

Biblical Missionaries

The Jonah Saga

Lesson #4 for July 25, 2015

Scriptures: Jonah 1-4; 2 Kings 14:25; Isaiah 44:8; 56:7; Matthew 12:40; Revelation 14:6-12.

1. From the days of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) to the present time, God has struggled to get His faithful people to reach out to those around them. The story of Jonah is an account of an occasion when God specifically ordered one of His prophets to reach out to a heathen, savage, war-like group of people in the city of Nineveh and give them the gospel message.
2. Jonah was a recognized prophet of God (2 Kings 14:25) and may even have been employed by Jeroboam II, the king about 750 B.C. Jeroboam II was a very wicked king, following the example of Jeroboam I who intentionally turned the people of the northern kingdom of Israel away from worshiping Yahweh at Jerusalem and set up pagan altars at Bethel and Dan.
3. Even the disciples of Jesus had a very difficult time accepting the idea that they were supposed to reach out to Samaritans and Gentiles. Compare the story of Peter and Cornelius as recorded in Acts 10 and 11. (Compare John 4.)
4. Try to imagine Jonah's initial reaction when God called him to go and preach a message of salvation to the people of Nineveh, one of the capitals of Assyria. The Assyrians repeatedly invaded and conquered Israel, forced them to pay tribute, murdered many of them, and generally made their lives miserable.
5. There are some interesting parallels between the story of Jonah and the story of Jesus. Jonah came from the town of Gath Hopher, only a few miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up. Both were considered Galilean prophets even though they were separated by 750 years.
6. Read Jonah 1:1-3,9,12; 2:1-9; 3:3-10. How do you think you would have responded to God's command if you had been Jonah? What was Jonah's response? What do we learn about Jonah from these passages? Remember that Jonah was apparently a prophet of the true God, living in the midst of the rebellious and idolatrous Israelite nation under Jeroboam II. Jonah took God's command seriously; but, he chose to rebel against it. Can you blame him? We do not know for sure who wrote this book; but, it certainly does not hide the faults of Jonah! Did Jonah tell his story? Did he speak with great conviction? What else did he say?
7. Do you find it encouraging to see that God has used even flawed human beings to do His will? Moses and Isaiah thought that they could not speak well enough. Amos stated that he was only a farmer. Gideon was a frightened idol worshiper. Think of the problems that we know about Sampson, David, and even Solomon. Yet, God used each of them. Can He use us?
8. Read Isaiah 56:7. Repeatedly in the Old Testament, God called for the nations to come to Israel to worship Him. But, in this case, God sent Jonah to Nineveh. Was God forced to change His plans because the people were so wicked in Israel? Despite God's command to go east by land and preach to the Ninevites, why did Jonah choose to go west by sea?
9. The story of Jonah and the "big fish" is quite widely known. Very few people in our generation believe the story. Why do you think that is? Do you choose to believe it as a true story? Why do you choose to believe it? Read Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 8:23-27; and Luke 8:22-25. There are some interesting parallels between this story about Jonah and the story of Jesus. Both Jonah and Jesus were sleeping in the bottom of a boat when a terrible storm arose. Both crews thought they were going to die. Both Jonah and Jesus were awakened. Jonah instructed the crew of the ship to throw him overboard and the sea would become calm, and it did. Jesus awoke, stood up, and commanded the waves to stand still; and they did. Do you think God intended for us to compare and contrast these two stories?

10. Notice Jonah's reply to the sailors on his boat when they asked him about his identity. He said: "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:9, *NIV*) Even though most pagan nations in Jonah's day believed that the sea was the habitation of the evil god Mot, Jonah recognize that Yahweh was the true God of both land and sea.
11. Read Matthew 28:19-20. Compare Revelation 14:6. In contrast to Jonah, the early disciples and apostles finally recognized that the gospel message was supposed to go to all the world. It is supposed to reach every "people group."
12. Early Adventists made the same mistake that the early disciples made in believing that they only needed to reach out to groups that were easily accessible to them. They believed that preaching the gospel to every nation and people group meant that they were supposed to spread the gospel to all those who had come to America.
13. Do you think it is possible that God still expects us to reach out and carry the gospel to communist nations like Russia and China and Cuba? What about Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, or even Somalia or Iran? While we believe that there is only one God, (Isaiah 44:8; 45:5-6) how should we relate to those who do not believe in God at all, who believe in the Big Bang theory and evolution, and laugh at those who trust in the Bible?
14. What do you think about the story of the fish swallowing Jonah? When you are among your non-Christian friends and if they were to ask questions about the Bible, do you wish that the story of Jonah was not there? Read Jonah 1:17-2:10 and Matthew 12:39-41. Like Jesus quoting the story of the rich man and Lazarus, (Luke 16:19-31) was Jesus just quoting the story of Jonah because He understood that the people of His day thought it was true? Or, was He quoting it because He knew it was a historical fact? There are accounts in recorded history when people have been swallowed by whales, for example, and then have been vomited up and survived! (See <http://theox.org/index.cfm/PageID/701/index.html> - go to Teachers Guides, Minor Prophets, then Jonah -item # 4.) No matter what you believe about the story, there is no possible explanation except to say that it was a miraculous event.
15. There is evidence that the phrase "three days and three nights" was an ancient figure of speech expressing the time needed for the imaginary journey to Sheol, the Hebrew name for the realm of the dead. Considering what happened to him, Jonah indeed should have been as good as dead. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, July 21)
16. Biblical time is most often inclusive. That means that any part of a day is counted as if it were a whole day. Thus, *three days and three nights* as in the experience of Jesus may have included nothing more than a small part of one day, an entire second day, and a small part of a third day. In any case, the story was a miracle.
17. What can we learn from the psalm prayed by Jonah while in the belly of the fish? There are a number of songs of deliverance like this one that follow a fairly strict pattern: 1) Introduction, 2) Description of the distress, 3) A cry to God for help, 4) A report of God's action, and 5) A promise to keep any vow made and to testify to God's saving action. Have you ever made such a vow to God under a stressful situation?
18. Read Jonah 3. How do you think Jonah felt when God repeated His call to go to Nineveh? God is certainly persistent! He seems to expect us to do what He asks us to do. And He clearly wants us to witness for Him.
19. God's messages are often given in the general format of a threat and then a promise. Sometimes, we call them judgment and gospel. When Jonah finally arrived at Nineveh, the only message we have recorded from him was seven words in length, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!" (Jonah 3:4, *GNB*) How much more did Jonah say beyond those few words? Did he stop to answer any questions? Did he tell of his personal experience? Did the people know

