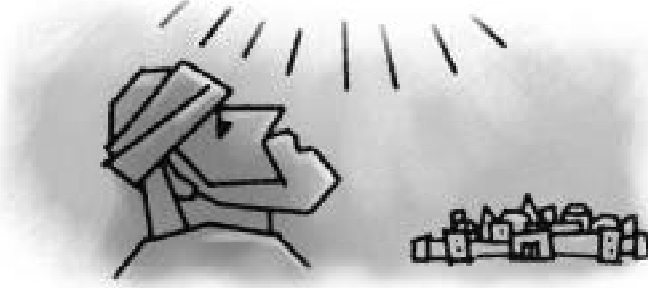


The Last Word



Sabbath Afternoon

THE FOUR-CHAPTER NARRATIVE OF the book of Jonah now closes. God has the last word, even though that last word is a question. The question is presented, however, not as God wanting to learn from Jonah but as God wanting to teach him.

Because the book doesn't tell us whether Jonah ever understands the point or not, it must not be that important for us to know. Instead, what's important is, Do we get the point? Sure, we know about God's love, mercy, and compassion; and we are glad to have these things for ourselves. But are we willing to allow God to work in us so we can have love, mercy, and compassion for others? Are we willing to make the self-sacrifices needed in order for us to teach modern-day Ninevites the truth that judgment is coming and that one day they will have to answer for their sins?

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What does God say to Jonah about the Ninevites? How does the Lord express their moral ignorance? Why does the Lord talk about the animals in the city? What lesson is the Lord trying to teach Jonah? How does Jonah respond? In what ways is Jonah a model of ancient Israel? Or even the modern church? Why does the Lord end the book of Jonah with a question that remains unanswered?

MEMORY TEXT: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30).

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 13.

Sunday

December 7

ONE LOST SOUL.

“And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (Jon. 4:11).

How can the Lord impress upon this poor man’s mind which things are important and which things aren’t? Jonah lived in a world, much like ours, where human life often seems cheap. Yet, the Lord died for all humanity, because He loves all humanity. In fact, we are told that He would have died for just one soul. “In the parable the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep—the very least that can be numbered. So if there had been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 187.

In the context of the last verse in the book of Jonah (and of Jonah’s attitude), read Matthew 18:11-14. What kind of contrast does it create between God’s attitude toward people and Jonah’s (whose attitude might differ from ours only in degree)? What kind of rebuke do these words of Jesus have for us and for our coldness and for our lack of zeal for souls?

The thought of Christ dying for this whole planet, as small as it is in contrast to the size of the universe, is amazing enough. But for one person? Who can grasp that kind of love? Though we don’t know in the end how many ultimately will be saved (Isa. 66:23; Rev. 21:24), it certainly will be more than one. And yet, even if only one, Christ would have died anyway! No wonder the secular mind has a hard time grasping the gospel. Even those of faith can barely wrap their minds around such a powerful concept.

Think about who God is, who we are, and how small and wretched we are in contrast; and yet, look what God did for us, anyway. Dwell on what that thought tells us about God’s love. Write a paragraph expressing what this truth means to you and the hope it gives. What does this concept say to us about the assurance of salvation? Ask this question too: How, in the face of such love, are souls ultimately lost?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Jonah 4:11.

Teachers Aims:

1. To discuss the significance of God's mercy toward the Ninevites.
2. To examine what the Lord has to say about the moral accountability of those who are ignorant of Him.

Lesson Outline:

I. Just One.

- A. Just as Jonah wrestled with God's mercy for Nineveh, we, too, find it difficult to understand why God would sacrifice His Son for just one soul.
- B. The Ninevites' lack of instruction in the ways of God made them spiritually equal in understanding to children.
- C. They embraced the light given them, and for this God could not justify their destruction.

II. Obedience: Nature Versus Humanity.

- A. All the created world is under God's power and care, including animals.
- B. Nature is without morality, while humanity is of a moral nature, endowed with free will and a soul.
- C. Nature is compelled to obey God; humanity is offered a choice.

Summary: The book of Jonah ends with God's mercy, love, and grace contrasted to the tarnished character of humanity. The difference between our fallen selves and our holy God should not overwhelm us but should fill us with gratitude that, despite this gap, God loves us and saves us anyway.

