

Eager to Forgive (Jonah)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Jonah 1–4, Ps. 139:1–12, Isa. 42:5, Rev. 10:6, Matt. 12:39–41, 2 Chron. 36:15–17.

Memory Text: “ ‘But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD’ ” (Jonah 2:9, NIV).

Key Thought: The book of Jonah reveals, among other things, that God is more willing to forgive others than we often are.

The story of Jonah, this rather unusual messenger of God, is one of the best known in the Bible. The prophet had been sent by God to warn Nineveh of coming destruction. He suspected that these non-Hebrew people might repent of their sins and that God would forgive them. Being a true prophet, Jonah knew that God's plan was to save Nineveh, not to destroy it. Maybe that is why he, at first, tried to run away. Due to forces beyond his control, however, Jonah changed his mind and obeyed God's command.

In response to Jonah's preaching, the entire city believed the message and repented in a way in which, unfortunately, Israel and Judah did not. Jonah, meanwhile, had a number of important lessons to learn. The story shows how God patiently was teaching His narrow and stubborn prophet what grace, mercy, and forgiveness are all about.

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

The Disobedient Prophet (Jonah 1)

Not much is known about Jonah or his family background. Second Kings 14:25 tells that he lived in the northern part of Israel and ministered during the eighth century B.C. The same text reveals that Jonah predicted a territorial expansion of Israel's kingdom.

Nineveh was historically one of the three great cities of Assyria, an important country situated by the Tigris River. Because God is the Lord of all nations and all peoples are accountable to Him (*Amos 1-2*), He sent His servant Jonah to warn the Ninevites of impending destruction. God's command recorded in Jonah 1:2 to "preach against it" (*NIV*) also can be translated as "preach to it."

Assyrian cruelty was notorious. About a century later, the prophet Nahum called Nineveh a "bloody city . . . full of lies and robbery" (*Nah. 3:1*). Jonah was sent to deliver God's message to such people. Perhaps it was fear of the hated Assyrians, among other things, that prompted Jonah's attitude. When told by God to make a trip east to Nineveh, the prophet refused and tried to flee west by ship to Tarshish.

At first, all things appeared to work well for Jonah, but then the Lord sent a great storm against the ship in order to teach His servant the lesson that no one can hide from God.

Jonah ran from God because he did not want to do God's will. Even now people have many reasons to try to run away from God. Some do it because they do not know Him personally. Others reject even the idea of God and His Word. While people's motives vary, in many cases they flee God in order to not feel guilty about the way in which they live. After all, if there is no higher power to answer to, why not do whatever you want? There are even some Christians who avoid God when He calls them to do something that they do not want to do, something that goes against their inherently selfish and sinful nature.

Read Psalm 139:1-12. What's the basic message there for us? What kind of feelings does this fundamental truth evoke in you? Or look at it this way: we believe that God not only sees all that we do but knows even our thoughts. Do we live with that constant realization, or do we tend to try and blot it out of our minds? Or, perhaps, are we just so used to the idea that we just do not pay it much attention? Whatever the reasons, how differently would you act if, at all times, you were keenly sensitive to the fact that God does know your every thought?

Reluctant Witness

In Jonah 1, the Lord wants to halt Jonah’s escape, so He stirs up such a severe storm that it threatens to wreck the ship. The seamen call on their gods for help. Due to the severity of the storm, they feel that someone must have provoked the anger of the gods. They cast lots to decide who will be first to volunteer information about himself that might expose such an offense. For the casting of lots, each individual brings an identifiable stone or wooden marker. The markers are placed in a container that is shaken until one of the markers comes out. The lot falls on Jonah, who now confesses his sins and urges the seamen to throw him into the sea.

This story is remarkable because in it the non-Hebrew seamen act positively while Jonah is presented in a negative light. Although they worship many gods, the seamen show a great respect for the Lord to whom they pray. They are also tenderhearted toward the Lord’s servant Jonah, which is why they go out of their way to try to row back to the land. Finally, they agree with Jonah that he should be thrown overboard. With this done, the storm stops and the seamen sacrifice to the Lord and praise Him.

