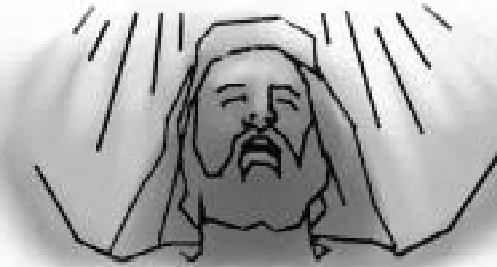


# Conversing With God



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**J**ONAH HAS COMPLETED A MOST successful preaching mission. The citizens of the capital city of Nineveh, from the least to the greatest, accepted his judgment message and turned in repentance to the God of heaven. Jonah can now travel home, full of joy and thanksgiving for the mighty power of God to change even violently wicked pagan hearts. This is what one might expect. But the book of Jonah has still more surprises.

All through the book of Jonah God has far more trouble with His prophet than with the most profligate of the heathen world. The wicked Ninevites in chapter 3 respond in repentance to the call of judgment from God. Jonah obeys God only after being subjected to the most extreme divine measures. Even the pagan king humbly submits to God's sovereign authority, recognizing that God is not obligated to spare the city. Jonah presumes upon God's mercy.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How did Jonah respond to the amazing repentance of the Ninevites? What was it about Jonah that made his attitude even more repugnant? What was this prophet's problem? By his attitude, whom was Jonah emulating? What does this story reveal to us about God's grace and about the limits of humans to understand that grace fully?

**MEMORY TEXT:** “‘For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,’ says the Lord God. ‘Turn, then, and live’” (Ezekiel 18:32, NRSV).

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 29.

**UNEXPECTED RESPONSE.**

One of the most unexpected verses in Scripture is Jonah 4:1. In the Hebrew, the text reads: “And it was evil to Jonah, a great evil, and he was furious at it.” Furious at what? What was this “great evil”? It was that the Ninevites had turned from their sin and violence, and, therefore, the judgment that was to fall on them didn’t.

Imagine an evangelist holding a series in a city known for wickedness and then getting depressed when the whole city turns out and accepts the message!

What’s going on here? Why would Jonah feel this way?

Perhaps he felt that these wicked Assyrians had done so much evil that they deserved punishment and that the grace God extended to them violated the basic forms of justice. Maybe feeling purely nationalistic, he wanted God’s judgment to fall upon these heathen. Maybe he felt that because the judgment hadn’t fallen, he would be viewed as a false prophet. Whatever the reason, here’s the situation: A prophet of God is angry that the Lord has shown mercy to repentant people. It’s hard to imagine a worse sin in one called to be a prophet.

**However bad Jonah’s reaction, what happened to him personally that made his reaction even worse? See Jon. 1:17–2:10.**

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Perhaps one of the greatest lessons we can learn from Jonah’s reaction is that it reveals, in a unique way, the grace of God—not as it was expressed toward the Ninevites (though it was) but how it was expressed toward Jonah. The Lord knew Jonah’s heart, knew how Jonah would react, and yet chose him anyway and was still willing to work with him, despite his bad attitude. All through the Bible, we see this principle at work.

**Look up these texts. Make a list of the character flaws they reveal. Gen. 9:20, 21; Gen. 16:1-4; Num. 20:11, 12; 2 Sam. 11:4; Matt. 11:3; Acts 15:35-41; and Gal. 2:11-14. What do they tell us about God’s willingness to work with us, and even to use us, despite our faults, as he did with Jonah?**

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## TEACHERS COMMENTS

**Key Text: Jonah 4:1-4.**

**Teachers Aims:**

1. To examine the cause of Jonah's response to the repentance of Nineveh.
2. To define what this story reveals about God's grace.

**Lesson Outline:**

**I. The Unlikeliest Prophet's Un-Prophetlike Response.**

- A. Nineveh's repentance and God's mercy anger Jonah.
- B. Jonah may be worried that he will be viewed as a false prophet and a failure because God did not destroy the city.
- C. Jonah's anger is an accusation that "God was so merciful that He was not just."—Exell, p. 200.
- D. He asks God to end his life (Jon. 4:3).

**II. God's Mercy, Grace, and Patience.**

- A. The Lord knew Jonah's heart and how he would react yet called him to service despite his character flaws.
- B. Jonah's story teaches that God can use us, as well, despite our flaws.
- C. God's mercy, grace, and patience are more than theological doctrines but are part of the experience of what it means to be a Christian.

