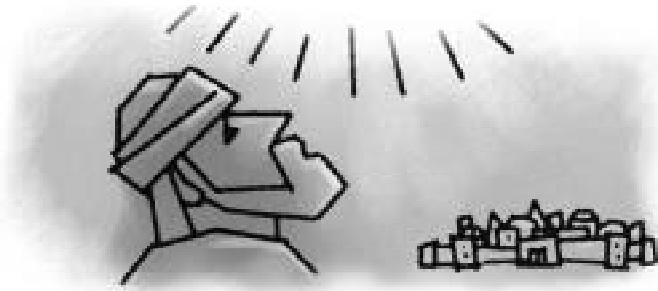


The Last Word



Sabbath Afternoon

THE FOUR-CHAPTER NARRATIVE OF the book of Jonah now closes. God has the last word, even though that last word is a question. The question is presented, however, not as God wanting to learn from Jonah but as God wanting to teach him.

Because the book doesn't tell us whether Jonah ever understands the point or not, it must not be that important for us to know. Instead, what's important is, Do we get the point? Sure, we know about God's love, mercy, and compassion; and we are glad to have these things for ourselves. But are we willing to allow God to work in us so we can have love, mercy, and compassion for others? Are we willing to make the self-sacrifices needed in order for us to teach modern-day Ninevites the truth that judgment is coming and that one day they will have to answer for their sins?

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What does God say to Jonah about the Ninevites? How does the Lord express their moral ignorance? Why does the Lord talk about the animals in the city? What lesson is the Lord trying to teach Jonah? How does Jonah respond? In what ways is Jonah a model of ancient Israel? Or even the modern church? Why does the Lord end the book of Jonah with a question that remains unanswered?

MEMORY TEXT: “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 13.

ONE LOST SOUL.

“And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (Jon. 4:11).

How can the Lord impress upon this poor man’s mind which things are important and which things aren’t? Jonah lived in a world, much like ours, where human life often seems cheap. Yet, the Lord died for all humanity, because He loves all humanity. In fact, we are told that He would have died for just one soul. “In the parable the shepherd goes out to search for one sheep—the very least that can be numbered. So if there had been but one lost soul, Christ would have died for that one.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 187.

In the context of the last verse in the book of Jonah (and of Jonah’s attitude), read Matthew 18:11-14. What kind of contrast does it create between God’s attitude toward people and Jonah’s (whose attitude might differ from ours only in degree)? What kind of rebuke do these words of Jesus have for us and for our coldness and for our lack of zeal for souls?

The thought of Christ dying for this whole planet, as small as it is in contrast to the size of the universe, is amazing enough. But for one person? Who can grasp that kind of love? Though we don’t know in the end how many ultimately will be saved (Isa. 66:23; Rev. 21:24), it certainly will be more than one. And yet, even if only one, Christ would have died anyway! No wonder the secular mind has a hard time grasping the gospel. Even those of faith can barely wrap their minds around such a powerful concept.

Think about who God is, who we are, and how small and wretched we are in contrast; and yet, look what God did for us, anyway. Dwell on what that thought tells us about God’s love. Write a paragraph expressing what this truth means to you and the hope it gives. What does this concept say to us about the assurance of salvation? Ask this question too: How, in the face of such love, are souls ultimately lost?

LIVING IN IGNORANCE.

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Notice the expression in Jonah 4:11 the Lord uses to describe the Ninevites. Obviously, it’s a metaphor. What is the Lord saying with that description? What other point does He wish to convey to this Hebrew prophet (notice the emphasis on the adjective Hebrew)?

The Lord talks to Jonah, a Hebrew, someone who comes from the nation whom the Lord called out to be a special people, those who were given great light and understanding of not only who God is but of His eternal, moral principles (see Exod. 19:5; Exodus 20; Deut. 4:7; 12:8; Pss. 19:7-11; 37:31; Jer. 31:33). So much of Hebrew history is defined by their understanding of the law and the moral precepts found in the law. In this way, the Hebrew nation stood far in advance of all the pagan societies around them.

In contrast, God describes the Ninevites as not being able to discern between their right hand and their left. Obviously, these people didn’t have the same kind of moral direction the Lord had given to Israel. A similar phrase appears in the Bible (Deut. 17:20; 28:14; Josh. 1:7), referring to the moral issue of not deviating from the divine law and from revelation. Thus here, in the book of Jonah, we are instructed that the Ninevites lacked the knowledge of the law of Yahweh. The use of the phrase “right hand and left hand” is also found in Babylonian texts as a synonym for “truth and justice” or “law and order.” Thus, God instructs Jonah that in the case of Nineveh He defers judgment for the sake of the morally ignorant, for those who don’t understand.

