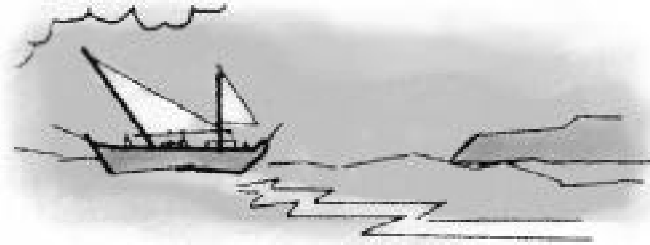


A Hebrew Prophet and Heathen Mariners



Sabbath Afternoon

IN SOME WAYS, THE STORY line that unfolds this week (basically, Jon. 1:4-13) is a small example of what happened to ancient Israel. God originally designed that, had the nation been obedient, the heathen would have come from all around to learn about the God who had done so much for His chosen people. Unfortunately, that wasn't how things turned out. Because of Israel's disobedience, instead of those pagans coming to the Hebrews, the Hebrews went to the pagans, often in chains. That is, they witnessed for the Lord, as He said they would, but they did so amid great calamity and distress.

This week we'll see, on a minor scale, a similar paradigm. It's in the midst of great trial and calamity that Jonah, surrounded by "pagans," is put into a situation in which he has to witness for the Lord, even if it's upon a ship sinking amid a terrible storm.

Yet, even despite Jonah and his faults, the message gets through.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What is it about tragedy that often helps us put things in perspective? What powerful irony appears in this part of the book of Jonah? Why does Jonah identify his God as the Creator of the earth and the sea? How was God able to use Jonah as a witness, despite the prophet's stubbornness?

MEMORY TEXT: "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" (Psalm 119:90, 91, NKJV).

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 1.

Sunday

October 26

STORM AT SEA.

In Jonah 1:4, 5, the narrative continues. The Lord sends a mighty storm, the ship is in danger of sinking, the pagan sailors are praying to their respective gods, and Jonah had “gone down into the hold of the ship” (vs. 5, NRSV), where the captain found him sleeping. The captain was, obviously, quite vexed to find someone snoozing in such an emergency.

Notice, too, what happens among these pagan sailors. The text says they started casting their “wares” overboard. These were things that, in normal circumstances, would be of great value to them. This even could have been the cargo. Now, however, in such an emergency, they are willing to cast it all into the sea! What’s the spiritual lesson here? (See also Eccles. 2:11; Matt. 16:26; 1 John 2:15-17.) How many of us have ever found ourselves in a situation in which, suddenly, many of the things we deemed so important become less so? How can the Lord use such situations to teach us about what’s truly of value?

Read what the captain says to Jonah. Why was he so upset? What did he want from the sleeping prophet? Was this an appeal made by faith or simply by desperation? Jon. 1:6.

Note the striking similarity of the captain’s summons to Jonah—“Arise!” (Jon. 1:6), and Jonah’s original summons from God in verse 2—“Arise.” Moreover, the captain begs Jonah to “cry” unto God, using the same verb that God had when He called Jonah to “cry” against Nineveh (Jon. 1:2). Now, however, the summons to arise and to cry comes from a pagan sailor who doesn’t even worship the God of heaven.

Jonah, a prophet of the true God, is asked by a pagan to pray. The irony of this situation shouldn’t be missed.

What spiritual significance can you find in the irony of this pagan asking a Hebrew prophet to pray? Do we as Christians ever find those not of our faith, or those of even no “faith,” who are more “spiritual” or “moral” or even more faithful to what they believe than we ourselves are to what we know? What can we learn from these situations?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Jonah 1:9.

Teachers Aims:

1. To explore how calamity prioritizes what is important.
2. To reaffirm belief in God as Creator.

Lesson Outline:

I. Jonah: Asleep in the Storm.

- A. The crew tosses its prize cargo into the sea in order to save the ship from sinking.
- B. The captain is vexed to find Jonah asleep.
- C. He begs Jonah to pray for deliverance.
- D. God sends the storm, not in anger but in love.
- E. Pagan mariners believe a storm of this magnitude is tied to a person's guilt. Thus, finding the culprit would set matters right.
- F. God allows the casting of lots to implicate Jonah as the cause of the storm (Jon. 1:7).
- G. The sailors ask Jonah of what he is guilty.

II. The Sermon in the Storm.

- A. Jonah names God as the Sovereign Creator over land and sea (Jon 1:9).
- B. Ironically, in his attempt to avoid warning the Ninevites, Jonah finds himself doing the very thing he originally ran from: witnessing.
- C. The crew fears God more than the storm (vs. 10).
- D. They fear that in God's attempt to punish Jonah, they will die with him.
- E. The violence of the storm convinces them of God's wrath and stirs their hearts to action.

