

1. Biblical Prophets, Modern Critics

Texts: 2 Timothy 3:16; Amos 3:7; Jonah 1:1.

Quotes:

- If the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe it. William Jennings Bryan.
- It is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true. Bertrand Russell
- Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God. Karl Barth.
- A merry heart doeth good *like* a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones. Proverbs 17:22.
- One does not discover new continents without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time. André Gide.

Introductory questions

The lesson spends much time wanting to establish that Jonah is both historical and factual. Why is this important? Is it significant to find parallel experiences of human beings swallowed by whales? How do we decide what is truth? What is the essential theme of the book of Jonah? How is God pictured in this prophetic book? How does God look?

Discussion ideas

The book of Jonah is so *different* to the other minor prophets that unfortunately some have dismissed it as a mere fable. Sandwiched between the obedient prophets Obadiah and Micah, Jonah is the anti-prophet, the one who reveals a whole new side to the divine-human relationship. In fact Jonah is more of a parody of what is meant to be the arrangement between God and his prophet, and the result is a very serious depiction of the prophetic call, of judgment, and the nature of God—all in a story that is at the same time full of comic irony.

The key ingredient in humor is the unexpected. Charlie Chaplin once observed that while slipping on a banana skin was seen as funny, comedy was someone carefully stepping over a banana skin only to fall down an unnoticed manhole.

One definition of humor is “the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous.” Comic situations involve the oddness, unusual, or absurd nature of a situation, which is often exaggerated for effect. What makes us smile is the unexpected, the surprise that catches us off-guard because we had not anticipated it. What if we see Jonah in this way?

Jonah makes a mockery of the way things are “supposed” to be. This book is God’s subversive handbook and Jonah is the anti-hero. The book of Jonah destroys the wrong-headed, rigid and formalistic ideas about God and reveals his gracious desire to save all, not the ones who arrogantly see themselves as God’s elite.

Just a few examples of the ironic opposites:

- Prophets of God obey God—Jonah refuses and runs away.
- Good, God-fearing sailors—bad, God-disobeying prophet.
- Imminent destruction—God’s man asleep.

- Heathen nation repents—Israel refuses to listen.
- Nineveh is spared—Jonah gets mad.
- God explains he has the right to be gracious—Jonah disagrees with God.
- Jonah appreciates gourd that he did not plant, then blames God when it dies.

This is not to say that Jonah is not to be taken seriously. Quite the contrary—in these highly unorthodox situations, we see God even more clearly than in “normal” life. Here we see a God whose love and grace far exceeds anything any of us could reasonably expect, and who is working for the salvation of all who will respond.

While much of this lesson is dedicated to refuting arguments that the book of Jonah is not historical and factual, we can take it as read. The very surprising nature of the book as part of God’s word points not to fables but to a God who is very much involved in the lives of his followers, who is concerned for all the “heathen,” and smiles as he accomplishes his purpose.

Ellen White Comments

The word of God reveals His character. He Himself has declared His infinite love and pity. When Moses prayed, “Show me Thy glory,” the Lord answered, “I will make all My goodness pass before thee.” Exodus 33:18, 19. This is His glory. The Lord passed before Moses, and proclaimed, “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” Exodus 34:6, 7. He is “slow to anger, and of great kindness,” “because He delighteth in mercy.” Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18. {SC 10.2}

When the joy of the Lord is in the soul, you will not be able to repress it; you will want to tell others of the treasure you have found; you will speak of Jesus and His matchless charms. We should devote all to Him. Our minds should be educated to dwell upon those things that will glorify God; and if our mental powers are dedicated to God, our talents will improve, and we shall have more and more ability to render to the Master. We shall become channels of light to others. {HP 123.3}

God’s people have many lessons to learn. They will have perfect peace if they will keep the mind stayed on Him who is too wise to err and too good to do them harm. They are to catch the reflection of the smile of God, and reflect it to others. {MM 45.3}

Extra material

A little girl was discussing the Bible with an older man. She explained that she trusted everything that was written in it.

The man scoffed at her, saying her attitude was foolish. “You don’t really believe all that’s in the Bible, do you?” he asked.

“Of course I do,” came her answer.

“What, all those fables and fairy tales—like Jonah being swallowed by a fish?” he asked again.