Maybe the Ninevites didn’t have the same knowledge of God’s law as did the Hebrews; nevertheless, the actions of the people and the king, as expressed in Jonah 3:10, show that they had some moral conscience and some understanding of good and evil. Look again at what the Lord says to Jonah in the last verse about the Ninevites. What does that tell us regarding God’s fairness in dealing with those who don’t have a deeper revelation of moral truth? Are they, therefore, not accountable to God for their actions? Or, will they be accountable to God in a different way?

ANIMALS TOO? (READ JOB 39).

All through chapter 4 God has kept gentle pressure on Jonah to reconsider his evaluation of God's treatment of the Ninevites. And in a book of surprises, one of the most surprising is the final question to Jonah.

What is the last phrase of the final verse in the concluding chapter in the book of Jonah? Jon. 4:11.

The rather cryptic ending of Jonah concludes with God showing His compassion not only on the pagan Ninevites but, apparently, on their cattle, as well (the Hebrew word there can mean not just cattle but "animals" in general). Though the recorded ending is quite abrupt (one would love to know how the conversation ultimately concluded), and the precise meaning isn't absolutely clear, it seems as though the Lord tells Jonah it wasn't only the people He had wanted to have pity on but their animals, as well.

This really shouldn't be that surprising, should it?

Throughout the four chapters in the book of Jonah, the " 'Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land' " (Jon. 1:9, NASB) is seen in His sovereignty over all His creation. This is also regularly expressed by many of the Bible writers, in both Testaments. And we are often reminded in Scripture how all the created world is part of God's concern. Even the heavens are included in this divine perspective.

Read Job 39. Notice the focus the Lord has on the creatures He refers to. What does that tell us about God's interest and care about animals, as well? Also, no matter how greatly different the situations, what parallels can you find between what the Lord says here to Job and what He says to Jonah?

Jewish tradition teaches that God takes note of those who are kind to animals, because animals can't return the favor, as humans can.

One of our greatest dangers is going to extremes. We can take a good thing so far that it becomes a bad thing. How can Christians strike the right balance in their attitude toward animals (or nature, in general) so that, on one hand, they don't treat animals cruelly nor, on the other, become fanatical in devotion toward them?

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS . . .

The book of Jonah comes to a sudden halt with a probing question that is left unanswered. We are never told whether or not Jonah finally admits to his self-centered enjoyment of God’s favor while begrudging it to the Ninevites. Nor whether he was ever able to grasp that God’s generous love for all people far surpassed his own idea of fairness. We are left wondering whether Jonah ever would appreciate God’s forgiveness of those who don’t deserve that forgiveness.

It is very unusual for a book in the Bible to end with a question, a most surprising question at that; yet, there is really no reason why a book cannot end that way. In fact, this ending is not an example of unfinished thinking and careless writing. On the contrary, by ending this way, the book sharply contrasts Jonah’s attitude to God’s.

Though it’s not common for a book of the Bible to end with a question, it is common for the Lord Himself to ask questions. Do two things with these questions God asked: First, ask yourself, Why did He ask them? Second, write down what you think the answers are (and give reasons for your answers):

Exod. 4:11 _____

Job 40:1, 2 _____

Jon. 4:11 _____

Mark 8:36 _____

Luke 6:9 _____

Take your answers to these questions and summarize in a short paragraph what they teach us about the character, mercy, and power of our God.

THE OX KNOWS.

“The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider” (Isa. 1:3).

Read the first three verses of Isaiah 1. What parallel can you see there with the story of Jonah and his attitude toward the Lord?

As we’ve seen all through the book of Jonah, nature is under the Lord’s control. This teaching, of course, is nothing new (see Matt. 21:18, 19; 17:24-27; Mark 4:35-41). If human beings were only just as obedient. The difference, however, is that God didn’t make nature morally culpable, as He made humanity. God forces nature; He doesn’t force humanity. In order for us to be moral beings, we have to be free beings. Sadly, we often abuse that freedom.

Survey, again, the book of Jonah. What and who obeyed the Lord, and who didn’t? What irony can you see in the answer?

