

JONAH AND THE GREAT FISH

Jonah 1; 2

Begin by giving the classes a brief outline of the background of the Minor Prophets. This can be done simply even with the Primaries. Then go to the particular position of Jonah, mentioning the difficulties which the unnecessary doubts of the miracle have caused. Do not dwell on this unless the class seems especially interested.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord allows hard experiences to come to us when we will learn in no other way.

It is not particularly important for us to know just when any prophet lived.

Doctrine is just another name for “teaching.”

We should never despise anyone just because he is different from ourselves.

Notes for Parents

Most of us have heard people make fun of the story of Jonah. It is one of the stories in the Bible whose wonderful lessons have been hidden from many people by careless talk. Jonah was saved by a miracle no more remarkable than any other miracle in the Bible. “The Lord prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” If we believe that God is the Creator of everything, we certainly should not question His power to create new forms and to govern and direct His creation.

Jonah was a prophet in the kingdom of Israel some seventy-five years before Israel was taken captive by Assyria, but even then Assyria was recognized as an enemy. It was quite natural that when the Lord told Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and tell the people there of their wickedness, Jonah did not want to obey. How often we are willing to do anything but the one thing

we know the Lord wants us to do! We run away from our duty just as Jonah did. The Lord put the story of Jonah in the Word to teach us that running away does no good. When we run away, nothing goes well for us. We cannot hide from the Lord and we cannot hide from ourselves. If we mean to be good people, sooner or later we shall have to bring our fault out into the open and look at it honestly and make up our minds to get rid of it. Then we have a period of struggle, which is pictured by Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the fish. He says of himself, "The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head." Doesn't this describe the way we feel sometimes when we are fighting some bad feeling deep in our hearts? But finally the Lord brought Jonah out of his trouble, and then Jonah thanked the Lord even for the trouble, because it had showed him his fault, and now he could do what the Lord wanted him to do.

Primary

The story is an easy one to tell and to talk about. Try to read the whole two chapters to the children. Then follow the notes and questions. Stress the fact that the Lord "prepared" a great fish.

Today we have a story about a prophet who did not want to do what the Lord told him to do. He ran away, imagining that the Lord would not follow him. Did you ever run and hide when you did not want to do what your mother told you to do? It didn't work very well, did it? Let us read from the Bible about Jonah and what happened to him. [Read both chapters.]

Some people do not believe this story is true.

But we should remember that it is no more wonderful than the rest of the miracles described in the Bible.

And we should remember that the Lord *prepared* the great fish to swallow up Jonah.

It was not just any great fish that happened to be swimming around at the time.

The Lord had work for Jonah to do, and made plans to take care of him.

The Lord knows our hearts so well that He is always ready for what we do.

Why was Jonah running away?

We sometimes try to run away from what we know we ought to do.

But there were good things about Jonah, too.

I wonder if you noticed something in the story which showed why the Lord could use Jonah as His prophet even though Jonah was not eager to obey. When Jonah found that his unwillingness was making trouble for other people, he admitted his fault and took the penalty himself rather than let others suffer. So, although he did go through a very frightening and unpleasant experience, the Lord could save him.

Another thing to notice is that when Jonah was inside the great fish and prayed to the Lord, he did not pray just to be saved, but instead he thanked the Lord for showing him his faults so that he could repent of them.

Jonah saw the lesson the Lord was teaching him and thanked the Lord for it, even when he did not know he was going to be saved.

Afterward Jonah obeyed the Lord and carried His message to Nineveh.

The people of Nineveh listened and repented.

So Jonah finally was the means of helping many people.



Junior

Have the class look up the Bible references, mentioning in connection with Matthew 12:40 the fact that the word “whale” which appears in some versions is a mistranslation. Impress the children with the importance given the book by the Lord Himself. Then show them how the story applies to their own experience.