**III. The Great Mystery of the Grace of God.**

- A. Nineveh responded to God's grace after just one warning and fully embraced repentance.
- B. God graciously responds to Jonah's wish to die with a yearning for him to see the error of his thinking.
- C. Jonah has more in common with the Ninevites than he cared to admit: Both he and they are rebellious sinners who deserve punishment but who receive mercy and grace instead.

**Summary:** Jonah throws a temper tantrum after God spares Nineveh. In an over-dramatic gesture, he asks God to take his life. He is too blinded by his own bruised ego and his imaginary failures to see the success of his mission: the saving of sin-enslaved souls.

**Commentary.**

**I. The Angry Prophet.**

In Jonah 3, the people of Nineveh turned from their evil (*ra'ah*) ways (vs. 8). When God saw this, He changed His mind about bringing

**Monday**

**November 24**

**JONAH'S SIN (Jon. 4:2).**

**T**he first time we see Jonah praying is in the belly of the fish, when he's asking for deliverance from destruction; the next time we see him praying is here, in chapter 4, where he's angry because God delivered others from destruction. Talk about hypocrisy!

Basically, Jonah was saying that the reason he didn't want to go to Nineveh was that he knew God was merciful. Thus, he's confessing, clearly, that he didn't want God to spare these people. If that's not amazing enough, the Lord, knowing his attitude, used him anyway. Surely, God's grace is greater than human wisdom allows for.

**Look at the content of what Jonah says is the character of God (Jon. 4:2). What are the attributes listed there? (See also Exod. 34:6, 7; Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; Joel 2:13.) What is the great irony here of this confession? (Who, in many ways, was the greatest recipient of God's grace, mercy, and kindness, Jonah or the Ninevites?) On the lines below, write out each characteristic Jonah mentions and then a sentence in your own words describing what you think each one of those characteristics means.**

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For Christians, the concept of God's mercy, grace, and patience isn't just theological doctrines. They should be part of the *experience* of what it means to be a Christian, of what it means to walk with the Lord. After all, if we have a relationship with God, if we love God, we should have experienced, for ourselves, what His mercy, grace, patience, and so forth are like.

**How have you experienced these aspects of God's character in your own life? What kind of personal testimony could you give to the reality of these attributes of God?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

evil (*ra'ah*) upon them (vs. 10). But as for Jonah, he was absolutely furious, literally “displeased with great displeasure” (*ra'ah*) (Jon. 4:1). The Lord has abandoned the *heat* (root, *hrh*) of His anger (Jon. 3:9) while the prophet’s anger consumes (root, *hrh*) him (Jon. 4:1). Jonah considers the city’s amazing repentance a great evil.

### II. “ ‘This, O Lord, Is What I Feared When I Was in My Own Country’ ” (Jon. 4:1, 2, NEB).

From the very beginning, Jonah was convinced the Ninevites might repent and that God would forgive them. Jonah knew that God was loving, merciful, gracious, and forgiving. The Old Testament uses the adjective “compassionate” or “gracious” (*hannun*) several times and applies it only to God.

Read Exodus 22:26, 27. Clothing, being handmade, was extremely expensive in the ancient world. Often the only clothes people had were what they wore every day. They would suffer from the cold in their unheated dwellings without a cloak to wrap around them. If one person kept the garment of another as security for a loan, the person whose clothing was taken as a pledge had every right to cry for the Lord’s help. And He would respond because of His compassionate nature.

The adjective *merciful* appears a number of times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for “merciful,” *raham* is related to *rehem* (womb) and has a connotation of motherly love. The Hebrew for “slow to anger” indicates the opposite of a quick temper (Prov. 14:29), or a hot temper (Prov. 15:18), and is better than might (Prov. 16:32) or pride (Eccles. 7:8). “Steadfast love” translates the Hebrew *chesed*, which means love with a strong element of loyalty. Hosea preached God’s *chesed* love and willingness to forgive (Hos. 11:1-11, 14:1-4) but not Jonah. He was of sterner stuff.

The prophet desired a Deity that fit his personal theology rather than making his theology fit his God. Furthermore, Jonah had his own concept of what a prophet should be like. A prophet’s message must not fail to come to pass. After all, Deuteronomy 18:22 said that if a prophet foretold something and it did not come to pass, it was a false prophecy and, by implication, spoken by a false prophet. If God did not destroy Nineveh, he feared his professional reputation would be ruined.