Commentary.

I. A Book of Questions.

Commentator James Limburg suggests "the Jonah story is . . . addressed to each individual Israelite or to each individual who is a part of the people of God. . . . Some eleven questions are directed to Jonah/the hearer in the course of the story, thus placing the listener in the role of Jonah in the story and leaving the listener with the Lord's final question still ringing in his or her ears."—*Jonah: A Commentary*, p. 25.

Elsewhere Limburg comments, "As the story winds down, the questions addressed to Jonah more and more become questions ad-

Monday

December 8

LIVING IN IGNORANCE.

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Notice the expression in Jonah 4:11 the Lord uses to describe the Ninevites. Obviously, it’s a metaphor. What is the Lord saying with that description? What other point does He wish to convey to this Hebrew prophet (notice the emphasis on the adjective Hebrew)?

The Lord talks to Jonah, a Hebrew, someone who comes from the nation whom the Lord called out to be a special people, those who were given great light and understanding of not only who God is but of His eternal, moral principles (see Exod. 19:5; Exodus 20; Deut. 4:7; 12:8; Pss. 19:7-11; 37:31; Jer. 31:33). So much of Hebrew history is defined by their understanding of the law and the moral precepts found in the law. In this way, the Hebrew nation stood far in advance of all the pagan societies around them.

In contrast, God describes the Ninevites as not being able to discern between their right hand and their left. Obviously, these people didn’t have the same kind of moral direction the Lord had given to Israel. A similar phrase appears in the Bible (Deut. 17:20; 28:14; Josh. 1:7), referring to the moral issue of not deviating from the divine law and from revelation. Thus here, in the book of Jonah, we are instructed that the Ninevites lacked the knowledge of the law of Yahweh. The use of the phrase “right hand and left hand” is also found in Babylonian texts as a synonym for “truth and justice” or “law and order.” Thus, God instructs Jonah that in the case of Nineveh He defers judgment for the sake of the morally ignorant, for those who don’t understand.

Maybe the Ninevites didn’t have the same knowledge of God’s law as did the Hebrews; nevertheless, the actions of the people and the king, as expressed in Jonah 3:10, show that they had some moral conscience and some understanding of good and evil. Look again at what the Lord says to Jonah in the last verse about the Ninevites. What does that tell us regarding God’s fairness in dealing with those who don’t have a deeper revelation of moral truth? Are they, therefore, not accountable to God for their actions? Or, will they be accountable to God in a different way?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

dressed to those listening to the story. Jonah, it becomes clear, is me! Thus the story asks its hearers: Do you recognize yourself in the figure of Jonah? Do you detect in yourself symptoms of the Jonah syndrome?"—*Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 156.

God's final question in the book is especially relevant to God's people in earth's final days. We are His last-day *prophets* too.

II. "Who Do Not Know Their Right Hand From Their Left" (Jon. 4:11, NRSV).

Jonah feels sorrow over the death of a solitary plant. He did not bring the plant into existence or even care for and nurture it, but he still feels grief when it perishes. Yet, he has no compassion for the people of Nineveh. God leads him to face the shocking inconsistency in his thinking. He wants Jonah to experience the love and tender care He feels for the people of the city and, in the process, lead him to do everything possible to save them.

The verb translated "care" literally means "to have tears in one's eyes." God weeps over the city of Nineveh just as Jesus will later sob, heartbroken, over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44).

"Jesus once said that God cared about the sparrows of Jerusalem (Matt. 10:29). The Book of Jonah tells of that amazing grace by speaking of the Lord's concern for the cows of Nineveh."—James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, p. 157.

III. Who Is Nineveh?

In Isaiah 19:25, God made a startling proclamation. After prophesying punishment against Egypt, He concludes, " 'Blessed be Egypt *my people*, and Assyria *the work of my hands*, and Israel *my heritage*' " (NRSV, emphasis supplied). Israel suffered much from Egypt and Assyria, yet God declares them His people.