In verse 9, how does Jonah describe the Lord whom he said he feared? What is significant about the way in which he described the Lord?
See also Rev 14:7, Isa. 42:5, Rev. 10:6.

Jonah’s confession of faith in God as Creator of the sea and land underscores the futility of his attempts to escape from God’s presence. The immediate cessation of the storm after the men throw Jonah into the sea shows them that the Lord, as Creator, has control of the sea. Because of this, the seamen worship the Lord all the more. How long their newfound fear and reverence for the Creator lasts, we are not told. There is no doubt, however, that they do learn something about Him from this experience.

We can barely comprehend many of the wonders of the world around us, much less all that is beyond the reach of our senses and even our imagination. How does the Creator speak to you through that which He has made?

Jonah's Psalm

When Jonah was thrown into the sea, a big fish swallowed him at God's bidding. Jonah must have thought that death indeed was going to be the only way to escape the mission to Nineveh. But the big fish (not called a whale in the book) was an instrument of salvation for the prophet. Unlike Jonah, this creature responded promptly and obediently to God's commands (*Jon. 1:17, 2:10*).

God's providence worked in an amazing way here. However, even though some people scoff at the story, Jesus testified to its veracity (*Matt. 12:40*) and even used it in reference to His own death and bodily resurrection.

Read Jonah 2, often called Jonah's psalm. What is he saying there? What has he learned? What spiritual principles can we take away from this chapter?

Jonah's psalm celebrates God's deliverance from the perilous depths of the sea. It is the only poetic part of the book. In it Jonah recalls his prayer for help as he was sinking deep into the waters and facing certain death. Becoming fully aware of his salvation, he thanks God for it. The hymn indicates that Jonah is familiar with biblical psalms of praise and thanksgiving.

Jonah's vow likely consisted of a sacrifice of thanksgiving. He was grateful that, though he deserved to die, God had shown him extraordinary mercy. In spite of his disobedience, Jonah still considered himself loyal to God because he had not succumbed to idol worship. Whatever his many character flaws, he was now determined to try to be faithful to his calling.

Sometimes it takes a terrible experience to open our heart to the Lord, and to realize that He is our only hope, our only salvation. Dwell on an experience you have had in which you clearly saw the hand of the Lord working in your own life. Why is it so easy to forget the ways in which the Lord has led you, even miraculously, especially when new trials arise?

A Successful Mission

After such a miraculous deliverance, Jonah obeyed immediately when he was commanded by God the second time to go to preach in Nineveh. In his proclamation, Jonah (3:1–4) used language reminiscent of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis 19*). But in the original Hebrew, the word for “overthrown” (see *Gen. 19:21, 29; Jon. 3:4*) from Jonah’s proclamation can also have the meaning “turned around” or “transformed” (*Exod. 7:17, 20; 1 Sam. 10:6*). Jonah’s preaching of the divine message was not in vain.

The greatest achievement of Jonah’s prophetic career was the repentance of the city. After the seamen, the Ninevites were the second group of non-Hebrews in the book to turn to God, and all because of their interactions with God’s flawed messenger. The results were astounding. To humble themselves before God, the people of Nineveh wore sackcloth, put ashes on their heads, and fasted. All these were external signs of sorrow and repentance.

Read Matthew 12:39–41 and 2 Chronicles 36:15–17. What do these verses teach us about the importance of repentance?

The remarkable picture of a strong Assyrian monarch humbling himself in ashes before God is a sharp rebuke to many of Israel’s proud rulers and people, at least those who persistently rejected the prophetic calls to repentance. Because of the book of Jonah’s emphasis on God’s grace and forgiveness, the Jewish people read it every year at the climactic point of the Day of Atonement, which celebrates God’s forgiveness for their sins.