“Certainly,” she nodded.

“How do you think he survived all that time inside the fish?” the man added sarcastically.

“I don’t know,” the girl admitted. “I’ll ask him once I get to heaven,” she politely suggested.

“What if Jonah’s not in heaven?” the man asked in an arrogant tone.

“Then you can ask him,” the girl responded.

2. People and Places

Texts: Jeremiah 1:5; 2 Kings 14:25; Jonah 1:1-2.

Quotes

- God has always chosen the slow and difficult way, respecting human freedom at all cost. Philip Yancey.
- Jesus died for everyone—not just the people you know and like. Catholic school textbook.
- Whether we recognize it or not, we begin as agnostics. If we do not acknowledge this, we will be too preoccupied with trivial gods to notice the real God standing before us. Leslie Weatherhead.

Introductory questions

How do you see God's involvement in the lives of individuals? What is significant in the belief in a personal God? How do we begin to see what kind of God is portrayed in Jonah, especially as compared to other parts of the Old Testament? What does God's concern for Nineveh tell us about him, especially when considered against the nationalistic sentiments of the Israelites? What does this tell us about nationalism today too?

Discussion ideas

The Biblical perspective is that God is intimately involved in the lives of every one of us. That God should care about *all* his children is a thought we often lose sight of. When human beings are identified as “the enemy,” then we often see them as less than brothers and sisters. God's concern for Nineveh revealed to Jonah and the Israelites that even enemies need to hear the truth. God is not a personal or a national property, for God is God to everyone.

Nineveh was not a pleasant place. The people and their gods were notoriously savage and cruel. The prophet Nahum identifies Nineveh: “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! ...Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses—all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.” Nineveh was established by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11), and is located east of the Tigris river, opposite modern-day Mosul in Iraq. Hardly a choice evangelism assignment...

So it comes as a surprise to us (and Jonah!) that God should even care. But care he does, for all of his children, however steeped in evil and degradation they may be. The story of Jonah comes as a powerful reminder that whatever *we* may think, God's principles and purposes are much higher. So again in all of this, it is God who looks so good! We certainly would not bother with Nineveh, and would quite happily consign it to perdition. Jonah's reluctance to follow God's call is quite reasonable, from a human point of view—these are the heathen enemy, they don't deserve God's message, they can't be saved. But God has different ideas, and much to teach even one of his prominent spokesmen—a prophet of Israel.

And what of Jonah? Some speculate that he may have come from the school of the prophets set up by Elisha. Jonah (meaning “dove”) is the son of Amittai (meaning “truth”). Perhaps Jonah had that dovelike character of peace, and certainly was not about to run and preach to the enemy. However his subsequent actions reveal a man whose appreciation for the merciful and gracious character of God needed expanding!

Ellen White Comments on Nineveh

Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm. Founded on the fertile bank of the Tigris, soon after the dispersion from the tower of Babel, it had flourished through the centuries until it had become “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.” Jonah 3:3.

In the time of its temporal prosperity Nineveh was a center of crime and wickedness. Inspiration has characterized it as “the bloody city, . . . full of lies and robbery.” In figurative language the prophet Nahum compared the Ninevites to a cruel, ravenous lion. “Upon whom,” he inquired, “hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” Nahum 3:1, 19.

Yet Nineveh, wicked though it had become, was not wholly given over to evil. He who “beholdeth all the sons of men” (Psalm 33:13) and “seeth every precious thing” (Job 28:10) perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher, and who, if granted opportunity to learn of the living God, would put away their evil deeds and worship Him. And so in His wisdom God revealed Himself to them in an unmistakable manner, to lead them, if possible, to repentance. {PK 265}

But the rulers of Assyria, instead of using their unusual blessings for the benefit of mankind, became the scourge of many lands. Merciless, with no thought of God or their fellow men, they pursued the fixed policy of causing all nations to acknowledge the supremacy of the gods of Nineveh, whom they exalted above the Most High. God had sent Jonah to them with a message of warning, and for a season they humbled themselves before the Lord of hosts and sought forgiveness. But soon they turned again to idol worship and to the conquest of the world. {PK 363.2}

Extra Material on gods of the heathen

The ancient Assyrians had violent, war-like gods and goddesses that liked nothing better than to immerse themselves in the blood and gore of merciless warfare. Represented in gilded statues with hard, unsmiling faces, they always carried instruments of death—a sword or spear...

