



WEEK OF FEBRUARY 18, 2024
(COVERS READINGS FROM FEBRUARY 18-24)

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

In Jonah, the prophet is instructed to go to Nineveh “and preach against it.” However, instead of following God’s command, Jonah runs away from the Lord, fleeing in the opposite direction toward Tarshish. While he is aboard the ship to Tarshish, God sends a violent storm to threaten the ship. The crew, upon determining Jonah as the catalyst for the storm, throw him overboard. Immediately the sea becomes calm, and God sends a “great fish” to swallow Jonah whole, where he remains for three days and nights. There Jonah prays to the Lord and the fish expels him onto dry land. He at once heads to Nineveh to finally obey God’s command – and the Ninevites immediately repent and turn to the Lord. Seeing God’s compassion toward them, Jonah becomes angry and sulks away, prompting a rebuke from the Lord.

In Malachi, we hear both God’s lamentation and indictment against post-exilic Israel. Though the temple had long been rebuilt and the people had long been established in the land after returning from exile, their commitment to faithfully live as God’s people began to wane – they had shown contempt for God’s name (1:6), offered false worship (1:7-14), led others into sin (2:7-9), broken God’s laws (2:11-16), called evil “good” (2:17), kept God’s tithes and offerings to themselves (3:8-12), and became arrogant (3:13-15). Yet, while the list of Israel’s offenses against God is long, God reminds the people: “I have loved you” (1:1). For those few who remain faithful to the Lord, he promises a day of reckoning where he will send his messenger to “purify the Levites” (3:1-5), and “for those who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings” (4:2). Placed as the last book in the Old Testament, it sets the stage for understanding both the need for and the coming of a Messiah.

John 1:1-18 is the prologue to the gospel account, offering a succinct summary of who Jesus really is and how we are to interpret the ensuing “testimony” concerning Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. This Jesus simultaneously is God and was with God in the beginning. This Jesus created all things and is the life of all things. This Jesus is God incarnate – that is, simultaneously God and human – come to “dwell among us” (v. 14). This Jesus is the light of the world that overcomes darkness,

though he was not recognized as such by everyone. Those who do recognize him and believe in him are made to be God's children through him. To see him is to see God, because he is God. John was sent as God's messenger to testify to the world about Jesus.

In Luke 1 the writer attempts to provide "an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus" so that he – and presumably other "lovers of God" – might know the truth of what they've heretofore been taught orally. The writer begins with the miraculous account of John the Baptist's birth – how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was ministering as a priest in the temple. The angel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child and name him John. Zechariah, however, did not believe the angel because he and his wife were too old to have children, so the angel made him mute until everything had been fulfilled. Meanwhile, Gabriel appeared to a virgin in Nazareth named Mary, and told her that she would give birth to the Messiah through the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing this, Mary went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth who blessed her for believing the word of the Lord. The chapter concludes with the birth of John the Baptist who "grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (v. 80).

Luke 2:1-40 gives us the story of Jesus' birth. Because of the census, Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, taking with him his wife, Mary, who was pregnant. *While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn* (v. 6-7). Meanwhile, angels appear to shepherds in a field to proclaim the birth of the child. After seeing them, the shepherds hurry to Bethlehem where they find the child then proceed to spread the news about the child. Later, Mary and Joseph bring the child to the temple in Jerusalem. There he is recognized as the messiah by a devout man named Simeon and a prophetess named Anna. They return to Nazareth where the child "grew and became strong; he was filled with all wisdom and the grace of God was upon him" (v. 40). Luke 3 tells of John's ministry in the desert. There he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and proclaims of one who will come after him to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Matthew 3:13–4:17 gives a full account of Jesus' baptism and temptation. While John is baptizing in the desert, Jesus comes to fulfill what must be done even though John protests. Upon his baptism, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove upon him and a voice from heaven declares "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (3:17). After this, the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert for forty days and nights to be tempted by the devil. The devil tries to tempt him three times – first with bread, then with fame and security and lastly with power – only to be rebuked each time by Jesus. Finally, the devil leaves him and angels come to attend him. Upon learning of John's imprisonment, Jesus returns to Galilee and settles in Capernaum where he begins to preach "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17).

Matthew 5–6:4 records a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus gathers his disciples on a mountainside and begins to teach them, beginning with the Beatitudes (i.e. "blessed are the poor in spirit...", blessed are the meek..., etc.). He goes on to remind his listeners that they are to be salt and light to the world and that his teaching is not meant to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

General Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- How familiar were you with this week's readings? Was there anything that surprised you?

- What do you learn about God from these readings? What do you learn about humanity, or about human nature? How did the authors of these writings understand their relationship with God?
- What passages or aspects of these readings give you comfort or assurance? What passages or aspects of these readings do you find difficult to accept?
- Are there any particular passages that you want to study in-depth?

This Week's Discussion Questions

Malachi 1:6-14 | The prophet condemns the priest of his day for their insincerity in the practice of their duties. One commentator writes:

William Sanday used to tell his classes at Christ Church, Oxford, that three quarters of all the honest intellectual work of the world is unrelieved drudgery. Such drudgery is our moral opportunity to consolidate in achieved character the inspiration we have already had, and then it is the price we pay for inspiration yet to come. The same is true of the familiar and constantly repeated offices of religion, our familiar hymns and formal prayers and well-known passages of the Bible. True, they are often so well known that they lack novelty, but constant repetition and return to them in the services of the church implants them so deeply in our mind that they finally become second mental nature. In times of crisis, when we are put to the proof, it is this deeper level of the mind, rather than its surface rationalizations, which determines our action. Therefore our habitual religious practices cannot be safely discarded. They are the drill ground where character is trained against the day of spiritual battle and moral proving. If Malachi's priests had ever known this, they had forgotten it.

What "habitual religious practices" have you cultivated in your own life? To which practices are you most drawn? Which do you find most tedious? In what ways have you been guilty of simply "going through the motions"? Have you ever felt yourself strengthened through the faithful attention to spiritual disciplines?

Matthew 4:1-11 | In considering this passage, it is important to remember that it is the Spirit that leads Jesus into the desert specifically to be tempted. This implies then that the temptation itself, though not originating from God, is used by God as a means of developing character and trust within the one whom God has claimed. This is perhaps all the more evident when considering the parallels between Jesus' forty days/nights in the desert and the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the wilderness (see Exodus 13:17-18 and Deuteronomy 8:2-5). So then, "...the nature of temptation...it is a fork in the road, the leading of the Spirit and the opportunity of the devil, and we must choose. It is a chance to rise as much as it is a chance to fall."

It is often much easier to recognize the opportunity of the devil than to recognize the leading of the Spirit. When you've faced temptation or hardship, how have you recognized the leading of the Spirit? What tools have helped you to resist the devil? In what ways have you allowed God to use your victory over the devil as a witness to others? How is God calling you to be led by the Spirit now?

Closing Prayer

Grant to us, O Lord,
 to know that which is worth knowing,
 to love that which is worth loving,
 to praise that which pleases you most,
 to esteem that which is most precious unto you,
 and to dislike whatsoever is evil in your eyes.
 Grant us true judgment to distinguish things that differ
 and above all to search out and do what is well pleasing to you,
 through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.