“Our God is a God of compassion. With long-sufferance and tender mercy he deals with the transgressors of his law. And yet, in this our day, when men and women have so many opportunities for becoming familiar with the divine law as revealed in Holy Writ, the great Ruler of the universe can not behold with any satisfaction the wicked cities, where reign violence and crime. If the people in these cities would repent, as did the inhabitants of Nineveh, many more such messages as Jonah’s would be given.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 18, 1906.

Read Jonah 3:5–10. What do these verses reveal about the nature of true repentance? How can we apply these same principles to ourselves?

Forgiven, Yet Unforgiving

Read Jonah 4. What important lessons did Jonah need to learn? How is his own hypocrisy revealed here?

Jonah 4 reveals some startling things about the prophet. He seems to prefer to die rather than to witness about God's grace and forgiveness. Whereas before Jonah had rejoiced in his deliverance from death (*Jon. 2:7-9*), now that the people of Nineveh live, he prefers to die (*Jon. 4:2, 3*).

In contrast to Jonah, God is pictured in the Bible as someone who takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (*Ezek. 33:11, NKJV*). Jonah and many of his compatriots rejoiced in God's special mercies to Israel but wished only His wrath on their enemies. Such hardness of heart is rebuked sternly by the book's message.

What are some of the lessons we can learn from Jonah's mistakes? How does prejudice compromise our Christian testimony?

It rightly has been observed that Jonah's book is a handbook on how not to be a prophet. Jonah was a prophet of rebellious spirit and mistaken priorities. He could not control his desire for vengeance. He was small-minded and ill-tempered. Instead of rejoicing in the grace that God also showed to the Ninevites, Jonah allowed his selfish and sinful pride to make him resentful.

Jonah's last word is a wish for death (*Jon. 4:8, 9*) while God's last word is an affirmation of His immeasurable grace, an affirmation for life.

Jonah's book is left open-ended. Its closing verses confront the readers with one important question that remains unanswered by the author: Did the miraculous change of hearts in Nineveh eventually result in a radical change of Jonah's heart?

There is a lot in the story of Jonah that is hard to understand, particularly about Jonah himself. Perhaps, though, the clearest lesson is that God's grace and forgiveness extend way beyond ours. How can we learn to be more graceful and forgiving to those who do not deserve it as we see God doing here with Jonah and with the Ninevites?

Further Study: Read the following quotations and discuss how they help us to understand the messages from the book of Jonah more clearly.

“Whenever they are in need the children of God have the precious privilege of appealing to Him for help. It matters not how unsuitable the place may be, God’s ear of mercy is open to their cry. However desolate and dark the place may be, it can be turned into a veritable temple by the praying child of God.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1003.

“Confused, humiliated, and unable to understand God’s purpose in sparing Nineveh, Jonah nevertheless had fulfilled the commission given him to warn that great city; and though the event predicted did not come to pass, yet the message of warning was nonetheless from God. And it accomplished the purpose God designed it should. The glory of His grace was revealed among the heathen.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 272, 273.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ The book of Jonah teaches that God is in full control of nature. Imagine that one of your friends has lost a family member because of a natural disaster. How would you explain to him or her that God is still in charge despite the presence of natural disasters that devastate parts of our world and take away many human lives?
- ❷ Read the last verse of Jonah. What does it teach us about our responsibility for mission outreach to all corners of the world?
- ❸ In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (*Matt. 18:21–35*), Jesus compares God to an angry king who revokes his forgiveness and throws the once-forgiven slave into jail. Does God really revoke His forgiveness? Some Christians argue adamantly that He does not. As a church, what position do we take on this topic, and why?
- ❹ For many people steeped in secularism, the idea of a man being swallowed alive and living inside a “big fish” is not something to be taken seriously. As we saw earlier, however, Jesus clearly testified to the truthfulness of the story. How does the story of Jonah help us to realize just how narrow and confining an antisupernaturalist view of reality really is?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jonah 2:9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize God’s compassion as the motivating force behind his or her approach when dealing with people who differ from him or her in belief and lifestyle.

Feel: Acknowledge that true obedience must be a willing submission to God, springing from a heart grateful for knowing God’s character.

