

# The Restless Prophet



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Jonah 1–4, Jer. 25:5, Ezek. 14:6, Rev. 2:5, Luke 9:51–56, Jude 1–25.*

**Memory Text:** “ ‘And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?’ ” (*Jonah 4:11, NKJV*).

One of the most interesting stories in Scripture has to be that of Jonah. Here he was, a prophet of God, someone called of God, and yet—what? He ran away from God’s call. Then, after being persuaded in a dramatic way to change his mind and obey the Lord, he did so—but then only to do what? To complain that the people to whom he was called to witness actually repented and were spared the destruction that, otherwise, would have been theirs!

What an example of someone not at rest, not at peace—even to the point where he cried out, “ ‘Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!’ ” (*Jon. 4:3, NKJV*).

Jesus Himself referred to the story of Jonah, saying: “ ‘The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here’ ” (*Matt. 12:41, NKJV*). Greater than Jonah, indeed! If not, He couldn’t be our Savior.

This week, let’s look at Jonah and what we can learn from his restlessness and lack of peace.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 18.

## Running Away

Jonah was an amazingly successful missionary. At the same time, he also was a very reluctant one, at least at first. Whatever Jonah was doing, God's call interrupted his life in a big way. Instead of taking God's yoke upon his shoulders and discovering for himself that His yoke is easy and His burden light (*Matt. 11:30*), Jonah decided to find his own "rest," and that was by running in the opposite direction from where God was calling him to go.

**Where** was Jonah hoping to find peace and rest from God's call? How well did it work for him? Read *Jonah 1*.

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Jonah set off in the opposite direction from where God called him. He didn't even stop to reason with God, as had many of the other Bible prophets when called to be God's messengers (*see, for example, Exod. 4:13*).

Interestingly enough, this was not the first time that Jonah had been called to speak for God, as suggested by *2 Kings 14:25*. In that case, however, Jonah appears to have done what the Lord had asked him to. Not this time, however.

Why?

Historical and archaeological records document the cruelty of the Neo-Assyrian overlords who dominated the ancient Near East during the eighth century B.C., the time that Jonah ministered in Israel. About seventy-five years later, the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Judah. Israel and Samaria already had fallen about twenty years earlier, and King Hezekiah apparently had joined a local anti-Assyrian coalition.

Now the time had come for the Assyrians to settle accounts. The Bible (*2 Kings 18, Isaiah 36*), historical Assyrian documents, and the wall reliefs of Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh all tell us the cruel story about the fall of Lachish, one of the most important and well-fortified southern-border fortresses of Hezekiah. In one inscription, Sennacherib claimed to have taken more than two hundred thousand prisoners from 46 fortified cities that he claimed to have destroyed. When the Assyrian king took Lachish, hundreds or thousands of prisoners were impaled; hard-core supporters of King Hezekiah were flayed alive, while the rest were sent to Assyria as cheap slave labor.

The Assyrians could be incredibly cruel, even by the standards of the world at that time. And God was sending Jonah into the very heart of that empire?

Is it any wonder that Jonah didn't want to go?

**Fleeing from God? Have you ever done that before? If so, how well did it work out for you? What lessons should you have learned from that mistake?**

## A Three-Day Rest

Jonah's flight from God was not without problems. His short-lived "rest" was disturbed when God miraculously intervened with the storm. Jonah was saved from a watery grave by God, who ordered a fish to save Jonah.

However, it was only when Jonah found himself in a forced three-day rest in the stomach of the big fish that he realized how very dependent he was on God. Sometimes we have to be brought to the place where we don't have anything that this world offers to lean on in order to realize that Jesus is who we really need.

**Read** Jonah's prayer in the belly of the fish (*see Jon. 2:1–9*). What did he pray about?

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Though he was there in the deep, in a very dangerous situation, Jonah, in his prayer, prayed about the sanctuary. He would look toward "Your holy temple."

What is going on here?

The temple forms a focal point of this prayer, and it should be the central point of prayer in general. There is primarily only one place in the Old Testament where God can be found. He is in the sanctuary (*see Exod. 15:17, Exod. 25:8*). The sanctuary is the central point of prayer and communion with God.

Yet, Jonah was not referencing the Jerusalem temple. Rather, he was talking about the heavenly sanctuary (*Jon. 2:7*). That's where his hope existed, because that's where God and the salvation He offers truly come from.

Jonah finally understood this important truth. He had experienced God's grace. He had been saved. As the big fish spit him out, he understood firsthand about God's love for him, a runaway prophet. He certainly had learned (even if not without some detours along the way) that the only safe course for any believer is to seek to be within God's will.

