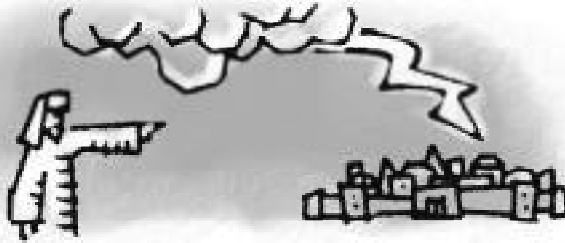


Jonah and Judgment



Sabbath Afternoon

AS THE FIRST VERSES OF JONAH reveal, this book is set against the background of judgment, God's judgment. Of course, that's nothing particularly unique or novel, not for the Bible, which is filled with different examples, warnings, and promises of God's judgment in the Old Testament and in the New.

God, we know, is a God of love; nothing proves that better than Jesus on the cross, the greatest example of God's judgment. We can trust that God's judgment will be fair and righteous. We don't have to worry about jury tampering; we don't have to worry about judges being bribed; we don't have to worry about being given an unfair trial. This week we'll continue to look at the concept of judgment in Jonah, for it reveals that God is concerned about the evil that has brought so much pain, suffering, and havoc to this world.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: Why is God concerned about the wickedness of Nineveh? Or of any place? What examples can we find in the Bible regarding God's divine judgment? What evidence exists that the Ten Commandments were known before Sinai? How can God judge people who never have been given a clear presentation of Bible truth?

MEMORY TEXT: "Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34, 35).

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 18.

Sunday

October 12

NINEVEH UNDER JUDGMENT.

Look again at Jonah 1:2, particularly the phrase that reads, in the Hebrew, “ ‘for their wickedness has come up before me’ ” (NKJV). Of course, God is in heaven, the Ninevites were on earth, so their deeds didn’t literally rise to heaven (see also Gen. 4:10). What do you think the phrase, therefore, means? More important, what does it tell us about God’s concern about our moral actions? See also Judg. 21:25; Eccles. 12:13; Matt. 12:36; 25:45; Heb. 5:14. How do these texts help answer the above question?

The Bible is very clear that God has created a moral world. In other words, despite the claims of many to the contrary, right and wrong, good and evil, do exist as moral absolutes placed upon humanity by God. We are all moral creatures, and we all have moral responsibilities, whatever our station or position in life. Though God ultimately will be the final judge of us and our actions, Jonah 1:2 proves that even the heathen, such as the Ninevites, must answer for their deeds before God.

And, apparently, they will have plenty to answer for too. The Assyrians were known for their extraordinary cruelty and violence. Numerous ancient Assyrian tablets and inscriptions have been found and translated from Nineveh. The following translation of a document from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 884–859 B.C., is one reminder: “ ‘I built a pillar over against his city and I flayed all the chiefs who had revolted, and covered the pillar with their skin. Some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar. . . . And cut the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled. . . .

“ ‘Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers; of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living and another of heads, and I bound their heads to tree trunks round the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire.

“ ‘Twenty men I captured alive and I immured them in the wall of his palace.’ ”—D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylon*, Ancient Records Series 1, in Geoffrey T. Bull, *The City and the Sign: An Interpretation of the Book of Jonah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), pp. 109, 110.

How does Romans 2:13-16 help shed light on some of the issues raised today? Using these verses, write a small paragraph summarizing the basic point of today’s study.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Jonah 1:2.

Teachers Aims:

1. To define how God's warning to Nineveh relates to us.
2. To recognize the hope and love in God's judgments.
3. To explore the link between the Ten Commandments at Sinai and God's warning against Nineveh.

Lesson Outline:

I. Nineveh: "Sin-City" of the Ancient World.

- A. Nineveh, "the bloody city . . . full of lies and robbery" (Nah. 3:1), served as the capital city of Assyria, a country known for its fierce army and corruption.
- B. Nahum compared the Ninevites to "a cruel, ravenous lion" (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 265; see also Nah. 2:11-13). Yet, the city of Nineveh was not wholly given over to evil.
- C. God calls Jonah to warn the Ninevites to repent or perish.