Often we assume that all God's people in the Old Testament descended from Abraham. A careful reading of Scripture shows otherwise. Abraham had a thousand people with him, including his servants and other retainers. Even though not all were biologically related, they were his people. Joseph married the Egyptian woman Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On (Gen. 41:45). She bore Joseph two sons (vss. 50-52), who founded the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. Judah married a Canaanite woman, as apparently did his son Er. His wife Tamar became an ancestor of David, as did the Moabite woman Ruth.

The mixed multitude, though it caused many problems after Israel left Egypt, became a part of Israel. When God renewed the covenant with Israel in Deuteronomy 29 and 30, Scripture describes the aliens in the camp as being included in the covenant (Deut. 29:10-12).

After the Exile, the book of Ezra lists those who originally came from the Gibeonite cities as just another part of Israel (Ezra 2:25). Most of these people would have descended from the Gibeonites, who

Tuesday

December 9

ANIMALS TOO? (READ JOB 39).

All through chapter 4 God has kept gentle pressure on Jonah to reconsider his evaluation of God's treatment of the Ninevites. And in a book of surprises, one of the most surprising is the final question to Jonah.

What is the last phrase of the final verse in the concluding chapter in the book of Jonah? Jon. 4:11.

The rather cryptic ending of Jonah concludes with God showing His compassion not only on the pagan Ninevites but, apparently, on their cattle, as well (the Hebrew word there can mean not just cattle but "animals" in general). Though the recorded ending is quite abrupt (one would love to know how the conversation ultimately concluded), and the precise meaning isn't absolutely clear, it seems as though the Lord tells Jonah it wasn't only the people He had wanted to have pity on but their animals, as well.

This really shouldn't be that surprising, should it?

Throughout the four chapters in the book of Jonah, the " 'Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land' " (Jon. 1:9, NASB) is seen in His sovereignty over all His creation. This is also regularly expressed by many of the Bible writers, in both Testaments. And we are often reminded in Scripture how all the created world is part of God's concern. Even the heavens are included in this divine perspective.

Read Job 39. Notice the focus the Lord has on the creatures He refers to. What does that tell us about God's interest and care about animals, as well? Also, no matter how greatly different the situations, what parallels can you find between what the Lord says here to Job and what He says to Jonah?

Jewish tradition teaches that God takes note of those who are kind to animals, because animals can't return the favor, as humans can.

One of our greatest dangers is going to extremes. We can take a good thing so far that it becomes a bad thing. How can Christians strike the right balance in their attitude toward animals (or nature, in general) so that, on one hand, they don't treat animals cruelly nor, on the other, become fanatical in devotion toward them?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

had originally tricked Israel into an alliance with them. (Also see Ezra 2:43-59.)

God wanted His people to so impress others with His love that all humanity would desire to become part of Israel.

Jonah's fear that God would repent of His plans to destroy the Assyrian city had come true and had left him furious, humiliated, and depressed to the point of suicide. When God's anger cooled, Jonah's heated up. Why, he demanded, did the Lord insist on saving the enemies of His people? Sadly, many in the church behave like Jonah. One racial, ethnic, or national group has looked down upon another as not worthy of salvation—or even as not fully human. But to God, all nations and peoples are “ ‘my people’ ” (Isa. 19:25, NRSV).

“The people of Nineveh are the ‘people of the world,’ the ‘outsiders.’ We recall the exemplary behavior of the outsiders in this story. In times of crisis, the sailors pray and act, and the Ninevites repent and clean up the violence in their city. These favorable pictures of the people of the world suggest two things for the people of God. First,

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Exodus 4:11, Jonah 4:11.

1. The story of Jonah illustrates that God is not willing for even one person to be lost. What other stories in the Bible illustrate this fact? What modern illustrations could portray God's compassion for just one sinner?
2. Read Exodus 4:11. God created every aspect of us, including our abilities and gifts. Why, then, did He not create us with greater compassion for other humans? Or did He? Why do we not take every opportunity to witness for God, when He is willing to teach us what to say?
3. Jonah 4:11 teaches us that God's compassion is so great He was even concerned about the animals living in Nineveh. How should this inform our treatment of His creation?
4. Jonah runs away from God and inadvertently preaches a sermon to the sailors. A fish swallows him. He repents and preaches to the Ninevites. Then they repent. Jonah, however, is angry enough to die. What kind of personal relationship do you think Jonah had with God?
5. The Ninevites readily obeyed God. At best, Jonah reluctantly did so. How could he have experienced all that he did and still have problems obeying God? Are there any parallels in your life today and in the corporate church? How can we change so we will be more like the Ninevites in heeding God's call?

