

God's Mission My Mission

Excuses to Avoid Mission

Lesson #5 for November 4, 2023

Scriptures: Jonah 1-4; Nahum 1:1; 2 Kings 17:5-6; Psalm 24:1; James 1:27; Isaiah 6:1-8.

1. In our previous lesson, we studied how compliant Abraham was. He may have had some problems; but, he was willing to do what God asked him to do and share the experiences of God in his life. Not all of us are ready to share God like Abraham did.

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

Ultimately, excuses to avoid mission are temptations of the devil [sic], who does not want anyone to hear or experience the goodness of God.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide 65.††**

2. In contrast to Abraham, let us look at some examples of biblical stories of people who believed they were God's faithful people but missed opportunities to which God had called them. We will discuss examples of avoiding God's call in the story of Jonah and the missed possibilities of Jesus's disciples.
3. **Jonah did not want to do what God wanted him to do.** God asked him to go to Nineveh the capital of Assyria which was 560 miles from Jerusalem. That would have taken a full month to walk, even for a person in good shape. But, Jonah did not want to go; so, he went to the coast at Joppa and purchased a ticket to get on a boat and go to Spain about 2000 miles to the west—as far away from Nineveh as he could get!
4. Let us be honest. The people of Nineveh were very wicked, and they were very cruel. They attacked almost every nation around them, trying to prove that their “god of war” would help them conquer the world. Compare God's call to Jonah with God's statement to Abraham about Sodom.

Jonah 1:2: He [God] said, “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware **how wicked its people are.**”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Jonah 1:2). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].††

Genesis 18:20-21: ²⁰ Then the LORD said to Abraham, “There are terrible accusations against Sodom and Gomorrah, and **their sin is very great.** ²¹ I must go down to find out whether or not the accusations which I have heard are true.”—*Good News Bible*.*†

5. Do you think Jonah had a good reason for not wanting to go to Nineveh? Nahum who lived about 100 years after Jonah had these words to say about Nineveh:

Nahum 3:1-4: ¹ Doomed is the lying, murderous city,

full of wealth to be looted and plundered!

² Listen! The crack of the whip,
the rattle of wheels,
the gallop of horses,
the jolting of chariots!

³ Horsemen charge,
swords flash, spears gleam!
Corpses are piled high,
dead bodies without number—
men stumble over them!

⁴ Nineveh the whore is being punished.
Attractive and full of deadly charms,
she enchanted nations and enslaved them.—*Good News Bible*.*

2 Kings 17:5-6: ⁵ Then Shalmaneser [of Assyria, with their capital in Ninevah] invaded Israel and besieged Samaria. In **the third year of the siege**, ⁶which was the ninth year of the reign of Hoshea, the Assyrian emperor captured Samaria, took the Israelites to Assyria as prisoners, and settled some of them in the city of Halah, some near the River Habor in the district of Gozan, and some in the cities of Media.—*Good News Bible*.*†‡

2 Kings 19:32-37: ³² “This is what the LORD has said about the Assyrian emperor: ‘He will not enter this city [Jerusalem] or shoot a single arrow against it. No soldiers with shields will come near the city, and no siege mounds will be built round it. ³³He will go back by the same road he came, without entering this city. I, the LORD, have spoken. ³⁴I will defend this city and protect it, **for the sake of my own honour** [*sic-Br*] and because of the promise I made to my servant David.’ ”

³⁵ That night **an angel of the LORD went to the Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 soldiers**. At dawn the next day, there they lay, all dead! ³⁶Then the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib withdrew and returned to Nineveh. ³⁷One day, when he was worshipping in the temple of his god Nisroch, two of his sons, Adrammelech and Sharezer, killed him with their swords, and then escaped to the land of Ararat. Another of his sons, Esarhaddon, succeeded him as emperor.—*Good News Bible*.*†‡

6. ***Why would God say that defending Jerusalem was “for the sake of my own honor”? In ancient times, people believed that the gods were the ones responsible for victory in any battle. If a weaker nation lost a battle against a stronger nation, it was because the god of the stronger nation was more powerful than the god of the weaker nation. So, the true God would be despised if His capital city was conquered and destroyed. Since the Bible and the Jewish people represented that they were regarded as the faithful followers of YAHWEH, then YAHWEH would lose face in the eyes of the other nations of the world if Jerusalem was defeated.***
7. A very important god of the Assyrians was the god of war. In order to make a name for oneself in Nineveh, he needed to kill many people in a conquest of another nation.