The Phoenicians had their Baals and Ashtaroths, fertility deities that were worshipped in the worst sexual deviancy that their followers could dream up. The sacrifices these “gods” demanded often included the burning of live children...

Even the “classical” gods of Greece and Rome have all-too-human characters: of hate and lust, violence and greed. Chronos (the Roman Saturn) ate his children as they were born. Zeus escaped this fate, and when he grew older, castrated his father. Zeus was married to Hera, but this did not prevent him conducting a wide variety of affairs with any female.

The Egyptians perhaps best illustrate the human (dehumanized?) image of god through their representations of animal gods with human bodies. A falcon-headed man represented Horus; a woman’s body with a cat’s head the goddess Bastet; a baboon with a human body Thoth, the god of wisdom. Wisdom! Is this the way to understand God, as some bestialized man?

As we look again at the images of gods from the past, it’s not surprising that they were feared and their worshipers depraved and corrupted. Faces like terrifying lions. Jackal heads. Hooked-beaked birds of prey. Dragon-headed Marduk from Babylon, Sebek the crocodile god from Egypt, bloodthirsty Kali from the East. Faces of supposed gods that exude malevolent hate and violent hostility. Faces of cruelty and evil that inspire fear. Faces of God?

No wonder then that God wishes to correct the “god image” of such people—that God cares for the heathen too. Even those of us who believe we think well of God need to reconsider our own views of God, his nature and character...

3. Jonah and Judgment

Texts: Jonah 3:1-4; Hab. 1:1-4; 2 Thess. 1:5-10.

Quotes

- I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly human can believe in everlasting punishment... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hellfire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. Bertrand Russell
- [Hell] makes man an eternal victim and God an eternal fiend. It is the one infinite horror.... Beyond this Christian dogma, savagery cannot go. Robert Ingersoll.
- If the love of God will not induce the rebel to yield, the terrors of an eternal hell will not drive him to repentance. Ellen White.

Introductory questions

Why is Nineveh singled out for judgment? Is judgment the most appropriate point at which to begin? How does God the judge match with other divine attributes? What is the good news in the judgment? How does this historical judgment relate to the end-time judgment?

Discussion ideas

Judgment. You're told you have to attend a court. How you feel? Pleased, joyful, excited? As the day comes round you jump out of bed with happy anticipation and drive to the court building full of exhilaration? No, no and thrice no, right?

The whole idea of judgment is full of negative overtones in our society. The idea of God as Judge does not thrill the heart. That's because our modern system of justice tends to look at the judgment process only in terms of conviction or acquittal. But judgment systems of the past were concerned with not only convicting criminals, but vindicating the righteous.

God's judgment on Nineveh is a challenge to make a decision—to judge and choose the right, or be judged by God. As we have already seen, God had plenty of evidence to condemn Nineveh for their evil actions.

But as a representation of the end-time judgment, Nineveh is not the same. As the lesson points out, quoting Ellen White (Wednesday's lesson, Teachers p.36), "The destruction of the wicked is not an act of arbitrary power..." Many other such quotes reveal that end-time judgment is based not on imposed penalty but natural consequence.

Ellen White Comments on the End-time Judgment

God destroys no man. Everyone who is destroyed will have destroyed himself. {COL 84}.

Then the end will come. God will vindicate His law and deliver His people. Satan and all who have joined him in rebellion will be cut off. Sin and sinners will perish, root and branch...

This is not an act of arbitrary power on the part of God. The rejecters of His mercy reap that which they have sown. God is the fountain of life; and when one chooses the service of sin, he separates from God, and thus cuts himself off from life. He is "alienated from the life of God." Christ says, "All they that hate Me love death." Eph. 4:18; Prov. 8:36. God gives them existence for a time that they may develop their character and reveal their principles. This accomplished, they receive the results of their own choice. By a life of rebellion, Satan and all who unite with him place themselves so out of harmony with God that His very presence is to them a consuming fire. The glory of Him who is love will destroy them. {DA 764.1}

Extra material A FEARFUL LOOKING FOR OF JUDGMENT

I can't see anything at first. A heavy weight of darkness presses down on me, thick gloom like I'm being suffocated by a black velvet blanket. I rub my eyes, terrified I've gone blind. Just like a child I'm full of fears of everything that goes bump in the night.