Now we come to a story which almost everybody knows, the story of Jonah. We usually hear it referred to as “Jonah and the Whale,” and we unfortunately sometimes hear people make fun of it. Scientists discovered long ago that the passage through the throat of the ordinary whale is much too small to admit of the whale’s swallowing a man. But we should notice that the Bible does not say a *whale* but a *great fish*, and further it says: “the Lord had prepared a great fish.” This is one of the miracles of the

the Bible, and it is not a bit more remarkable than any of the others. So we should not let people's questions about this simple fact lead our minds away from seeing the wonderful things the Lord is teaching us through the prophet Jonah.

Jonah was one of the twelve Minor Prophets, whose books are the last in the Old Testament. He is generally considered to have been the earliest of them, and his historical position is fairly well established by the reference to him in II Kings 14:25. He was one of the prophets of the kingdom of Israel, and we see from the statement in II Kings that he came from Gath-hepher, which was in the territory of Zebulun, and that he was given other messages from the Lord for the people of his nation and time—messages which were not among those chosen by the Lord to be recorded in the Word.

Where did the Lord tell Jonah to go with a prophecy?

Why was the Lord sending him?

Was Jonah willing to obey?

How did he try to escape?

Sometimes, when we are faced with a duty which we do not want to perform, we behave very much as Jonah did. We immediately decide that we have business elsewhere, or we become suddenly very active in some other way, or we “bury” ourselves in a book—anything to get out of doing the particular thing we know we ought to do. Usually we do not have very much better success in escaping than Jonah did.

What happened to his ship?

How did the sailors find out who was responsible?

Who suggested casting Jonah into the sea?

You can see from the story that Jonah really meant to be a good man, because when he found that his cowardice was endangering other people, he was willing to give up his life for their sakes. This was a virtue in him, but it is a virtue which is really not uncommon. People are often more willing to do some big, spectacular thing than to do their duty day by day. The sailors, too, were well-meaning men. They did their best to save themselves without sacrificing

Jonah even though he admitted he was to blame for their danger, and when they found it was really necessary to throw him into the sea, they prayed (to his God) to be forgiven.

But Jonah showed another and much greater virtue. Read carefully chapter 2.

Did Jonah pray to be saved from death?

No, in his prayer he expresses thanksgiving to the Lord for the experience through which he is passing, and the firm belief that even in his unhappy position the Lord is near and able to hear his prayer, and he pledges obedience to the Lord.

This was the reason why the Lord could save Jonah, and we can learn from it something that is very important to remember all our lives. Our troubles never come from the Lord. They are always the result either of our own shortcomings or of evils that have been allowed to go unchecked in the world around us. The Lord never lets troubles catch up with us that we cannot turn into blessings if we meet them in the right way. Our troubles should lead us first to look for our own faults and try to correct them; then they should lead us to turn to the Lord for guidance and help; and finally they should make us more sympathetic and helpful when other people are in trouble. We know that our muscles do not develop strength by always doing only easy things. Neither do our “spiritual muscles.”

After Jonah was saved, he kept his vow of obedience and went to Nineveh and delivered the Lord’s message there. We shall study the rest of his story next, where we will see the good which came to the people of Nineveh through Jonah’s mission. This is referred to by the Lord Himself in Luke 11:29-32. And in Matthew 12:38-41 the Lord also cites Jonah’s experience as a prophecy of His own death and resurrection. This makes us realize how careful we should be not to belittle or to make light of anything in the Word. There is nothing in the Word which does not have a deep meaning within it. Our constant effort should be to find and be led by that meaning.



Intermediate

The correspondence of the details of the story is the best lesson for this class. Other points may be brought in by the way.

In our Bible the books of the twelve Minor Prophets, the last twelve books of the Old Testament, are not exactly in the true historical order. Jonah, whose book comes fifth, is probably the earliest of all. We learn from II Kings 14:25 that he was prophesying at least as early as the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel. He was a prophet in Israel. We also learn from the same verse that he came from Gath-hepher, which was in the territory of Zebulun, and that he spoke other prophecies besides those recorded in the Word in the book of Jonah.