II. The Nature of God's Judgments.

- A. God's judgments against humanity's wickedness come not from a desire to destroy humanity but from His love for the lost and His desire to save us.
- B. God's warning against Nineveh serves also as an invitation to all fallen humanity to turn to Him and to embrace salvation.
- C. God gives humankind existence for a time so that they may develop their characters (see Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 764).

III. The Principles of the Ten Commandments.

- A. The law existed before Sinai and requires universal accountability from all humanity.
- B. It was Nineveh's violation of the law that required God to send Jonah to warn them to repent.
- C. God shall judge no sinner—from a backslider to an unbeliever—in an unfair or arbitrary manner.

Summary: Nineveh served as an example to Israel that none was too wicked or too lost to be saved. It also served to warn Israel not to follow in Nineveh's bloody footsteps or to take God's mercy for granted.

Monday

October 13

DIVINE JUDGMENT—A SERIOUS MATTER.

In spite of those who seek to soothe human consciences with an almost exclusive focus on God’s love, we observe here, in the first few verses of Jonah (and all through Scripture), that God is concerned about human wickedness. Interestingly enough, this concern isn’t something that’s in *opposition* to His love but, instead, stems directly as a result of that love.

When studying the Bible, one must take careful notice of the choice of words and their repetitions. Biblical writers do not use modern techniques of emphasis, such as underlining or italics. Instead, they carefully select their vocabulary in light of what they intend to communicate. Within the four chapters of the book of Jonah, the word *evil* or *wickedness* is used ten times, two times referring to the Ninevites (Jon. 1:2; 3:8). There’s a reason for this emphasis. The Lord wants us to know how bad a place this city is.

What are some of the other occasions in Scripture when God’s indictments against human wickedness have been issued?

Gen. 6:5 _____

Gen. 18:25 _____

Ezek. 7:10, 11 _____

Hab. 1:1-3 _____

Rev. 16:1-7 _____

God condemns wickedness. God also has pronounced judgment on countries beyond Israel. Ultimately, as the book of Revelation instructs us, the whole earth will fall under God’s judgment. Much of Isaiah is filled with warnings to many nations at that time. (See Isaiah 13; 14:24-28; vss. 29-32.) Jeremiah, too, is filled with one warning after another to the pagan nations around Israel that they will be judged for their evil.

Though the Bible is clear that God brings judgments against nations, why do we have to be careful in how we—as mortal sinners, whose understanding of issues is very limited—determine what is or isn’t God’s judgment? Just because a nation faces calamity doesn’t automatically mean that God is somehow punishing it. Ultimately, all we can do, in every situation, is call people to repentance, confession of sin, faith, and obedience.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Commentary.

I. Universal Judgment.

Most Christians are familiar with the passages on universal judgment in the New Testament. These texts declare that God judges more than just those who claim to be His followers. But many readers of the Bible assume that in the Old Testament God focused exclusively on His chosen people. The story of Nineveh, however, shows that He also dealt with the wickedness of other nations during this time.

The first such incident is His decision to destroy the earth with a Flood because of humanity's evil (Gen. 6:11-13). During the time of Abraham, He announces judgment on the non-Israelite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-19:29).

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, we see Him condemn the depravity of other nations. In Ezekiel (Ezekiel 25-32), for example, He pronounces judgment on Ammon, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt. The book of Amos contains a series of oracles against the practices of certain nations (Amos 1:2-2:3). While these nations have abused Israel and Judah, the Lord also concerns Himself with ethical issues they have raised. He condemns several nations for deporting people and selling them into slavery. He particularly charges them with indulging in violence—a crime of which Nineveh is also guilty (Jon. 3:8).