about his experience? What evidence did he provide to verify his story?

20. Read Revelation 14:6-12. As Seventh-day Adventists, don't we believe that God has given us His final message for this world? In what ways is our message similar to the message of Jonah? God does not suggest that we should tone down His message in any way.
21. What was the response to Jonah's message? Read Jonah 3:5-10. What an incredible response! Compare Deuteronomy 18:21-22. Was Jonah's reputation destroyed?

Jonah is the only person in the Scriptures who accuses God of being gracious, compassionate, and slow to anger, abounding in love and who relents from sending calamity. One would think most people would view these aspects of God with thankfulness. (*Op. sit.* for Thursday, July 23)

When Jonah learned of God's purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God's amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city. The compassion shown by God toward the repentant Ninevites "displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry." [Jonah 4:1]—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271. [Content in brackets is added.]

Remember that Deuteronomy 18:21-22 suggests that if a prophet's predictions do not come true, he is not speaking for God. On the other hand, just because one's "promise" or prediction comes true does not mean that he speaks for God. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

22. In the New Testament, Paul was proud of the gospel. He believed that it was powerful enough to save both Jews and Gentiles. (Romans 1:16-17) How would you compare Jonah's response in Jonah 4:1-3? Was Jonah really angry because God was so kind and loving? Imagine a person who wanted to see the entire population of Nineveh wiped out but was very angry because a plant that had provided a little shade for him died!
23. What was Jonah's problem? What do you think Jonah said to his friends when he left home to go to Nineveh? In light of God's commands to him, did he believe that, in fact, his message would result in the wiping out of that entire wicked city? Was he afraid that when he went home to report that Nineveh had repented and was not lost, his friends would regard him as an unreliable prophet? Did he care most of all about his own reputation?
24. Ellen White had some very interesting words to say following the famous 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

The terrible earthquake that has visited San Francisco [The San Francisco earthquake of April 18-19, 1906 left 503 dead and resulted in an estimated \$350 million in property damage.] will be followed by other manifestations of the power of God. His law has been transgressed. Cities have become polluted with sin. Study the history of Nineveh. God sent a special message by Jonah to that wicked city. . . . Many such messages as his would be given in our age, if the wicked cities would repent as did Nineveh.—Ellen G. White, *Ms 61a*, June 3, 1906; *Last Day Events* 114.2. [Content in brackets was added by the editors.]

25. Are we relieved of our responsibilities to carry the gospel to the cities because they will not repent as did Nineveh? What if we present the message poorly?
26. What should we conclude from this story about Jonah? If God calls us to do something, no matter how difficult or even impossible it may seem, we need to move forward in faith. Do we really believe that God knows what He is doing?

27. Do we believe that the blessings we claim by our observance of the Sabbath, our practice of health reform, and the benefits we receive from our Christian education are supposed to be exclusively for us? Why did God say what He did to the Laodiceans as recorded in Revelation 3:17-18. Do those words apply to us and only to us?
28. It is clear that Jonah's main problem was his own personal reluctance to do what God asked him to do. Are we witnessing to our neighbors, our fellow workers, and our friends as God would have us to? If not, what is preventing us from doing so?
29. Read Jonah 4:11. Was this question only for Jonah's benefit? Or, is it directed at us as well?
30. Was Jonah really the best person God could find for that job? What does that tell us about the rest of Israel and/or Judah at that point in time? Would God have chosen Jonah if someone else could have done a better job?
31. Surely, we can understand why Jonah may have been reluctant to go to Nineveh with such a message. What possible excuses can we give for not witnessing for God? Are we truly His disciples? Do we believe in the "Seventh-day Adventist message" for the end times? Or, are we always hiding in the most comfortable place and keeping our mouths shut?
32. There are a lot of details about the Jonah story that can be found in the Teacher's Guide on Jonah at www.theox.org. Go to Teacher's Guides, then Minor Prophets, then Jonah.
33. Is it possible that Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh not only because he was afraid but also because he felt a cultural and religious superiority and prejudice against them?

As Christian author Anne Lamott puts it: "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 22. (*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p. 53)

34. Are there people in your environment that you cannot reach out to because of feelings of superiority or prejudice? Was Jonah the best that God could find in his day?
35. Try to image a "Jonah story" in the 21st century. Could God call some of us to do extraordinary things in reaching out to people groups that have not heard the gospel? Where would you be willing to go? Could God use us today? Could God call us to China?
36. Maybe Jonah's greatest sin was his lack of empathy for the people of Nineveh. He seemed to care more about the plant that had provided him temporary shade than he did about the all those people in Nineveh! Are we concerned about the billions of people in our world who have not even heard about Jesus? Would we be willing to do something about them if God called us to do so? Could we at least give more support to those who are out there on the front lines of mission? *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p 56:

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

37. Have we lost our vision? Or, are we just becoming more like Jonah?

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