

Lesson 45: BEAUTY FOR ASHES
Jonah 3; Isaiah 61

INTRODUCTION:

Today's lesson is called "Beauty for Ashes," and we'll start with a very familiar and very dramatic story. "Ashes" play a part somewhere in this story, so listen for it. Today's story is the story of Jonah.

There was once a man named Jonah, and the Lord called to him. "Jonah, son of Amittai," the Lord called. "Arise and go to the great city of Nineveh, and cry out against them. For the people of Nineveh have become very wicked."

But Jonah, son of Amittai, did not want to do this thing. He knew about Jehovah. He knew that if he went to Nineveh and cried out to them about their wickedness, and if the people of Nineveh then repented, that Jehovah would forgive them. This thought did not please Jonah. If he were going to cry out against a wicked city, he wanted to see the city destroyed! The people of Nineveh deserved it!

And so Jonah ran away from his God. He boarded a ship, trying to sail far away from the presence of Jehovah.

But can anyone hide from the presence of God? Around the ship a wind began to blow, which grew stronger and wilder until it was a tempest—a mighty storm that tossed the ship mercilessly about on huge waves, so roughly that the terrified sailors feared that their vessel would break.

Every man aboard cried out to his own god. Every man aboard threw cargo out into the waves, trying desperately to lighten the load of the ship and keep it from sinking. Every man, that is, except Jonah. Jonah was down in the lowest parts of the ship, fast asleep.

"How can you be sleeping?" the captain shouted at Jonah in amazement. "Get up! Call upon your God! Our gods are not hearing us—perhaps yours will!"

Fearfully, Jonah arose from his sleep, but the sailors were already casting lots to try and see whose fault this storm was. Who was it who had done something so wrong as to bring this great trouble upon the ship?

To cast lots, the people of those times would place stones in a jar. Whoever pulled out a stone with a certain mark would be the one who was chosen. In this case, Jonah was the one who pulled out the marked stone, and then the sailors all knew that Jonah was the one who had brought this great trouble.

"Please tell us!" the sailors begged, as the wind howled around them. "What has caused this terrible trouble? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country, and who are your people?"

Jonah looked about him at the turmoil of the sea, which was causing the wooden ship to creak dangerously. He knew what a fool he had been to try and run away from God. He knew that he must not risk the lives of these sailors for a foolish mistake that he had made. Jonah answered

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them: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear Jehovah, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

At the mention of this powerful God, the sailors grew even more afraid. Jonah had told them before that he was running away from his God, but they now realized what a powerful God this was. “Why have you done this?” they cried. “What shall we do to you so that the sea will become calm again?”

Jonah knew in his heart what was the only thing that they could do. The tempest had come because of him, and it would continue as long as he was with them. Taking a deep breath, Jonah told the sailors, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea.”

Horrified, the sailors at first refused to do this. They had no desire to kill Jonah! But no matter how hard they rowed, they could not get to shore, and it was clear that they would all die unless they did as Jonah said.

Praying to Jehovah to forgive what they were about to do, the sailors lifted Jonah up and tossed him into the violent waves. Immediately, the waters ceased their raging, and the sea became calm. Jonah sank down and down, until out of the murky depths a huge fish appeared; and opening its great mouth, it swallowed Jonah down in one gulp.

There, alive in the dark belly of the great fish, Jonah was able to think. Jehovah did not wish him to die, but instead had brought this great fish to save his life. “You have brought up my life from the pit, O Jehovah, my God,” Jonah prayed. He knew then that Jehovah alone was God. When a person runs away from God, the very source of life, then all manner of terrible troubles will follow him, like violent storms of evil that threaten to kill.

After three days, the Lord spoke to the great fish, telling it to spit Jonah out onto the dry land. And there, back in the sunshine, with the sky above him, it was as if Jonah’s life had begun again. He had been given another chance.

READING:

Now read aloud or have the children read aloud **Jonah 3** (10 verses).

DISCUSSION:

Did you notice the mention of ashes? The people of Nineveh had fallen into great evil. When Jonah came into the city, crying out to them that Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 days because of their evil, the King of Nineveh was horrified. He and his people had not realized how far they had strayed away from the Lord. They were deeply upset, and wanted to change. What are the ways in which they showed how upset they were? (They fasted, put on sackcloth – rough, dark goatskin clothes – and the king sat in ashes.)

Sackcloth and ashes represent the sadness people feel when they realize they haven’t been listening to the Lord’s words, or receiving His goodness. It is a sign of great humility, showing that they realize how lowly they have been without the Lord.

Did the Lord punish the people of Nineveh? No. The Lord has no desire to punish anyone. It is the evil spirits who love to punish people, and they can do this when people stray too far from the Lord’s protection. When people indulge in evil, then evil spirits can get at them and bring them trouble. When the people of Nineveh humbled themselves and were sorry, they were then

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ready and open to receive the Lord. He would now be able to reach them, and bring them blessings.

Jonah was angry about this. Like before, he believed that the people of Nineveh deserved to be punished. But the Lord asked him, "Is it right for you to be angry? Why should I not have pity on all these people?"

Do you recognize this verse from the book of Isaiah?

"...the LORD has anointed me...to comfort those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified." (Isaiah 61:3)

When we are in ashes, that is, when we feel very sad because we know we have not been paying attention to the Lord or receiving his goodness, the Lord will come to comfort us. He will replace those ashes of sadness with the beauty of joy and happiness. It is like the legend of the beautiful Phoenix bird, which rises up new out of black ashes.

Today's project will show some beautiful colors shining through black, like the Lord's beauty shining through the ashes, to replace the sadness with joy.

PROJECT: Tissue Paper Window Pictures

Supplies:

black tissue paper
tissue paper in other bright colors
scissors
glue

Ahead of time

Cut 8 inch squares out of tissue paper: one black square for each child, and then other squares in a variety of bright colors—enough so that each child will be able to have two colored squares.

Procedure:

1. Have each child take one black tissue square, and choose two colored squares.
2. Take *one* of the brightly colored squares and fold it in half, corner to corner, to form a triangle. Fold that triangle in half *two* more times.
3. Cut small shapes along the two folded edges on this small triangle, leaving spaces between the shapes. (This is like making a paper snowflake.) Open up this square and see the patterns.
4. Take the *black* tissue square and fold it in half three times just like before. On this one, cut slightly larger shapes on the two folded sides *and* on the third side. Open it carefully.
5. Leave the other colored square whole.
6. Next lay down the whole colored square, and lay the colored square cut with patterns on top of it. Attach them together by putting dabs of glue between them at the corners.
7. Now lay the black square, cut with patterns, on top of both of them. Attach this black square again by dabbing glue underneath its corners. You may also want to put a few dots of glue at other places around the edges.
8. Tape it up in a window!

The black is like the “ashes” of sadness when we realize that we haven’t been hearing the Lord, and haven’t been close to him. The colors showing through is the beauty that the Lord will bring to us, shining through these ashes, when we turn back to Him. Those colors, that beauty, have been waiting there all along, because the Lord never leaves us.