II. Evil Nineveh.

We first read in Genesis 10:11, 12 about the ancient city of Nineveh, founded by Asshur after the Flood. Centuries later, as Assyria started its military push westward and threatened Israel and Judah, the prophets began to speak of Nineveh more frequently. Although most of the references come from the later period of the Assyrian Empire, the words of the prophets reflect conditions throughout Nineveh's history.

Zephaniah declares that someday, because of the city's pride, God "will make Nineveh a desolation" (Zeph. 2:13; see also vss. 14, 15).

The entire book of Nahum is an oracle against Nineveh (Nah. 1:1). The prophet declares that the city has plotted against God (vss. 9, 11), is worthless (vs. 14), and rages on the international scene like a ruthless lion (Nah. 2:11, 12; also see 3:1, 4, 19).

III. Doom Is Conditional.

The Lord's statement that Nineveh's " 'wickedness has come up before me' " (Jon. 1:2, NRSV) implies judgment and destruction. However, it does not mean that judgment and destruction automatically must happen. God tells Jonah that he must cry out against the city. This echoes Genesis 18:20, 21, in which an outcry rises against Sodom. Abraham immediately recognizes God's intention to wipe out the city and begins negotiating with Him to save it (vss. 22-32).

The English word *repent* means a change, or transformation, of

Tuesday

October 14

GOD'S STANDARD OF MORALITY.

Because of the overpowering pronouncement of the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, many people have decided that the Decalogue was initially given by God to the Israelites and that the moral law it reveals didn't exist until that time. However, a careful reading of Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus reveals a prior knowledge of these commandments and universal human accountability to them.

What are the indications that, long before the time of the prophets, even before the pronouncement of the Decalogue on Sinai to the Israelites, people were held accountable to the same moral standard as those in the Covenant Line?

Gen. 12:10-20 _____

Gen. 20:1-14 _____

Gen. 39:1-9 _____

With evidence for its antiquity within the text itself, the book of Job is recognized as the oldest book in the Old Testament. However, Job himself is not of the Covenant Line, and he lived before the Sinai Decalogue was proclaimed to the Israelites.

Which commandments (or at least the basic principles found in those commandments) are seen in the following texts found in Job? See also Exodus 20.

Job 31:5, 6 _____

Job 31:9-12 _____

Job 31:16-23 _____

Job 31:26-28 _____

Job 31:38-40 _____

How would you explain to someone the necessity of the existence of the law before Sinai? If, as John (1 John 3:4) wrote, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law," why did the law have to predate Sinai?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

behavior from worse to better. The Hebrew verb *niham*, while often translated “repent,” involves a decision to act differently, or to act otherwise, than before and does not necessarily mean that the first decision or action was in any way inferior to the second one. The word *relent* might therefore be a better translation of *niham*.

A fundamental principle of God’s dealings with fallen humanity appears in Ezekiel 18:21-23: “If the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?” (NRSV; also see Jer. 18:7, 8; 26:2, 3).

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Jeremiah 31:33, Matthew 12:36, Acts 10:9-16.

1. Matthew 12:36 says we will have to give an account of every careless word we say. Ask your class members what this means to them. What does this say about God? How does this make them feel right now? Is there anything about their words they think they might need to change?
2. If God knows our every thought and action, and if the law can be written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33), then why do we find it so hard to obey? Why do we studiously teach obedience to our children but then relax the rules for ourselves?
3. Read through Acts 10:9-16. Then do the following:
 - A. Ask each of your class members to write down on a piece of paper his or her first impression of the meaning of this passage.
 - B. In Acts 10, Peter questions God’s command to eat unclean foods by saying, “‘I have never eaten anything impure’ ” (vs. 14, NIV). God rebukes Peter, telling him, “ ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean’ ” (vs. 15). God was not talking about unclean meat but about people of different nationalities. How often do we treat certain people as unclean and in what ways? Yet, God loves us all so much. What can we do to change our “unclean” perspective?
4. Three times God told Peter not to call common what God had made clean. Three times he denied Christ. Three times Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep. What is significant about the number three in Peter’s life?

Wednesday

October 15

MORAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20).