III. Castaway.

- A. The storm worsens.
- B. The sailors plead with Jonah to tell them how to avert God's anger.
- C. Jonah tells the sailors to hurl him into the sea.

Summary: Ancient beliefs held that the authority of a deity was localized to a particular region or area, such as a mountain or a river. Outside its domain, the deity held no power. Thus, when Jonah books passage to Tarshish and later *tells* the crew he is fleeing from God, it comes as no surprise that the captain does not refuse him passage. How could Jonah's land God exert power over the sea? God, however, proclaims Himself as Lord of land and sea in the storm that shakes the ship.

Monday

October 27

PAGAN MARINERS CONTINUE THEIR INITIATIVE.

The sailors continue to struggle against the alarming storm while Jonah remains detached. The mariners are convicted that the violence of this storm is evidence the gods were angry.

In reality, of course, the storm was brought, not out of anger but out of love. We know that, because we know the ending of the story and what was happening behind the scenes, something the sailors didn't know. What does this tell us about how careful we need to be about drawing the wrong conclusions regarding whatever terrible problems we might be facing at the moment? (See also Proverbs 3; Rom. 8:28; 1 Pet. 4:12.)

The mariners assume that a storm of this magnitude is closely bound up with someone's guilt. The outcome of finding the culprit would put matters right. Though not often used today, casting lots was generally regarded in ancient times in Israel and by other nations as a method of resolving conflicts. (See Num. 33:54; 1 Sam. 14:41, 42; Esther 3:7; Prov. 16:33.) In the book of Jonah, God allows the casting of lots to implicate Jonah as the cause of the storm (Jon. 1:7).

Though we have clear-cut Bible examples of someone's evil bringing calamity (Joshua 7), what danger exists in assuming that calamity must result from someone's specific transgression? (See Job 1; 2.)

After the lot falls on Jonah, the sailors pepper him with numerous questions, obviously attempting to find out why the lot fell his way and why he was the cause of the storm (Jon. 1:7, 8).

Up to this point in the narrative, Jonah has not been heard talking. Now, in response to all the many pressing questions put to him, he answers selectively. In fact, he ignores the question about his occupation, about where he came from, and about his country. The only question he answers is regarding what ethnic background he has. He tells them that he is a "Hebrew." Then he answers a question they don't even ask, which is who his God is.

The phrase to "fear God" is a common Hebrew expression that implies the idea of worshiping and serving the Lord. What's so ironic about Jonah's answer in this specific situation?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Commentary.

I. Storm of Terror.

God often employs the elements of nature to accomplish His purposes (Exodus 20, Judg. 5:21). In the book of Jonah, God uses a terrible storm to pursue a fleeing prophet.

As the storm rages, the sailors cry out to their gods. Ships, then as now, often had international crews. Each nation represented on this ship had its own gods, and even those sailors who belonged to the same nation may have worshiped various local deities. Furthermore, the ancients believed that the same god might manifest himself in different forms at different places. That is why the Bible will mention Baal of such and such a place. The various Baals were usually storm gods. But none of the sailors' gods seemed able or willing to help. The author does not criticize or condemn the sailors' prayers. They were sincere individuals, operating honestly within the religious frameworks they knew.

In an attempt to save themselves and to appease the gods, the sailors hurl the ship's cargo overboard. Ancient ships transported gold and silver, copper ingots shaped like ox hides, lumber from the forests of Lebanon (especially precious to Egypt, which had almost no source of wood), and huge clay jars of grain, wine, and olive oil. Valuable as the cargo of Jonah's ship might have been, life was even more precious.

II. The Sleeping Prophet.

The crew members fight for their lives, but the passenger who boarded in Joppa sleeps in the hold of the ship (Jon. 1:5). The Old Testament uses the vocabulary here for the anesthetized sleep of Adam before God removed the rib to create Eve (Gen. 2:21), for the sleep of the slothful (Prov. 10:5, 19:15), or of visionary experiences (Job 4:13, 14; Dan. 8:18). Apparently Jonah was not in an ordinary sleep, though the text does not say whether God had sent it.

The ship's captain, finding Jonah asleep, demands to know how the prophet possibly could sleep through all the commotion (Jon. 1:6). Earlier the Lord had told Jonah to get up and cry out (vs. 2). Now the pagan ship captain uses the same vocabulary. Both he, and later the king of Nineveh (Jon. 3:9), suggest that Jonah's God might hear and save them. Their tentative phrasing teaches us that no one can control the God of Israel.

