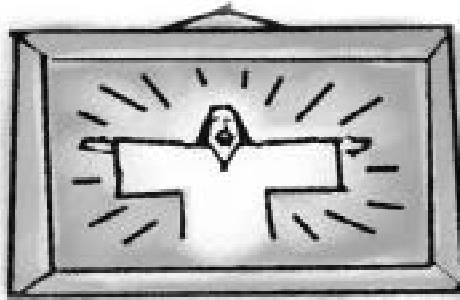


A Picture of God



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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Isaiah 40.

Teachers Aims:

1. To review the lessons from the book of Jonah about God's forgiveness.
2. To underscore God's desire to have a personal relationship with us.

Lesson Outline:

I. Mercy and Forgiveness: Portraits of God in Scripture.

- A. The Bible does not try to prove that God exists but provides examples of a God of mercy and of grace in action.
- B. Scripture presents God as the decisive and all-powerful Creator and Sustainer of the world.
- C. The book of Jonah provides us with examples of God's forgiveness, which only He can grant to us.

II. Our Greatest Advocate.

- A. Throughout the Bible, examples of God's involvement in personal relationships dispel the notion of a distant deity.
- B. Jesus is the manifestation of God, relating to us on a face-to-face basis.
- C. He continues His never-ceasing battle to woo us away from sin.

Summary: Christ came not as a dictator or monarch but as One with whom humanity could identify. His patience, love, and understanding cross gulfs that even the greatest of bridges can never hope to span. Through His life and ultimate sacrifice we are gifted with the opportunity for salvation.

Commentary.

I. The God of Jonah.

The book of Jonah may seem to be just a simple story. But we have discovered this quarter that it is actually a theologically complex book. It teaches that:

1. God created, controls, and cares for the natural world. During the storm in Jonah 1:9, the prophet stated that God made the sea and the dry land, terms that the Bible uses to represent all creation. Read Psalm 95:3-6.

Creation is under God's control, as we see when He sent a powerful wind to whip up the sea (Jon. 1:4) and appointed a great fish (vs. 17) to swallow Jonah. The Lord spoke to the fish, and it obeyed,

Monday

December 22

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

vomiting the prophet out on dry land (Jon. 2:10). Later, He brought into being a special plant and worm (Jon. 4:6, 7) and concluded the story with another wind (vs. 8). The Lord showed His concern for all the animals of Nineveh (vs. 11). The only being in the entire book who refused to accept God's protective rulership was Jonah himself.

2. *God stands ready to rescue those who ask for His help.* Jonah acknowledged God's deliverance during his prayer in Jonah 2:2-9. The pagan sailors pleaded for God to spare them (Jon. 1:14), and the people of Nineveh both spoke and acted out a prayer by their fasting and wearing of sackcloth (Jon. 3:7-9). God delivered both the prophet and the Ninevites from certain destruction.

3. *God cares about all the earth's inhabitants.* Jonah repeated God's statement made to Moses that He is " 'a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' " (Jon. 4:2; compare Exod. 34:6). God did show mercy and grace to the prophet, rescuing him from death in the sea. But He also saved the storm-tossed sailors and the repentant people of Nineveh. God sent the prophet to warn Nineveh, because He loved its people just as He loved Israel. Unfortunately, the only Israelite in the story did not reflect that universal love.

The crew of the sailing vessel displayed faith (Jon. 1:6) and wanted to do the morally right thing (vss. 12-14). After the display of God's power over the storm, they even worshiped and made vows to Him (vs. 16). The people of Nineveh quickly accepted the prophet's preaching about their corrupt condition and genuinely repented (Jonah 3). While Jonah recognized God's love for other nations (Jon. 4:2), he was angry about it.

4. *God may change His mind about His intention to punish.* Besides his hostility to the Assyrians, this may have been the thing that aggravated Jonah the most. His professional pride was at stake. Whatever a prophet predicted was expected to come to pass. This is one reason we find people in the Old Testament trying to kill the prophets.

If a prophet could be slain before he could deliver his prophecy, the prophecy would not be fulfilled. God told Jonah to announce Nineveh's doom then changed His mind about destroying the city. The prophet's self-image took a blow, especially since Deuteronomy 18:22 declares that a prophecy that did not come to pass was a false one. Jonah would rather have tens of thousands perish than be regarded as a false prophet. Would we allow others to perish just to preserve our own religious ideas? Have our theologies—vital as they are—assumed even more importance than our concern for others?

God, however, is free to act as He wills—even if it means doing something different from what He previously announced. Read Jeremiah 18:1-10.

God's freedom to do things His way can be frustrating from a human perspective, as we see in Matthew 20:1-16, in which the laborers in the vineyard resented the laborers hired last, receiving the

Tuesday

December 23

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

same wages as those first hired. The book of Jonah explores the relationship between God's justice and His compassion and reminds us that it is His right to balance them as He sees fit. God cannot be forced into any human theology or philosophy.

