

# 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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**JONAH’S SIN (Jon. 4:2).**

The 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?**

## THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S GRACE.

What 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 descension, 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.**

**GOD TOO IS MERCIFUL?**

Apparently, 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?**

**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.

**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.



## A Difficult Life Charlotte Ishkanian

Florentine's life has never been easy. As a child she was shifted from one relative to another to live and work. By age 13 she worked as a servant. She married young and had five children, before her husband left her. She supports the family by washing clothes.

When her youngest child was admitted to the hospital, Florentine met a woman, who invited her to church. Florentine believed in God, but she was not interested in the woman's invitation, because she did not know which church was God's true church. The woman urged her to ask God to show her the church she should attend.

Florentine began to pray, "God, I know You want me to attend church. Please show me the church where You want me to worship You, so I and my children can be saved."

The next day an Adventist woman visited her home and invited her to attend evangelistic meetings. Florentine felt this woman's visit was an answer to her prayer. She took her children to the meetings. She wrote down the Bible references that the pastor quoted, but she had no Bible to look them up. So she borrowed a Bible. Soon she realized that this was the church that taught all of God's commandments.

Florentine asked for prayer to quit smoking and to find work that allowed her to keep the Sabbath. The unskilled work she did required that she work every day in order to feed her family. If she did not work, they did not eat.

Following the prayers on her behalf, Florentine was able to quit smoking. The evangelist asked her to work in his garden to earn a little money. Soon she began washing the family's clothes too.

Some weeks later Florentine and two of her five children were baptized. Then one of her sons left home to stay with his father. But his father sent him back to her. Florentine believes that God sent the boy back in answer to her prayers, so that he would remain in the influence of a Christian home.



Florentine still does not have her own Bible. But her faith is strong that one day soon God will provide one for her.

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