

Talking With God



**SAB
PM**

JONAH HAS FINISHED A MOST SUCCESSFUL PREACHING MISSION.

All the citizens of Nineveh have accepted his message and repented¹ to the God of heaven. We might expect Jonah to travel home, full of joy and thanksgiving for the power of God to change wicked hearts. But the book of Jonah has more surprises.

All through the book of Jonah, God has far more trouble with Jonah than with the most rebellious of the Ninevites. In Jonah 1, the sailors and their captain recognize God's power in the storm and worship Him. The wicked people of Nineveh in Jonah 3 answer God's message by repenting. But Jonah obeys God only after He puts Jonah through serious tests. Even the king of Nineveh humbly surrenders to God. He recognizes that God does not *have* to save the city (Jonah 3:9). But Jonah dares to challenge mercy.²

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What was Jonah's attitude³ toward the repentance of the people of Nineveh? What was it about Jonah that made his attitude even more disgusting? By his attitude, whom was Jonah copying? What does this story show us about God's grace, and about our limits to understand His grace?

MEMORY VERSE: " 'For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,' says the Lord God. 'Turn, then, and live' " (Ezekiel 18:32, NRSV).

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 29.

¹repented—to have been sorry for your sins and to have turned away from your sins.

²mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

³attitude—how a person thinks or feels about someone or something.

SUN UNEXPECTED⁴ ANSWER.

One of the most unexpected verses in the Bible is Jonah 4:1. In the Hebrew, the verse reads: “And it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and he was furious [angry] at it.” Jonah was angry because the people of Nineveh repented of their sin and violence, and because God’s punishment did not fall on them.

Imagine that an evangelist⁵ holds meetings in a city famous for wickedness. Then the evangelist gets depressed when the whole city repents!

Why would Jonah feel depressed? Perhaps he felt that these wicked people had done so much evil that they deserved punishment. Probably he felt that God’s grace to them was not fair. Maybe he felt nationalistic,⁶ and *wanted* God’s punishment to fall upon the Ninevites.⁷ Maybe Jonah felt that because the punishment had not come, people would look upon him as a false prophet. Whatever the reason, here is the situation: A prophet of God is angry that God has shown mercy to people who repented. It is hard to imagine a worse sin.

No matter how bad Jonah’s attitude was, what had just happened to him personally that made his attitude even worse? Jonah 1:17–2:10.

One of the greatest lessons we can learn from Jonah’s attitude is that it

shows how God offered His grace. God knew Jonah’s heart, and how Jonah would act. But He chose Jonah anyway and was still willing to work with him, even though he had a bad attitude. All through the Bible, we see God willing to work with people who have bad attitudes.

Make a list of the character faults the following verses show. What do these verses tell us about God’s willingness to work with us or use us, even though we have faults? Genesis 9:20, 21; Genesis 16:1-5; Numbers 20:1-12; 2 Samuel 11:1-4; Matthew 11:1-6; Acts 15:35-41; Galatians 2:11-14.



Moses’ fault was that he did not have enough faith in God. So he hit the rock instead of speaking to it as God told him to do.

⁴unexpected—not expected.

⁵evangelist—a preacher who travels, preaching the gospel.

⁶nationalistic—being loyal to one’s country or nation.

⁷Ninevites—people from Nineveh, Assyria.

MON JONAH'S SIN.

The first time we see Jonah praying is in the belly (stomach) of a fish, when he is asking God to save him from destruction. The next time we see Jonah praying is in Jonah 4, where he is angry because God saved other people from destruction. Jonah wanted God to save him from destruction. But he did not want God to save other people from destruction!

What Jonah was really saying was that he did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew God was merciful.⁸ In this way, Jonah is admitting that he does not want God to save the Ninevites. But God wanted to use Jonah anyway! God's grace is greater than we can understand.

Below, write the words in Jonah 4:2 that Jonah uses to describe God. Also write what you think each of these words mean. (Read also Exodus 34:6, 7; Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13; Psalm 86:15.) Who was the greatest receiver of God's grace and kindness, Jonah or the Ninevites? Explain your answer.

For Christians, God's grace and patience are not just topics for religious discussions. His grace and patience should be part of the experience of what it means to be a Christian. Because we love God and have a relationship with Him, we

should experience for ourselves what His grace and patience can do for us.