[From the writings of Ellen G. White=EGW:] Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm....

In the time of its temporal prosperity Nineveh was a center of crime and wickedness. Inspiration has characterized it as “the bloody city, ... full of lies and robbery.” In figurative language the prophet Nahum compared the Ninevites to a cruel, ravenous lion. “Upon whom,” he inquired, “hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” Nahum 3:1, 19.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 265.1-2.‡

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

But the **Assyrians were also ruthless.** In his account of the conquest of Babylon, Sennacherib boasted that he filled the streets with the corpses of its inhabitants, young and old, and relief carvings found during excavations depict scenes of soldiers impaling victims. These were not people you wanted to cross; they were not averse to using violence, and gratuitously cruelly, too, against those they didn’t like. Indeed, at the thought of walking among the masses of people in Nineveh, Jonah must have quaked with fear.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, October 29.††

8. Imagine Jonah’s feelings as he thought about approaching Nineveh.
9. Have you ever been convinced that you should do something for God’s cause that you were afraid to do? Don’t we believe that when we are doing God’s will, He will protect us?

1 John 4:18: There is no fear in love; perfect love drives out all fear. So then, love has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment.—*Good News Bible*.*

10. Have we thought carefully about our fears? What are we afraid of?

Jonah 1:1-12: ¹ One day the LORD spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. ²He said, “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware how wicked its people are.” ³**Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the LORD.** He went to Joppa, where he found a ship about to go to Spain. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Spain, where he would be away from the LORD. ⁴But the LORD sent a strong wind on the sea, and the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. ⁵The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god. Then, in order to lessen the danger, they threw the cargo overboard. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below and was lying in the ship’s hold, sound asleep.

⁶ The captain found him there and said to him, “What are you doing asleep? **Get up and pray to your god for help.** Maybe he will feel sorry for us and spare our lives.”

⁷ The sailors said to one another, “Let’s draw lots and find out who is to blame for getting us into this danger.” They did so, and Jonah’s name was drawn. ⁸So they said to him: “Now then, tell us! Who is to blame for this? What are you doing here? What country do you come from? What is your nationality?”

⁹ “I am a Hebrew,” Jonah answered. “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made land and sea.” ¹⁰Jonah went on to tell them that he was running away from the LORD.

The sailors were terrified, and said to him, “That was an awful thing to do!”

¹¹The storm was getting worse all the time, so the sailors asked him, “What should we do to you to stop the storm?”

¹² Jonah answered, “Throw me into the sea, and it will calm down. I know it is my fault that you are caught in this violent storm.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

11. Why did Jonah think that throwing him into the sea would stop the storm?

[BSG:] When the storm came, Jonah blamed himself (*Jon. 1:1–12*). His attitude does reveal something about the kind of worldview and understanding of God or “gods” that many had back then. While various gods, they believed, ruled in their various lands, **the sea was deemed the chaotic realm of demons. In the worldview of the mariners, sacrifice was needed to appease their wrath.** Although Jonah was a Hebrew, he quite possibly had a worldview that was influenced by the traditional beliefs of his times. [Or, at least he understood their thinking.]—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*^{*} for Monday, October 30.^{†§}

Jonah 2:1-2,7-10: ¹ From deep inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God:

² “In my distress, O LORD, I called to you,
and you answered me.

From deep in the world of the dead
I cried for help, and you heard me....

⁷ When I felt my life slipping away,
then, O LORD, I prayed to you, [Why bother God until you really need Him?]
and in your holy Temple you heard me.

