



2015 Q3 “Biblical Missionaries” Lesson 4 The Jonah Saga

We are studying Lesson 4 in the current quarterly Biblical Missionaries, and this lesson is titled “The Jonah Saga”. Probably one of the most familiar stories in the entire Bible...and it really was a saga wasn't it? Because it is more of a saga with lots of drama, I thought I would start out with a little funny story. Some of you may not know this, but my mom has a budding career in stand-up comedy...so I am always kind of on the lookout for material for her, and I found this little ditty that happens to be about Jonah. This is why you should never argue with children...A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human, because even though the whale is a very large mammal its throat is very small. The little girl stated that Jonah was indeed swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human - it was physically impossible. The little girl said, "Well, when I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah." The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?" The little girl replied, "Then you ask him." There is no theological concepts included there...just a little lighthearted comedy.

So it's a well-known story, a truth-is-stranger-than-fiction kind of story, it is just chock full of valuable object lessons we can learn from. Let's try to make a comprehensive list of typical object lessons gleaned from the story of poor Jonah:

- God has a specific plan or calling for each of our lives
- You can't run from god or His plan...or you can run but you can't hide
- Amazing insight into the grace, longsuffering, and patience of God that He wants not even one of His children to be lost, and will go to such extraordinary measures to save us
- Provides a dramatic picture of God's discipline, correction, and protection...even in the midst of rebellion
- The teacher's notes say, “By the end of the lesson, you should be able to comprehend the magnitude of God's love for outsiders and the mission responsibility of insiders.” Any thoughts about that statement?
- The teacher's quarterly summarizes the lesson this way: “The book of Jonah shines a bright light on the wideness of God's mercy and the depth of His patience, both for the pagan sinners of Nineveh and the reluctant prophet God chooses for His mission. As the drama unfolds, we're left with no doubt that relying on our own wisdom and inclinations is a poor way to approach mission. Only through submission to God's leading can we begin to understand the scope of His mission plan and our role within it.” I think this is well-written and a nice summary...thoughts?
- So let's take a look at the memory text in Sabbath's lesson...it is not taken from the book of Jonah, but speaks to the heart of what motivated God to call Jonah to the mission field. “I now



realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right.” Acts 10:34, 35, NIV. Of course, this is Peter speaking to Cornelius after they both had visions and Peter went to his house and ended up baptizing him and his whole family. So we know even in the New Testament that Jews had trouble accepting that gentiles were included in God’s plan of salvation...but back in Jonah’s day, despite repeated statements to the contrary, popular Israelite theology believed that God intended to limit salvation to only his chosen people. So Jonah is the only OT prophet we know of who was directly called to be a foreign missionary, and the four chapters of this brief book give an honest record of both the positives and the negatives in his reluctant pioneering missionary experience...and it really tries to show Jonah’s inner struggle, fear, and very human reaction to God’s calling.

SUNDAY

The Flawed Prophet

Jonah was born just a few miles from Nazareth, and he had some other interesting parallels to another Galilean prophet 750 years later. The quarterly lists several texts that give us a picture of Jonah, and he seems to be a study in contrasts:

- Mix of strength and weakness
- Self-willed and rebellious, but teachable and eventually obedient...so although he initially runs away from his mission assignment, when he finally steps up to the job he ends up leading an entire pagan city to conversion
- Loyal to God, courageous, selfless and willing to die to save the heathen sailors, he believed in prayer, but also narrow-minded, selfish, and vindictive...he was a poet and became emotionally attached to a plant, but he could also be callous in the potential destruction of an entire city.
- The quarterly calls this a “strange mixture”, but does anyone else find these descriptions frighteningly familiar? Doesn’t this sound like all of us? Doesn’t this describe each of your children at one time or another? I mean I identify with every one of these traits! #iamjonah
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And Jonah is just one in a long list of flawed prophets, priests, kings, and disciples who were used by God in spite of (or *because* of) their character flaws – get your minds around that. Our part in vindicating and glorifying God’s character is the very real transformation of our hearts, minds and characters that takes place when we are won back to trust and His Holy Spirit is poured out into us. Mrs. White says that our hearts are united with His heart; our wills are merged in His will; our minds become one with His mind; our thoughts are brought into captivity to Him (ST 11/22/1905). Wow...I really want that, don’t you? When Moses offered to have his name removed from the book of life in order to save the Israelites, doesn’t it make his testimony much more powerful to know that he started



out as a murderer and a reluctant leader? What if we didn't know about David's adulterous and murderous past? Peter's cowardice and prejudice? Paul's Isis-like persecution of the first Christians? To me, it is these traits being transformed, these character corrections that stand as of the most powerful evidence that God exists...and that his methods and design principles work!

The pink box at the bottom of Sunday's lesson asks, "What hope can we draw for ourselves from the fact that God uses flawed and damaged people to work for Him in reaching out to others? It is the **ONLY** hope we have, if we have any hope of being involved in the process! And I believe it is our testimony of this transforming work in our lives that constitutes the "greater things" Christ talks about in John 14 when he says, "Believe me: I am in the Father and my Father is in me. If you can't believe that, believe what you see – these works. The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even **greater things**, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I have been doing." This story...our story...of being lost once and now found, of being blind and now being able to see, of amazing grace that saved a wretch like me...Jesus doesn't have this story to tell – telling that story to others is up to us.

