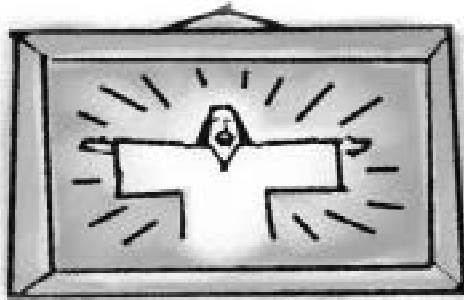


A Picture of God



Sabbath Afternoon

THIS WEEK BEGINS THE END of our study on Jonah. Hard to believe the book itself is only 48 verses. But brevity shouldn't be mistaken for shallowness. On the contrary, some of the most profound concepts in Scripture can be expressed quite succinctly ("God is love," for instance). The book of Jonah might be short, but its message touches themes we'll spend eternity trying to fathom.

Of those themes, however, the most amazing is God's grace. We really can't appreciate it fully, because we really can't see just how fallen we are. The very thing we use to understand the world and our place in it is our minds—and our minds, more than anything else, have been tainted by sin. It's like asking someone in the midst of a drunken stupor to explain the evil of alcohol use. Nevertheless, God has revealed enough to us so we can learn to love Him and to express that love in faith and obedience, which is all He asks.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What does the book of Jonah teach about God's forgiveness? About His power over the world? How does it reveal God's desire to have a personal relationship with us? What role does morality play in Jonah or in the Bible, as a whole?

MEMORY TEXT: " 'Comfort, O comfort My people' says your God. 'Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins' " (Isaiah 40:1, 2, NASB).

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 27.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS.

The book of Jonah has something in common with all the biblical books: None of them ever tries to prove the existence of God. Not one of them ever expresses any doubt that God exists. Nor do they merely speak of Him out of their imaginations. Instead, without hesitancy, they fill the pages of Scripture with detailed pictures of God in action within human history. The book of Jonah is part of this vast panorama.

And one picture, drawn very clearly from this book, is seen all through the Bible (however uniquely presented in Jonah): our God's willingness to forgive. God is always surprising human beings in His capacity and inclination to forgive. Jonah, as with so many people, has a hard time grasping this profound aspect of God's character. It must be a difficult thing for sinful human beings to appreciate God's radical grace. In the New Testament, the four Gospels frequently recount that God is far more generous with His forgiveness than most of us think.

How do the following words of Jesus illustrate this aspect of God's character; that is, His willingness to forgive?

Matt. 7:7-11 _____

Matt. 20:1-16 _____

Luke 15:11-32 _____

The book of Jonah presents a profound picture of God's forgiveness. Perhaps this is the reason it is read by Jewish people at *Minchah*, the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement, near the holiest hour when Yom Kippur is nearing its peak. In the final hours, when judgment is about to close, the book of Jonah is opened, with its powerful emphasis on God's mercy.

Do you harbor anger? Does it seethe within you (and maybe with good reason too)? How can dwelling on Jesus and His attitude of forgiveness help? Also, how can concentrating on what God has forgiven you for help you to learn to forgive others?

GOD'S OMNIPOTENCE.

In the book of Jonah, we are dramatically reminded that the extent of God's sovereignty is far more vast than merely a narrow focus on only believers. Even the pagan mariners of chapter 1 recognize the power of the "great storm" involves more than just natural causes, and it draws their attention to the great God of heaven and earth.

Without exception, all the Bible writers allow no serious point of comparison between the true God and any false gods. The decisive and powerful actions of Yahweh are seen throughout Scripture in stark contrast to all other gods, which are no gods at all.

Review, again, the attributes of God's power over nature that are portrayed in the book of Jonah. Then read Isaiah 40. In what ways do we see the Lord do some things in the book of Jonah that are expressed about Him in Isaiah 40?

Notice especially verses 26 and 28 in Isaiah 40, because they both make references to the Lord's creative power. It is because He is the Creator and the Sustainer that He has such control over the world. Hard as it might be for us to see at times, particularly in times of pain, turmoil, and suffering, we, nevertheless, have the assurance that our God is ultimately in control. We also have the promise that, in the end, He will make all things right, if not now and not in this life then in the life to come—the one life, that really matters, because it's eternal, while our existence here is only a vapor.

There's so much we just don't, and can't, understand. That's how it always has been. But what the Lord teaches us through His Word and also in the story of Jonah is that however much we don't understand, we can know enough about God, about His character, about His power, and, most important, about His love that we can trust Him enough to love Him and stay faithful to our divine calling, which will allow Him to work in us so others can learn about Him and His love, as well. Only to the degree that we love and trust Him can He do this through us.

Wherever you live, as far as possible, step outside, read Isaiah 40 out loud, and look at the marvels of creation. What do you see, and what does it tell you about the power of God?

GOD'S MORALITY.