Jonah is undoubtedly the best known of the Minor Prophets. This is because his book, unlike the others, is a story and a very unusual one. You may hear people make fun of “Jonah and the Whale,” even people who ought to know better. The saving of Jonah was a miracle no more wonderful than any of the other miracles in the Bible. The seventeenth verse of our first chapter says that “the Lord prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” And the Lord Himself, when He was in the world, referred to this story as a fact (Matthew 12:40) and said that it was a prophecy of His own death and resurrection. The common idea that the great fish was a whale comes from this passage in the Gospel, but we should know that “whale” is a mistranslation of the Greek word.

Let us think first of this meaning of the book of Jonah with reference to the Lord’s life on earth. We know that the Word came from the Lord and that its inmost meaning always concerns His life. He came, as He said, “to fulfil” the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17). This means that when He was in the world, He lived out before the eyes of everybody all the things He had been saying about Himself in the Word from the beginning. Sometimes the inmost meaning comes out in the letter, as it does in this story of Jonah.

But the story has a meaning for our lives, too, and a very important one. What was the trouble with Jonah? He was a prophet of

the Lord and had probably spoken faithfully all the prophecies which the Lord had given him for his own people. But now the Lord had asked him to go to Nineveh with a message to another nation, the Assyrians, who were enemies of Israel, and he did not want to go. All through the Bible we see that the Jews of long ago despised the Gentiles. “Gentile” is merely a word used to describe people of another religion than one’s own. To Jews Christians are Gentiles, as Mohammedans, Buddhists, and others are considered Gentiles by Christians. The Christian might just as truly consider a Jew a Gentile, although this is not customary. You remember how the Lord showed the Jews of that day in the parable of the Good Samaritan that they ought not to despise the Samaritans, who were Gentiles.

Jonah felt himself too good to be sent to Gentiles. We are like Jonah whenever we think we are too good or too old or too big to be asked to do any particular kind of useful work. Like Jonah, we may try to get out of doing some duty that is laid upon us. We may try to hide from our duty by becoming very busy about something else. Perhaps we make our lessons an excuse for not doing our chores around home, just as Jonah found that he had business which would take him in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

What happened to Jonah? The ship in which he had taken passage encountered a great storm and was in danger of being wrecked. Does this remind you of what often happens to us when we try to get out of doing what we know we ought to do? In the Word a ship is always a symbol of doctrine. Doctrine is not just something the minister talks about. It is any teaching or system of thought. The general ideas that we have chosen in order to determine what we shall do are doctrine. This is the “ship” in which we are riding the sea of our everyday thought and life. If our ideas are right, that is, if they are in harmony with the Lord’s laws and plan, our ship will carry us safely—our sea will be calm. But when selfish ideas creep in, our ship runs into trouble. This is the storm. We do not always recognize that there is selfishness in our thoughts.

Jonah was asleep in the hold of the ship. But if we examine ourselves carefully with the Lord's help, which is pictured by the casting of lots, the lot will always fall on Jonah, and we shall have to bring him up into the light and find out just who he is and where he came from, and then throw him overboard.

Jonah really meant to be a good man. You notice it was he himself who told the sailors to save themselves by casting him into the sea. When he saw that his disobedience was making things hard for others, he preferred to pay the penalty himself. That was why the Lord could save him and use him finally to save the people of Nineveh. You should read the last two chapters of the book to get the end of the story, although we shall take it up next.

Now let us see just how Jonah was saved. We remember that water represents truth, or its opposite, falsity. The sea represents all the truths and falsities which we have gathered into our minds throughout our life. The living creatures in the sea, the fish, picture our affection for learning truth. So the Lord provided that Jonah should be saved by being swallowed by a great fish. If we at heart want to be good, to serve the Lord and the neighbor, we shall have the desire to learn from our experiences all that the Lord is trying to teach us through them. And this desire will stay with us until we have learned the lesson and are ready to obey. Read Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish and notice that he was not asking to be saved from his predicament, but thanking the Lord for saving him from doing wrong. He was really thanking the Lord for the hard experience which had showed him his own selfishness and disobedience. This, too, is a lesson from the story of Jonah which we should take to heart. When we get into difficulties, we should not blame other people or the Lord for them. We should know that the Lord is letting them come to us to teach us a lesson we need and which we have refused to learn by any easier way. We should be grateful to our parents for punishing us when we do wrong. They do it only because they know that if they let us go on doing wrong, we shall be much unhappier later. The willingness to learn from our experiences is the great fish that saved Jonah

and let him go on doing the Lord's work.