Then I hear the throbbing of a somber drumbeat, like that of a slow-marching execution squad. Shrill trumpets blare and suddenly I'm dazzled by a blazing searchlight. Trapped in that narrow circle of light, I am imprisoned as the victim. Lightning whip-cracks and deafening thunder crashes. *I want to crawl away somewhere...*

Great thrones are set up in the circling gallery above me. The place is full of rich purple, gold filigree and black velvet: an awesome scene of overpowering majesty and might. A heavy bell rings out its doleful knell of doom; a monstrous organ crashes out swirling chords; a huge gong clangs with terrifying ear-splitting noise. My head spins, my body shakes, my heart stops. Like some panic-stricken mouse I'm about to die of fright. All around me this vast court machine grinds on in all its relentless dignity and power. *I want to fall through a crack in the floor...*

Then a million million eyes stare. Hands point in accusation. Wildly I look around for some way out, but everywhere I see these same accusers chanting: "Guilty! Guilty!" The hunters have their sacrificial prey, the accused trembles in the dock, the criminal cowers to be rightly condemned. From high above the great voice of command resounds through the echoing chambers of this awesome trial: "LET JUDGMENT BEGIN." *I want to die...*

I close my eyes and wait for the ax to fall. Waiting...waiting... Pleading: "Please finish it all. I'm guilty! I confess. Just make it quick. Don't torment me any longer. Please..."

Nothing comes. After an eternity of waiting I slowly open my eyes. A man in white smiles at me. He takes my hand and leads me away.

"But what about this...?" I turn back and point at the courtroom, the pointing fingers and the shouts of 'Guilty!' But they've all disappeared. "Oh, it's all gone. Whatever happened to the judgment? Wasn't I about to be sentenced? Fearful condemnation and all that. So what about that terrifying picture of God's Last Judgment?"

"It's not like that," he says softly.

"Huh? Come on—what's that text? 'We all have to come before the judgment seat of God' or something. And I remember the sermons: 'And God will unmercifully smite all his wretched unfaithful servants...'"

"It's not like that."

"Then there's the lake of fire and the brimstone hail and the excruciating burning of the lawbreakers. That's the judgment, and it's got to be done. 'In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God.'" I smile to myself: I know the texts, but this poor guy really doesn't know his Bible! "For God to be truly good and righteous he has to pour out his wrath on the rebellious unbelievers and fearsomely punish all those who refuse to obey him. It's only fair. Part of the reward for the righteous is avoiding all that burning alive as the wicked are punished."

The man in white doesn't need to say 'It's not like that.' I can see it in his saddened eyes. He sighs: "Do you honestly believe that's the Judgment of the righteous Judge? What sort of End is this? What kind of reason to be good? Certainly those who refuse my healing, my offers of rescue and reconciliation, they will experience the results of going their own way—self-destruction. The wage that sin pays is death. But I am not the Executioner. I destroy no one—they destroy themselves. Besides, what sort of person says 'Do as I say or I'll burn you alive?'"

He has a point there! Only a sadist, a dictator, a terrorist. Is God really like that?

But there must be an End. The good must finally be vindicated. God must be proved right. And the wicked must get what they deserve! I tell myself.

The man in white turns slowly to me, knowing my thoughts. Looking straight into my eyes he asks quietly: "And what do you deserve?"

I keep quiet. Doesn't seem like the time or the place to rattle off my good behaviour record.

4. The “Dove” Flees

Texts: Jonah 1:1-3; Exodus 3:11; 4:1; 4:10-14.

Quotes:

- If thou wilt fly from God, the devil will lend thee both spurs and a horse. Thomas Adams.
- Never look back unless you want to go that way. Anon.
- That men so universally disobey God bespeaks alienation and enmity of mind, for as obedience proceeds from love so disobedience proceeds from enmity. John Howe.

Introductory questions

Why did Jonah want to run away? What appalled him? Did he have good reasons for not wanting to respond to God’s call? How do we know for sure when God is calling us? What kind of evidence would be important? Does God give up on us when we run away from him? What does this incident tell us about God and his true nature?

