

## JONAH AND THE GOURD

*Jonah 3; 4*

The lesson for today cannot be taught without first being sure that the class knows and understands the first part of the story, that of Jonah and the great fish. The teachers should therefore review the first two chapters of Jonah and also read the summary given in the Junior notes, which answers questions commonly raised concerning the story of Jonah. New Church people should have a clear understanding of this story because it is so often questioned and even ridiculed.

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### Doctrinal Points

*The Lord's love for men is greater than any love of ours.*

*We should not go to the Word to find confirmation of our own ideas.*

*One of the greatest hindrances to the development of faith is self-love.*

*True charity rejoices when an evil person repents and is spared from punishment.*

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### Notes for Parents

People often make fun of the story of Jonah and the “whale.” This is a great pity. As a part of the Word of God it is given to teach us important lessons which we need to know, and when we make fun of it, we deprive ourselves of help which the Lord is trying to give us. This is one of the ways of breaking the commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” We should know, too, that the Bible does not say it was a whale that swallowed Jonah. The book of Jonah itself even in the English says that “the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” And although the word “whale” is used in the traditional English translations of Matthew 12:40, this is a mistranslation of the Greek

word which, like the Hebrew word, means “a great fish.” This was one of the Lord’s miracles—no more and no less remarkable than any other—and the Lord Himself while He was on earth spoke of it as true, and showed that it was a prophecy of what His own experience in the world was to be. Read also Luke 11:29-32. The Lord’s use of the story should lead us to believe in it and to reverence it.

Strangely enough, the lesson of this story applies to the very people who ridicule it, for it points out the folly, and wickedness of belief in our own wisdom and of the feeling of superiority to others. Making fun of something one doesn’t understand is one of the evidences of this evil. Jonah was proud of himself as the Lord’s prophet and as one of the “chosen people” who had the Scriptures. Like most of his countrymen, he despised all who were not like himself. When the Lord first told him to go and prophesy to the people of Nineveh, the great capital of the Assyrians, he tried to get out of obeying. And even after his experience with the great fish had taught him that he must obey, his heart was not changed. He went to Nineveh in the hope of seeing it destroyed, and when it was spared by the Lord, he was angry.

When we despise and dislike a person, we often would rather see him suffer in some way than make an effort to instruct and help him. This is not a Christian attitude. The Lord loves us all alike, and is always trying to lead us to a better life. He never permits punishment to come to anyone unless he will learn in no other way. On the cross He prayed for those who had crucified Him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” When we draw back from other people and shut ourselves up with our own self-satisfaction, we are like Jonah going outside the city and making himself a booth to sit in. And our enjoyment of our exaggerated ideas of our own wisdom and importance, like the gourd which grew up to shade Jonah, will soon be destroyed by our own suspicions and disagreeable thoughts. It is only by forgetting ourselves and trying to make others happy that we can find any lasting happiness ourselves.



**Primary**

First tell the children in simple terms the whole story of the first three chapters. Then read them chapter 4 and draw from it the lesson that we should never want to see people suffer even if we do not like them. The moral lesson is the wrongness of Jonah's attitude toward the Ninevites, and the Lord's love for all people.

Way back in the days of the kings of Israel there lived a prophet whose name was Jonah. A prophet is one who speaks for the Lord. Jonah had been giving the Lord's message faithfully to the kings of Israel for some time when one day the Lord gave him a command which he did not want to obey. The Lord told him to go to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and rebuke the people there for their sins. But Jonah, like most of his countrymen, despised anyone who was not an Israelite; so he did not want to go to Nineveh. He tried to run away and hide from the Lord. Do you ever try to run away and hide when your mother wants you to do something you don't want to do?

Do you remember what happened to the ship in which he sailed?

What happened to Jonah?

How did the Lord save him?

Then Jonah was ready to take the Lord's message to Nineveh.

The people of Nineveh had never had a prophet from the Lord before to tell them what was right.

They listened to Jonah and believed him and repented of their sins.

So the Lord forgave them and did not destroy the city as Jonah had foretold.

You would think that Jonah would have been pleased at this, wouldn't you? But you see, Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh and he wanted to see them punished. Did you ever feel this way about some child you didn't like, and wish the teacher would punish him?

Where did Jonah go to see what would happen?

What grew up to give him shade?

Then what happened to the gourd?

How did the Lord use this to teach Jonah how wrong his feeling had been?



### Junior

The Juniors will probably remember most of the first part of the Jonah story. Find out how much they know and be sure their knowledge is accurate; this is particularly important in the case of a story so frequently misrepresented. Have the children look up the Bible references in their notes, and be sure they understand the major implications in each case. The final lesson of our chapters is obvious and simple.