Basic Correspondences

a ship = doctrine

the sea = knowledges gathered in the mind

a fish = an affection for learning truth

Senior

With this class it will be worthwhile to discuss at some length the fallacies involved in the criticism of the story of Jonah, because young people of this age can hardly have failed to be exposed to such criticism, and it is usually the first thing that comes to their minds when Jonah is mentioned. Then show them in every possible way what a remarkable and important book Jonah is.

Swedenborg says that the experience of Jonah “actually happened.” Probably most people today would not believe this. In studying the book of Jonah it seems worthwhile to spend a little time on one small point of translation, because a mistranslation has contributed materially to the failure of many people to appreciate this book and get help from it. In the passage in the Gospels (Matthew 12:40) in which the Lord refers to the story of Jonah, the “great fish” of Jonah 1:17 is called by the translators [of KJV and RSV] a “whale.” The Greek word used in this passage means exactly what the Hebrew word in Jonah means—any great fish or sea creature. But, doubtless because the Latinized form of the Greek word had come in later times to be applied to the genus of whales, the King James translators said “whale.” This led to inquiry as to whether a whale really could swallow a man, and scientists said no. It apparently made no difference that the creature had not originally been called a whale or that it was said to have been “prepared” by the Lord, and so specifically placed in the category of miracles. With many, the story of Jonah was discredited and then ridiculed, and it is still discredited even by people who accept as facts many much more remarkable miracles found in the Word. And devout Bible readers, instead of pointing out the source of the difficulty, have unfortunately merely devoted themselves to

hunting the seas for a whale that really could have swallowed Jonah. So the world at large has gone on missing the point of the book of Jonah.

This is especially strange when the Lord Himself referred to it as a true story and called it a prophecy of His death and resurrection. Swedenborg explains in detail in *Apocalypse Explained*, n. 538¹¹ the prayer of Jonah from the fish's belly as it describes the Lord's combats with the hells, especially during the three-day period when His body lay in the tomb, although he says that the three days represent the fullness of his states of combat and victory throughout His life in the world.

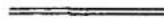
Swedenborg also, in his summary explanation of the Prophets and Psalms, points out the application of the book of Jonah to the inner states of his times, especially the attitude of the ancient Jews toward Gentile nations, saying that they—who had the Word—were commanded to teach it to the nations round about, but would not. This is pictured by Jonah's unwillingness to take the Lord's message to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and his subsequent behavior when the people of Nineveh believed his message and repented. We shall study this part of the story next.

There are other lessons in the story of Jonah, however, which come nearer to our own daily experience. The first and most obvious one is that when Jonah tried to run away from the duty he found distasteful, he fell into difficulties. We have all done this same thing. With Jonah the commission he found displeasing was the command to carry the Lord's message to a Gentile nation, an enemy of his own people. We are sometimes made aware that we can in some way help a person we dislike or despise, perhaps someone who has injured us. Our first reaction is likely to be unwillingness and a tendency to argue ourselves out of a distasteful task. Jonah took ship for Tarshish and immediately went down into the hold of the ship and went to sleep. A ship always represents "doctrine," a system of ideas which has been developed and has become an attitude of mind. In this case we fall back on our accustomed way of thinking about the person in question and try to

close our ears to the call of duty. But the very presence of this selfish attitude in the mind is disturbing, and presently we find we have to acknowledge it and take it out and look at it honestly, just as the sailors woke Jonah up, brought him out of the hold, and then, after the lot fell on him, asked him who he was and where he came from.