Do: Cultivate thanks for God’s desire to save everyone and a warm, loving attitude toward others who need help.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Salvation Comes From the Lord

A Notice that God saves different categories of people: a prophet, sailors, and Ninevites. What does this say about God’s willingness to save all humanity?

B How does God exercise compassion over people when dealing with their sins?

II. Feel: Forgiven and Forgiving

A Why was Jonah so unforgiving even though he experienced God’s forgiveness?

B How can you avoid feeling strong prejudice toward your audience while you preach, teach, or share Christ?

C What was Jonah’s attitude when he finally went to Nineveh, and what does that reveal about his obedience to God?

III. Do: God’s Compassion

A How can you cultivate the warmth of God’s compassion and avoid the coldness of Jonah when approaching others who are different from you?

B How can you help others to develop proper attitudes in cross-cultural situations and societies in which racism exists?

C What difference would it make in our churches, homes, and neighborhoods if every member showed true compassion for others?

► **Summary:** God saved sailors, the Ninevites, and also His disobedient prophet. His compassion is open to everyone, reaches even the worst sinners, transcends borders, and goes beyond our human limits and understanding.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Jonah 4*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: There is no one special group or “chosen” people exclusively appointed to receive God’s grace. God’s forgiveness is available to all.

Just for Teachers: Take some time with your class to reflect on that which makes forgiveness difficult or easy.

A recent University of Miami study showed that people are more likely to forgive when relationships are characterized by two qualities: (a) closeness and commitment to the relationship and (b) a high degree of apology and the making of amends by the transgressor following the transgression (http://www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/mmccullough/Papers/forgiveness_feeling_connected_pspb.pdf, p.12).

But what about situations, such as the one Jonah faced, in which modeling God’s love and forgiveness requires looking beyond the offensive actions of the past that were committed by a group of people with whom you have no personal relationship? And, furthermore, situations in which there is no public (or human-directed) apology for those past actions? Have you been in a situation in which the thought of forgiveness was so unbearable that you felt it would be better, to use Jonah’s words, “ ‘to die than to live’ ” (*Jon. 4:3, NIV*)?

Discuss: What makes forgiveness easy, and what makes it difficult? Why does it sometimes seem that forgiveness is a miscarriage of justice? Jonah felt that really bad people just “got away” with being bad; why, in the end, is that not true?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Forging the Unforgivable (*Review Jonah 4:1–3 with your class.*)

Jonah, the son of a persecuted Israelite nation, was sent into hostile territory to

aid another nation in averting a judgment that he may well have thought it deserved. Implicit in Jonah's anger is his own unwillingness to see the Ninevites as worthy of forgiveness. Nineveh, part of the Assyrian Empire, was a city that was very warlike and an important part of the Assyrian state, which had the largest standing army ever seen in the Middle East or the Mediterranean (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Assyrians.html>). The Ninevites had almost certainly committed enough atrocities that they deserved judgment, and perhaps Jonah wanted them to get their just due.

In the face of Jonah's reluctance to see the "enemy" repent, one might ask, where is the love, where is the tender concern and kindness in the book of Jonah? The Hebrew word translated into "love kindness" or "loving kindness" is *chesed*; and it is central to Jewish ethics and is repeated throughout the Bible. Some modern Jewish scholars claim the entire Torah begins and ends with *chesed* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesed>).

As Monday's study points out, we see much more tenderheartedness and respect for God in the actions of the pagan sailors than we do in Jonah. We also see an openness and repentance in the hearts of the people of Nineveh. We hear concern in the voice of God. But Jonah? Jonah struggles with anger. He is upset that the people of Nineveh repented and that God bestowed His mercy upon them, as he knew would happen given that the Lord is " 'gracious and compassionate . . . slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' " (*Jon. 4:2, NIV*).