⁸ Those who worship worthless idols
have abandoned their loyalty to you.

⁹ But I will sing praises to you;
I will offer you a sacrifice
and do what I have promised.

Salvation comes from the LORD!”

¹⁰ Then the LORD ordered the fish to spew Jonah up on the beach, and it did.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†} [Was that a direct response to Jonah’s prayer?][‡]

12. As we noted earlier, many of the ancient peoples believed that gods were assigned to various territories. Therefore, Jonah might have had the idea that *Yahweh* was the God of Israel and that He would not be able to help Jonah outside of Israelite territory. He

learned that God is fully active everywhere, even at the bottom of the ocean which they thought was the devil's territory!

13. Many Christians and unfortunately many Seventh-day Adventists in our day somehow feel that their main focus should be on getting **themselves** saved. Then, there is little time for them to think about reaching out to others.
14. It is very difficult to help someone who is stuck in the mud without getting yourself covered in mud! How can we associate with people of the world without being influenced by their behavior and thinking? It is always easier to pull someone down than it is to raise them up! But, we need to remember that God is on our side!

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

Winning souls is hard, too hard for humans to do on their own. How can we learn, instead, to let God win souls, but through us and our life and witness?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, October 30.†‡§

15. ***What is the best way to find out what God wants us to do? Can we clearly understand God's plans for us and for our work? Is the Spirit guiding us to witness?***
16. Another form of excuse that is often prevalent, perhaps unconsciously, is inconvenience. Despite Jonah's incredible experience with the fish, his attitude toward the Ninevites probably had not changed!

Jonah 3:1-10: ¹ Once again the LORD spoke to Jonah. ²He said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to the people the message I have given you."

³So Jonah obeyed the LORD and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to walk through it. ⁴Jonah started through the city, and after walking a whole day, he proclaimed, "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!" [Does that sound like a great loving message? Did they need it?]

⁵ The people of Nineveh believed God's message. So they decided that everyone should fast, and all the people, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth to show that they had repented.

⁶ When the king of Nineveh heard about it, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat down in ashes. ⁷He sent out a proclamation to the people of Nineveh: "This is an order from the king and his officials: no one is to eat anything; all persons, cattle, and sheep are

forbidden to eat or drink. ⁸All persons and animals must wear sackcloth. **Everyone must pray earnestly to God and must give up his wicked behaviour [sic-Br] and his evil actions. ⁹Perhaps God will change his mind; perhaps he will stop being angry, and we will not die!”**

¹⁰ God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behaviour [sic-Br]. **So he changed his mind** and did not punish them as he had said he would.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†‡}

17. *Had Jonah said anything further to the Ninevites about what God expected of them? What did they know about God’s expectations? Did Jonah tell them anything about his experience with the fish? Did anything about his appearance support his story?*

18. Is Jonah 3:10 a contradiction of Malachi 3:6?

Malachi 3:6: “I am the LORD, and I do not change.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

19. The only information we have about Jonah and his message to the Ninevites is that short expression: “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!” (Jonah 3:4, *GNB**) Surely, Jonah said more than that!

20. Considering what we know about the Ninevites, wouldn’t you expect them to turn on Jonah and kill him?

21. Do you expect to see some of those Ninevites in heaven? What did they know about doing God’s will? Then, Jonah went out on a hill east of Nineveh to watch and see the destruction of Nineveh! God was able to work through Jonah despite his attitude about people from other nations.

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

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

The good news is that **in spite of Jonah’s inadequacies, God worked powerfully in bringing the Ninevites to repentance.** Sadly, Jonah did not share in the blessing of heaven’s joy.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, October 31.^{†‡}

22. Another reason why people hesitate to reach out to others is because **it might lead to uncomfortable confrontations, even with God.** Jonah complained about God’s kindness and mercy!