So, now he decided to do his duty and obey God's orders, finally heading for Nineveh, no doubt on faith, as he was heading toward an exceedingly wicked city whose citizens might not like this foreign prophet telling them just how bad they were.

**Sometimes we might just need to get away from it all in order to get a fresh perspective on things. Though the story of Jonah, who miraculously survived in the belly of a fish, is a rather extreme case, how might stepping out of your normal environment allow you to look at it from a new and, perhaps, needed perspective?**

## Mission Accomplished

Compared to any city or town in Israel, Nineveh was a huge city. It was an “exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent” (*Jon. 3:3, NKJV*).

**Read** *Jonah 3:1–10*. What is the response of this wicked place? What lessons can we take from this story for ourselves in our attempts to witness to others?

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While walking the city, Jonah proclaimed God’s message: “ ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ ” (*Jon. 3:4, NKJV*). The message was right to the point. Though the details are not given, it becomes clear that the message fell on receptive ears, and the people of Nineveh (collectively!) believed Jonah’s words of warning.

In a typical Near Eastern manner, a decree was declared by the king of Nineveh in order to demonstrate a change of heart. Everyone—including animals—had to fast and mourn (how animals mourn, the text doesn’t say). The king stepped down from his throne and sat in the dust of the ground, a very important symbolic act.

**Read** *Jonah 3:6–9*. Compare it with *Jeremiah 25:5*, *Ezekiel 14:6*, and *Revelation 2:5*. What elements were involved in the king’s speech that show he understands what true repentance is all about?

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The sermon was short, to the point, but filled with correct theology regarding true repentance. While Jonah had been preaching, the Holy Spirit must have been hard at work in the hearts of the Ninevites.

The Ninevites did not have the benefit of all the stories of God’s tender leading that the Israelites had, and yet, they still responded to Him in a positive manner. They were saying in effect, “Let’s throw ourselves on God’s mercy, not on our own accomplishments! Let’s rely completely on His goodness and grace.”

Strangely, Jonah, who had experienced God’s grace for himself personally, firsthand, seemed to think that God’s grace was something so exclusive that only some might have opportunity to rest in it.

**Why is repentance such a crucial part of the Christian experience? What does it mean truly to repent of our sins, especially the sins that we commit again and again?**

## An Angry, Restless Missionary

Unfortunately, the story of Jonah doesn't end with chapter 3.

**Read** Jonah 4:1–11. What is Jonah's problem? What lesson can we learn from his rather faulty character?

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Jonah 4 begins with Jonah's anger toward God because his mission outreach was so successful. Jonah was worried about looking foolish. We find God taking the time to talk to and reason with His prophet, who behaved like a toddler having a temper tantrum.

Here is evidence that true followers of God—even prophets—may have some growing and overcoming yet to do.

“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.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

God's patience with His prophet was astounding. He seemed intent on using Jonah, and when Jonah ran away, God sent the storm and the fish to bring the runaway back. And even now, again, when Jonah was being contrary, God sought to reason with Jonah and his bad attitude, saying to him: “‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ ” (*Jon. 4:4, NKJV*).

**Read** Luke 9:51–56. How does this account somewhat parallel what happened in the story of Jonah?

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“‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ ” (*John 3:16, NKJV*) or, as God puts it in Jonah 4:11: “‘Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and also much livestock?’ ” (*NKJV*). How grateful we should be that, in the end, God—and not we ourselves—is the ultimate Judge of hearts and minds and motives.

**How can we learn to have the kind of compassion and patience for others that God has, or at least to learn to reflect that compassion and patience?**

## A Two-Way Street

Jonah seemed to be more trouble than he was worth. Nineveh was dangerous, but in the story of Jonah the Ninevites didn't seem to be the problem. They understood the message and quickly repented. Jonah, the missionary, seems to be the weak link in this mission story.

In this account, God pursued a reluctant prophet because He knew that Jonah needed the missionary trip to Nineveh as much as the Ninevites needed to hear the missionary's message.

**Read** the book of Jude. How can we “keep [our]selves in the love of God” (*Jude 21, NKJV*)? What does that mean?

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In his short book in the New Testament, Jude tells us in Jude 21 to “keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (*NIV*).

Experiencing God's love and grace personally is not a one-time event. One sure way to “keep yourselves in God's love” is to reach out to others. In the next verses Jude tells us to “be merciful,” and “save” others by “snatching them from the fire” (*NIV*).