However different the book of Jonah is from other books of the Bible, its message is consistent with them. And like the others, Jonah is very clear that God is a moral God, that the Lord has a standard of morality that applies to all the world. However differently the Lord might judge people, depending upon how much light they've had, the world will, nevertheless, be judged by God's standard of righteousness.

Look up these texts. What is the essential message in them? How do these texts relate to the story of Jonah? Pss. 9:8; 96:10, 13; 98:9; Acts 17:31; Rom. 3:6.

In all of Scripture, religion and morality are related in the closest possible way. The Bible knows nothing of morality apart from religion (the idea that you can have morality apart from religion is a modern one). In Scripture, we find God consistently evaluating human history on a moral basis, no matter which person and no matter which people group. This makes perfect sense, because just as He created all human beings, He has placed them all under His moral order, as well.

Note how God speaks of Egypt and of the Amorites in Genesis 15:13-16. What is implied in these words regarding not only the moral state of these pagan nations but their own personal responsibility for their moral actions?

In the book of Jonah, we observe further that even the wicked Ninevites, when falling under the judgment of God, were convicted of the correctness of God's sentence. Even more, a relationship with God in the book of Jonah, as in all Scripture, is expressed in a moral life. "Walking uprightly" before the Lord is a common expression in Scripture for moral living. The importance of doing righteousness is constantly stressed throughout the entire canon.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we've often heard the statement made to us by other Christians, "Well, the law was done away with at the Cross," meaning, of course, that we no longer need to keep the Sabbath commandment. In light of today's study, in particular (not to mention the Bible, as a whole), why is that statement so erroneous? What would it mean if the law were done away with?

GOD IS A PERSONAL BEING.

God is pictured involved in personal relationships in the book of Jonah. He is not just an abstract idea or some vague impersonal power. Neither is He a distant Being, barely involved with the people on this earth. Nor is He a cosmic dictator who seeks uncomprehending, speechless submission on the part of His subjects. All through Scripture, we find Him pleading and reasoning with human beings. One whole chapter in the book of Jonah is a conversation between God and Jonah. In many ways, the whole life of Jesus was a manifestation of God coming down and talking face-to-face with us.

Look up each of the following texts, in which God is speaking to people. What, if anything, do they have in common?

Gen. 4:1-7 _____

Exod. 3:1-8 _____

Job 38-41 _____

Jonah 4 _____

Acts 9:3-8 _____

Notice, in every one of these examples, God is seeking either to warn, to inform, to teach, or to reveal Himself and His love to sinful human beings. What these accounts show us is that God deals with us as we are, beings with free wills who need to be wooed away from evil choices or, in the cases of Cain and Jonah, of wrong attitudes, which can be an evil choice, just as well. In all these examples, we see a Lord who is working only for the benefit of humanity, the same Lord who is working in our behalf today, as well. Again, what's amazing is to think of the size of the universe, at least the known universe (there's so much out there we don't even know about), and then to realize that the God who created all this wants to enter into a personal relationship with us! It is a thought that defies the imagination.

If someone were to ask you, How can I have a personal relationship with the Lord? how would you answer? What are a few of the crucial steps we must take in order to have that relationship?

JESUS IS A PICTURE OF GOD.

The God of the Old Testament, who sought a personal relationship with human beings, is the same God of the New Testament. This is clearly seen through the life and ministry of Jesus.

A preacher once described it like this: Imagine you are watching a group of ants cross a street. Knowing that they are going to be squished by the first vehicle that comes down the road, you stand above them and shout, “Hey, ants, get out of the road!” More than likely, it wouldn’t work. So, instead, you become an ant, get down on their level, and, speaking their language, lead them from the path of destruction. A bit fanciful, yes, but it does make the point: Jesus became one of us in order to best communicate with us and, of course, in order to redeem us from the path of destruction.

What are some of the conversations of Jesus recorded in the Gospels? What do they all have in common? In other words, what was Jesus seeking to do in each of these conversations?

Matt. 19:16-22 _____

Mark 7:24-37 _____

John 3:1-21 _____

John 4:1-27 _____

Christ gives human beings time and room to listen thoughtfully and answer honestly. He allows people to dispute His Word or simply not to listen. He never communicates in a way that forces anyone to assent. That’s simply not God’s way. He wants us to obey Him because we love Him, and love cannot be forced.

In the book of Jonah, the Old Testament reaches one of its loftiest points of revealing God in His relationship to creation and history and His tender concern for all His creatures.

With God’s final question to Jonah—Should I not pity Nineveh, and what about the animals?—we find one of the most amazing biblical glimpses of the Personhood of God and His entanglement in our human situation. What Jonah tells us is what all the Bible tells us: We are not alone. Our God cares, however difficult it might seem to appear to us on the surface. But that’s part of the problem. We see only on the surface. The Bible has been given to help us see, in a sense, the formula behind the ferment.