How many Minor Prophets are there?

Which are the first and the last of them?

Where do the Minor Prophets come in the Bible?

In our Bibles the book of Jonah is the fifth of the Minor Prophets. But these books are not arranged exactly in the order in which the men lived. Jonah was probably the first of them all. Look up II Kings 14:25. He was the first prophet whose name we know after Elisha. And we also learn from this verse in II Kings that he had prophesied to his own people in Israel for a long enough time to be recognized by the king as the Lord's prophet. But his prophecies to his own people were not recorded for us in the Word. We know that everything which the Lord chose to have recorded in the Word contains a message for people in all times; so we must remember that, although the book of Jonah seems to be just a story about Jonah, it really has within it prophecies of things to come and deep lessons for us all. You will not study these until you are older, but you may form some idea about them by reading Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:29-32.

Many people know the book of Jonah just as the story of Jonah and the "whale," and have never really read it carefully or learned anything about the last two chapters, which are our lesson for today. In our lesson on the first two chapters we found that it was not a whale at all, but a "great fish" prepared by the Lord to swallow Jonah. In some versions of Matthew it is called a whale, but that is an incorrect translation of the Greek word, which really means a "great fish." We need to know this, and also to know the story of the first two chapters, and, as you may not remember it clearly, we will just go over its main points.

Jonah was commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh and “cry against it,” that is, to rebuke the people of Nineveh for their sins. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the ancient Jews despised and hated the Assyrians; so Jonah did not want to go there. He thought he could flee from the presence of the Lord by boarding a ship to Tarshish, a distant port on the Mediterranean. But the Lord sent a great storm, and when the sailors cast lots to see for whose fault the storm was sent, the lot fell on Jonah, and he agreed to be thrown into the sea to save the rest. He did not drown, however, because the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow him. He remained in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, and in that time he came to acknowledge his sin and that he ought not to oppose his will to the Lord’s, and he thanked the Lord for teaching him this lesson and promised to obey Him. Then he was cast out on the shore, the Lord’s command came to him the second time, and he went to Nineveh.

Nineveh was a very old and very famous city. It is mentioned as far back in the Bible as Genesis 10:11, and you remember that that is part of the Ancient Word. It was also a very great city. The ruins which have been uncovered show that it was sixty miles in circumference. So we can understand that Jonah may easily have walked “a day’s journey” before getting to the heart of the city.

What did Jonah tell the people of Nineveh?  
Did the people of Nineveh believe him?  
What did the king do?  
What did he command the people to do?  
What did the Lord do for Nineveh?  
Was Jonah pleased that Nineveh was spared?

Jonah had learned that he must obey the Lord, but his feelings toward the people of Nineveh had not changed. He evidently had been looking forward to seeing this great enemy city destroyed, and he also felt that after all he had gone through, his prophecy should certainly have been fulfilled. We sometimes allow ourselves to feel that we should like to see certain bad people punished, but this story of Jonah shows us that this is not the way we ought to feel.

Where did Jonah go to see what would happen?  
What did the Lord cause to grow to give him shade?  
What came to destroy the gourd?  
How did Jonah feel about it?  
Then what did the Lord tell him?

The Lord loves all of us. When we are bad, His only desire is to bring us to a better state of mind so that He can make us happy. Sometimes He has to let punishment come to us when we will not learn in any other way, but He takes no pleasure in our suffering. Perhaps you remember that when the Lord was being crucified, He prayed for the people who had condemned Him saying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." This is our example. Read Ezekiel 18:23.

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### Intermediate

Young people often have "naturally" the feelings represented by Jonah's attitude in our story. This is our best opportunity to show them how unworthy and dangerous these feelings are, and to try to lead them into a more Christian attitude toward people they dislike.

Our lesson for today is again about the only one of the Minor Prophets who is at all familiar to most people. This is partly because in the letter the book of Jonah is a story, and partly unfortunately because the story has been so generally disbelieved and so often ridiculed. We have had a lesson on the first two chapters of Jonah and you may remember that much of the disbelief stems from the assumption—based on a mistranslation of the original Greek of Matthew 12:40—that the great fish which is said to have swallowed Jonah was a whale, and the scientific fact that no whale's throat would permit the passage of a human body. If we keep in mind that both in the Hebrew and in the Greek the word merely indicates a great fish or sea creature, and that the book of Jonah says "the Lord prepared a great fish," we shall see that this is a miracle no more difficult to accept than any other, and we shall be able to speak up in answer to any ridicule of the story which

we may hear, and so perhaps do some good. Swedenborg says in his *Spiritual Diary* 1391 that the story of Jonah is true.

