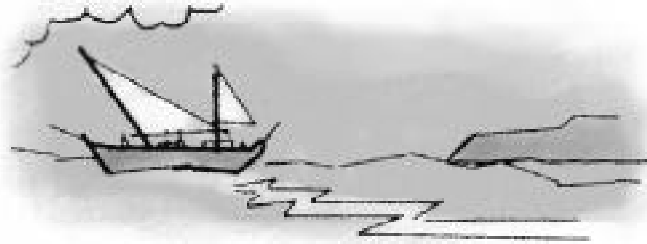


# A Hebrew Prophet and Heathen Mariners



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**I**N SOME WAYS, THE STORY line that unfolds this week (basically, Jon. 1:4-13) is a small example of what happened to ancient Israel. God originally designed that, had the nation been obedient, the heathen would have come from all around to learn about the God who had done so much for His chosen people. Unfortunately, that wasn't how things turned out. Because of Israel's disobedience, instead of those pagans coming to the Hebrews, the Hebrews went to the pagans, often in chains. That is, they witnessed for the Lord, as He said they would, but they did so amid great calamity and distress.

This week we'll see, on a minor scale, a similar paradigm. It's in the midst of great trial and calamity that Jonah, surrounded by "pagans," is put into a situation in which he has to witness for the Lord, even if it's upon a ship sinking amid a terrible storm.

Yet, even despite Jonah and his faults, the message gets through.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** What is it about tragedy that often helps us put things in perspective? What powerful irony appears in this part of the book of Jonah? Why does Jonah identify his God as the Creator of the earth and the sea? How was God able to use Jonah as a witness, despite the prophet's stubbornness?

**MEMORY TEXT:** "Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides. They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants" (Psalm 119:90, 91, NKJV).

\*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 1.

**STORM AT SEA.**

**I**n Jonah 1:4, 5, the narrative continues. The Lord sends a mighty storm, the ship is in danger of sinking, the pagan sailors are praying to their respective gods, and Jonah had “gone down into the hold of the ship” (vs. 5, NRSV), where the captain found him sleeping. The captain was, obviously, quite vexed to find someone snoozing in such an emergency.

**Notice, too, what happens among these pagan sailors. The text says they started casting their “wares” overboard. These were things that, in normal circumstances, would be of great value to them. This even could have been the cargo. Now, however, in such an emergency, they are willing to cast it all into the sea! What’s the spiritual lesson here? (See also Eccles. 2:11; Matt. 16:26; 1 John 2:15-17.) How many of us have ever found ourselves in a situation in which, suddenly, many of the things we deemed so important become less so? How can the Lord use such situations to teach us about what’s truly of value?**

---

---

**Read what the captain says to Jonah. Why was he so upset? What did he want from the sleeping prophet? Was this an appeal made by faith or simply by desperation? Jon. 1:6.**

Note the striking similarity of the captain’s summons to Jonah—“Arise!” (Jon. 1:6), and Jonah’s original summons from God in verse 2—“Arise.” Moreover, the captain begs Jonah to “cry” unto God, using the same verb that God had when He called Jonah to “cry” against Nineveh (Jon. 1:2). Now, however, the summons to arise and to cry comes from a pagan sailor who doesn’t even worship the God of heaven.

Jonah, a prophet of the true God, is asked by a pagan to pray. The irony of this situation shouldn’t be missed.

**What spiritual significance can you find in the irony of this pagan asking a Hebrew prophet to pray? Do we as Christians ever find those not of our faith, or those of even no “faith,” who are more “spiritual” or “moral” or even more faithful to what they believe than we ourselves are to what we know? What can we learn from these situations?**

**PAGAN MARINERS CONTINUE THEIR INITIATIVE.**

**T**he sailors continue to struggle against the alarming storm while Jonah remains detached. The mariners are convicted that the violence of this storm is evidence the gods were angry.

**In reality, of course, the storm was brought, not out of anger but out of love. We know that, because we know the ending of the story and what was happening behind the scenes, something the sailors didn't know. What does this tell us about how careful we need to be about drawing the wrong conclusions regarding whatever terrible problems we might be facing at the moment? (See also Proverbs 3; Rom. 8:28; 1 Pet. 4:12.)**

The mariners assume that a storm of this magnitude is closely bound up with someone's guilt. The outcome of finding the culprit would put matters right. Though not often used today, casting lots was generally regarded in ancient times in Israel and by other nations as a method of resolving conflicts. (See Num. 33:54; 1 Sam. 14:41, 42; Esther 3:7; Prov. 16:33.) In the book of Jonah, God allows the casting of lots to implicate Jonah as the cause of the storm (Jon. 1:7).

