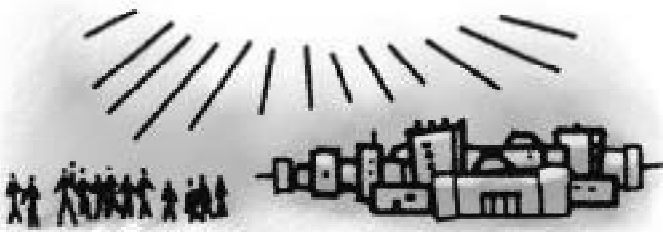


People and Places



Sabbath Afternoon

ONE OF THE GREAT TRUTHS of the Christian faith isn't just the teaching that God exists but that He is a personal God, a God who is intimately involved with His creation. What Christianity doesn't teach is that we have been created and then left on our own to do the best we can with what we have been given. On the contrary, the clear, explicit testimony of Scripture, from Eden onward, is that our God and our Creator is also our Provider and Sustainer. God knows about each of us and about our personal situations. He cares about us, as well. This great truth has been best revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus, in which the Lord became one of us in order to bond with us, now and for eternity. This week, we'll see how the first verses of Jonah give another example of God's knowledge of individuals and the places where they live. In a subtle way, these verses tell us something of God's love for humanity.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: How does God reveal His concern for people? How does the Bible show us God's intimate knowledge of us? How did Jesus reveal the fact that God knows so much about us? How does the book of Jonah instruct us about this aspect of God's amazing grace? Why did God send Jonah to Nineveh? Which of Nineveh's sins spurred Jonah's prophetic call?

MEMORY TEXT: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 11.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH.

“Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me” (Jon. 1:1, 2).

Think about the implications of the words. God, the Creator of the universe, the One who sustains the cosmos, is now in communication with a single human being, a mere speck on a planet that itself is a mere speck in an entire galaxy that is a mere speck itself, as well.

The universe, at least what we know about it now, extends more than 20 billion light-years across. This means that, traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles, or 300,000 kilometers, per second), it would take 20 *billion* years to go from one end to the other. The God who created this immense cosmos, who stands above and beyond it, and who upholds it by His power, nevertheless, now contacts a single person, giving him a message to deliver to other human beings.

Perhaps, you think that you aren't important or that nobody cares about you. But here in the book of Jonah (and all through Scripture, actually), we see a picture of God that is amazing, for it reveals a God who not only knows about us but cares about us, as well, a God who has stretched across the vast expanse of the cosmos to touch each of our lives.

Read Psalm 104. How does this passage illustrate God's providence and power in the world and in our lives? What comfort can one derive from this psalm? What is the essential message of the psalm?

This psalm is an extended picture of God's personal involvement in His creation. Notice how its verses follow the basic order of the Genesis Creation account (see Genesis 1 and 2); notice, however, in the psalm how the verbs connected with God's power shift to the present tense (vss. 6-10). Thus, God is seen here in His ever-continuing roles as both Sustainer and Provider of His creation. According to the consistent testimony of Scripture, God did not create this world and then depart to a distant realm, leaving it to operate solely by the natural laws He established. Rather, Scripture portrays a God who remains vitally involved, not only in nature but also in the lives of His creatures.

Read Psalm 104:35. What is the author saying here? In other words, after talking about God's creative and sustaining power, he introduces another facet of God's activity. What is that, and what comfort can we draw from it? Or does it scare us?

THE HAIR ON OUR HEADS (Matt. 10:30).

The book of Jonah helps show us that God, though invisible to us, is intimate with His creation. Moreover, His knowledge of us, His human creatures, is personal and inclusive. God knows details about us that we wouldn't even consider important to know about other people.

How does Matthew 10:30 illustrate God's personal involvement in our lives? What is Jesus saying with those words? Does the thought of God knowing so much about you make you comfortable or fearful? What reasons do you have for whatever answer you give?

In this context, that of God's knowledge regarding each of us, look at Psalm 139:1-18. After reading and praying over it, answer the following questions: What are the parallel thoughts between these texts and the texts we saw in Psalm 104? What differences are there? Together, what are both telling us about God? According to these texts, when did God's knowledge of us begin? What does that mean? What are the specific things about us the psalmist says the Lord knows? How should the realization that God knows these things impact how we live? What do you think the phrase "O Lord, thou hast searched me" means? What moral implication can you find in that text?

It's one thing for God to know all about us—about where we go, what we say, think, and do. That, in and of itself, might not be necessarily good news. In fact, it quite easily could be bad news; that is, if this all-knowing God had malevolent designs on us. In this case, though, the psalmist is so clear. In the midst of all these verses about God's omniscience, His total power over us, the psalmist writes: "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand" (Ps. 139:17, 18).