Jonah, as though he were waving his fist at God, offers the bizarre prayer, “ ‘O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live’ ” (Jon. 4:3, NRSV). The prophet who has been the recipient of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness now refuses to allow the Lord to extend it to others. There are those who would rather be lost than share heaven with those whom they despise. They may reject others for being of another race, culture, political perspective, etc. Jonah resented God’s love for the Ninevites because of their long history of cruelty. Jonah had plenty of reasons why God should destroy them. But God rejected those reasons. Nineveh’s repentance

**Tuesday**

**November 25**

**THE MYSTERY OF GOD’S GRACE.**

**W**hat we see with Jonah is a small example of how limited humanity is in its understanding of God’s grace, which—in its greatest expression—was revealed at the Cross. How can we, as humans, understand the love of a God who would do this for beings who are such a tiny—at least in a physical sense—part of His creation? We can’t—at least not fully; that’s why we have to (1) experience this love and grace ourselves and (2) take it on faith.

In the context of Jesus, of His death providing a sufficient atonement for the world as being something that modern men living in the scientific age could no longer take seriously, Richard Tarnas wrote: “The sheer improbability of the whole nexus of events was becoming painfully obvious—that an infinite eternal God would have suddenly become a particular human being in a specific historical time and place only to be ignominiously executed. That a single brief life taking place two millennia earlier in an obscure primitive nation, on a planet now known to be a relatively insignificant piece of matter revolving about one star among billions in an inconceivably vast and impersonal universe—that such an undistinguished event should have any overwhelming cosmic or eternal meaning could no longer be a compelling belief for reasonable men. It was starkly implausible that the universe as a whole would have any pressing interest in this minute part of immensity—if it had any ‘interests’ at all.”—*The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 305.

In contrast, Ellen White wrote: “It will be profitable to contemplate the divine condescension, the sacrifice, the self-denial, the humiliation, the resistance the Son of God encountered in doing His work for fallen men. . . . Angels marvel, as with intense interest they watch the Son of God descending step by step the path of humiliation. It is the mystery of godliness. It is the glory of God to conceal Himself and His ways, not by keeping men in ignorance of heavenly light and knowledge, but by surpassing the utmost capacity of men to know. Humanity can comprehend in part, but that is all that man can bear. The love of Christ passes knowledge. The mystery of redemption will continue to be the mystery, the unexhausted science and everlasting song of eternity. Well may humanity exclaim, Who can know God? We may, as did Elijah, wrap our mantles about us, and listen to hear the still, small voice of God.”—*The Bible Echo*, April 30, 1894.

**Using these verses (1 Cor. 2:7; 3:19; Eph. 3:9; Phil. 4:7; Col. 2:2; 1 John 4:10) and any others you find relevant, as well as what Ellen White wrote above, pen a paragraph answering Tarnas’s challenge to the Christian faith.**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

made them meaningless. What about the petty objections we sometimes raise against others?

### III. “Is It Right for You to Be Angry?” (Jon. 4:4, NRSV).

Jonah accuses the Lord of being too slow to anger. Thankfully, God was exactly that, or the prophet himself might have felt divine wrath. The Lord brings Jonah face-to-face with his own anger through “a simple question: ‘Is it good for you to be angry?’ This question turns the focus away from the Ninevites and what they deserve to Jonah and his response. The question ‘is it good’ can be interpreted on many levels. Is it [the anger] theologically sound? Morally correct? Emotionally healthy? Yahweh, by continuing to interact with the stubborn prophet, demonstrates the depth of his attachment to Jonah. Jonah, however, does not answer the question; he is not yet ready to acknowledge it in all its ramifications. Instead, he leaves the city. Is he once more running away?”—James L. Mays, gen. ed., “Jonah,” in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), p. 659.

However, God again deals compassionately with Jonah. He does

## INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

### Texts for Discovery: John 3:16, Romans 3:21-26, 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

1. Humans are full of faults, and the Bible is full of how many humans chose to do the wrong thing. However, the Bible also is full of how God continued to offer these people His grace. Why do you think He does so? John 3:16, Rom. 3:21-26.
2. The book of Jonah is full of God’s grace. Jonah received it numerous times. David and Peter also received it more than once. Why is God ever ready to dispense His grace?
3. Ellen White writes that “humanity can comprehend in part, but that is all that man can bear.” —*The Bible Echo*, April 30, 1894. What does our being able to comprehend only a little tell us about God and His love? What does it tell us about humankind?
4. This week’s lesson tells us that grace is about getting what we do not deserve. Neither the Ninevites nor the Israelites deserved the grace God gave them. Why did God not just give both groups up to their sin and folly?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10. What do you think Paul is saying in these verses about grace? Is grace weak or strong? What does he mean when he says that only in his weakness does God’s power rest on him?

**GOD TOO IS MERCIFUL?**

**A**pparently, not only a modern like Richard Tarnas has trouble understanding God's grace; poor Jonah did, too, which is why he didn't want to preach to Nineveh. He didn't want them to get something they didn't deserve. But that's always what grace is about: getting what we don't deserve.