In our Bible the Minor Prophets are not placed in exact historical order. They do not all indicate just when and where they were written, but Jonah was probably among the first. From the reference to him in II Kings 14:25 we learn that he is the first prophet mentioned by name after the death of Elisha, that he prophesied in Israel, and that he was recognized by the king of that time as the Lord's prophet. We learn also that he spoke other prophecies besides that of which the book of Jonah treats. He was the Lord's faithful prophet to his own people. But when he was given a message for the people of Nineveh, he did not want to deliver it. And it was this part of his life which the Lord chose to have recorded in the Word. The whole book of Jonah is a prophecy, meant not for the ancient Hebrews or for the people of Nineveh alone, but for us and for people of all time. In Matthew 12:39-41 the Lord Himself tells us that the experience of Jonah with the great fish was prophetic of His own three days in the tomb after His crucifixion, and in Luke 11:29-32 He refers to the two chapters which we have for today as a rebuke to those to whom He was preaching.

Many people who know about Jonah and the great fish do not know the rest of the story. Jonah's experience taught him that he must not set up his will against the Lord's, and while in the belly of the fish he promised obedience. So when, after he was cast out on the shore, the command of the Lord came to him the second time to go to Nineveh and preach the Lord's message there, he went. But his dislike of the Assyrian Gentiles, which had prompted his original flight, was unchanged, as we learn from the letter of the story. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was indeed a great city. It was very old, going back to the time of the Ancient Church (Genesis 10:11), and archaeological excavations of its ruins show it to have been sixty miles in circumference; so Jonah may well have walked a day's journey in it before reaching its center.

We remember that Assyria represents the reasoning plane of the mind, and Swedenborg tells us that Nineveh represents "falsities

from the fallacies of the senses in the obscurity of an unenlightened understanding and from ignorance.” (AC 1188) He tells us that Jonah was sent to enlighten the people of Nineveh because at that time only the Israelites had the Word; and because the people of Nineveh had sinned from ignorance and repented when they were told the truth, the Lord could pardon and spare them. All through the Bible we have this same lesson, that wrong done from ignorance, while it has its inevitable effects, does not injure our souls, whereas wrong done when we know better does injure them.

Jonah was angry when the people of Nineveh were spared. He felt that all his hard experiences had been vain or useless. This was partly because he was thinking of his own reputation as a prophet, and partly because he had hoped to see Nineveh destroyed—both unworthy feelings. There is a lesson for us here because we are sometimes tempted by the same feelings. When we see someone doing wrong—especially someone whom we dislike—we are tempted to hope that we shall see him punished and be able to say, “I told you so.” The fourth chapter of Jonah shows us just how unworthy of a Christian these feelings are.

Jonah went out of the city and made himself a booth to sit in while he watched to see what would happen. So we sometimes draw away from the person we have condemned and from the safety of our own self-satisfaction watch to see what will happen to him. The gourd which grew up to shade Jonah represents the evil state of pride in which he was—his sense of superiority and his unfriendliness. (It is now generally thought that the “gourd” was probably the castor oil plant, which even with slight handling may wilt and wither. —*Ed.*) The worm which destroyed the gourd represents falsity from evil. The selfish man never feels secure for a long time. He imagines all kinds of bad intentions in other people which may be threatening him, and lets his imagination destroy his comfort like the vehement east wind, and his resentment burns like the sun which beat upon Jonah’s head. His thought is all for himself and his own safety and importance. The Lord’s words to Jonah in the last verse of the chapter teach us how opposite such

feelings are to the Lord's love, which longs to save and bless everyone.

*Basic Correspondences*

- Nineveh = falsities from the fallacies of the senses with those in ignorance  
the gourd = the evil in which Jonah was  
the worm = falsity from evil
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**Senior**

Young people are apt to be more democratic in their daily relations with those of their own age than are older people who have grown into a fixed pattern of life. But young people are by no means free from the temptation to self-satisfaction and intolerance. The subtlety of the working of this selfish love in the heart, and the false ideas and attitudes which it develops in the mind should be stressed.

In our Bibles the book of Jonah is the fifth of the books called the Minor Prophets, but this does not mean that he was the fifth historically. In II Kings 14:25 Jonah is referred to as the Lord's prophet in Israel. This places him shortly after the death of Elisha and makes him probably the first of the twelve.