MONDAY

An Early Missionary

In Monday's lesson, the quarterly makes a point of contrasting God's desire/design for Israel – live out their religion (all of which pointed to the plan of salvation), making the nation so attractive that other nations would come to them for guidance. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could all do that – make our lives such a reflection of Christ's love and character that people come to us, in search of what we have?

So Jonah is characterized as a forerunner of the New Testament disciples...and instead of waiting for folks to come to him, he was told to go to Nineveh...and he was less than excited about this prospect.

To put this into some current perspective, Nineveh was over 500 miles east of Jonah's hometown on modern-day Iraq. It was a big city...one of the capitals of Assyria, which by the way had brutally attacked and conquered Israel a few years earlier – an event still very much alive in Israelite memories. The quarterly says Jonah imagined it as an unclean center of idolatry, brutality, and totalitarianism. A few years earlier, Assyria, of which Nineveh was one of the capitals, and according to Nahum, Nineveh was "the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!"(Nah. 3:1, NIV). He asks, "Who has not felt your endless cruelty?"(vs. 19, NIV). No doubt Jonah was well aware that the Assyrians had finely nuanced ways of mass killing and were experts in impaling and mutilating human bodies. Perhaps he felt it wasn't an ideal location for a public evangelist to begin a campaign. And yet God's command was clear. But it wasn't just fear that spurred Jonah's disobedience. Historians tell us that Jonah would have felt a sense of cultural superiority and religious



prejudice against the pagan Ninevites. It's a human tendency that is alive and well today – isn't it? As Christian author Anne Lamott puts it in her book, *Bird by Bird*:

“You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 22

Can you think of any places in the world today that could be described this way? Really not much has changed. It was very much like being asked today to go be a Christian missionary in Iraq (literally), Iran, Syria, or Afghanistan. Yikes! No wonder his first inclination was to run in the opposite direction!

Jonah 1:3-17 reads,

“But Jonah got up and went the other direction to Tarshish, running away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went on board, joining those going to Tarshish—as far away from God as he could get. But God sent a huge storm at sea, the waves towering. The ship was about to break into pieces. The sailors were terrified. They called out in desperation to their gods. They threw everything they were carrying overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone down into the hold of the ship to take a nap. He was sound asleep. The captain came to him and said, “What's this? Sleeping! Get up! Pray to your god! Maybe your god will see we're in trouble and rescue us.” Then the sailors said to one another, “Let's get to the bottom of this. Let's draw straws to identify the culprit on this ship who's responsible for this disaster.” So they drew straws. Jonah got the short straw. Then they grilled him: “Confess. Why this disaster? What is your work? Where do you come from? What country? What family?” He told them, “I'm a Hebrew. I worship God, the God of heaven who made sea and land.” At that, the men were frightened, really frightened, and said, “What on earth have you done!” As Jonah talked, the sailors realized that he was running away from God. They said to him, “What are we going to do with you—to get rid of this storm?” By this time the sea was wild, totally out of control. Jonah said, “Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It's all my fault. I'm the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you'll get rid of the storm.” But no. The men tried rowing back to shore. They made no headway. The storm only got worse and worse, wild and raging. Then they prayed to God, “O God! Don't let us drown because of this man's life, and don't blame us for his death. You are God. Do what you think is best.” They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the sea was quieted down. The sailors were impressed, no longer terrified by the sea, but in awe of God. They worshiped God, offered a sacrifice, and made vows. Then God assigned a huge fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the fish's belly three days and nights.” (MSG)



The quarterly lists out several object lessons we can glean from this narrative, and none of these was on my original list:

- The winds and the waves obey their creator, even when we do not – evidence of his design laws and our freedom.
- Jonah slept during the storm while even the gentile crew prayed – perhaps another forerunner to the NT disciples, in the garden of Gethsemane.
- There was true selflessness and compassion shown on both sides – Jonah was honest in admitting that he caused the calamity, and was willing to sacrifice himself to save others/strangers. The gentile sailors shown compassion to Jonah in their reluctance to toss him overboard even though their own lives were at risk.
- Jonah testified of the true God and creator, and the amazed sailors become Jonah’s first converts – even though he was not actively engaged in “mission work” or soul seeking. We can never underestimate the magnetic power of presenting the creator/designer God as Jonah did.

TUESDAY

In the Belly of the Big Fish

The quarterly mentions an interesting tidbit about the phrase “three days and three nights” being an old figure of speech used to express the time needed for the imaginary journey to Sheol, the Hebrew name for the realm of the dead...and also a symbolic pointer to the death and resurrection of Christ, as written in Matthew 12:40

“Jesus said, “You’re looking for proof, but you’re looking for the wrong kind. All you want is something to titillate your curiosity, satisfy your lust for miracles. The only proof you’re going to get is what looks like the absence of proof: Jonah-evidence. Like Jonah, three days and nights in the fish’s belly, the Son of Man will be gone three days and nights in a deep grave.”