Thus, the crucial thing to remember as we study about God's power and knowledge, as presented in Jonah, is that this God is a God of love and that He has our best interests at heart. How important that we never lose sight of this crucial point.

Dwell upon some of the specific manifestations of God's love that you have experienced in your own life. Write them down, pray over them, and (if comfortable) share them with others.

“HEY, YOU!”

All through the Bible, we are given examples of God’s intimate knowledge of people, whether heathen or believers. Time and again we see that God knows things about individuals that, perhaps, they don’t even know about themselves.

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-3. What is happening here, and what does it teach us about God’s knowledge of what’s inside us?

In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus is traveling through Jericho and is surrounded by a crowd. Yet, He pauses at a sycamore tree and notices a man sitting in the branches. Jesus doesn’t just say “Hey, you, up there in the tree.” Instead, He called to the man by name: “Zacchaeus, I want to go to your house today” (see Luke 19:5). In other words, Jesus knew the man by name.

Ellen White, in *The Desire of Ages*, reveals that Zacchaeus, however abhorrent his life on the outside, was open to the influence of the Holy Spirit, which had already been working on him. Jesus, of course, knew all this about him beforehand and used this opportunity to minister to Zacchaeus in a big way. See Luke 19:9.

Read John 4:4-19. How do you see the same principle revealed there? What intimate, secret knowledge does Jesus know about the woman of Samaria, and how does He use it for her eternal good?

God’s involvement in human lives is not limited to merely His covenant people. In Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1, even a non-Israelite ruler is divinely predicted by name.

Involvement with humanity is a notable attribute of God in Scripture. It gives us a crucial insight into the attitude God has toward human beings. When God summons people, He doesn’t just say “Hey, you.” Rather, He comes to them with intimate knowledge of who they are, what’s inside them, and what their circumstances happen to be. In the case of Jonah, God knows him as an individual, not just some obscure face in the sea of humanity.

If you look at many of the texts for today, you can see that not only does God have intimate knowledge about each of us but He uses that knowledge for our benefit. God meets us where we are. If someone, then, were to ask you the question, “How can I surrender to Him so that He can take me from where I am to where He wants me to be?” how would you answer?

PEOPLE AND PLACES.

God knows not only people but places, as well. This makes sense, because the people whom God loves, and whom He died for, live in places; and often, their particular situations are directly linked to the places in which they live. Thus, God knows cities by name but, more important, He knows what's happening in them. His concern, of course, isn't for the inanimate buildings or the streets or the rocks but for those who have made their homes and lives among them.

What do the following texts indicate about God's familiarity with this world? Gen. 11:1-9; 18:20; Luke 19:41-44.

Let's look at Luke 19:41-44. We can see that God loves Jerusalem, even though Jerusalem rejects Him. He expresses that love with His tears as He stands over the city and weeps, for He knows of its terrible future at the hands of Rome.

However prominent Jerusalem and the Hebrew nation are in the Old Testament times, after the death of Jesus, the *geographical* center of God's plan for humankind's salvation shifts away from one specific geographical locality. Why is that so? See Matt. 21:43; 24:14; Gal. 3:28.

Cities, towns, and other places all over the ancient world become prominent in the New Testament biblical narrative. The letters to the seven churches that open the book of Revelation are linked to seven different cities (Rev. 1:4–3:22). All Paul's great missionary journeys are linked to different cities (Acts 17:1-4; 16-34; 18:1-11). Many of Paul's letters, which make up so much of the New Testament, are directly tied to prominent cities and territories (Gal. 1:1, 2; Eph. 1:1, 2; Phil. 1:1). Thus, we should not be surprised with the mention of a city in Jonah's prophetic call. The book of Jonah opens with God's appointment of a person named Jonah, who is given the divine command to go to a specific place, Nineveh, an ancient and populous city on the fertile banks of the Tigris. This is a city founded by Nimrod, who went forth from the land of Shinar about the time of Babel's dispersion.

No question, God knew all about each of those places mentioned in the Bible. Was He involved in what happened in and to them? If so, how did He express His involvement? How can you see God's involvement in the locality where you live?

NINEVEH—THAT GREAT CITY.

What is the first scriptural mention of Nineveh? Gen. 10:11.

Archaeologists have excavated the outline of the walls of ancient Nineveh. The chief palace in existence when Jonah was sent to Nineveh (eighth century B.C.) was probably that of Ashurnasirpal, a king whose name means “the god Assur is guardian of the heir.” The buildings alone occupied six acres.

Ancient documents from the first century B.C. describe Nineveh as a quadrangle, measuring 150 x 90 stadia, with a total perimeter of 480 stadia, or about 60 miles. This agrees favorably with the record of Nineveh in the book of Jonah as a “city of three days’ journey” (Jon. 3:3).