**Though we have clear-cut Bible examples of someone's evil bringing calamity (Joshua 7), what danger exists in assuming that calamity must result from someone's specific transgression? (See Job 1; 2.)**

After the lot falls on Jonah, the sailors pepper him with numerous questions, obviously attempting to find out why the lot fell his way and why he was the cause of the storm (Jon. 1:7, 8).

Up to this point in the narrative, Jonah has not been heard talking. Now, in response to all the many pressing questions put to him, he answers selectively. In fact, he ignores the question about his occupation, about where he came from, and about his country. The only question he answers is regarding what ethnic background he has. He tells them that he is a "Hebrew." Then he answers a question they don't even ask, which is who his God is.

**The phrase to "fear God" is a common Hebrew expression that implies the idea of worshiping and serving the Lord. What's so ironic about Jonah's answer in this specific situation?**

**WITNESS AT SEA.**

**I**mmediately after identifying himself as a Hebrew, Jonah then offers some information the sailors hadn't specifically requested: " 'I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' " (Jon. 1:9, NKJV).

**What other prophet uses the title "the God of heaven"? Dan. 2:19.**

Daniel blesses the "God of heaven" when God reveals Nebuchadnezzar's dream and spares the lives of the Babylonian wise men. This phrase, "the God of heaven," appears numerous times in the Old Testament in reference to the Lord.

Perhaps, though, what's most interesting is that not only does Jonah name Him "Yahweh, the God of heaven"; he immediately describes him as the Creator, the One who made the sea and the dry land, an unmistakable reference to the Genesis Creation account.

**What are these texts (Exod. 2:11; Pss. 100:3; 146:5, 6; Mal. 2:10; Acts 4:24; Col. 1:16, 17; Rev. 4:11; 14:7) saying that is so important to our faith as Seventh-day Adventists?**

---

---

Jonah knows that the power and authority of his God come from the simple, yet crucial, fact that the Lord is the Creator, the Source of all that is, the foundation of truth, the One who has made reality. Our whole faith is based on the notion that we are worshiping the God who created all things. It's a fact that He, alone, is the Creator, and that makes Him, alone, the only true God. If He's not the Creator, then why worship Him, for He would be, just as we are, merely a product of something even greater than He is?

Thus, Jonah isn't wasting time here on any long theological excursions on the essential nature of his God. Instead, He gets right to the heart of the issue, telling them what they need to know.

**God commands that every week (no exceptions) we devote one-seventh of our lives as a reminder that He is our Creator. What does this tell us about how important the doctrine of Creation is?**

**“WHY HAST THOU DONE THIS?”**

The irony here is outrageous. Jonah did not want to testify to the pagans in Nineveh. But now, in his mad flight from that assignment, he is forced to testify to the pagans on this ship.

**What did Jonah say to the men (Jon. 1:9, 10) that made them so fearful?**

Jonah’s proclamation causes the sailors to be “exceedingly afraid.” They were already “afraid” of the storm (1:5) to begin with; now, they are “exceedingly afraid” (vs. 10). They react even more fearfully to Jonah’s confession about God than they had to the perilous storm. And no wonder: It’s one thing to worship the powerful God; it’s another to flee openly from Him. No doubt, not knowing much about this God, the pagans must have assumed that He brought the storm in order to destroy Jonah for his disobedience. And, because they had the unfortunate luck of being with him, they were going to be destroyed, as well.

There is a signal contrast between these pagan seamen and Jonah. While Jonah, the prophet of God, dares to act contrary to the God he fears, the mere mention of the mighty God of heaven causes great fear in the sailors’ hearts. The violence of the storm is all the testimony they need to the power of the God whom they believe Jonah has angered.

This conviction didn’t happen because Jonah consciously testified for God. No, he was forced to make his confession because of the storm. But through this unplanned disclosure, the mariners’ hearts were stirred. They expressed horror at Jonah’s flight from the God of heaven and earth. Thus, even in disobedience, Jonah was used by the Lord as a witness.

Indeed, what impressed the sailors about the terrible storm took place *despite* Jonah. They certainly saw nothing particularly virtuous in him. God, however, was able to work around Jonah’s disobedience. It’s kind of ironic, too, that it was through his testimony that they learned something about the true God.

**The sailors, after learning about Jonah’s flight, said to him, “Why hast thou done this?” What do we say when, after being caught in sin, we are asked, “Why hast thou done this?” Do we, as born-again Christians—who have been promised so much power from above (Rom. 6:1-12; 1 Cor. 10:13)—ever have a valid excuse to sin?**

**THE EMERGENCY WORSENS.**

**What phrase is repeated in Jonah 1:10 for the third time in this chapter?**

**T**his phrase “from the presence of the Lord” has appeared in this first chapter almost like a refrain. We already have seen it twice in verse 3. The author of the book of Jonah—as are all writers of biblical narrative—is deliberate in his choice of words. Repetition in Hebrew narrative is a technique employed to emphasize something important. In this case, our attention is deliberately focused on Jonah’s obstinate attitude.