Discussion ideas

Jonah’s decision not to respond positively to God is the first big surprise. Prophets were meant to do as they were told. That God allowed Jonah to react in the way he did is the first important lesson here, and is a major insight into the nature and character of God.

The thought of being seen as “going over to the enemy” and the potential damage to his prophetic reputation must have been one aspect in Jonah’s rejection of the call. Jonah came from the northern borders of Israel and would know the reputation of Nineveh. He was already a “successful” prophet, so why go on this mission. No other prophet was so called, so he could claim this was an unfair expectation on the part of God.

Jonah could also see this as a suicide mission. How could an Israelite convince the mighty capital of their enemies that he was right? Instant death awaited him.

Jonah’s decision to take ship was not an easy way out. Ancient ships were very small and vulnerable. He also decided to go to the extreme west of the known world, as far away from Nineveh in the east as possible. This is no easy option, in fact it was highly dangerous.

He also seems to believe that by placing so much distance from the God of Israel he could escape him. Perhaps Jonah believed like many of his contemporaries that the “tribal” god was only effective in the local region. That God intervenes so far from home is another major lesson for Jonah and his people to learn.

Jonah’s self-centred choice speaks to us too. Despite all his profession of faith, his declared spiritual values, when hard choices arise, he fails. That God goes along with him speaks so well of God’s character as he allows Jonah time to return. God eventually intervenes to bring Jonah to his senses—but he is concerned to make sure Jonah has the time to think about it!

On the basis of some Biblical incidents (e.g. Uzzah) you could be forgiven for asking why Jonah was not immediately punished for his disobedience. But the book of Jonah is surprising in many aspects, and is rightly identified as the story of grace. Our gracious God allows us to reject him and go our own way if we please, but does not leave us to our fate. He will repeatedly work to win us back, and not to allow our foolish choices to overwhelm us. However if Jonah had continued to totally reject God and his call, in the end God would have had no choice but to allow Jonah the consequences of his actions. That’s the message here—and throughout the book—the gospel of good news from our gracious God.

Ellen White Comments on Jonah's rejection of God's call

As the prophet thought of the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of this commission, he was tempted to question the wisdom of the call. From a human viewpoint it seemed as if nothing could be gained by proclaiming such a message in that proud city. He forgot for the moment that the God whom he served was all-wise and all-powerful. While he hesitated, still doubting, Satan overwhelmed him with discouragement. The prophet was seized with a great dread, and he "rose up to flee unto Tarshish." Going to Joppa, and finding there a ship ready to sail, "he paid the fare thereof and went down into it, to go with them." {PK 266.2}

Nineveh, wicked though it had become, was not wholly given over to evil. He who "beholdeth all the sons of men" (Psalm 33:13) . . . perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher. . . . God revealed Himself to them in an unmistakable manner, to lead them, if possible, to repentance.

The instrument chosen for this work was the prophet Jonah. . . . 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. . . . {CC 230}

Extra material

I ran away from home when I was five years old. Thankfully I only made it as far as the garden shed. I had packed all I thought I would need. A pullover, a change of jeans, and some chocolate biscuits. All in my little suitcase.

I sat in the shed for quite a while, feeling rather pleased with myself. Wasn't I quite grown up to be running away like this? Now I would show them my independence. I was perfectly able to look after myself. I could handle it. Whatever came!

Then I looked around at where I was. The shed was dark, dusty and full of spiders! Why had I given up my room at home for this place? I wanted to go home. But I was too proud to admit it. So when Mum called, "Jonathan, are you coming in? It's time for tea," I was so happy.

No criticisms or complaints from my mother. No sarcastic comments. Just warm acceptance: "It's good to have you home." As if I had never left.

My self-confident, self-absorbed words melted away as I took in the whole meaning of "home." After all, I had my freedom here, and everything else besides. Why run away? I must have been stupid, I reasoned later. All this, and heaven too...

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase,

And unperturbèd pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,

They beat -- and a voice beat

More instant than the Feet --

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me." Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven."

5. A Hebrew Prophet and Heathen Mariners

Texts: Jonah 1:4-16;

Quotes

- Not only the ship, but the whole world becomes too small for Jonah. Martin Luther.
- Peace and comfort can be found nowhere except in simple obedience. François Fenelon.
- In my view, God educates us through our deceptions and mistakes, in order to make us understand at last that we ought to believe in Him, and not in man. Jacques Maritain.