Read over these verses and, using whatever reference material you can find, summarize what they are saying, particularly in the context of what we have been studying this week:

Whatever else these texts are saying, they are clear that God isn’t going to judge the evil and unrighteousness of humanity in an unfair or arbitrary manner. God is a God of love; Christ’s death encompassed all humanity, every person who has or ever will live (John 3:16; Rom. 5:18; Heb. 2:9). God’s desire, from the beginning, was that all humanity would be saved, including the heathen. According to these texts, enough about God has been made known so that these people will be “without excuse.”

What do you think the phrase “without excuse” means? What does that thought tell us about God’s fairness and justice in bringing judgment upon all unrighteousness?

The crucial thing we need to remember is that the same God who brings this judgment is the same God who died on the cross for the sinners whom He, of necessity, must judge. Only as we keep the Cross, and what it represents, before us can we truly begin to understand God’s righteous judgment upon evil.

“But even this final revelation of God’s wrath in the destruction of the wicked is not an act of arbitrary power. ‘God is the fountain of life; and when one chooses the service of sin, he separates from God, and thus cuts himself off from life’ (DA 764). God gives men existence for a time so that they may develop their characters. When this has been accomplished, they receive the results of their own choice.”
—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, on Romans 1:18, vol. 6, pp. 477, 478.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

One would think that of all people, a prophet especially would recognize prophecy's conditional nature. Jonah had seen this principle at work throughout the history of God's people. After Israel made the golden calf, the Lord threatened to destroy them and offered to make a new people from Moses' descendants (Exod. 32:7-10). While it must have been a tempting offer—especially after the constant grief they had caused him—Moses “implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change [repent, KJV] your mind and do not bring disaster on your people’ ” (vss. 11, 12, NRSV). In response, “the Lord changed his mind [repented, KJV] about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (vs. 14, NRSV). While the author of the book of Jonah waits until chapter 4 to express the prophet's belief that God forgives and changes His mind, the story of Jonah teaches that God is free to respond perfectly to whatever human beings do.

WITNESSING

“For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccles. 12:14). Why? Because “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against . . . spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). There is a spiritual warfare going on, and we must choose whom we will serve. We cannot be neutral.

Ann found her three-year-old son hiding in the food pantry after being told not to go into the kitchen. The boy had decided he wanted to taste the pudding that rested on one of the high shelves. Since the pudding had not yet been prepared, he settled for the chocolate powder still in the box. He climbed up the shelves and seized his forbidden treasure. When his mother found him sitting on the pantry floor, he was covered in dusty pudding pow-

der, holding the empty box in his hand. Startled by his mother's unexpected appearance, he cried, “I didn't do it!”

A day is coming when every hidden thing will be revealed. “For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing” (Eccles. 12:14). We will not be able to claim “I didn't do it!” All are guilty, “for all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). Our only escape is the redeeming power of God through the blood of Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26).

God has commissioned us to preach the gospel to the world, so that all will have the opportunity to be saved. However, we cannot be effective witnesses while hiding secret sins in our hearts, those things we are not willing to give up. One day, everything will be brought to light. On that day, let us not be found *holding the box*.

Thursday

October 16

NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS (Acts 10:34, 35).

Scripture reveals that both the prophet Jonah and the nation of Israel had proven unfaithful to their destined role of being a light to the nations. Both had forgotten how God always has expressed His concern for all humanity, not just those whom He specifically called out to be His people. Indeed, it was precisely because the Lord wanted to reach other people, the heathen, that He called out Israel to be a special treasure unto Himself.

How does even the ancient Abrahamic covenant pointedly include people beyond the Covenant Line? Read Genesis 22:18. How were all nations to be blessed by what God did through Abraham? See Gal. 3:26-29.

Divine love, transcending Israel's borders, surely is not an unknown idea to Jonah. But it is easy to choke the channels that God has ordained to flood the world with His grace. No person is immune to this possibility. During New Testament times, on a sunlit rooftop, Simon Peter struggled with the same issues as did the Old Testament Jonah. And in the same town of Joppa!