III. Casting Lots.

The sailors recognize that the storm is a divine punishment on someone aboard their ship. They decide to cast lots to find out who it is. Casting lots as a means to discerning divine will appears frequently, both in Scripture and elsewhere in the ancient world. Here it possibly involved putting stones into the lap of one's garment or into a con-

Tuesday

October 28

WITNESS AT SEA.

Immediately after identifying himself as a Hebrew, Jonah then offers some information the sailors hadn't specifically requested: " 'I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' " (Jon. 1:9, NKJV).

What other prophet uses the title "the God of heaven"? Dan. 2:19.

Daniel blesses the "God of heaven" when God reveals Nebuchadnezzar's dream and spares the lives of the Babylonian wise men. This phrase, "the God of heaven," appears numerous times in the Old Testament in reference to the Lord.

Perhaps, though, what's most interesting is that not only does Jonah name Him "Yahweh, the God of heaven"; he immediately describes him as the Creator, the One who made the sea and the dry land, an unmistakable reference to the Genesis Creation account.

What are these texts (Exod. 2:11; Pss. 100:3; 146:5, 6; Mal. 2:10; Acts 4:24; Col. 1:16, 17; Rev. 4:11; 14:7) saying that is so important to our faith as Seventh-day Adventists?

Jonah knows that the power and authority of his God come from the simple, yet crucial, fact that the Lord is the Creator, the Source of all that is, the foundation of truth, the One who has made reality. Our whole faith is based on the notion that we are worshipping the God who created all things. It's a fact that He, alone, is the Creator, and that makes Him, alone, the only true God. If He's not the Creator, then why worship Him, for He would be, just as we are, merely a product of something even greater than He is?

Thus, Jonah isn't wasting time here on any long theological excursions on the essential nature of his God. Instead, He gets right to the heart of the issue, telling them what they need to know.

God commands that every week (no exceptions) we devote one-seventh of our lives as a reminder that He is our Creator. What does this tell us about how important the doctrine of Creation is?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

tainer and then shaking whatever held the stones until one of them tumbled out. (The Greek phraseology used to describe the casting of lots to select a replacement for Judas [Acts 1:26] is the same as the ancient Greek translation of Jonah 1:7.)

When the lot fell on Jonah (vs. 7), the sailors bombarded him with some questions: Why has the calamity struck them? What is his occupation? Where did he come from? and What people did he belong to?

When he tells them that he, a Hebrew who worships the Creator-God, has fled his God, they become even more afraid and demand to know why he did so (vs. 10). What are they to make of a man who openly announces that he is a servant of a God from whom he ran away in order to avoid doing His will?

Because Jonah admits that he worships the Creator-God (“ ‘who

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: John 18:15-18, 25-27, 21:15-25; 1 John 2:15-17

1. Read 1 John 2:15-17. Where does one draw the line between having too many possessions and enough to meet our physical, spiritual, and aesthetic needs?
2. Jonah ran away from God, the same God whom He professed to the sailors. What other people in the Bible ran away from God? Name some Bible characters who did not. What made the difference in the lives of those who did not run away from the Lord?
3. Peter, who professed that he would lay down his life for Christ and seemed to do so when he defended Him with his sword, turned right around and denied Christ three times (Luke 22:54-62, John 18:15-18, 25-27). Discuss the similarities and differences between Peter's denying Christ and Jonah's running away from Christ. Jesus forgave Peter and reinstated him to the
4. What was it about Jonah that caused the captain and the sailors to single him out? Why would the captain ask Jonah to “ ‘call on your God’ ”? (Jon. 1:6, NKJV). Was there something about Jonah that screamed “Hebrew prophet”? Should there be something about us that screams “Adventist Christians”? If so, what?
5. Do you think Jonah was still running away from God when he asked the sailors to throw him overboard? Or was he acknowledging God and thinking that he deserved such a fate? Do you think that if Jonah had asked the sailors to return to port, the storm would have stopped? Would the storm have stopped if Jonah had asked to be put off the ship at the next port? What would Jonah not have learned if the great fish had not swallowed him?

Wednesday

October 29

“WHY HAST THOU DONE THIS?”

The irony here is outrageous. Jonah did not want to testify to the pagans in Nineveh. But now, in his mad flight from that assignment, he is forced to testify to the pagans on this ship.

What did Jonah say to the men (Jon. 1:9, 10) that made them so fearful?