The story of Jonah speaks to the miraculous ways of God and His capacity to engage in supernatural acts. As such, it teaches young and old alike to be open to wonder, to expect more than our human eyes and the laws of science tell us is possible. On more complex levels, it teaches one of the deepest spiritual lessons we must learn: that there is no person who is beyond the healing mercy of God's grace. Jonah, a sinner saved by divine grace, is nevertheless extremely unhappy that the people of Nineveh are co-recipients of that grace. This story shows the revolutionary teaching that God's grace is for everyone and challenges bigoted notions and attitudes often held by "believers" toward "unbelievers."

The story of Jonah illuminates one of the most central and yet hard-to-accept truths of God's gospel message: forgiveness and redemption are for anyone with a heart open to God. Race, creed, and nationality are never factors in the divine equation; God's love and membership in His family are universal. And most important, past actions (no matter how heinous, how unjust, how wretched) are never insurmountable for the repentant heart. There is no hurdle that a heart filled with repentance cannot cross. There is no past that God cannot forgive.

Consider This: Given all this good news, why is it that we, like Jonah, find forgiveness so hard to give?

■ *Instead of harshly judging Jonah, encourage the class to look at Jonah sympathetically. Jonah, a prophet of God, was having a very human response to his calling. What does God's forgiveness of Israel's enemies say about God and about the way that we are to forgive those who wound or offend us?*

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: There is much about Jonah that we don't know. For example, we don't know Jonah's backstory, a story that might explain why he acted and felt the way he did. All we know is what we read in these four short chapters. Spend some time with your class exploring their responses to the following two compelling questions that the reader is left with after reading the story of Jonah. They are profoundly important spiritual questions for our time.

Thought/Application/Inductive Questions:

❶ Why is Jonah so angry at God's forgiveness of the Ninevites?

❷ “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” This is the question that God asks Jonah in chapter 4, verse 11. Translate this question for our time by imagining God asking us, “Should I not be concerned with (fill in the blank for whichever group of people seems like the “bad/unworthy/sinful people” of today's age)?” Encourage your class to assemble the list of “bad guys”—from those people who fill the pages of newspapers and television on a global scale down to the “bad guys” you know in your local communities, schools, political arenas, and so on. Ask them how it makes them feel to know that all these people are able to obtain God's forgiveness and mercy.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: All of us have something to forgive and something for which to be forgiven. Speak to God in prayer about what you are going through as though He were your counselor and best friend. For those still dealing with fresh, difficult, or longstanding pains, perhaps you are still coming to terms with your pain. Others may be finding a way to let go. Some may be experiencing forgiveness in their heart of hearts. Using prayer to help you through the journey, at whatever point you find yourself, is vital. The following activity is designed to help you enter into a conversation with God about forgiveness.

Activity: Ask your class members to spend 2 to 5 minutes in quiet contemplation about people they are struggling to forgive or the pain they may have caused others. At the end of that quiet contemplation, invite your class to spend 2 to 5 minutes in prayer (this can be solitary, or people may pair off as they wish) about those things. Some people may wish to go somewhere private to pray. Here are some basic tools to help you to enter into conversation with God about forgiveness:

Praying for Forgiveness

- Acknowledge the pain or hurt you have experienced/caused and what that has meant for your life/someone else's life.
- Request God's healing of that pain or forgiveness for causing that pain. For those still holding on to pain/anger, ask for the strength to release it, soften your heart, and let it go. (Did anger cause you to hurt someone else? Are you angry because you were hurt by someone else's actions?)
- Invite God to work with you to find a way through that valley of pain/anger and to bring to your awareness something valuable, beautiful, and worthwhile that may be in store for you in this experience. Invite God to open your eyes to the blessings and positives that might be hidden within a very negative experience. Claim God's promise that all things do work together for good to those who love God, even when it is hard to believe/see.
- When your soul is ready to renounce all anger and resentment, thank God for the opportunity to forgive a wrong or be forgiven of a wrong. Invite into your life and heart all of the blessings that will come to you from the peace that comes with that forgiveness. Pray for humility and loving-kindness to imbue your soul and spirit as you enact forgiveness or receive it.