



WHERE LIFE & PURPOSE CONNECT

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 25, 2023

Weekly Prayer

O God, you are my light and salvation. Living in your presence, I have nothing to fear. Open my heart to your word today. Help me be ready to follow you on whatever path you lead me. Cast aside my fears and doubts, teaching me to trust in you. Amen.

Monday, June 26

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17

The LORD's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention." So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD. But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter. Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. The ship's officer came and said to him, "How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won't perish." Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, "Come on, let's cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that's happening to us." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they said to him, "Tell us, since you're the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What's your country and of what people are you?" He said to them, "I'm a Hebrew. I worship the LORD, the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were terrified and said to him, "What have you done?" (The men knew that Jonah was fleeing from the LORD, because he had told them.) They said to him, "What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?" (The sea was continuing to rage.) He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you." The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. So they called on the LORD, saying, "Please, LORD, don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the LORD: whatever you want, you can do." Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. The men worshipped

the LORD with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made solemn promises.

Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

Observation

The book of Jonah is short, just four chapters, which we'll read together this week. It is a story that uses metaphor, wordplay, suspense, hyperbole, and humor to tell us about how God is at work in our lives and world.

Application

As we begin, Jonah flatly defies God's call, setting out to Tarshish trying to run from God. As the storm brews, the sailors discuss amongst themselves who had the bad luck to "cause" such a storm upon them. Jonah then begins to take the blame, explaining in part: "I worship the Lord of heaven who made the sea and dry land." Isn't it interesting that Jonah was on the boat out of disobedience to God, while still claiming connection to God. Have you ever identified yourself as a follower of God, while also acting in ways that are disobedient? If so, how effective was your witness in this moment? Though recognizing this is important (and I'm sure that all of us have had this experience) don't get stuck here either; the good news of God is that we aren't abandoned in our disobedience but invited to follow again.

Prayer

God of the land, the oceans, the seas – you are magnificent and worthy to be praised. Even when I fail to obey or trust, you never give up! Thank you for calling me again and again to follow you. Amen.

Tuesday, June 27

Scripture: Jonah 2

Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:

"I called out to the LORD in my distress, and he answered me.

From the belly of the underworld I cried out for help;
you have heard my voice.

You had cast me into the depths in the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounds me.

All your strong waves and rushing water passed over me.

So I said, 'I have been driven away from your sight.

Will I ever again look on your holy temple?

Waters have grasped me to the point of death;
the deep surrounds me.

Seaweed is wrapped around my head
at the base of the undersea mountains.

I have sunk down to the underworld;

its bars held me with no end in sight.
But you brought me out of the pit.’
When my endurance was weakening,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
to your holy temple.
Those deceived by worthless things lose their chance for mercy.
But me, I will offer a sacrifice to you with a voice of thanks.
That which I have promised, I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”
Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

Observation

From the belly of a big fish (Hebrew had no word for “whale”), Jonah prayed to God. While my kids love to imagine what the belly of a whale would be like – wishing they could take a trip, as if on the Magic School Bus – I remind them, and us, that a lot of us have probably experienced a “night in the belly.” That is, a night in deep darkness, without a sense of direction or escape. As a metaphor, we can better understand what sleeping in the belly of a whale might be like.

Application

CS Lewis said, *“I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”*

As Jonah spent time in the belly of the whale, a prayer came forth from his lips. It is a prayer seeking help, saying sorry, and finding thanksgiving. This prayer changes Jonah’s perspective and understanding of God’s call and presence in his life. How might you rephrase this prayer for yourself today? What might you bring before God to seek help, say sorry, and express thanks?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, keep me willing to pray “sorry” when I mess up, “help” when I face problems, and “thank you” for all the ways you accompany, forgive, and love me through life. Amen.

Wednesday, June 28

Scripture: Jonah 3:1-3

The LORD’s word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD’s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days’ walk across.)

Observation

After a pretty unpleasant escape (the fish “vomited Jonah onto the dry land,” 2:10), Jonah made his way to Nineveh. Nineveh was a principal city and last capital of Assyria. Their empire had defeated and scattered the tribes of Israel. This means that people felt about Nineveh the same kinds of fears and distaste that “Moscow” brings to Ukrainians today.

Application

Jonah has made clear his strong desire to avoid Nineveh, and honestly – I can understand it. I would not want to enter the gates of a community that had caused such harm. I am less brave, and more risk averse than that! (And sometimes, that’s okay too!) Still, even while dragging his feet, Jonah found ways to trust God and carry God’s message out into the world. Are there people, places, or situations that feel difficult for you to carry God’s message? How might God encourage you to trust that God will make a way?

Prayer

God of all creation, help me to love others as you do. Help me to build a world that embodies your mercy, love, and grace. Make me willing, trusting, and courageous in following you. Amen.