Jonah’s proclamation causes the sailors to be “exceedingly afraid.” They were already “afraid” of the storm (1:5) to begin with; now, they are “exceedingly afraid” (vs. 10). They react even more fearfully to Jonah’s confession about God than they had to the perilous storm. And no wonder: It’s one thing to worship the powerful God; it’s another to flee openly from Him. No doubt, not knowing much about this God, the pagans must have assumed that He brought the storm in order to destroy Jonah for his disobedience. And, because they had the unfortunate luck of being with him, they were going to be destroyed, as well.

There is a signal contrast between these pagan seamen and Jonah. While Jonah, the prophet of God, dares to act contrary to the God he fears, the mere mention of the mighty God of heaven causes great fear in the sailors’ hearts. The violence of the storm is all the testimony they need to the power of the God whom they believe Jonah has angered.

This conviction didn’t happen because Jonah consciously testified for God. No, he was forced to make his confession because of the storm. But through this unplanned disclosure, the mariners’ hearts were stirred. They expressed horror at Jonah’s flight from the God of heaven and earth. Thus, even in disobedience, Jonah was used by the Lord as a witness.

Indeed, what impressed the sailors about the terrible storm took place *despite* Jonah. They certainly saw nothing particularly virtuous in him. God, however, was able to work around Jonah’s disobedience. It’s kind of ironic, too, that it was through his testimony that they learned something about the true God.

The sailors, after learning about Jonah’s flight, said to him, “Why hast thou done this?” What do we say when, after being caught in sin, we are asked, “Why hast thou done this?” Do we, as born-again Christians—who have been promised so much power from above (Rom. 6:1-12; 1 Cor. 10:13)—ever have a valid excuse to sin?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

made the sea and the dry land' ” [NRSV], a figure of speech representing all creation), they had no more doubt that it is his presence causing the storm. But what should they do about it? Jonah assures them that when they hurl him into the sea, the storm will cease (vs. 12). In asking the sailors to treat him as excess baggage, we realize that Jonah truly would die rather than do God's will.

IV. Godly Pagans.

Unlike Jonah, who, as we shall see later, is still willing to allow a populous city to perish, the sailors are humane. They want Jonah to live (vs. 13).

Besides sails, the other power for ancient ships was rowing. Now the pagan sailors try to get their vessel back to land with their oars. The Hebrew literally says that they “dig” their oars into the water. They do not want to sacrifice Jonah, even to save themselves. Desperately they struggle against the waves, but the storm worsens, and they beg Jonah's God to save them. As they “cried out to the Lord” (vs. 14, NRSV), we again hear an echo of God's call to Jonah. Further, they acknowledge that the God of Israel has done as *He* pleases (vs. 14).

But what about Jonah? He does not pray even to save himself. The only alternative he offers the sailors is his life for theirs. This is not self-sacrifice but selfishness. He is determined to escape his mission

WITNESSING

In Jonah 1:3, we read how Jonah fled from what God wanted him to do. However, just as he had settled in the bottom of the ship, God took control. He sent “a great wind . . . and . . . a mighty tempest” (vs. 4). Fearing for their lives, the other men on board began to pray to their false gods of wood and stone—gods who could not see, hear, or speak; gods they had created by their own hands or imaginings. Later, Jonah confessed “I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ ” (vs. 1:9, NKJV). No wonder the men on the ship were exceedingly afraid. Jonah professed to worship the God who created the sea—the same sea possessed by a raging storm on which their little ship was helplessly tossed to and fro.

It was God who commanded the scorching fire of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace not to consume Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. It was God who caused the fountains of the heavens to burst forth and flood the earth in the days of Noah. It was God who ordained the hawk to fly and the eagle to soar up at His command (Job 39:26, 27).

Many people trust in earthly things: money, possessions, false religion, etc. But like the fire, the water, and every living creature, we must bear witness that because the God of heaven is greater than all these, we are to worship Him. Like Jonah, we also are to proclaim our faith in the living God who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is” (Exod. 20:11).

THE EMERGENCY WORSENS.

What phrase is repeated in Jonah 1:10 for the third time in this chapter?

This phrase “from the presence of the Lord” has appeared in this first chapter almost like a refrain. We already have seen it twice in verse 3. The author of the book of Jonah—as are all writers of biblical narrative—is deliberate in his choice of words. Repetition in Hebrew narrative is a technique employed to emphasize something important. In this case, our attention is deliberately focused on Jonah’s obstinate attitude.

Why do you think that phrase is used again? What point is the author trying to make? What irony is found in its use? Can anyone ever really flee from the presence of an all-knowing God (Prov. 5:21)? In what ways can we attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord?