FURTHER STUDY:

Divine love has been stirred to its unfathomable depths for the sake of men, and angels marvel to behold in the recipients of so great love a mere surface gratitude. Angels marvel at man's shallow appreciation of the love of God. Heaven stands indignant at the neglect shown to the souls of men. Would we know how Christ regards it? How would a father and mother feel, did they know that their child, lost in the cold and the snow, had been passed by, and left to perish, by those who might have saved it? Would they not be terribly grieved, wildly indignant? Would they not denounce those murderers with wrath hot as their tears, intense as their love? The sufferings of every man are the sufferings of God's child, and those who reach out no helping hand to their perishing fellow beings provoke His righteous anger. This is the wrath of the Lamb."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 825.

"The Lord is in active communication with every part of His vast dominions. He is represented as bending toward the earth and its inhabitants. He is listening to every word that is uttered. He hears every groan; He listens to every prayer; He observes the movements of every one."—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 292.

"In Christ is the tenderness of the shepherd, the affection of the parent, and the matchless grace of the compassionate Saviour. His blessings He presents in the most alluring terms. He is not content merely to announce these blessings; He presents them in the most attractive way, to excite a desire to possess them. So His servants are to present the riches of the glory of the unspeakable Gift."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 826.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Philosopher Bertrand Russell had been thrown in jail for antiwar activities. One of his jailers, wanting to start a conversation, asked Mr. Russell what his religious beliefs were. "I'm an agnostic," Russell replied. The jailer, looking puzzled (as if not quite sure what an agnostic was), finally answered with a big smile, "Oh, well, it really doesn't matter. We all worship the same God anyway." From what you have learned this quarter, what's wrong with that answer, and why should we as Seventh-day Adventists, of all people, know why that answer is wrong?

SUMMARY: Let us praise God that He's more kind, loving, and forgiving than we as human beings are.



Prayer, the Chief Evangelistic Tool

J. H. Zachary

Valli faced a huge problem. For years her husband had been falling ever deeper into alcoholism. Often she suffered great pain from his drunken blows. Valli and her children often tried to escape his drunken wrath. When an evangelistic meeting was advertised in her village she decided to attend.

This was a difficult decision because the political party that administered her village was determined that everyone should support the national religion. Her attendance brought extra burdens to her personal life. Those who attended were forbidden to draw water from the village well. Valli had to walk more than a mile (two kilometers) to fetch water. However, as she began to experience a new outlook on life, the long hike for water became bearable.

As Valli surrendered her life to Jesus, her life took on new directions. Old ways of thinking and acting disappeared. The Holy Spirit was performing a spiritual miracle in her life. Her drunkard husband began to see these changes in his wife and was impressed by the power of the God that Valli so often referred to.

Out of the depths of discouragement Valli's husband accompanied his wife to the evangelistic service. His life began to change. When the couple's six adult children saw what was happening to their parents, they, too, began to attend. The entire family has been baptized.

Villagers were deeply impressed by the power of Jesus to change lives. The prejudice against Christians began to wane.

Then a 6-year-old boy fell ill. The family could not afford medical care, so they turned to the visiting teachers for help. The team gathered around the child in earnest prayer, and he was healed. The boy's miraculous recovery changed the attitude of the people in the village. Attendance at the meetings grew, and as the meetings progressed, a baptismal class was organized.

Today there is a new church with 70 believers in this village.



Valli (left). J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.

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Bible Study Guide for First Quarter, 2004

The Gospel of John often has been called “the beloved Gospel.” This quarter’s *Adult Bible Study Guide*, “John: The Beloved Gospel” written by Jon Paulien, explores the life of Jesus as seen through the eyes of one closest to Him during his ministry on earth.

Lesson 1: The Unique Purpose of John’s Gospel

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:

Sunday: How the Gospels Were Written (Luke 1:1-4).

Monday: Selecting With a Purpose (John 20:30, 31).

Tuesday: The Occasion of the Gospel (John 21).

Wednesday: Second Generation (John 1:40-42).

Thursday: The Word Is as Good as His Touch (Luke 4:40).

MEMORY TEXT: John 20:29, NIV.

SABBATH GEM: The Gospel of John tells us that the absence of physical contact with Jesus is no disadvantage to those seeking a relationship with Him today. Jesus’ word is as powerful as His touch.

Lesson 2: Jesus Is the Best

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:

Sunday: The Word as Eternal God (John 1:1, 2).

Monday: Creator and Sustainer (John 1:3-5).

Tuesday: Rejection and Reception (John 1:4-13).

Wednesday: The Humanity of Jesus (John 1:1, 2, 14).

Thursday: The Greatest Revelation (John 1:14-18).

MEMORY TEXT: John 1:14, NIV.

SABBATH GEM: At the beginning of his Gospel, John describes Jesus as the Word who was God from eternity yet who becomes flesh. Thus, He alone is worthy of our worship.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired

The regular Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide is available free each month in braille and on audiocassette to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, old age, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097.