

DAILY READINGS

JONAH

AUGUST 12 - 16

Day 1 – Jonah and the Whale

Silence, Stillness and Centering before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading – Jonah 1:1-2

Adam and Eve. David and Goliath. Samson and Delilah. Jonah and the whale. Even in our post-Christian world there are many biblical stories so embedded in our culture that those who have never opened a bible would have at least some knowledge of the story and the characters involved. Most people would be aware of Jonah's encounter with the whale, and his time spent deep in the belly of the beast, even if they aren't aware of how he got there, why he was there in the first place, and what happened to him once the whale had disgorged him onto the shore. For those of us more familiar with the story, we know Jonah as a reluctant prophet, called by God to take a message of prophetic warning to the city of Nineveh, who runs from his calling and seeks to evade his God and his mission.

But this focus on Jonah and his various travails can sometimes blind us to the story of the most important character in the book: God himself. It is God's story that is at the centre of the book. This little book, a mere four chapters long, focuses on the very story that is at the centre of the entire biblical narrative: the pouring out of God's unmerited grace upon those who have sinned against him, the offer of reconciliation with the One humanity has turned its back on. As we go through the book of Jonah, we should keep in our minds the challenge that closes the book, the challenge that God puts before Jonah: is our character truly imitating the character of the God we serve?

Questions to Consider

What does the story of Jonah mean to you? What is it about?

Prayer

Almighty Lord, thank you for your word, the precious gift of scripture that shows us who you are and reveals your will for us as your followers. Help me be faithful to your call. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

Day 2 – The Real Main Character in the Story

Silence, Stillness and Centering before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading – Jonah 1:3-10

Even from this brief opening passage of the book of Jonah, we are left in no doubt as to who is in charge here: God is. He commands Jonah to go. He sends the storm. He is in control of the story, and his will will not be thwarted, no matter the surprising twists the story contains. Even here at the very beginning, the theme of the worship of God not being limited to Israel alone – the key thing Jonah must learn – is evident. The sailors don't just fear God because he has sent the storm, but because they see his power evident in the way he controls nature and in the way he delivers them. The storm was God's, from beginning to end.

Jonah resists God, and as we will see his disobedience leads to the sailors' conversion to the worship of the true God of all creation. Yahweh is shown to be a universal God, the one who created the world and who controls it. All of humanity can know God if they so wish. Even though it is definitely the majority position of the Old Testament to focus almost exclusively on Yahweh as Israel's God and Israel alone as his chosen people in relationship with him, knowing and worshipping God is something open to all people, even foreigners and Israel's enemies. This is a major point of the book of Jonah. What these pagan sailors see God doing – demonstrating his power over nature, but also having compassion on them and rescuing them – causes them to abandon their own gods, turn to him and vow to serve and worship him only.

Questions to Consider

Have there been times in your life when you have seen God's hand in things that at first looked like God was nowhere in it? What happened? How was God's purpose revealed to you in what happened?

Prayer

Loving Father, you are the centre of the story, the centre of my life. Remind me of this fact when my heart wavers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

Day 3 – Blocking the Father’s Work

Silence, Stillness and Centering before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading – Jonah 1:11-17

The bible is full of stories of people considered to be beyond the pale, beyond saving, beyond redemption, and yet still being saved by the power and grace of a God who takes the initiative in reaching out to them. God was with David, even after David had committed adultery and murder. God heard the last, desperate prayer of Samson as he tried one final redemptive act for his God. Zacchaeus was restored in his relationship with God and with his community even though he was a tax collector. And Saul was persecuting and killing the followers of Jesus, and yet God still reached out to him on the road to Damascus.