**Why do you think that phrase is used again? What point is the author trying to make? What irony is found in its use? Can anyone ever really flee from the presence of an all-knowing God (Prov. 5:21)? In what ways can we attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord?**

The sailors grow more desperate as the storm worsens. Now they realize something must be done, or everyone will perish.

Notice how the sailors continue to take the initiative. They acknowledged the God Jonah worshiped. Now they ask him what action they should take. The sailors admit their acute fear, and they beg of Jonah the remedy: *What can we do that God should not be angered? You tell us, and we will obey. In other words, you got us into this mess, now you tell us what to do to get out of it.*

**Look at Jonah’s response (1:12). How would you characterize it? Was Jonah, admitting his guilt, ready to sacrifice himself for the good of others? Was he playing the role of the pious martyr? Or was he still continuing in disobedience? What does the fact that there’s no record of Jonah repenting or confessing to the Lord tell us about his attitude, at least to this point?**

At this point in the story, we see, perhaps, a bit of softening in Jonah. He admits that he was fleeing from the Lord, admits that he is the cause of their present suffering, and is willing to be cast into the sea in order to spare them sure destruction. Whatever his ultimate motives, Jonah is showing some signs of character development, however extreme the circumstances needed to bring it out.

**FURTHER STUDY:**

**C**ontrast Jonah’s response with the apostle Paul’s experience of a terrible storm on board a ship in the same body of water: Acts 27:21-25.

Consider how Paul takes command of the situation and declares that God will save all those on board. Courageously he exhorts them not to despair. “ ‘Last night there was standing beside me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, and He said, “Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to appear before Caesar, and for this reason God grants you the safety of all who are sailing with you.” So take courage, friends; I trust in God that things will turn out just as I was told’ ” (Acts 27:23-25, Jerusalem). Imagine had Jonah displayed a similar faith in the same God.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- 1. What might have happened had Jonah repented of his defection right there and called for God to save him, the crew, and the ship?**
- 2. Read Jonah 1:13. What is the text saying? What’s implied in there about the character of these “pagans”? Was there something already there that made them open to the moving of God’s Spirit upon them?**
- 3. Jonah was acting not out of disbelief but out of . . . what? He clearly believed in the existence of the Lord. Otherwise, why would he have fled after receiving the “word of the Lord”? Why flee from “the presence” of a God you don’t believe in to begin with? When confronted by the sailors, he instantly confessed his belief in the Lord. And He knew of the power of his God, for Jonah admitted that it was because of his fleeing from the Lord that this terrible storm had come. What, then, was his problem? Why would anyone openly disobey a God whom they were so sure existed? In what ways do Christians do the same thing? It’s one thing to disobey the commands of a God whom you don’t believe even exists; it’s another thing to disobey openly the commands of a God whom you do believe in. Discuss.**

**SUMMARY:** God used Jonah, despite himself. How much better the outcome would have been had Jonah cooperated right from the start.



## A Soul Winning LE

J. H. Zachary

Josue Mpwatsibenikanka was raised in an idol-worshipping family in southern Rwanda. When he heard the call of Christ and followed Him, his family persecuted him.

During the Rwandan civil war soldiers accused him of collaborating with the “enemy.” They were about to execute him when a soldier standing on a hill nearby called out, “We have more traitors over here.” When the soldiers ran toward the hill, Josue escaped. In gratitude to God he promised that for the rest of his life he would work for God. Although he had been a farmer, he became a literature evangelist.

Josue and a friend were concerned that there were no Sabbathkeepers in a village near their own. Josue visited every home in the village and gave interested people a small gift book. Later he returned and sold many copies of *The Great Controversy*.

In Rwandan churches music is an important part of the worship experience, and every church has at least one choir. Members often spend several hours on Sabbath afternoons enjoying the music of their choirs. So Josue and his friend began inviting choirs from nearby Adventist churches to sing for their targeted village. Crowds came out to listen.

As interest grew, the two men began teaching the Bible in connection with the choral programs. They spent many days visiting the homes of people who had come to hear the choirs. As they opened the scriptures and prayed with these families, attendance at the concerts and Bible studies grew.

Each evening they would close their Bible study with a call to accept Jesus and follow Him in a new life. This community had lost many during the civil war that ravaged Rwanda. The survivors were seeking comfort and spiritual support. Bible studies on the return of Jesus and the glorious resurrection encouraged people to respond to the call to come to Jesus.

Soon Josue and his friend began Sabbath services with about 40 persons. However, after he had canvassed every home in the village and the nearby area, his work took him to another community. He asked one of the elders from a nearby congregation to lead the new group.

Josue continues to work in this region praying for more persons whom he can lead to Jesus.

**J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.**

I  
n  
s  
i  
d  
e  
  
S  
t  
o  
r  
y