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**Editorial Office:** 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904

**Principal Contributor**

JoAnn Davidson

**Editor**

Clifford Goldstein  
goldsteinc@gc.adventist.org

**Associate Editor**

Lyndelle Brower Chiomenti

**Editorial Production Manager**

Soraya Homayouni Parish

**Art and Design**

Lars Justinen

**Pacific Press® Coordinator**

Paul A. Hey

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## Divine Surprises

A farmer every morning went out to feed his chicken. Each morning, when it saw the farmer approach, the bird got ready for breakfast. This scenario happened over and over until, one morning, the farmer arrived and, instead of feeding the fowl, wrung its neck.

The point is this: The past is no guarantor of the future. Though things that have happened before, even regularly, can and often do happen again, they don't, automatically, have to. The unexpected does arise and often when least expected (which is part of what makes it unexpected).

This concept was hard for many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans to grasp. The tremendous advances in science, particularly through the seminal work of Isaac Newton, led many to believe that all of nature works through cold, uncaring, and unvarying laws. Once these laws were understood, it was conceivable (if enough other information were given) that a person could know everything that would happen in the future because everything—from what the king would want for dessert on New Year's Eve to the number of hailstones in the next hailstorm over Paris—could be predicted with unerring accuracy.

By the early twentieth century, however, scientists like Niels Bohr, Max Planck, and Erwin Schrödinger—with their discoveries in quantum physics—brought these deterministic assumptions into great question. According to quantum theory, reality at its most fundamental level reveals itself in a transitory, elusive, even statistical, manner, so that we can know only the probability of events, nothing more. Gone, now, was the clockwork universe of the previous few centuries. Einstein, responding incredulously to quantum uncertainty, once said, "I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world."

No, God doesn't. But He can be full of surprises, and some of His most unexpected ones appear in the topic for this quarter—the book of Jonah, which although on the surface seems filled with the uncertainty and surprise of the quantum realm, though, in fact, it is based on a certitude more solid and constant than the physics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.

First, there's Jonah, a prophet who refuses to accept his call—hardly the usual biblical paradigm, to be sure. Though a Daniel he isn't, a prophet he, nevertheless, is: "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of *his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet*, which was of Gathhepher" (2 Kings 14:25, emphasis supplied). This is the same Jonah, son of Amittai (hard as it, at times, might be to believe), whom we'll be following for the next few months.

Next, this prophet flees from the Lord in a boat (A prophet fleeing the Lord?), only to have the Lord send a storm that threatens to sink

the vessel. Amid the storm, it's the pagans, not the Hebrew, who pray for deliverance (another surprise), and Jonah is thrown overboard, only to get swallowed alive by a big fish that holds him in its stomach for three days before spewing him out, alive, on the land.

Jonah, finally, after all this prodding, delivers the message of warning to the Ninevites, who en masse repent from their evil ways, sparing themselves divine condemnation (a rather surprising turn of events, as well). But the greatest surprise comes next, because Jonah becomes saddened, even angry, over their repentance. *A prophet angry over those who repent and turn away from sin?* (As said before, this book is full of surprises.)

Yet, the most important point of Jonah isn't found in the surprises that spill out of its 48 verses but in the one thing that's constant all the way through those verses, and that is, God's incredible grace toward wayward, erring people, even wayward, erring prophets like Jonah. If the Lord would continue to work with someone who squandered privileges and ignored light, then there's hope for us. We surely have done as badly as this weak-willed, spiritual pipsqueak of a prophet who should have known better than to do what he did, even though he did it just the same. Of course, grace is the most gracious when bestowed upon those who know better but do wrong anyway (Who among us can't relate?).

The focus of Jonah, then, really isn't on the "great fish" that swallowed Jonah alive but on "the great God" who prepared that fish. The great God who never manifested His greatness more than when He was the most "helpless"; that is, when in the person of His Son He was nailed to the cross, His life crushed out for the sins of those who don't know better and even, maybe especially, of those who do. In one sense, it hardly matters which, because we're all spiritual charity cases, taking where we don't give, receiving what we don't deserve, and getting what we don't earn . . . like Jonah.

Many thanks to this quarter's able author, Dr. JoAnn Davidson, assistant professor of theology, in the Department of Theology and Christian Philosophy, at the Andrews University Seminary. Her love for the book of Jonah, and especially for the God revealed in that book, is apparent all through this Bible Study Guide.

Challenging, baffling, even occasionally disturbing, the book of Jonah, with all its surprises—maybe even through those surprises—reveals one truth that never changes: God's love for even the most unlovable, which, at times, is all of us.

# Got Questions?

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