It is strange that so many Christians disbelieve and even ridicule the story of Jonah, for the Lord Himself teaches that Jonah's experience was a prophecy of His own rejection and of His three days in the tomb after His crucifixion (Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:29-32). For us in the New Church there is the further assurance of Swedenborg, who says that Jonah's story is true. In our lesson on the first two chapters of the book we learned that much of the disbelief in this particular miracle stems from the use of the word *whale* in Matthew, which is a mistranslation of the Greek. The word used both in the Greek and in the Hebrew means merely a "great fish," and we are told that the Lord had "prepared" the great fish.

Our lesson for today is on the last part of the story of Jonah, which is not so well known as the first two chapters. Jonah's

original flight from the presence of the Lord was caused by his unwillingness to take the Lord's message to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Over and over again in both the Old and the New Testaments we are told how prone the ancient Hebrews were to despise all Gentiles. Swedenborg tells us (AE 401<sup>36</sup>) that "Jonah was of that nation, and therefore was sent to Nineveh; for the Jewish nation had the Word, and were therefore able to teach those who were outside of the church, and who are called Gentiles; these are signified by 'Nineveh.' Because the Jewish nation was, above others, in the love of self and in falsities from that love, they wished well to none but themselves, thus not to the Gentiles, but these they hated. Because the character of that nation was such, and Jonah represented it, he was very angry that Jehovah should spare Nineveh." Jonah's experience with the great fish had made him obedient, but it had not changed his heart.

The temptation pictured in the story is one which is by no means characteristic of the Israelite nation alone, but is common to us all in one form or another; so the story is recorded for us as part of the Word, whereas Jonah's prophecies to his own people were not recorded. We all have a natural tendency to feel ourselves superior to those who differ from us. Our own race, our own education, our own knowledge, our own type of mind, our own idea of how things should be done—even our own taste in literature, in art, in music, in dress, in food—is, we assume, necessarily superior, and we tend to despise in one degree or another anyone who disagrees—who is "different." The Lord directed many of His parables and teachings against this attitude, and there is nothing more severely condemned in the writings than this sin of arrogance and superiority.

The story of Jonah and the gourd is one of the Lord's ways of bringing to our attention this deep-seated evil in us and showing us how contrary it is to the principles which, as Christians, we should be practicing. Jonah's withdrawal outside the city of Nineveh to "see what would become of the city" pictures our tendency to stand aloof from people we consider inferior to ourselves and

observe them as mere curiosities. The booth he made for his shelter pictures our self-satisfaction. The gourd which grew up so rapidly to give him shade is the evil of arrogance which seems at first to give us pleasure and satisfaction. But this very sense of superiority breeds false ideas of everything. We begin to believe that nothing is good which does not minister to our pride in ourselves. We misjudge the thoughts and intentions of others and imagine all sorts of affronts and threats to our dignity where none exist, as Jonah, loving his position as a prophet, felt that the Lord had made light of it, and so he wanted to die. These false ideas are the “worm” which destroyed the gourd and left Jonah exposed to the burning “sun” of his self-love.

The Lord’s lesson taught in the last two verses of the book is clear. Jonah had thought only of himself and of worldly honor, which passes away “in a night,” as all earthly things do. The Lord’s concern is with the souls of all men, good and bad alike. He loves each one, regardless of his worldly position, education, wealth, or even his knowledge of the truth or his correctness of life. He wants us all to be happy, and permits punishment to fall on us only when we will learn in no other way the things in us which are leading to unhappiness. In Ezekiel 18:23 He says: “Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” If we are to be true followers of the Lord, we should recognize and fight in ourselves all tendency to set ourselves above others. We should keep in mind always the Lord’s words to His disciples (Matthew 20:25-28): “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”



### Adult

With this class the passages quoted from the writings as well as those quoted from the Word might be taken up and discussed one at a time. The powerful lesson presented by the story of Jonah should make us realize the importance of trying to correct the world's false estimate of it.

The prophet Jonah lived in the kingdom of Israel in the time of the second Jeroboam, not long after the death of Elisha. We learn this from II Kings 14:25. It is evident that he was recognized by the king as the Lord's prophet, for the prophecy mentioned in that verse is not a part of the book of Jonah. We see from this that it was not Jonah's prophecies to his own people which the Lord chose to have recorded. The book of Jonah differs from those of the other Minor Prophets in that it is a story about Jonah rather than an obvious prophecy or series of prophecies. Yet the whole story is prophetic and its importance is evidenced by the Lord's own references to it in Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:20-32.