Jonah 4:2: So he prayed, “LORD, didn’t I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That’s why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

23. Obviously, Jonah and God had previously had other conversations. So, what was Jonah's response to God's love?

Jonah 4:3-10: ³ "Now, LORD, let me die. I am better off dead than alive."

⁴The LORD answered, "What right have you to be angry?"

⁵ Jonah went out east of the city and sat down. He made a shelter for himself and sat in its shade, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh. ⁶Then the LORD God made a plant grow up over Jonah to give him some shade, so that he would be more comfortable. Jonah was extremely pleased with the plant. ⁷But at dawn the next day, at God's command, a worm attacked the plant, and it died. ⁸After the sun had risen, God sent a hot east wind, and Jonah was about to faint from the heat of the sun beating down on his head. So he wished he were dead. **"I am better off dead than alive,"** he said. [Was Jonah that depressed?]

⁹ But God said to him, "What right have you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah replied, "I have every right to be angry—angry enough to die!"

¹⁰ The LORD said to him, "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it, and you didn't make it grow—yet you feel sorry for it! ¹¹How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!"—*Good News Bible*.^{*†‡}

[BSG:] Jonah was grateful, not for God, who performed the miracle, but for the plant. Rather than seeing this as an unmerited miracle, he saw it as an appropriate and well-deserved blessing that followed his good works. When the plant died, it was a misfortune that caused Jonah to grow angry and insecure in his self-worth, and his thoughts grew suicidal.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, November 1.[‡]

24. Are we worried that despite our efforts, someone might not respond and might even reject us and reject God?
25. Jonah is the only book in the Bible that ends with a question mark in most versions but not the *Good News Bible*. Why do you think that is? Through Jonah, God is throwing the challenge to us.
26. **The story of Nineveh certainly reveals that God loves all of his children, even those who are rebellious and misbehaving.** Jonah was a known prophet of God.
- 2 Kings 14:25:** He reconquered all the territory that had belonged to Israel, from Hamath Pass in the north to the Dead Sea in the south. This was what the LORD, the God of Israel, had promised **through his servant the prophet Jonah son of Amittai**, from Gath Hopher.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}
27. Don't you think God is still calling for missionary volunteers? As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that it is our duty to present the three-angels' messages—the final warning messages to the world—to everyone around us. Are we doing that?
28. ***Or, are we to wait until we get a specific call from God before we do something? How are we supposed to know when God has called us to do anything?***

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

Challenge Up: Choose a city near you as well as a city in another part of the world. Begin praying for the people who live and work in each. Ask that God will raise up a strong Adventist presence that can share the truth as we know it—the truth about the soon coming of Jesus.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, November 2.‡

[EGW:] **The excuses of those who fail to do this work do not relieve them of the responsibility, and if they choose not to do this work, they neglect the souls for whom Christ died, neglect their God-given responsibility, and are registered in the books of heaven as unfaithful servants.** Does the minister work as did the Master, to be a strength and a blessing to others, when he shuts himself away from those who need his help? Those who neglect personal intercourse with the people, become self-centered, and need this very experience of placing themselves in communication with their brethren, that they may understand their spiritual condition, and know how to feed the flock of God, giving to each his portion of meat in due season. Those who neglect this work make it manifest that they need moral renovation, and then they will see they have not carried the burden of the work.—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*,* August 30, 1892, par. 6.††

29. Notice the specific words from Ellen White about Jonah.

[EGW:] In the charge given him, Jonah had been entrusted with a heavy responsibility; yet He who had bidden him go was able to sustain His servant and grant him success. Had the prophet obeyed unquestioningly, he would have been spared many bitter experiences, and would have been blessed abundantly. Yet in the hour of Jonah’s despair the Lord did not desert him. **Through a series of trials and strange providences, the prophet’s confidence in God and in His infinite power to save was to be revived.**—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 266.3.††

30. Contrast the story of Jonah with the story of Isaiah.

Isaiah 6:1-8: ¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord [*sic*]. He was sitting on his throne, high and exalted, and his robe filled the whole Temple. ²Round him flaming creatures were standing, each of which had six wings. Each creature covered its face with two wings, and its body with two, and used the other two for flying. ³They were calling out to each other:

“Holy, holy, holy!