One of the Lord's early expressions of profound grace was proclaimed to Israel following their great apostasy worshipping the golden calf in the wilderness (see Exod. 34:6). At that point, they might rightfully have been forsaken by God. As a result, this revelation of God's mercy, and grace, was especially precious to Israel.

**Read over Exodus 32. In what ways was Israel's guilt worse than that of the Ninevites? Contrast the attitude of Moses to that of Jonah. What could have caused such a profound difference?**

However grateful Jonah was for God's mercy toward him, he was upset that these marvelous, gracious attributes of Israel's God were to be shared with a wicked people like the Ninevites. He is now highly critical of these divine qualities of grace and lovingkindness. He thinks that God should reserve His salvation for the righteous and that judgment should be the destiny of the wicked.

**Who else manifests this same spirit as Jonah? (see Zech. 3:1-7; Rev. 12:10). How does this show how bad Jonah's attitude was?**

Jonah sees the deferment of judgment on Nineveh as a mistake. He disapproves strongly of wasting the Lord's compassion on these people. His reasoning reveals how he presumes to govern God's world better than God Himself! Ultimately, Jonah's underlying reason for running away from God's commission has less to do with Nineveh's vile sinners than with the character of God.

However, the wicked Ninevites are really no different from Jonah. The Ninevites and Jonah are all rebellious sinners deserving only punishment. Yet, God graciously decides to show them mercy. Jonah is willing to accept this mercy for himself but not for Nineveh.

**Geraldo's unbelieving brother had been murdered by a man who, subsequently, went to prison, where he was later converted. Geraldo, however, struggles with what he believes is a great injustice: salvation for a murderer and death for his brother. How would you answer his questions about God's justness?**



## TEACHERS COMMENTS

not debate with him or back him into a corner, forcing him against his will to admit the foolishness of his behavior. Instead, He asks a simple question and lets the prophet consider its implications when he is ready to do so. The prophet may have stalked off just to see if he could sit God out. But the question remains—lurking in his mind, nibbling away at his prejudices and objections. God seems as determined to make Jonah mature as He is to save Nineveh.

### IV. How Shall We Answer?

Not only is God's question directed at Jonah, it also is intended for us. When God works in ways that may be different from those we would select, what right do we have to disapprove? Suppose God employs methods that make us uncomfortable or that may draw people to Him who embarrass us? What if He accepts worship styles that trouble us? The list of things that can make us angry enough to want to die is as endless as the number of controversies that trouble God's people. People have fled the church because of all kinds of issues that have upset them. But does He not have the freedom to do as He sees best? Is it good for us to be angry?

## WITNESSING

In the book of Esther, we read of how the queen went before King Ahasuerus unannounced, knowing full well that anyone who went into the king's court without being invited could be put to death. However, when the king saw Queen Esther "standing in the court" (Esther 5:2), he was pleased and held out his golden scepter to welcome her.

Jonah was angry when God graciously spared the Ninevites after they repented. He told the Lord just how he felt, and the same merciful God *allowed* him to do so. God is a God of reason. He has gone beyond what we deserve by explaining His law and presenting it in a way we can understand. He does this so we will choose to serve Him freely.

We know this is true by the

life of Christ. Throughout His ministry on earth, He presented the principles of God's law in parables. He told practical stories of ordinary people and events to convey God's love and the importance of keeping His law. More than anything, we know He is a God of reason by the simple fact that He has allowed the great controversy between Christ and Satan to continue. He wants the whole universe to see that He is a merciful and a just God, a God of love. So when someone questions whether or not God will understand his or her mistakes and will forgive, we, as God's witnesses, can tell this person "Yes!" God understands, and He beckons each of us to "come boldly unto the throne of grace . . . [to] obtain mercy" (Heb. 4:16).

*Thursday*

*November 27*

**GOD'S PATIENCE WITH JONAH.**

**How does God appeal to Jonah after the prophet, so upset over God's mercy, asks to die? Jon. 4:4.**

**J**onah's gracious and merciful God quietly asks Jonah a searching question. With only three words in Hebrew, God urges Jonah to reconsider.

**Compare and contrast what the Lord says to Jonah in verse 4 with what He said to Cain (Gen. 4:6). What are the parallels in the issues addressed in both incidents?**

God's response to Jonah is surprisingly mild. He yearns for Jonah to come to see the childishness of his behavior. Helping this stubborn person become a more mature believer seems to be one of His main goals. In light of this amazing conversation with Jonah in chapter 4, this goal seems equally as important to Him as was the salvation of Nineveh. God challenges Jonah to think about his reaction and to analyze his thinking. God is gently suggesting to Jonah that he might not be correct in his estimate of the situation. Jonah is not the only person in Scripture who has been troubled by the ways of God.