It is strange that in view of the Lord's own witness to the truth of the story, so many Christians who do not question other miracles have been induced to discard it as impossible. In our lesson on the first two chapters, we called attention to the fact that the word *whale* in Matthew 12:40 is a mistranslation—one which was not corrected in the Revised Standard Version.\* The Greek word in Matthew as well as the Hebrew word in Jonah meant, at the time when it was used, any great fish or sea creature. It was at a much later date that its Latinized form came to be restricted to apply to the whale family only. Swedenborg says in the *Diary* that the story of Jonah is factual. We should all have this information in mind and not be silent when we meet with disbelief in the story and especially with ridicule of it.

For the story of Jonah contains very important lessons. In AC 8481 Swedenborg says: "The falsity of evil which is in the good that is from our own, is compared to 'a worm' . . . for falsity also gnaws and thus torments. There are two things which make hell,

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\*It has, however, been corrected in several more recent versions. —Ed.

as there are two which make heaven . . . the two which make hell are evil and falsity . . . The torment in hell from the falsity is compared to ‘a worm’; and the torment from evil there is compared to ‘fire.’” See Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:43-44. We recall that Assyria, of which Nineveh was the capital, represents the reasoning plane of the mind, and we are told in AC 1188: “That ‘Nineveh’ signifies falsities from the fallacies of the senses in the obscurity of an unenlightened understanding, and from ignorance, is evident in Jonah, who was sent to Nineveh, which city was pardoned because they were such.” We might note that by this definition many of the people who disbelieve the story of Jonah today are “Ninevites,” who would really change their opinion if the truth were told them.

This outline from the writings points to a very common temptation which few of us escape—the temptation to set ourselves up as the pattern which everyone should follow and to condemn and disparage anyone who does not conform to our pattern. That this is a very serious evil is impressed upon us by Swedenborg in many places, as for example in AC 4949 where he speaks of some in the spiritual world “who have abodes under the soles of the feet” and who are constantly in the endeavor to ascend but always falling back. He says of these: “I was told that such are they who have despised others in comparison with themselves . . . They are in a kind of stupidity; for such arrogance extinguishes and suffocates the light of heaven, and consequently intelligence.” Jonah delivered the Lord’s message to Nineveh, threatening it with destruction, but in his heart he was glorying in his own superiority to the Ninevites and looking forward to their discomfiture. He was thinking of his own importance as the Lord’s prophet. When we are in this state of mind, we cannot be happy for any length of time, because we are always looking for things to criticize in those we despise and constantly being offended through our own false estimate of what they say and do. We miss all the true joy which comes from seeing and appreciating their good qualities. Our “worm dieth not.” The tendency to think of ourselves as superior to others is one of our most subtle and deadly foes.

The Lord set us the example of humility and perfect love. We should take to heart His words in Matthew 20:25-28. He Himself, who was greatest of all, was the servant of all. On the cross He prayed for those who had crucified Him: “Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do.” He has no pleasure in anyone’s discomfiture, but only in leading each one, by whatever means is most likely to succeed, into the way of happiness and peace. He bade the disciples be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” This same lesson is brought out clearly in Ezekiel 18:20-24. As we learned in the case of David and Solomon, none of us ever reaches the point at which he is so wise and so great that he can think nothing false or do no wrong. In self-satisfaction lies concealed the “worm” of destruction.

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#### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Apocalypse Explained*, n. 401<sup>36</sup>: “This evil in that nation is signified by the gourd which the worm smote so that it withered. ‘The sun that beat upon the head of Jonah’ signifies the love of self which prevailed in that nation; and ‘the scorching east wind’ falsity therefrom; and ‘the worm that smote the gourd’ signifies the destruction of this evil and its falsity.”

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#### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Is the book of Jonah one of the Major or one of the Minor Prophets?  
*Minor*
- J. When and where did Jonah live? *shortly after Elisha, in Israel*
- J. Why did he try to run away from the Lord? *too proud to warn Nineveh*
- P. What happened to him? *thrown overboard, swallowed by great fish*
- J. Where was Nineveh? *Assyria*
- J. When Jonah went to Nineveh, what did he tell the people? *forty days till doom*
- J. Why did his prophecy not come true? *the people repented*
- P. Was Jonah pleased? *no*
- P. Where did he go? *edge of town*
- P. What grew up to give him shade? *“gourd”*
- P. What came to destroy the gourd? *worm*
- P. Was Jonah angry? *yes*

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- J. What did the Lord tell him? *he should have as great pity for people*
- I. What does the gourd represent? *arrogant pride, sense of superiority*
- S. What does the worm represent? *false ideas associated with pride*
- S. Do people today ever behave as Jonah did? Explain. *yes, every time we feel our ways and our ideas must be better than those of anyone who is “different”*