5. *The Lord of the Bible is the only true God.* While the story recognizes the existence of the religious beliefs and practices of the sailors (Jon. 1:5-7), it stresses God's goal of leading them to worship Him (vs. 16). While the prophet acknowledges the folly of idol worship (Jon. 2:8), the rest of the book does not directly criticize any of the non-Israelites in the story. It accepts them where they are and seeks to lead them to a greater understanding. This is a model for the church's dealing with others. There is only one true God, but He seeks others in love, not condemnation and criticism. He works to convert sincere worship into true worship.

6. *The Lord longs for thanksgiving, praise, and worship from those He delivers.* The sailors worshiped God after He calmed the sea (Jon. 1:16). The king of Nineveh said " 'Who knows? God may relent and

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: The book of Jonah, Isaiah 40:28-31, Matthew 7:7-11.

1. Too often people ask whether God really exists. Just as often, people believe God exists but do not believe He exists in their lives. How does the story of Jonah show that God not only exists but that He can exist in your life?
2. Read Matthew 7:7-11. If God gives only great gifts, then how can we explain to someone the bad things that happen to people? Consider Jonah's life in your answer.
3. Forgiveness is not an easy concept to understand, even for some Seventh-day Adventists. Youth and young adults especially feel they have been abused by the "institutionalization" of Adventism. Using the Old Testament, find five stories of forgiveness that are relevant to young people today.
4. From the book of Jonah, we have learned the depth of God's power over creation. What does Isaiah 40:28-31 tell you about God? About yourself? How can you use these verses as a testimony to others?
5. Throughout our study this quarter, we learned that God is a personal God. Not only was He involved personally with Jonah; He also seeks to be involved with us on a daily basis. Find and discuss three texts showing that God wants to be involved in your life.

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish' ” (Jon. 3:9). Implicit in the king’s statement was the beginnings of praise. Even Jonah praised God after his rescue from the fish (Jon. 2:9).

II. God Can Be Witnessed but Never Fully Understood.

Instead of trying to define or explain God, the Bible prefers to tell stories showing Him in action. Rather than abstractly outlining the relationship between justice and mercy, the book of Jonah recounts God’s gracious dealings both with a rebellious prophet and a pagan nation. A story of God’s love is infinitely more powerful than all our theologies and sermons about it.

The story of Jonah raises more questions than it answers. We must consider how we would react if we were in the situation of someone in the story. But those questions the story forces us to confront make us think about the implications of God’s love in our life—and thinking through something so vital is the only way we can really learn about it.

WITNESSING

An image closely resembles something else. *To image* is to reflect or to symbolize. The Hebrew word for image is *tselem*, which means a resemblance or representative figure. “God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27) or *to resemble Himself*. The Greek word for image, *eikon*, means “a likeness.” “[You] have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image [*likeness*] of him that created him” (Col. 3:10).

To say that we were created in the image of God means that God made us to be like Him in thought (Phil. 2:5), in words (Eph. 4:15), in action (1 Cor. 10:31), and in character (Deut. 8:6).

When we have no other gods before Him, we are walking in His ways. When we honor our fathers and mothers, we are walking in His ways. When we do not covet, we are walking in His ways. When we walk in *His* ways, we behave or conduct ourselves in the way Christ, our Example, would conduct Himself. By doing this, we *image*, or reflect, God’s character.

In the book of Jonah, we see a picture of God, of His character. God is forgiving. God is omnipotent. God knows and loves each one of us personally and has called us to be His representatives on earth, to be His witnesses.

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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: A. W. Tozer once reflected that all God's acts are consistent with all His attributes. No attribute contradicts any other, but all harmonize and blend into one another in the infinite abyss of the Godhead. All that God does agrees with all that God is, and being and doing are one in Him. The familiar picture of God as often torn between His justice and His mercy is altogether false to the facts. To think of God as inclining first toward one and then toward another of His attributes is to imagine a God who is unsure of Himself, frustrated, and emotionally unstable, which, of course, is to say that the one of whom we are thinking is not the true God at all but a weak, mental reflection of Him badly out of focus.

Thought Question:

What kind of portrait does the Bible paint of God? What does it say about the relationship between God and humanity? Have the class find word pictures, or descriptive phrases, in the psalms that paint a picture of the God we worship.

Application Questions:

1. One of the characteristics of God that appeals to humans is

consistency, or reliability. The fact that God can be depended on at all times and in all circumstances is deeply assuring to our faith and trust. Imagine life without consistency. Consider the consistency created by the things in life that often are taken for granted: watches, office hours, traffic rules, and so forth. What kind of life would inconsistency create? Now make a list of reasons why you are glad you worship a God who is consistent.

2. On their way home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon confused me." The mother asked, "Why is that?" The little girl replied, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?" The mother replied, "Yes, that's true." "And he also said that God lives in us? Is that true, Mommy?" Again the mother replied, "Yes." "Well," said the little girl, "if God is bigger than we are, and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?" What characteristic of God would you like to show through your life? What can you do to ensure that it is an accurate representation of God?

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.