How have you experienced God's grace and patience? What could you tell someone about how God's grace and patience has helped you?

TUE THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S GRACE.

What we see with Jonah is a small example of how limited humans are in understanding God's grace. The greatest example of God's grace was shown at the Cross. We cannot fully understand the love of a God who would send His Son to die for sinful humans who are such a tiny part of His creation. That is why we have to (1) experience God's love for ourselves and (2) accept His love on faith.

Richard Tarnas claimed that people living in the modern scientific period can not seriously accept Jesus' sacrifice as good enough for all people. He wrote: "An eternal⁹ God becoming a human and dying such an unglorious¹⁰ death on the cross is impossible¹¹ to believe! One short life taking place two thousand years ago in an unknown¹² nation, on a planet now known to be an unimportant¹³ piece of matter traveling around one star among billions of stars in a vast (great) universe should not hold any special

⁸merciful—full of mercy.

⁹eternal—forever; without beginning or end.

¹⁰unglorious—not glorious.

¹¹impossible—not possible.

¹²unknown—not known.

¹³unimportant—not important.

meaning to people who can think and reason. It would not make much sense to believe that the universe as a whole would have any important interest in this tiny, unimportant part of history.”
—Adapted from *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 305.

But Ellen White wrote: “It will be worth our time to think deeply of the Son of God in human form, how He made the sacrifice on the Cross, and how He suffered resistance¹⁴ to His work on earth for fallen humans. Angels wonder with great interest as they watch the Son of God taking each step down the path of suffering. It is the mystery of godliness. It is the glory of God to hide Himself and His ways. Instead of keeping heavenly light and knowledge from people, God goes beyond our ability to understand. We can understand only a little. But that is all we can understand. The love of Jesus goes beyond what we know. The mystery of salvation will continue to be the mystery, the science, and song of eternity.¹⁵ Well may we say, who can know God? We may, as Elijah did, wrap our robes around us, and listen to hear God’s still, small voice.”—Adapted from *The Bible Echo*, April 30, 1894.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:7; 1 Corinthians 3:19; Ephesians 3:7-11; Colossians 2:1, 2; Philippians 4:7; and 1 John 4:10. Then write a paragraph answering Mr. Tarnas’s challenge to the Christian faith.



**This is the mystery of God’s grace.
“This is what love is” (1 John 4:10, TEV).**

WED GOD, TOO, IS MERCIFUL?

A modern thinker such as Richard Tarnas (Tuesday’s lesson) has trouble understanding God’s grace. Poor Jonah had a hard time understanding too. This is why Jonah did not want to preach to Nineveh. He did not want the Ninevites to get something they did not deserve. But grace *is* getting what we do not deserve.

One of God’s early examples of grace and loving-kindness was preached to Israel after Israel’s great backsliding when they worshiped the golden calf in the wilderness (Exodus 34:6). At that point, God had the right to leave them.

¹⁴resistance—when people tried to stop Jesus from doing His work.

¹⁵eternity—life without end; forever.

As a result, this example of God's mercy and grace was special to Israel.



The fact that God did not destroy Israel when they worshiped the golden calf is an example of His grace.

Read Exodus 32. In what ways was Israel's guilt even worse than the guilt of the people of Nineveh? Contrast¹⁶ Moses' attitude with Jonah's attitude. What could have caused such a great difference?

Jonah was very thankful for God's mercy toward him. But he was upset that God would show mercy to wicked people such as the people of Nineveh. Jonah is now highly critical of God's grace. He thinks God should save His salvation for His righteous (holy)

people. He also believes that punishment should be the future end of wicked people.

Who else shows the same spirit Jonah had? Zechariah 3:1-7; Revelation 12:10. How does this help us understand just how bad Jonah's attitude was?

Jonah sees the postponement of punishment on Nineveh as a mistake. He does not share God's compassion toward these people. Jonah's reasoning shows how he thinks he can rule God's world better than God can rule! Jonah's real reason for running away from God's command deals more with his character than with Nineveh's terrible sinners.

But the wicked people of Nineveh were really no different from Jonah. They and Jonah were all rebellious sinners who deserved only punishment. But God had decided to show mercy to all of them. Jonah was willing to accept this mercy for himself, but not for Nineveh.