God likes to save those who are considered – by others, often us – to be beyond saving. Maybe we think the pagan sailors were unworthy of being saved; perhaps we scoff at their turning to God as it was only imminent destruction that prompted them to do so. Jonah ran from his calling and his God, fleeing in the opposite direction he was commanded to go; surely such flagrant disobedience does not deserve God’s gracious mercy? But it was God’s initiative that saw these people saved. It was his mercy and grace that saw them redeemed and welcomed back into relationship with God. This is what God wants for everyone. Jonah’s mission was one that showed God’s love for all people, even those who turned away from him. God reached out to the Ninevites through Jonah, and yet Jonah turned away from the ones God was reaching out to. Will we, like Jonah, also let our prejudices get in the way of God’s work?

Questions to Consider

Have you ever found yourself blocking God’s work? How? Why? What got you moving in the right direction again?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, guide me back to the right path when I stumble. May I be a channel for your love not an impediment to it. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

Day 4 – Hymn of Thanksgiving

Silence, Stillness and Centering before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading – Jonah 2:1-9

There is much scholarly debate about whether the psalm in chapter 2 is actually an original part of the book of Jonah, written in line with the author's purposes for the book, or whether it is a pre-existing, independent psalm inserted into the book much later, in an attempt to make the character of Jonah a little more attractive. Whatever the ultimate origin of the poem, it is clear that the main concern the psalmist has is his distance from his community and from the temple, the sacred, holy place where he feels safe and protected. Death, though present, doesn't seem to be terribly much of a problem for Jonah at this point. What is more concerning is the separation from his people and his place, and the dwelling place of God. And yet Jonah learns something new, encountering a reality that he had not considered or experienced before. Though cut off from the temple, his prayer still reaches God and God answers.

Jonah learns – via this experience – that God is everywhere, not just resident in his temple but resident in his creation. There is nowhere Jonah, or indeed anyone, can go where God is not present. For Jonah, this revelation comes as both comfort and threat. Comfort, because even in his time of deepest need, so far from home, he still found God at hand to rescue him – because God is everywhere. Threat, because no matter where Jonah runs to, no matter where he tries to hide, there is no escaping from God, because God will seek him out and find him – because God is everywhere.

Questions to Consider

Have you ever tried to run from God before? Why? What happened?

Prayer

Father God, forgive me for the times when I have tried to run from you, or been slow to respond to you. Forgive my fears and doubts. I thank you for still meeting me wherever I flee, and bringing me back to you. Amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

Day 5 – A Change of Heart?

Silence, Stillness and Centering before God (2 minutes)

Scripture Reading – Jonah 2:9-10

The hymn of thanksgiving that Jonah offers to God is a beautiful evocation of a change of heart. If anything deserves to be labelled a conversion hymn then this could very well be it. But if we know the rest of the story of Jonah that follows, then we know that we have cause to question the sincerity of Jonah's repentance and return to God. Such a turnaround in perspective, such a change of heart, if genuine, would surely have resulted in different behaviour than that which Jonah will almost immediately begin displaying. We would expect a transformed Jonah to continue on his way with an entirely new outlook towards his God and his mission. "What I have vowed, I will make good," he says. But we pretty much get more of the same. Jonah does the bare minimum necessary to fulfil his commission, and he goes into a self-righteous sulk when the Ninevites take his prophetic word seriously and actually repent.

Through Jonah's unreformed behaviour, the story forces us to look at ourselves and ask, "Are we like Jonah?" Do we only wish to be in a worshipping community with people like ourselves, people of whom we approve? Do we speak of God's saving power and all he has done for us (rescuing us from certain death) and yet have no interest in what he is doing in the lives of others (bringing to salvation)? Do we praise God for delivering us from sin and freeing us from lives trapped in cycles of destructive, addictive behaviour, only to show no sympathy for those whose lives are still similarly trapped?

Questions to Consider

How can we combat ingratitude? How do we let compassion become the dominant lens through which we view others?

Prayer

Lord God, grow in me the same compassion for others that you have shown me, the same love for others that you showered on me, Amen.

Conclude with Silence (2 minutes)

Saturday/Sunday Notes

++ SOUTH WEST BAPTIST CHURCH
Redemptive communities and lifelong followers