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS . . .

The book of Jonah comes to a sudden halt with a probing question that is left unanswered. We are never told whether or not Jonah finally admits to his self-centered enjoyment of God’s favor while begrudging it to the Ninevites. Nor whether he was ever able to grasp that God’s generous love for all people far surpassed his own idea of fairness. We are left wondering whether Jonah ever would appreciate God’s forgiveness of those who don’t deserve that forgiveness.

It is very unusual for a book in the Bible to end with a question, a most surprising question at that; yet, there is really no reason why a book cannot end that way. In fact, this ending is not an example of unfinished thinking and careless writing. On the contrary, by ending this way, the book sharply contrasts Jonah’s attitude to God’s.

Though it’s not common for a book of the Bible to end with a question, it is common for the Lord Himself to ask questions. Do two things with these questions God asked: First, ask yourself, Why did He ask them? Second, write down what you think the answers are (and give reasons for your answers):

Exod. 4:11 _____

Job 40:1, 2 _____

Jon. 4:11 _____

Mark 8:36 _____

Luke 6:9 _____

Take your answers to these questions and summarize in a short paragraph what they teach us about the character, mercy, and power of our God.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

God's people could be instructed by the people of the world. Jesus once commended the resourcefulness of the 'people of this world,' concluding that his own followers could learn from them (Luke 16:1-13). Second, the report of this people's eagerness to hear a word from God is a reminder of the missionary calling of the church. Israel had been called to be a 'light to the nations' (Isa. 49:6). Jesus spoke of the task of the disciples in the same language (Matt. 5:14). The picture of Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem is a reminder of God's love for the people of that city and that tradition (Matt. 23:37-39). The story of Jonah shows us a picture of God with tears of compassion in his eyes for the people of the other great cities of the world."—James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, p. 156.

IV. Unanswered Questions.

The book of Jonah ends with a question each of us must respond to. Should not God be concerned about His creation wherever and whoever it is? And how should those who claim to be His people put that concern into concrete action? God awaits your answer today.

WITNESSING

"May I ask you a question?" is a question many of us have asked at one time or another. Asking a question is a good way to get someone's attention. Most people enjoy feeling as though they may know the answer. Even if they do not know it, they may still attempt to give an intelligent response.

The lesson for this week refers to some of the questions God asked various individuals in the Bible. "Who hath made man's mouth?" (Exod. 4:11). "Who shut up the sea with doors . . . ?" (Job 38:8). "Who provideth for the raven his food?" (Job 38:41). These questions point to only One, the Creator of all things.

Jesus asked questions to stimulate thought and lead His

hearers to the truth. When discussing the Word of God with others, we also should ask thought-provoking questions that point to the truth. We also should teach others to search the Scriptures for themselves to find answers. They will believe more readily and accept God's Word when they do this.

Satan has called into question God's character. Is God just? God answered that question at the Cross. In the end, those who have overcome will sing its conclusion. "Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy" (Rev. 15:3, 4).

Thursday

December 11

THE OX KNOWS.

“The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider” (Isa. 1:3).

Read the first three verses of Isaiah 1. What parallel can you see there with the story of Jonah and his attitude toward the Lord?

As we’ve seen all through the book of Jonah, nature is under the Lord’s control. This teaching, of course, is nothing new (see Matt. 21:18, 19; 17:24-27; Mark 4:35-41). If human beings were only just as obedient. The difference, however, is that God didn’t make nature morally culpable, as He made humanity. God forces nature; He doesn’t force humanity. In order for us to be moral beings, we have to be free beings. Sadly, we often abuse that freedom.

Survey, again, the book of Jonah. What and who obeyed the Lord, and who didn’t? What irony can you see in the answer?