So, down in the belly of the fish, in what looks to be a rather hopeless situation, Jonah finally begins some serious prayer...in the form of a psalm containing five parts:

- Introduction
- Description of the distress
- Cry to God for help
- Report of God’s action
- Promise to keep any vow made and testify to God’s saving action...sound familiar?
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So, after he made his way back onto dry land, Jonah finally accepted his gospel commission and took God’s message to the Gentiles...and in so doing became the most successful missionary in the OT.



“Jonah’s rescue witnessed to God’s saving mercy. His seaweed-draped arrival on the beach testified to God’s determination to save even sinful Assyrians from death.” Thoughts about that statement?

WEDNESDAY

The Nineveh Generation

The quarterly points out the two important verbs in the Jonah 3 commission – Go and Proclaim. Go out into the nations versus expecting other nations to come to you...and “Proclaim”, the quarterly says that “Proclamation has always been important in the Bible, and is still the most effective way of spreading the gospel message.” Agree or disagree? Thoughts? And what gospel message are we proclaiming?

Let me read the last several paragraphs in Wednesday’s lesson, in case you missed them...because we always seem to end up back here sooner or later:

“God’s message is generally threat and promise, judgment and gospel. His stark proclamation was, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (vs. 4, NIV). That was the judgment. <Was it? Foreknowledge?> Yet, there was also the promise of hope, of deliverance, of salvation (there must have been because the people heeded the message and were saved). Even with the “everlasting gospel” at the heart of it, Revelation 14:6–12 also warns about judgment. Gospel and judgment go hand-in-hand: the gospel offers us God’s way to avoid the condemnation that judgment would justly bring upon us all

Judgment would bring upon us? Who is judgment? The implication here is, of course, God.

So this author is obviously writing from an imposed law point of view here. What is God’s way to avoid the “condemnation” that tying a plastic bag over our heads would justly bring upon us all? What is God’s way to avoid the “condemnation” that a terminal disease would justly bring upon us all? No preaching of the gospel is fully effective unless judgment is taught. “Political correctness,” which leads to a watering down of these stark elements and downplaying differences between religions or even between different Christian traditions, is risky. Though in mission we need to adapt our presentation for the people we are trying to reach (contextualization), we must never do so at the expense of the message God has given us to proclaim.

sigh.



The pink box states, “God has given us some wonderful promises, and stern warnings too. What should this story teach us about the conditionality of these promises and warnings? Are they conditional? Or are the cause and effect outcomes of natural laws absolutely guaranteed?”

There is a blurb in the teacher’s quarterly about the decline in mission support in our denomination. If Sabbath School mission offering trends are any indicator, then the grand narrative of global outreach has indeed lost a great deal of its shine for Seventh-day Adventists.

In 1932, during the Great Depression, per capita giving to the church’s Sabbath School mission offerings was \$5.83 per member for that year. More than eighty years later, with wages exponentially higher, the per capita mission giving was actually lower, with an average of \$4.81 per member in 2010. (See Gina Wahlen, “100 Years of Mission Giving,” *Adventist World*, Nov. 1, 2012, pp. 16–19.) What attitudes do you think are driving this trend? Is it possible the attitude and message in the previous paragraph are what is driving it...our message?

THURSDAY

Jonah’s Lament

Remember the hashtag...#iamjonah. Jonah chapter 4 confirms that the greatest obstacle for God to get his prophet involved in world mission was not distance, wind, sailors, fish, or Ninevites...it was the prophet himself. Jonah is the only person in scriptures who accuses God of being gracious, compassionate, and slow to anger, abounding in love and who relents from sending calamity. One would think most people would view these aspects of God with thankfulness. One would think that...right? Has this been your experience when sharing this message about a God of love? Does anyone think it is by chance or coincidence that this view of God...by one of his prophets...is shared in scripture for us?

The quarterly includes this quote from *Prophets and Kings*:

“When Jonah learned of God’s purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God’s amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city. The compassion shown by God toward the repentant Ninevites ‘displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.’ (p. 271)

Does anyone else believe this is prophetic? Have we seen folks get angry when extolling the gracious, compassionate, abounding love and forbearance of a God is not required to punish sins?



We are asked to read Jonah 4:10-11, and describe what these texts teach us about the contrast between God's character and man's sinful nature. Why should we be glad that God, not fellow human beings, is our ultimate Judge? What law lens are you looking through? Why should you be glad that Doctor Moses is diagnosing your orthopedic issues and operating on you...and not me?

How often do we find ourselves more concerned about our own personal issues, many of which at times can really be trivial, than about the lost souls who need healing and transformation? Based on what we have witnessed this past week in our own church.

“In the history of Nineveh there is a lesson which you should study carefully. . . . You must know your duty to your fellow beings who are ignorant and defiled and who need your help.”—Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work*, p. 80.

What is our duty to these fellow beings? When is the last time we were genuinely upset at the thought of millions of people not knowing Jesus? Are we seeing these folks through God's eyes?
