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JONAH

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God's Surprises

A farmer went out to feed his chicken every morning. Every morning the chicken would see the farmer come and expect its breakfast. This routine happened over and over. But one morning, instead of feeding the bird, the farmer killed it!

The point of the story is that what happens in the past will not always happen in the future. Things that always have happened before may not continue to happen. Things we do not expect to happen will surprise us.

It was hard for many people in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries¹ to understand that things that happen daily may not always happen, because Isaac Newton² led them to believe that all of nature works through unchanging³ laws and that once people understood these laws, they would know everything that would happen in the future.

But by the early 20th century, scientists such as Niels Bohr, Max Planck, and Erwin Schrödinger discovered that things are always changing, so that something that has happened before may or may not happen again. This makes life full of surprises. Albert Einstein did not believe the way these scientists do. He said, "I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world."

No, God does not play dice with the world He created. But He can be full of surprises. Some of His most unexpected⁴ surprises appear in the book of Jonah. The first surprise is that Jonah, a prophet, refuses to accept God's will for his life. Next, Jonah flees from God in a boat. A prophet fleeing from God? But God sends a storm that threatens to sink the boat. During the storm it is the pagans,⁵ not Jonah, who pray to be saved! Then they throw Jonah overboard and a big fish swallows him alive. Jonah stays in the fish's stomach for three days before the fish vomits him out alive.

Jonah finally preaches the message of warning to the Ninevites. They all repent,⁶ and God saves them from punishment.

But the greatest surprise comes next. Jonah becomes saddened and angry over the people's repentance.⁷ A prophet angry over people who repent?

But the most important surprise in the book of Jonah is God's wonderful grace toward backsliding⁸ people, even backsliding prophets like Jonah. Just

¹centuries—hundreds of years.

²Isaac Newton—an English scientist who discovered the law of gravity.

³unchanging—not changing.

⁴unexpected—not expected.

⁵pagans—people who do not believe in God.

⁶repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and then to turn away from your sins.

⁷repentance—being sorry for your sins, wanting to stop sinning, and turning away from your sins.

⁸backsliding—leaving God.

imagine God continuing to work with someone as stubborn as Jonah. So we know there is hope for us, because who of us has not been as stubborn as Jonah?

The focus of Jonah is not on the “great fish” that swallowed him alive. Jonah focuses on “the great God” who prepared the fish. He is the great God who never showed His greatness more than when He was the most “helpless.”⁹ God was most helpless when in the person of His Son Jesus, He was nailed to the cross. His life was crushed out for the sins of stubborn people.

Many thanks to the person who wrote this Bible Study Guide, Dr. JoAnn Davidson. She is assistant professor of theology¹⁰ in the Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy at the Andrews University Seminary. She shows her love for the book of Jonah, and especially for God, throughout this Bible Study Guide.

The book of Jonah challenges us, puzzles us, and bothers us. But with all its surprises, Jonah shows one truth that never changes: God loves us all, even those of us who are hardest to love.

⁹helpless—without help.

¹⁰theology—the study of God.