Introductory questions

What are the issues in this part of the story? How is it that the sailors are so “virtuous”? How could Jonah sleep in such a situation? Can you imagine just a touch of amusement on God’s part when Jonah is “forced” to witness to the heathen sailors? Is it not ironic that Jonah is asked to pray to God by the captain who doesn’t believe in Jonah’s God?

Discussion ideas

The storm sweeps down on the ship. Everybody on board is busy trying to save their lives. The sailors throw everything they can overboard to lighten the ship—even their precious cargo. They call to their gods to save them. Everybody is desperately trying to rescue themselves. All except one. See what Jonah is doing? He’s fast asleep!

Now if he were a true man of God, would he be so unconcerned that he would be sleeping in such a situation? How could you sleep, running away from the Lord, and in such a violent storm? You can imagine what the others thought! They wake him up, and tell him to pray too. After casting lots, the finger points at guilty Jonah. So he explains why they’re in this mess—because of him and his rejection of God! (Incidentally, the Latin writer Cicero mentions that sailors on a ship with Diagoras attributed a storm to his being an atheist.)

Jonah tells them to throw him overboard. But these good, religious sailors don’t want to do this, and try to row for the shore. But the sea grows wilder, and so they eventually do as Jonah says, even praying for forgiveness as they do so! Good, religious sailors and bad, wayward prophet. Strange reversal of the normal roles!

Note also that he identifies himself as a Hebrew—the term used by others for his nationality, another little mark of authenticity. Jonah is forced to witness to these “heathen” sailors, who have revealed a marked spirituality... Jonah also realizes that his God is far greater than theirs, and is not confined by time and place. He cannot outrun God.

Note the irony amid the drama. Sailors panic, Jonah sleeps. Sailors pray, Jonah is at first silent. The captain is shocked, Jonah seems calm. Jonah doesn’t act, the heathen captain tells Jonah the prophet of God to pray. Jonah’s prayer is not answered, and it’s only because of the casting of lots that he is forced to declare his guilt. More instances of the “surprising” theme.

Once more, ask how God looks in these scenes. Having arranged the crisis, he leaves it to Jonah to respond. When Jonah does not, God has to intervene in the lot-casting process. Only then does Jonah acknowledge the situation, and speak for God as he should have in the first place. Instead of seeing a God who compels actions, we understand that God is prompting and prodding his reluctant prophet, helping Jonah see that God’s way is truly the best way. God has arranged circumstance so Jonah can see the stark choices, and give up his self-rationalizations.

Ellen White Comments

As the mariners were beseeching their heathen gods for help, the master of the ship, distressed beyond measure, sought out Jonah and said, “What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.” Verse 6.

But the prayers of the man who had turned aside from the path of duty brought no help. The mariners, impressed with the thought that the strange violence of the storm betokened the anger of their gods, proposed as a last resort the casting of lots, “that we may know,” they said, “for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; what is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? {PK 267}

Extra material on rightly understanding the Bible

In understanding the Bible you need to remember to ask the right questions! The most obvious is to do with the basic sentences—do you understand the actual words used? The first role of language is to agree what words represent. If two people use one word and yet mean different things, no wonder there’s misunderstanding.

The second is to ask for the meaning, not just of the words, but of the whole passage. “What is it all about?” or “What is the author getting at?” The way in which words are put together leads you to make some decision as to what the passage itself means.

The third is to ask the reason why! What is it for? Why is this being written, what is its purpose? And of course this can be the most hotly debated, for different people see different reasons and purposes.

Those are the basics. And they apply to any kind of writing. But for the Christian, treating the Bible as the Word of God, there’s a fundamental aspect that must be added—what does this tell me about God, his nature and character—and how I relate to Him? What is God trying to communicate? And why is He communicating?

Rudyard Kipling is right when he speaks about his six serving men:

*I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

By using these basic questions, we can gain understanding most of all about the God who is revealed in Scripture. Without the questions, the Bible becomes just some kind of rule-book or catechism, and its primary role as a record of the divine-human interaction fails.

In Jonah, as in all books of the Bible, we need to be asking the question: *what does this tell me about God?*