jesus in the Gospel. It tells an amazing story. The King of the universe, the eternal Creator, became a human being. The One who walked this earth, who became sweaty, tired, and hungry, was intimate with God before the world began, because He Himself was one with God. Although He became part of the human race, and was subject to human limitations, He was the One who created the human race and the world in which it lived.

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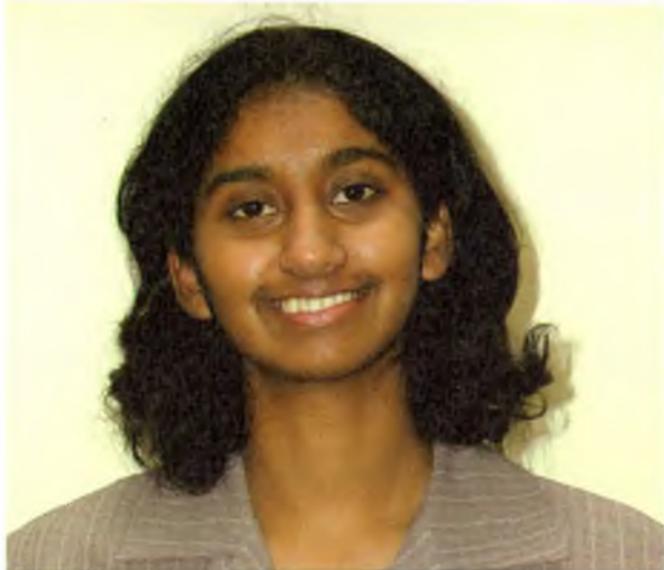
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Grace Cartan grew up in Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. When she wanted to study abroad after high school, her mother could not afford to send her. So Grace went by faith and prayer.



Euro-Africa Division

She arrived in France with little money and no place to live. Her only resource was God. When she asked God for an affordable room in which to live, God gave her two—free. When she needed a job, God provided one. At every step God gave her more than she asked for.

Read her testimony in this quarter's Mission and Teen Mission.

The Thirteenth Sabbath Offering:

Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter will help build an evangelistic center in the heart of Paris, France, and a seminary in Bulgaria.



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