

May–August 2024



# Day by Day with God

Rooting women's lives in the Bible

FEATURING ALIANORE SMITH, AMY BOUCHER PYE AND CLAIRE MUSTERS

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Rooting women's lives in the Bible



Ministries



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ISBN 978 1 80039 255 7  
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Cover image © AleksandarNakic/istockphoto.com

Distributed in Australia by:  
MediaCom Education Inc, PO Box 610, Unley, SA 5061  
Tel: 1 800 811 311 | [admin@mediacom.org.au](mailto:admin@mediacom.org.au)

Distributed in New Zealand by:  
Scripture Union Wholesale, PO Box 760, Wellington  
Tel: 04 385 0421 | [suwholesale@clear.net.nz](mailto:suwholesale@clear.net.nz)

### **Acknowledgements**

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by Gutenberg Press, Tarxien, Malta

# Day by Day with God

Edited by **Jackie Harris**

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**Lakshmi Jeffreys** inhabits various roles including wife, mother, friend, dog-walker, vicar and others, within and beyond the church. Having discovered the significance of sabbath, she wants to make more effort simply to 'play' in God's presence, both with others and on her own.

**Amy Boucher Pye** is a writer, speaker, retreat leader and spiritual director. She's the author of six books, including *Transforming Love: How friendship with Jesus changes us* (Form, 2023) and *Holding Onto Hope* (BRF, 2023). Find her at [amyboucherpye.com](http://amyboucherpye.com).

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**Catherine Butcher** is a freelance writer and editor, an Anglican reader and a member of General Synod. As communications director for HOPE Together for ten years, she wrote magazines and books to help churches make Jesus known.

# Welcome



Thank you for joining us in our Bible studies. It is always a pleasure to introduce these notes and to see how our contributors have developed their theme or what they have discovered in familiar stories or passages.

How are you as we move towards the middle of the year? Are things turning out as you expected or are you in a season of change? Are you feeling strong or a bit wobbly? Excited or wary and worried?

I was thinking about writing this letter on Sunday and a song we sang at church reminded me of how important scripture is in reminding us of God's love and faithfulness. The song – 'My Lighthouse' – speaks of how we can trust in God's promises and in his love for us, and this is the message of many of our studies in this issue.

We begin by focusing on God's promises, as each contributor shares a promise that has been important to them. Then we move on to Peter, a favourite character for many people, whose story is such a wonderful encouragement that God can use us as we are. We end our first month with the second part of our study of Hosea and his revelation of God's redeeming love.

As we move into June, we delve into Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount, look closely at the creation story and explore what the Bible says about living simply and how this helps us to regain our focus on what is important. Our summer reading continues with Paul's letter to Titus, written to encourage the young man he had commissioned to build up the church on the island of Crete, and stories of God's refreshing and reviving in our themed study on water and springs. We'll learn too how God not only gives us the gift of friends, but also wants to be friends with us, and discover more of God's patience and mercy through the story of Jonah. Our concluding study looks at how God meets with us, often when we least expect it, through the experiences of both Old and New Testament characters.

As you study the scriptures with us over the next four months, may you find God's word to be a lighthouse – lighting the way, guiding your steps and reassuring you of his love and care.

Jackie

**Jackie Harris, Editor**

# Jonah: you can never outrun God's mercy



*Claire Masters writes:*

The story of Jonah is one that most of us will have been taught in Sunday school, but now we are adults, how well do we know it? With just 48 verses, it is one of the shortest books of the Bible – but do we know the full narrative? Children's versions of the story often focus on Jonah being swallowed by a big fish (or whale) and the fact that when he repents God allows him to be spat back on to shore. But this isn't quite the truth and actually misses out a whole chunk of the story, so in this study we are going to focus on a short set of verses each day to really dig into what is being said.

Jonah was a contemporary of two other biblical prophets, Amos and Joel. He was a prophet to Israel and Assyria, during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was king of Israel from 793–753 BC. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 and may have been part of the company of prophets that were mentioned in connection with Elisha's ministry – see 2 Kings 2:3. His words also reached the king of Judah in the southern kingdom – see 2 Kings 14:23–25.