The sailors grow more desperate as the storm worsens. Now they realize something must be done, or everyone will perish.

Notice how the sailors continue to take the initiative. They acknowledged the God Jonah worshiped. Now they ask him what action they should take. The sailors admit their acute fear, and they beg of Jonah the remedy: *What can we do that God should not be angered? You tell us, and we will obey. In other words, you got us into this mess, now you tell us what to do to get out of it.*

Look at Jonah’s response (1:12). How would you characterize it? Was Jonah, admitting his guilt, ready to sacrifice himself for the good of others? Was he playing the role of the pious martyr? Or was he still continuing in disobedience? What does the fact that there’s no record of Jonah repenting or confessing to the Lord tell us about his attitude, at least to this point?

At this point in the story, we see, perhaps, a bit of softening in Jonah. He admits that he was fleeing from the Lord, admits that he is the cause of their present suffering, and is willing to be cast into the sea in order to spare them sure destruction. Whatever his ultimate motives, Jonah is showing some signs of character development, however extreme the circumstances needed to bring it out.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

to Nineveh. While the sailors do not wish to die, neither do they want the prophet's blood on their hands (vs. 14). Finally, they fear that they have no other choice. As they hurl him into the sea, it grows calm (vs. 15). God's need for the storm ends, so it ceases to rage. The sailors accept the storm as a display of His power, while Jonah takes advantage of it as a way out of his duty.

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: The royal portrait looks like a parody. William Scrots, the court painter, appears to have done a great injustice to Edward VI—the skull balloons out in the back, the forehead bulges forward, the nose curves like a beak, and the chin under-shoots the face. This, however, is no ordinary piece of art. It is anamorphosis art, which can be appreciated only by squinting at the picture through a peephole in the side of the frame. From this *narrow* view, one may see the real, true-to-life, handsomely proportioned face of Edward VI.

Thought Questions:

1. Sometimes a narrow perspective is needed; at other times it is advantageous to see the bigger picture. Think of examples that illustrate this. Describe Jonah's perspective of God's plan for Nineveh. What obstructions blocked Jonah from viewing it according to God's vantage point? What is the ideal, mature response to a change in plans? What are the characteristics of sin that keep us from responding positively to change?
2. Israel was designed to attract surrounding nations to the

true God. However, history records that this is not what happened; Israel assimilated with, more than it strived to be set apart from, its neighbors. Like Israel, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is made up of a called-out people, a group selected to be peculiar. Why, then, are we often embarrassed by our peculiarities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being different? What role do our differences play in the bigger picture?

Application Question:

In 1910, the boll weevil wiped out the cotton crop in the southern United States, forcing farmers to diversify by planting peanuts and other crops they never thought of growing before. The change brought prosperity to the region. Growers in Enterprise, Alabama, were so grateful to the destructive beetle for ending their one-crop dependency they eventually erected a monument to it in the town square in 1919. Time has a way of putting things into the right perspective. Share some of your *big-fish* and *boll-weevil* experiences that, over time, turned out to be blessings.

FURTHER STUDY:

Contrast Jonah's response with the apostle Paul's experience of a terrible storm on board a ship in the same body of water: Acts 27:21-25.

Consider how Paul takes command of the situation and declares that God will save all those on board. Courageously he exhorts them not to despair. "Last night there was standing beside me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, and He said, "Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to appear before Caesar, and for this reason God grants you the safety of all who are sailing with you." So take courage, friends; I trust in God that things will turn out just as I was told' " (Acts 27:23-25, Jerusalem). Imagine had Jonah displayed a similar faith in the same God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What might have happened had Jonah repented of his defection right there and called for God to save him, the crew, and the ship?**
- 2. Read Jonah 1:13. What is the text saying? What's implied in there about the character of these "pagans"? Was there something already there that made them open to the moving of God's Spirit upon them?**
- 3. Jonah was acting not out of disbelief but out of . . . what? He clearly believed in the existence of the Lord. Otherwise, why would he have fled after receiving the "word of the Lord"? Why flee from "the presence" of a God you don't believe in to begin with? When confronted by the sailors, he instantly confessed his belief in the Lord. And He knew of the power of his God, for Jonah admitted that it was because of his fleeing from the Lord that this terrible storm had come. What, then, was his problem? Why would anyone openly disobey a God whom they were so sure existed? In what ways do Christians do the same thing? It's one thing to disobey the commands of a God whom you don't believe even exists; it's another thing to disobey openly the commands of a God whom you do believe in. Discuss.**

SUMMARY: God used Jonah, despite himself. How much better the outcome would have been had Jonah cooperated right from the start.