If, like Jonah, we admit our fault and are willing to sacrifice our selfish feelings in the interest of the common good, the Lord can save us and bring us back and give us another chance. The great fish represents a genuine affection for the truth; this means an interest in finding out the truth for the sake of amending the life. We often need to ask: What was my real motive in turning my back on this duty? Do I really have this deep selfishness in me? Is it possible for the Lord to lead me out of such a depth? It is such searching questions as these which are reflected in Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great fish. The three days and three nights represent fullness of experience of alternating doubt and enlightenment. We notice that the last verse of Jonah's prayer is an expression of thanksgiving, not for the deliverance from his predicament—which he has not yet experienced—but for the suffering which has led him to see his fault and recognize the Lord's constant presence and power to save. And he pledged obedience for the future. Then he was returned to "dry land." His mental conflict had been resolved, and he was ready to go on with his life.

Jonah was probably the earliest historically of the twelve Minor Prophets. II Kings 14:25 tells us that he lived in the time of Jeroboam II of Israel, and that he was from Gath-hepher, a town in the territory of Zebulun. As this verse refers to another prophecy of his, we know that he was not raised up just for the mission to Nineveh, but was one of Israel's recognized prophets, who doubtless had given them many messages from the Lord. This knowledge forms a background against which his disobedience in the case of Nineveh stands out all the more strikingly.



Adult

The various levels of inner meaning in this story should interest the Adults. You will be able to tell by their first comments whether or not you need to spend time on the matter of mistranslation. If you do, put the emphasis on the importance of accurate translation of the Scripture. It is what the original text actually says that we should want to know, rather than what some person or group thinks it ought to say.

The book of Jonah is the fifth in the series of the twelve Minor Prophets, but historically Jonah is probably the first of them, for we are told in II Kings 14:25 that he lived in the time of Jeroboam II of Israel. Even so he was partly contemporary with Hosea, Amos, and Joel. He was from Gath-hepher, a town of Zebulun, and was a recognized prophet of Israel, but the particular story recorded in the book of Jonah is the only part of his message chosen by the Lord to make part of the Word.

In Matthew 12:38-41 the story of Jonah is cited by the Lord as a prophecy of His death and resurrection on the third day, and Swedenborg in AE 538¹¹ interprets the prayer of Jonan from the belly of the fish as a description of the Lord's combats with the hells and victory over them. So Jonah can be classed definitely with the Messianic prophecies.

The book has its historical application, and it is this which Swedenborg principally gives in his summary of it in the *Prophets and Psalms*. There he tells us that Jonah's call and his reception of it (Jonah 1:1-3) picture the fact that "those who were of the Jewish nation were commanded to teach the Word to the nations round about, but they would not, and thus they kept the Word among themselves alone." Some Bible students outside of the New Church have recognized national pride and antipathy as the primary cause of Jonah's original refusal to go to Nineveh and also of his later disappointment when Nineveh was spared. Unfortunately these students are inclined to laud Jonah's patriotism rather than to deplore his disobedience. Swedenborg says, however, that chapter 2 is a "prophecy concerning the Lord's combats with the hells, and concerning His most grievous temptations at that time, and

concerning His state at that time; the ‘three days and nights during which Jonah was in the bowels of the fish,’ signify the entire duration of the combat with the hells.”

Both of these interpretations of the book of Jonah—in the celestial sense and in the internal historical sense—help us to get some insight into the spiritual sense, the sense which describes our individual experience. From its meaning in the Lord’s life we see that it concerns deep temptations, and in its meaning with reference to the Hebrew nation we see that it has to do with our constant tendency to imagine that external piety excuses inner uncharitableness.

Jonah was obviously a prophet held in honor by his own people, since even Jeroboam II, who was an evil king, heeded his words. Jonah was in the habit of receiving the word of the Lord and speaking it boldly. But the Lord unerringly picked his weak spot and brought him down from his high place for his own good, at the same time using him for the salvation of the Ninevites and even of you and me, if we follow the example of the Ninevites (Luke 11:29-32). How often we are willing to do everything but the one thing the Lord requires of us, which is to recognize that we have no goodness of our own and to accept His guidance in love to Him and to the neighbor!