The LORD Almighty is holy!

His glory fills the world.”

⁴ The sound of their voices made the foundation of the Temple shake, and the Temple itself was filled with smoke.

⁵ I said, “There is no hope for me! I am doomed because every word that passes my lips is sinful, and I live among a people whose every word is sinful. And yet, with my own eyes, I have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!”

⁶ Then one of the creatures flew down to me, carrying a burning coal that he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷He touched my lips with the burning coal and said, “This has touched your lips, and now your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven.”

⁸ **Then I heard the Lord [sic] say, “Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?”**

I answered, “I will go! Send me!”—Good News Bible.*†

31. Turning to the New Testament, think of the story of Jesus’s disciples after that lengthy discussion found in John chapters 13-16 as they approached the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew 26:36-46: ³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

³⁷He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee. Grief and anguish came over him, ³⁸and he said to them, “The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹ He went a little farther on, threw himself face downwards on the ground, and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want.”

⁴⁰ **Then he returned to the three disciples and found them asleep;** and he said to Peter, “How is it that you three were not able to keep watch with me even for one hour? ⁴¹Keep watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

⁴² Once more Jesus went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cup of suffering cannot be taken away unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³**He returned once more and found the disciples asleep;** they could not keep their eyes open.

⁴⁴ Again Jesus left them, went away, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵Then he returned to the disciples and said, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look! The hour has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to the power of sinners. ⁴⁶Get up, let us go. Look, here is the man who is betraying me!”—*Good News Bible.*†*

32. Why do you think the disciples were so prone to falling asleep despite Jesus’s request to them? **Is it possible that Satan was doing his best to keep them asleep?** Surely, the disciples loved Jesus; and they had many reasons for doing that. As we know, the next thing that happened was the arrest of Jesus. See Matthew 26:47-56.
33. We may feel like we understand the gospel and that we love Jesus. But, are we tempted at times to fall into spiritual sleepiness?

34. Returning to Jonah's story, he missed two wonderful opportunities to witness for God. The first one was when the sailors asked him to pray to his God. And what did he do? He asked them to throw him overboard to what he believed would be his death! What did the sailors think after the storm calmed?

35. The second incredible missed opportunity was after the people of Nineveh repented. Jonah should have returned to the city and spent time talking to them about God's will and what they could do to serve Him. But, Jonah became angry, even angry at God, and complained about God's kindness and mercy! As we read earlier:

Jonah 4:2: So he prayed, "LORD, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! **I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, and always ready to change your mind and not punish.**"—*Good News Bible*.^{*†} [Jonah was embarrassed by God's mercy and His willingness to forgive and change His stated plan.][‡]

36. Jonah's excuses are wrapped up in what we today call ethnocentrism, prejudice, and racism. Our world is full of these problems. All too often, even among Seventh-day Adventist Christians, we might hear ideas that reflect these prejudices. They are not a good excuse for us for our failure to witness.

[BSG:] As individuals and as churches, we need to take an honest look at our daily lives and hold ourselves accountable. If we are not actively pursuing relationships with people who are suffering or need help in bearing their burdens, we have grown complacent. Accountability requires getting together with a small group of trusted friends from your local church who are willing to be open about their complacency and are ready to help each other come up with ways to rekindle experiences with God by creatively sharing Him with the broader world around us.

For others, the reality is grimmer; they have developed excuses to avoid mission to specific groups of people, such as Muslims or Catholics, because they feel that these people are unworthy of God's love.... If we are afraid of certain groups or think they are not worth saving, then it is a sign something is wrong with us, not the group in question. Honest assessment takes a level of self-scrutiny and truthfulness that is hard to achieve, but a church willing to grapple with these realities is a church the Holy Spirit can influence.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 68.[‡]

37. Is God calling you to do something for Him? Are you listening?

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