Nature obeyed, the pagans obeyed; only Jonah, the Hebrew, didn’t, or at least to the degree that, no doubt, the Lord wanted him to. In a sense, Jonah typified the nation of Israel during various times in its history. What it could have done in peace and prosperity (1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 27:6; 56:6; Zech. 8:23), it was forced to do under terrible circumstances—that of captivity, slavery, and exile. The same with Jonah. The storm, the fish, and the three days and nights all could have been avoided had he obeyed when first asked. What’s sad, too, is that although we don’t know, ultimately, what happens to Jonah, the book ends with him seemingly still not being where the Lord wanted him to be. In other words, he still doesn’t get it. Historically, it seems that much of ancient Israel didn’t, either.

Keeping this day’s lesson in mind, what do you think Ellen White meant when she wrote: “The work which the church has failed to do in a time of peace and prosperity, she will have to do in a terrible crisis, under most discouraging, forbidding, circumstances”?
—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 463.

FURTHER STUDY:

As individuals and as a nation God proposed to furnish the people of Israel ‘with every facility for becoming the greatest nation on the earth’ (COL 288; see Deut. 4:6-8; 7:6, 14; 28:1; Jer. 33:9; Mal. 3:12; PP 273, 314; Ed 40; DA 577). He purposed to make them an honor to His name and a blessing to the nations about them (Ed 40; COL 286).

“As the nations of antiquity should behold Israel’s unprecedented progress, their attention and interest would be aroused. ‘Even the heathen would recognize the superiority of those who served and worshiped the living God’ (COL 289). Desiring the same blessings for themselves, they would make inquiry as to how they too might acquire these obvious material advantages. Israel would reply, ‘Accept our God as your God, love and serve Him as we do, and He will do the same for you.’ ‘The blessings thus assured Israel’ were, ‘on the same conditions and in the same degree, assured to every nation and to every individual under the broad heavens’ (PK 500, 501; see Acts 10:34, 35; 15:7-9; Rom. 10:12, 13; etc.). All nations of earth were to share in the blessings so generously bestowed upon Israel (PK 370).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol 4, p. 28.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. C. S. Lewis wrote: “There are only two kinds of people in the end, those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no hell.”—*The Great Divorce* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 72. However deficient C. S. Lewis’s understanding of the nature (and timing) of hell, dwell on this quote. Do you agree with him or not? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Read Luke 4:24-28. How does what Jesus is saying here parallel somewhat the situation displayed in the book of Jonah? What warnings should we, as Adventists, take from what Christ said to those in the synagogue?

SUMMARY: The book of Jonah ends with a theme seen all through the Bible: the love and greatness of God contrasted with the pettiness and sinfulness of humanity.



Witness In a Drug Rehabilitation Center

J. H. Zachary

The Dominican Republic government operates a drug rehabilitation center in Azua City. The director, cured of an addiction to crack cocaine in 1993, is convinced that spiritual therapy must be part of the help offered to the youthful patients in the rehabilitation center. He invited Pastor Daniel Sanchez to come to the center and conduct Bible studies and hear presentations by medical and other specialists for the 35 in-patients.

The government has found that of 30,000 persons this facility has treated for addictions, only 30 have relapsed.

During a visit to the Azua center in August 2001, I met 36-year-old Rafael Rosario, who was introduced to drugs by his own mother, who gave them to him to sell. He began taking cocaine, and before long he was addicted. His life became focused on getting his next fix. But his wife and children left him, and his life fell apart.

It took 10 years for Rafael to realize that he was trapped by the chains of drugs. At this low point in his life he learned about the Azua center. Rafael asked to be admitted to the program. His heart was touched by the religious services and the kind pastor who listened to his troubles. Rafael remembered the many occasions when he had spurned his brother's invitation to attend the church. But in the Wednesday spiritual therapy meetings, Rafael began to understand what his brother had been trying to tell him.

For years Rafael had rejected his brother's religion. Now he realized he needed spiritual help. Rafael recently testified to the other patients, "I am happy, for I have accepted Christ as my Savior."



Rafael's family visits him, and his children are delighted to see the changes in their father. When he completes his treatment program he plans to find honest work and support his family, as a Christian father should.

"The Lord has given me to a new life," Rafael says. "I thank God for the ministry of Pastor Sanchez, which helped me find this new life in Jesus."

Rafael Rosario (left). J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.

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