Jonah took ship in the opposite direction from Nineveh. He “bought” a philosophy of life—a ship represents doctrine—which he thought would save him from the necessity of doing what he did not want to do. Then he immediately went down into the hold and went to sleep. This reminds us of Isaiah’s description of the fast acceptable to the Lord (Isaiah 58:3-7) which ends: “. . . and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh.” How often we hide in excuses instead of facing ourselves squarely! Then the storm rises. We are not at ease. Everything goes wrong. What is the trouble? Casting lots always pictures submitting our lives to the judgment of the Lord’s truth. The lot falls on Jonah, on the hidden fault. It must be brought out and examined and put out of our hearts before we can be at peace.

Jonah goes down into the depths in an effort to see and accept

truth about himself—a state pictured by the great fish—for three days and three nights, a full state of spiritual combat. And by this process he is brought to a realization of his own weakness and of the Lord’s goodness to him, of the divine providence which has directed his whole experience, to thanksgiving to the Lord for the lesson learned, and to the determination to be wholly obedient. Then he is cast out upon the dry ground. This is our experience whenever we are brought to see, acknowledge and repent of some deep fault in ourselves.

In the *Spiritual Diary*, Swedenborg says that Jonah’s experience “actually happened” (see below). There is no more reason to question the miracle performed in Jonah’s case than there is to question any of the miracles of the Word. Doubt of the miracles rests on a fundamental unwillingness to believe that there is anything superior to nature, that God is not a mere name but is the ever-present and ever-active creator, an unwillingness to believe that He creates new forms and controls the events of our lives. Such an unwillingness seizes upon every excuse to doubt and discredit the supernatural phenomena presented in the Word. The story of Jonah has been an especial target.

This is in part due to the use of the word “whale” in the King James translation of Matthew 12:40, a mistranslation which was carried over unchanged in the Revised Standard Version.* The Greek word, like the Hebrew word in Jonah 1:17, means any large fish or sea creature. It was used, for example, in the *Odyssey* to mean a seal or sea-calf. It did not take on the meaning of *whale* in the Greek, but later, after it had passed over into the Latin, it was adopted by science as the generic term for the whale family. Accurate translation is always essential to the study of the spiritual sense of the Word, and the history of the world’s reception of the book of Jonah shows that it may also be very important for those who know nothing of the spiritual sense. Men are still trying to

*The New English and the Jerusalem Bibles translate it “sea-monster.” Phillips has “great fish”; and Today’s English Version, “big fish.” –Ed.

decide the question of whether a whale could or could not have swallowed Jonah, and in the process the message of the book is completely lost sight of. It is a modern case of making the Word of God “of none effect” by our tradition. We need to study the real meaning and application of the Book of Jonah not only for our own help, but that we may present it to others in such a way as to lift it to its proper level again, above the possibility of discredit by careless critics.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Spiritual Diary, n. 1391: “*That representations in the other life are actual in the world. Moreover, similar [things] exist also in the world, for all those things actually exist upon earth; so that it cannot but be that they signify [spiritual things], as that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, which actually happened in the world; as also did the miracles of Egypt, and many other [things] called miracles.*” [This was written in March 1748, the year before Volume 1 of the *Arcana* was published. –Ed.]

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Which one of the Minor Prophets are we studying today? *Jonah (fifth)*
- J. When and where did Jonah prophesy? *Israel, in time of Jeroboam II*
- J. Where do we find this information? *II Kings 14:25*
- J. What did the Lord tell Jonah to do? *go and prophesy to Nineveh*
- J. Where was Nineveh? *capital of Assyria*
- J. Why did Jonah not want to obey? *too proud*
- J. How did he try to avoid obeying? *took a ship in the opposite direction*
- P. What happened to the ship? *endangered by storm*
- P. How did the sailors find out who was to blame? *cast lots*
- P. What did Jonah tell them to do with him? *throw him overboard*
- P. What happened when they cast him into the sea? *it became calm*
- P. How long was Jonah in the fish’s belly? *three days*
- J. What kind of prayer did he make? *thanks*
- J. What did he promise? *to obey God*
- J. Do you know what he did after he was returned to land? *went to Nineveh*
- I. What does this story teach us? *(1) not to run away from duty, (2) not to blame others for our troubles*
- S. What did the Lord say it pictured? *His death and resurrection*