**Think of others in Scripture who experience deep agony as they wrestle with God's ways. Job 7:17-21; Jer. 15:15-18. What is the essence of their complaints, and how do those complaints differ from Jonah's? Read also Luke 9:52-56. Compare what happened there with what happened with Jonah here in chapter 4.**

No other nation, corporately, ever wrestled with God with the same depth or intensity as Israel did. All through the Old Testament, a rich tapestry of such encounters displays rage, despair, and anguish. The Psalter is a prime collection of such struggles.

Though Christians today generally prefer the praise psalms, many of the 150 psalms are filled with pain and protest. And recall that these were sung by the Israelites even in worship. The intensity of the relationship with God in the Old Testament seems irreverent to some now. But, perhaps, it is more a matter of our own immaturity in our relationship with God. God does not chide hurting believers. In fact, He always shows amazing respect with all such expressions, Jonah's included. God apparently values honesty in our relationship with Him. We do not have to deny reality when praying reverently to God.

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

### *LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH*

**Icebreaker:** William Barclay said that it is interesting to him how Jesus looks at humanity. Jesus not only sees what a person is; He also sees what a person can become. He sees not only the actualities in a person; He also sees the possibilities. Jesus sees us not only as we are but as we can be, and He says “Give your life to Me, and I will make you what you have it in you to be.”

#### **Thought Questions:**

1. Do a character study of the twelve disciples handpicked by Jesus. What kind of people would you have picked had you been the CEO? What do the disciples say about outward appearances? About talent? About attitude? From the disciples, what lessons can we learn about team spirit? About acceptance? About tolerance? About potentials?
2. It has been said that there will be three things that will surprise us when we get to heaven: one, to find many there whom we did not expect to find there; another, to find some not there whom we had expected; a third, and perhaps the greatest wonder, will be to find ourselves there. With this statement in mind, how does grace help us accept people as they are? Grace is an acquired skill, developed

over time with the help of the Holy Spirit and mentors. How may we nurture an attitude of grace in little children?

3. In a grace-filled life, the human and the Divine will be so intermingled that it would be impossible to separate the two. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

#### **Application Questions:**

1. Michelangelo chipped away at a huge block of stone. When asked what he was doing, he replied, “I am releasing the angel imprisoned in this marble.” Outward appearances can be deceiving. Share with the class an incident when you were mistreated because of a misunderstanding. Think of the people in your neighborhood who are considered odd, or strange, and those who visit your church uninvited. How can we better reflect Jesus to them? Why is it important to remember not to judge a person based on his or her outward appearance?
2. Read John 14:12-14. Why do we hesitate to take Jesus’ words to heart? Why are we afraid to claim the promise that we can do the “works” that Jesus did (KJV)? What human flaws keep us from claiming the promise in John 14:12-14?

**FURTHER STUDY:**

**T**here are mysteries in the plan of redemption . . . that are to the heavenly angels subjects of continual amazement. The apostle Peter, speaking of the revelations given to the prophets of ‘the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow,’ says that these are things which ‘the angels desire to look into.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 702.

Ellen White eloquently works through the issues of God’s justice and mercy as worked out in the history of Israel.

Regarding Jeremiah’s ministry: “The unwillingness of the Lord to chastise is here vividly shown. He stays His judgments that He may plead with the impenitent. He who exercises ‘loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth’ yearns over His erring children; in every way possible He seeks to teach them the way of life everlasting. Jeremiah 9:24. He had brought the Israelites out of bondage that they might serve Him, the only true and living God. Though they had wandered long in idolatry and had slighted His warnings, yet He now declares His willingness to defer chastisement and grant yet another opportunity for repentance.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 413.

“Once more he yielded to his inclination to question and doubt, and once more he was overwhelmed with discouragement. Losing sight of the interests of others, and feeling as if he [Jonah] would rather die than live to see the city spared, in his dissatisfaction he exclaimed, ‘Now, O Lord, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.’ ”—Page 271.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1. Study the parable in Matthew 18:23-35. How do you understand this in contrast with what’s happening so far in Jonah?**
- 2. Read Psalm 10. What is going on there, and how can it be explained in the context of what happened with what we have studied so far in Jonah?**
- 3. French writer and Christian Blaise Pascal once wrote that “the heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing of.” What do you think he meant by that? Do you agree? And how does a thought like that fit in with the Christian faith?**

**SUMMARY:** Jonah has a lot of lessons to learn about the love and the mercy of the God he professes to serve.