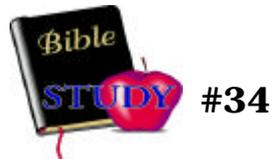


Journey Into God's Word



Ezra 1-10

Obadiah

Jonah 1-4

James 1-5

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me.”(Jonah 2:2) These words of Jonah summed up my week. Like a hot iron my heart was not only scorched but attempts were made to have it torn from me. I had never before been in a personal situation that was darker or more destitute. “From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”(Jonah 2:2) When I didn’t see an immediate answer I must confess I wondered if God was really listening. After all He “hurled me into the very heart of the sea, and the currents swirled around me. I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight;’” (Jonah 2:3,4) At this point it is so easy to give up. We are tempted to get down on ourselves, to believe God doesn’t love us anymore and that no one else cares yet Jonah said, “I will look again toward your holy temple.”(Verse 4) Jonah chose in spite of the circumstances to look to God even as he declared, “the engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.” (Verse 5) In my case it was the seaweed of fear, worry, doubt and even unbelief. But that wasn’t all. “To the roots of the mountain I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.” (Verse 6) “Dear God” I found myself crying out, “please hear my prayer I am feeling so low and trapped in what appears to be a hopeless situation.” But one thing about being at rock bottom the only place you can go is up. “But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.” (Remainder of verse 6 and verse 7) As I remembered Jonah spoke these words while he was still in the whale’s belly, I also was encouraged to remember the Lord in spite of the circumstances. From the bottom of the whale’s belly, I was reminded that, “those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.” (Verse 8) Lord, I want that grace so I hereby turn lose of those worthless idols. “But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good, salvation comes from the Lord.”(Verse 9) With that declaration, “the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. (Verse 10) Now I am continuing to believe God for the dry land for I know that

God is faithful and true to His Word. This wonderful Word got Jonah back on track so that God could use him to call the people of Ninevah to repentance. Now as we trust God from the bottom of whatever “whale’s belly” we might find ourselves in, we can rest assured He will deliver us, as we believe that “salvation comes from the Lord.”

But why the trials? James 1:2-4, says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Oh Lord it is hard in the midst of the trials, the tribulations, and the uncertainty of the future to persevere. As it seems that our world is crumbling around us we must remember that, “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (I Cor. 3:11) Our faith is tested to determine if it is based on the foundation of Jesus Christ or are we clinging to those worthless idols that Jonah was referring to and as a result forfeiting this grace that can be ours. How hard it is persevering in the midst of trials. The pain is unbelievable but here James says “consider it pure joy.” This perseverance that these trials produce must finish its work so we “may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” What we are told to do in the middle of these times of trials and uncertainties is to ask God for wisdom. He will give it if our goals are centered and not self centered. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”(Ps 51:17)

As one asks from such a broken and contrite heart “he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”(James 1:6-8) We must continue to trust God in the midst of these trials for as James 1:12 says, “blessed is the one who perseveres under trial, because when he/she has stood the test, he/she will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.” How does verses 13-15 show us that we are not to blame other people or God when we go through these trials? In the midst of the pain and uncertainty we must remember that, “every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” (James 1:17) When our world seems to have been turned upside down and circumstance lead us to believe that we have lost that which is closest to us we must remember that God does not change, He is the source of all that is good and, “He chose to

give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created.”(James 1:18)

When we are hurting our first reaction is to get angry. What does James 1:19-21 has to say about anger and the need to humbly accept the word planted in you? “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”(James 1:22) What does verses 26,27 say about our tongue and helping those in need? How does James 2:1-13 stress that it is wrong to show favoritism? “Mercy triumphs over judgment. What good is it if one claims to have faith but has no deeds?”(James 2:13,14) It is one thing to talk about faith it is another thing to actually live it in the midst of trials, tribulations and uncertainties. Faith involves believing God when the circumstances dictate otherwise. Faith involves action. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”(James 2:17) It involves surrendering that which is closest to us totally unto God. How did Abraham’s and Rahab’s actions described in James 2:21-26 result in righteousness? It is by faith that we are saved (Romans 3:28) but true faith results in actions.

One of the hardest places to express faith is in the controlling of our tongue. So many words are spoken that should have remain unsaid. What does James 3:1-12 say about the need to control the tongue? How we must daily surrender our tongues unto the Lord. Tongues reflecting the wisdom of God will be “first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:17,18) As we read these words and then examine our personal lives we are driven to our knees crying, “Lord have mercy upon us.” How we need to submit to God.

In James 4:1-12 James goes into great detail as to why such submission is absolutely essential. Please read these verses carefully and state what James says about praying with the right motives, humbling oneself before God, resisting the devil, not slandering or judging. In verses 13-16 how he describe we must submit our schedules to God daily. “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”(James 4:17)

James also deals with the issue of injustice in James 5:1-5. What does he say on this subject?

How hard it is to be patient when you are suffering “you too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble... as an example of patience in the face of suffering; take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we considered blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” (James 5:10,11)

Oh thank God for His Word, His compassion and His mercy. I must by faith hang on and so must you. God is faithful. “As you know, we consider blessed, those who have preserved.”

Thank God for community and the power of prayer. How is this power expressed in James 5:13-17? Thank God for those who exercise the faith and courage to keep us from wandering off the path of life. “If one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover a multitude of sins.”(James 5:19,20) Sharing the gospel is a mission of love. It involves hearing the Word, being saved personally and sharing with others. Through the grace of Jesus Christ we can have hope both now and for all eternity.

We must continue to believe God in spite of the circumstances. In the book of Obadiah we see hope offered to Israel, as judgment will come on Israel’s ancient enemy Edom. Israel will in turn experience deliverance. This small book offers hope to each of us that like Israel; God will not forget us in our time of need.

Ezra believed this and God used him to fulfill His promise to deliver the nation of Israel. The first half of the Book of Ezra is about God and His promise to the Jews to return to their land. It also shows in the second half of the book how Ezra not only knew God’s Word but also believed it and obeyed it. Please look at Ezra 8:21-22 and note his reasons for proclaiming a fast. What were the results according to verse 23? In Ezra 9:3,4 how did Ezra directly confront sin? What action did he take? Please describe Ezra’s prayer that is found in Ezra 9:6-15 and the results described in Ezra 10.

The journey into God’s Word this week takes us into Nehemiah 1-13, Micah 1-7, 1 John 1-5. Please join me in reading these scripture selections. Remember “He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He created.”(James 1:18) What a high calling it is to be the first

fruit of all He created. Let us now be born into this reality through reading, studying on meditating on the Word of truth.

Yours in Christ,

Larry Rice