Geraldo's unbelieving¹⁷ brother had been murdered. The killer went to prison, where he later became a Christian. But Geraldo struggles with the idea of salvation for his brother's killer. How would you answer Geraldo's questions about God's fairness in this situation?

¹⁶contrast—show how things are different.

¹⁷unbelieving—not believing.



How do you feel about salvation for a murderer? How does God feel?

THU GOD'S PATIENCE WITH JONAH.

How did God plead with Jonah after Jonah asked to die? Jonah 4:4.

Jonah's kind and merciful God quietly asked Jonah a deep question. With only three words in Hebrew, God encouraged Jonah to think about his attitude.

How is what God said to Jonah in Jonah 4:4 the same as what He said to Cain in Genesis 4:6? How is it different?

God's answer to Jonah was surprisingly soft. God wanted Jonah to come to his senses and see how childish he had been. Helping Jonah become a more

mature believer seemed to have been one of God's goals. According to this conversation with Jonah in chapter 4, this goal seemed equally as important to Him as was the salvation of Nineveh. God challenged Jonah to think about his attitude. God was gently suggesting to Jonah that he might not have a correct understanding of the situation.

Jonah was not the only person in the Bible who had been troubled by God's ways. Who else in the Bible experienced puzzling problems as they tried to understand God's ways? Job 7:17-21; Jeremiah 15:15-18. What was the important part of their complaints? How did those complaints differ from Jonah's complaint?

Also read Luke 9:51-56. Contrast what happened there with what happened with Jonah in Jonah 4.

No other nation as a group ever struggled so hard with God as Israel did. All through the Old Testament, there is a rich history of such struggles showing anger, depression, and mental suffering. The book of Psalms describes those struggles.

Christians today generally prefer the praise psalms. But many of the 150 psalms are filled with pain and protest. The Israelites sang many of these psalms in worship. The emotional closeness of the relationship with God in the Old Testament may not make sense to us because of our own immaturity¹⁸ in our rela-

¹⁸immaturity—not being fully developed.

tionship with God. God does not sneer at or mock hurting believers. In fact, He always shows great respect to all people, even people like Jonah. God values honesty in our relationship with Him. We do not have to avoid unpleasant¹⁹ topics or how we feel when praying to God.

FRI FURTHER STUDY: “There are mysteries in the plan of salvation . . . that are subjects of continuing surprise to the angels. Speaking of the visions given to the prophets of ‘the sufferings of Christ [Jesus] and the glory that should follow,’ Peter says that these mysteries are the things ‘the angels desire to study.’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 702.

Ellen White describes well the questions of God’s justice (fairness) and mercy as worked out in Israel’s history. About Jeremiah’s work she writes: “The unwillingness²⁰ of God to punish is clearly shown. God holds back His judgments (punishments) that He may plead with sinners who do not repent.²¹ God uses ‘loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness [holiness] in the earth’ and pleads with His sinning children. In every way possible, He tries to teach them the way of everlasting²² life (Jeremiah 9:24). God brought the Israelites out of slavery to serve Him, the only true and living God. Israel had wandered long in idol worship and had failed to listen to His warnings. But God now declares

His willingness to postpone punishment and give yet another opportunity for repentance.”—Adapted from *Prophets and Kings*, p. 413.

“Once more Jonah surrendered to his questions and doubts. Once more he was overcome with discouragement. Jonah lost sight of the interests of other people. He felt as if he would rather die than live to see the city saved. In his unhappiness,²³ Jonah said, ‘Now then, Lord, let me die. I am better off dead than alive’ (Jonah 4:3, TEV)”—Adapted from *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Study the parable (story) in Matthew 18:21-35. How do you understand this story based on what is happening so far in Jonah?
2. Read Psalm 10. How can we explain this psalm with Jonah’s problem in mind?
3. A French Christian writer, Blaise Pascal, once wrote that “the heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing of.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree or not agree? How does what Pascal wrote fit with the Christian faith?

SUMMARY: Jonah has a lot of lessons to learn about the love and mercy of the God he claims to serve. God is patient and kind to us even when we have a bad attitude.

¹⁹unpleasant—not pleasant.

²⁰unwillingness—not being willing to do something.

²¹repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and then to turn away from your sins.

²²everlasting—lasting forever; without a beginning or an end.

²³unhappiness—not being happy.