Nature obeyed, the pagans obeyed; only Jonah, the Hebrew, didn’t, or at least to the degree that, no doubt, the Lord wanted him to. In a sense, Jonah typified the nation of Israel during various times in its history. What it could have done in peace and prosperity (1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 27:6; 56:6; Zech. 8:23), it was forced to do under terrible circumstances—that of captivity, slavery, and exile. The same with Jonah. The storm, the fish, and the three days and nights all could have been avoided had he obeyed when first asked. What’s sad, too, is that although we don’t know, ultimately, what happens to Jonah, the book ends with him seemingly still not being where the Lord wanted him to be. In other words, he still doesn’t get it. Historically, it seems that much of ancient Israel didn’t, either.

Keeping this day’s lesson in mind, what do you think Ellen White meant when she wrote: “The work which the church has failed to do in a time of peace and prosperity, she will have to do in a terrible crisis, under most discouraging, forbidding, circumstances?” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 463.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: Alfred Hitchcock, the famous director of suspense shows and movies, once told the following parable about the unknown: There lived a king who was granted two wishes. His first wish was to see the future. He was granted his wish, but when he saw all that lay ahead—the beauty and the pain—he immediately asked for his second wish: that the future be hidden. “I thank Heaven,” exclaimed Hitchcock, “that tomorrow does not belong to any man. It belongs to God.”

Thought Questions:

1. Most everyone has a fear of the unknown. A tiny little peek into the future would, in some ways, make a big difference in the way we make decisions today. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of knowing the future? How does the ability to know the future, based on prophecy, affect our freedom to make choices?
2. Here are two Jewish proverbs: “If God doesn’t approve, a fly doesn’t move.” “What God does not choose to give, you cannot take.” Jonah was reared in the wisdom of a culture that gave rise to such proverbs and knew better than to argue with God. Why, then, does he question God’s plan? Why does he find it hard to allow God to be in control?

Application Questions:

1. How often have you heard a toddler cry in frustration: “It’s not fair!” No matter how hard the parent tries to explain the situation, the child continues to insist “It’s not fair!” Childish minds think this way, because they cannot see a situation from a mature perspective; they cannot see the repercussions of their actions. It is often the same with God and us. What are the elements of sin that keep us from seeing things from a divine perspective? Does this mean we have to go through life feeling that life is unfair? Explain.
2. We do not know whether Jonah ever saw the bigger picture in which he was a crucial figure or whether he saw a glimpse of Nineveh from God’s perspective. Why do you think the story ends with a question from God and not an analytical statement? Why do you think it was important for God to have the last word, literally, in the story? What about your life? Do you have a hard time keeping quiet when God wants to give you His last word of advice or of warning?

FURTHER STUDY:

As individuals and as a nation God proposed to furnish the people of Israel ‘with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth’ (COL 288; see Deut. 4:6-8; 7:6, 14; 28:1; Jer. 33:9; Mal. 3:12; PP 273, 314; Ed 40; DA 577). He purposed to make them an honor to His name and a blessing to the nations about them (Ed 40; COL 286).

“As the nations of antiquity should behold Israel’s unprecedented progress, their attention and interest would be aroused. ‘Even the heathen would recognize the superiority of those who served and worshiped the living God’ (COL 289). Desiring the same blessings for themselves, they would make inquiry as to how they too might acquire these obvious material advantages. Israel would reply, ‘Accept our God as your God, love and serve Him as we do, and He will do the same for you.’ ‘The blessings thus assured Israel’ were, ‘on the same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and to every individual under the broad heavens’ (PK 500, 501; see Acts 10:34, 35; 15:7-9; Rom. 10:12, 13; etc.). All nations of earth were to share in the blessings so generously bestowed upon Israel (PK 370).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol 4, p. 28.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. C. S. Lewis wrote: “There are only two kinds of people in the end, those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no hell.”—*The Great Divorce* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 72. However deficient C. S. Lewis’s understanding of the nature (and timing) of hell, dwell on this quote. Do you agree with him or not? Give reasons for your answer.**
- 2. Read Luke 4:24-28. How does what Jesus is saying here parallel somewhat the situation displayed in the book of Jonah? What warnings should we, as Adventists, take from what Christ said to those in the synagogue?**

SUMMARY: The book of Jonah ends with a theme seen all through the Bible: the love and greatness of God contrasted with the pettiness and sinfulness of humanity.