Thursday, June 29

Scripture: Jonah 3

The LORD’s word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD’s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days’ walk across.) Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant. When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. Then he announced, “In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water! Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that’s under their control!” He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish. God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it.

Observation

Once in Nineveh, Jonah preached a short message (only 5 words in Hebrew!) warning the people to get their act together. They took seriously Jonah’s words: changed their behavior, fasted, and wore mourning clothes. Seeing this, God “stopped planning to destroy them and didn’t do it” (v10).

Application

I'll be honest, this chapter always challenges me. Imagine being Jonah, and after finding courage to speak to your "enemy" -- they listen! I'll bet Jonah was ready for a fight, or at least for their "evil ways" to continue... but instead, they repented. Is this hard for you, too? It makes me wonder: how might God help me give others opportunities, grace, and forgiveness, in the same spirit as God does?

Prayer

God, you are lavish in grace and quick to forgive. Help me to grow and become more like you. Make my heart eager to give second chances, to forgive, and to see others as your beloveds. Amen.

Friday, June 30

Scripture: Jonah 4

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "Come on, LORD! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live."

The LORD responded, "Is your anger a good thing?" But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, "It's better for me to die than to live." God said to Jonah, "Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?" Jonah said, "Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!" But the LORD said, "You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Observation

Turns out we aren't the only ones who struggle with God's response. Jonah was mad, too! (4:1) But I love Jonah's prayer, "This is why I didn't want to do this. I *knew* you are merciful and compassionate" (4:2). How quick we are to be angry when God shows others the same compassion and grace that we require!

Application

In chapter 2, Jonah praised God for God's mercy. And now, Jonah is angry for the same mercy being shown to others. Humans are funny, aren't we? But isn't this relatable? God used a shrub to answer Jonah's question, to show Jonah how God continues to feel love

and compassion for Nineveh, even when they strayed. Some of us might know this same heartache God feels, for someone we love to find their way back. Some of us might *be* that lost city (or sheep or son, as other parables tell), who are searching for our own way back. Jonah reminds us again, that God does not say "except" when it comes to forgiveness and grace. Rather, God's mercy and grace is for all people.

Prayer

Merciful and loving God, thank you never placing boundaries on whom you will love, how often you will forgive, or far and deep your mercy will be found. Amen.

Saturday, July 1

Scripture: Acts 15:1-2 (3-21)

Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position. The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders. The church sent this delegation on their way. They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling stories about the conversion of the Gentiles to everyone. Their reports thrilled the brothers and sisters. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity. Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, "The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses." The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. After much debate, Peter stood and addressed them, "Fellow believers, you know that, early on, God chose me from among you as the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and come to believe. God, who knows people's deepest thoughts and desires, confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith. Why then are you now challenging God by placing a burden on the shoulders of these disciples that neither we nor our ancestors could bear? On the contrary, we believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus." The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity. When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, "Fellow believers, listen to me. Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written,

*After this I will return,
and I will rebuild David's fallen tent;
I will rebuild what has been torn down.
I will restore it*

*so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who belong to me.
The Lord says this, the one who does these things
known from earliest times.*

“Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn’t create problems for Gentiles who turn to God. Instead, we should write a letter, telling them to avoid the pollution associated with idols, sexual immorality, eating meat from strangled animals, and consuming blood. After all, Moses has been proclaimed in every city for a long time, and is read aloud every Sabbath in every synagogue.”

Observation

The book of Jonah showed a prophet who wanted God’s mercy for himself (and his people) but found it “utterly wrong” that God showed mercy to foreigners in Nineveh. The gospels were clear that Jesus wanted the good news of God’s gracious love shared with “all nations.” In Acts 15, some of Jesus’ first followers struggled with that. The apostle Paul preached Jesus’ good news to the Gentile (i.e. not Jewish) Mediterranean world. “Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we’ve received from Moses, you can’t be saved’.... Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law from Moses’” (Acts 15:1, 5). James, Jesus’ half-brother who led the Jerusalem church, quoted the Old Testament prophet Amos to show that God had always wanted his love to reach all nations.

Application

Pastor John Ortberg wrote, “Two of the most powerful words in the human race are *us* and *them...*” Jesus breaks these barriers, crosses lines, and reminds us that we are all beloved children of God in need of God’s mercy, love, and grace. We so easily get this wrong. We use our unique and God-given diversities to make divisions of “us” and “them.” For Jonah, God’s love was only for *us*, not *them*. Search your heart, asking God to identify your “us” and your “them.” Then pray that God will help you learn from Jonah that God calls you to live beyond those human distinctions.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to love as you love. Help me to heal divisions and harm caused, and instead celebrate the present diversity in your creation, and seek unity with others. Amen.