In view of Jonah’s experience, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew “Nineweh” is a translation of the Assyrian “Ninua.” This, in turn, is a rendering of the earlier Sumerian “Nina.” Nina was a name of the goddess Ishtar, represented with a sign depicting a fish inside a womb or some sort of enclosure.

Nineveh was 500 miles to the northeast of Israel (near the city of Mosul in today’s Iraq). To obey God’s commission, Jonah would have had to make a tremendous journey across the desert on foot or in a camel train. This meant traveling to the capital city of what would become one of Israel’s most menacing enemies, Assyria.

Read Jonah 1:2. Why does God send Jonah to Nineveh?

Nineveh was a citadel of heathen glory and violence. In the time of its greatest prosperity, it was also a city of crime and wickedness. Jonah is not the only prophet who warned Nineveh. More than a hundred years after Jonah, Nahum was commissioned by God to confront the citizens of Nineveh with divine judgment. And he provides graphic details of the violent wickedness found there, probably not much different from what was happening in Jonah’s day.

Skim through the book of Nahum to get an idea of the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. Here is Nineveh, a heathen city steeped in wickedness. And yet the Lord sends to those people a Hebrew prophet, a Jew, to call them to repentance? What message should this send to us, as a church today, regarding the importance of spreading our message everywhere? How can you parallel what’s happening here with the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14?

FURTHER STUDY:

While Peter was in Joppa, he was called by God to take the gospel to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile by birth, training, and education. Ellen White describes this meeting between the apostle Peter and Cornelius: “The angel appeared to Cornelius while he was at prayer. As the centurion heard himself addressed by name, he was afraid, yet he knew that the messenger had come from God, and he said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ The angel answered, ‘Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: he lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.’”

“The explicitness of these directions, in which was named even the occupation of the man with whom Peter was staying, shows that Heaven is acquainted with the history and business of men in every station of life. God is familiar with the experience and work of the humble laborer, as well as with that of the king upon his throne.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 133, 134.

“As regards this earth, Scripture declares the work of creation to have been completed. ‘The works were finished from the foundation of the world.’ Hebrews 4:3. But the power of God is still exercised in upholding the objects of His creation. It is not because the mechanism once set in motion continues to act by its own inherent energy that the pulse beats, and breath follows breath. Every breath, every pulsation of the heart, is an evidence of the care of Him in whom we live and move and have our being. From the smallest insect to man, every living creature is daily dependent upon His providence.”
—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 130, 131.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

The modern philosophical movement of “Atheistic Existentialism” says that there is no God and no ultimate purpose to life. There is NOTHING outside ourselves. We are alone in the universe. Those who believe this worldview are called “Atheistic existentialists.” They insist human life is meaningless, pointless, and absurd. How does what we’ve read this week show not only how wrong that view is but why the biblical worldview offers us something so much more hopeful?

SUMMARY: The first few verses of the book of Jonah exemplify a truth found all through the Bible: There is a God who not only knows each of us personally but is interested in our affairs. The story of Jonah is, simply, one example of God’s work in our lives.



“Before They Call, I Will Answer”

J. H. Zachary

When Galina Veretennikova was 18 years old an Adventist pastor lived next door. Several times she watched as the secret police came to the pastor’s home. She saw home meetings broken up. *Why would the police do this to these lovely people?* she wondered.

Galina graduated with a degree in electronics and became attractive to the communist officials. Little by little she gained their confidence until she became a member of the communist governing body for the entire province in which she lived in the former Soviet Union.

She enjoyed the position. Everyone knew her. She also had a good job and good income. Everything seemed to be going her way.

During all this time Galina’s Adventist neighbor befriended her and her family. Pastor Bolebrukh shared his joy in the Lord with Galina. In her heart she knew that he was telling the truth, but pressures from the popular church officials in town kept her from acting upon her understanding of truth. She did not want to become associated with a “cult.”

When Galina’s daughter turned 18, she suddenly disappeared. Galina asked the local police to search for her, but the girl was not found. Galina asked the secret police to help her find her daughter, but they turned up no clues. Next Galina turned to her church. Frequently, she went to pray for her daughter. But still no one turned up any sign of her daughter.

One day her neighbor invited Galina to attend a Bible seminar that was being conducted in the local palace of culture. At first she refused. She still thought that this group was a cult. But finally she agreed to go with her neighbor. One of the lessons dealt with prayer.

Galina asked the group to pray for her daughter, who by then had been missing for two years. Galina found comfort in the earnest prayers that her new friends offered for her daughter’s safe return. Two hours after Galina returned home from the meeting, she heard a knock at her door. She unbolting the door and found her daughter standing there.

Galina learned that her daughter had been taken by force to another country. She managed to escape and return home, even without money or passport. Galina realized that God had begun to answer her prayer even before the Bible study group prayed.

Galina joined the “cult” she had avoided for so long. Later her daughter also joined the church. They sponsor a small Bible study group in their home. Six people are preparing for baptism.

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