How does God instruct Peter regarding His compassion for all people? Acts 10:9-16, 34, 35; 11:4-10.

Repetition in biblical narrative writing is a significant pointer of emphasis. Modern writers now use italics or underlining to give emphasis to an important point. But biblical writers use repetition. In this case, Peter is told *three times* that what God has declared clean he must not call common.

Peter's own explanation of this vision makes it clear he realizes that his vision is not instructing him about proper eating habits but about God's compassion for all nationalities of people. Even so, people do reject the God of heaven's grace.

Imagine, if as Adventists, we thought salvation belonged only to us. Even worse, imagine if we didn't want to give it to those who were "unclean"! It's hard to think of a greater way to be unfaithful to our calling. And yet, in what ways, however subtly, do we face the danger of having that same attitude?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: J. Willard Marriott was once asked how his company managed to grow an average of twenty percent every year for ten years. He said the secret lay in his use of Phantom Shoppers—inspectors, posing as customers, who rate the service received. If the service is good, the phantom shopper hands the server a ten-dollar bill clipped to the back of an ID card that discloses the phantom shopper’s true identity. If the service is bad, no ten-dollar bill is attached to the back; instead, the card says “OOPS.” The server is then sent for retraining. Every employee gets three chances.

Thought Questions:

1. The Marriott Corporation generously gives its employees three chances to straighten out their acts. Our God, on the other hand, gives us “seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22)—and more! How does God’s forgivingness help us understand His love for us? If God gives us so many chances, does His role as *Judge* contradict His many measures of forgiveness? Explain.
2. As human beings, we limit how much and how long we bear with the wickedness of those around us. However, the lesson reminds us that the wickedness of people concerns God. Does this mean that God stops caring

at a certain point? Does a time come when God has had enough of us? Explain your answer in light of Bible texts where God says things such as: “ ‘ “I will spew you out of my mouth” ’ ” (Rev. 3:16, RSV).

Application Questions:

1. God is all-knowing, all-seeing. Why don’t these characteristics of God help us live true to Him? Does the fact that God forgives us over and over again cause us to be lax in obedience to God’s law? Would your behavior and attitude be positively altered if God periodically sent a “Phantom Shopper” into your life to evaluate your Christian service? Or what if He gave you only three chances to gain eternity?
2. Compare and contrast Jonah’s attitude toward the people of Nineveh with Moses’ toward Israel after they made the golden calf. Jonah wanted the wrath of God to pour down on the Ninevites, while Moses’ response to a disobedient people was to plead to God—“Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (Exod. 32:32). In what ways can Moses’ attitude be our guide in the treatment of those who “persecute” (Matt. 5:11) us?

Friday

October 17

FURTHER STUDY:

However much God wants those who hear the messages of warning and judgment to repent, He does not force the will. “The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God’s government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan. This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world’s dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, ‘with healing in His wings.’ Mal. 4:2.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 22.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

One argument for the existence of God is known as the “Moral Argument,” and it goes like this: Suppose, hypothetically, some world ruler arose who decided that, for the benefit of all humanity, all red-haired people had to be exterminated. Suppose, too, that through a very elaborate and sophisticated propaganda machine, he or she convinced everyone that, indeed, killing every red-haired person was the only moral and right thing to do. Now, if everyone in the world were convinced that it were morally justifiable to kill all red-haired people, would that act be wrong? Most people, from our perspective now, would believe it to be wrong, regardless of how many people believe it to be right. But why? If moral values arise only from within individuals, instead of coming from some outside, transcendent source, such as God, why would it be wrong? How could it be wrong? And yet we know that it is, even should everyone at that time think it were not. For many people, the answer to this dilemma is easy: Those moral values do come from an outside Source, one that goes beyond humans, and it’s called God. Discuss the strong and weak points of this argument.

SUMMARY: God is a God of love, but He’s also a God of justice, and just as His mercy extends to all nations, so does His divine judgment.