**Read** Jude 20–23. What is it saying here that relates to the story of Jonah, and what does this say to us as well?

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God called Jonah to go to Nineveh because Jonah probably hadn't spent much time thinking about his relationship to the Assyrians before this particular call. He probably knew that he didn't like them, but he had no idea of how much he hated them or the extremes to which he would go in order to avoid them, even after he got the call. Jonah wasn't ready to have a Ninevite as a next-door neighbor in heaven. Jonah hadn't learned to love as God loves. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh because God loved the Ninevites and wanted them in His kingdom. But God also called Jonah because God loved Jonah. He wanted Jonah to grow and become more like Him as they worked together. God wanted Jonah to find the true rest that comes only by being in a saving relationship with Him and by doing God's will, which includes reaching out to others and pointing them to the faith and hope that we have.

**How much time do you spend working for the salvation of others? In a spiritual sense, how does this kind of work lead us to find true rest in Jesus?**

**Further Thought:** “In the charge given him, Jonah had been entrusted with a heavy responsibility; yet He who had bidden him go was able to sustain His servant and grant him success. Had the prophet obeyed unquestioningly, he would have been spared many bitter experiences, and would have been blessed abundantly. Yet in the hour of Jonah’s despair the Lord did not desert him. Through a series of trials and strange providences, the prophet’s confidence in God and in His infinite power to save was to be revived.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 266.

“Thousands can be reached in the most simple and humble way. The most intellectual, those who are looked upon as the world’s most gifted men and women, are often refreshed by the simple words of one who loves God, and who can speak of that love as naturally as the worldling speaks of the things that interest him most deeply.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 232.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 A “prophet of God” who was upset that the people God called him to witness to accepted salvation? How are we to understand this attitude on the part of Jonah? What a powerful example of God’s patience with His people, even when they act contrary to the light they have!
- 2 Jonah’s story seems to suggest that God not only is in the business of saving wayward people but also is very interested in transforming His followers. How can we get a “new heart” and a “new spirit,” even if we already know the Lord and the truth for this time? What is the difference between knowing truth and being transformed by it?
- 3 Read the book of Jude again. What is the essential message of the book, and why is that message relevant to us as a church today?
- 4 How does the experience of working for the salvation of others do us so much spiritual good as well?
- 5 Whatever good reasons Jonah had, or thought he had, for not wanting to go to Nineveh, God showed him how wrong he actually was. What attitude might we have toward others that could reflect the same wrong attitude that Jonah displayed?

## No More Resentment

By TERRI SAELEE

Imagine being seven years old and fleeing for your life in a jungle. This was Jimmy Shwe's life in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar.

Young Jimmy developed a deep resentment toward the authorities because of his experiences. At one point, lost in the jungle, he thought he would die. He decided that if he survived, he would take up arms to get revenge.

After two years of separation, Jimmy found his father in a refugee camp in Thailand. But his father did not agree with Jimmy's plan, saying it would not help to fight. Instead, he urged Jimmy to become a pastor.

It was not easy for Jimmy to give up his anger and deep resentment. But he saw his father's peace and joy as they attended a Seventh-day Adventist church in the refugee camp. He read about the conflict between Christ and Satan in the Bible. He realized his father was right and decided to forgive.

Jimmy became a pastor and later resettled in the United States. He soon discovered that many Adventist refugee families whom he had known in refugee camps in Thailand were now scattered across North America. They were trying to find churches but did not know enough English to understand the messages or participate in the services. Many were discouraged. Jimmy longed to visit and encourage them in their faith. He wanted to help them to organize small groups so they could worship in their own language.

With much prayer, Jimmy planted three churches. But working full time to support his family, he did not have time or funds to travel to help anymore of the 2,000 Karen Adventist refugees scattered across the continent.

"But God knew my heart and my needs," said Jimmy, now a pastor in the Carolina Conference and a Karen church-planting consultant for the North American Division's Adventist Refugee and Immigrant Ministries. "God had been leading all the time, and He already had a plan."

A Thirteenth Sabbath Offering that was collected in 2011 provided funds to reach out to refugees in North America. The funds allowed Jimmy to visit refugees scattered throughout the United States and Canada, helping them to organize congregations in their own language and to serve their communities.

Through his work, 55 Karen churches have been planted across the continent over the past decade.

All this was possible because church members gave, and Jimmy and others like him allowed God to replace their resentment with love.




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*This quarter, your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will again help share the gospel with refugees in the North American Division. Thank you for planning a generous offering.*