So Jonah was a man of great standing in his community, and yet when God called him to take a message to Nineveh he ran in the opposite direction. Why? Some view this book of the Bible as a parable or other fictional tale, but there was a place called Nineveh and it was the most important city in Assyria (it became the capital 50 years later). However, its people were truly wicked. Any Israelite would have trembled at the idea of the Ninevites, as they had experienced exploitation and cruelty at their hands.

Jonah can be a confusing book – it certainly ends in a perplexing manner. But there are themes that feature strongly throughout: God's sovereignty, his mercy and compassion and the need for repentance. We might view God's mercy as being most apparent in the way he dealt with the Ninevites – and yet the patient way he dealt with Jonah is a powerful picture of his compassion too. While many view this story as far-fetched and fanciful (and some of the details do seem over the top), Jonah's story is actually pretty relatable and honest. Throughout this study, I will be asking: are we that different to Jonah?

## No thanks, God!

**But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship... and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. (v. 3, NIV)**

Right at the start God commissioned Jonah. This was nothing new – Jonah was God’s prophet after all. So what *was* different? Rather than speaking to the Israelite king, God was asking him to speak a message condemning the wickedness of Nineveh. For Jonah, one would have been a known situation, where he received some level of respect, and the other a difficult journey to a hostile people. How do you respond when God asks you to move from your comfort zone? Do you embrace the change, however difficult, or try to ignore his request?

Jonah’s response was to run in completely the opposite direction! If we are honest, are we that different? But was his response out of fear or anger? Jonah 4:2 sheds light on this – he had argued with God because he didn’t like the sound of the message and knew that God was merciful. He didn’t want the Ninevites to have a chance to repent. His mindset against them was at the heart of his disobedience. He felt he knew better than God.

Jonah soon learned that saying no to God has consequences! God was still in control of the situation, stirring up a storm once Jonah was aboard the boat. Jonah’s actions affected all those onboard, just as our sin can hurt others. Interestingly, he was fast asleep below the deck. This reminds me of Jesus sleeping during a storm (see Mark 4:35–41). However, Jonah’s sleep shows his conscience wasn’t even pricked – he slept peacefully even though he was disobeying God. Our own conscience is not always a good measure of our holiness.

Finally, God used the crew’s act of casting lots to show Jonah that he couldn’t hide from him.

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*Lord, Jonah’s story is a stark reminder to me that you are always in control. Help me to learn to say yes to you quickly, rather than running from your requests. Amen.*

CLAIRE MUSTERS



## Taking responsibility

**‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea,’ he replied, ‘and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.’ (v. 12, NIV)**

The sailors already knew that Jonah was running away from God (v. 10), but once they had cast lots, they demanded to know more about who he was and what he was doing. He began by stating his racial identity: ‘I am a Hebrew’ – another clue that Jonah’s attitude was one of racial superiority.

When Jonah explained that he worshipped ‘the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land’ (v. 9), it was abundantly clear to the ship’s crew that they were in trouble. While they had been trying to call on their own gods, they recognised there was something more powerful about this one, who answered a runaway with a huge storm.

We can’t run away from God and still expect to be under his protection. I learned this the hard way. After struggling with loneliness in the early years of our marriage when I hardly ever saw my husband, I left with another married man from my church. But right from the outset I pleaded with God not to take his presence from me. I had a heart for worship and had already been involved in church leadership. I was desperate for God not to leave me. (You can read more of my story in *Taking Off the Mask and Grace-filled Marriage*. Find out more at [clairemusters.com](http://clairemusters.com).)

Like he did with Jonah, God patiently worked with me – even though there were painful consequences. Ultimately, I had to take responsibility for myself, which is what Jonah did here. He realised the storm was his fault (v. 12), so he began to think of others and threw himself on God’s mercy by suggesting they throw him overboard. Don’t miss the irony: he refused to go to the Ninevites because he viewed them as wicked foreigners, yet here he was willing to die for other foreigners who worshipped other gods.

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*Take some time to think about your own attitudes towards different people groups. Ask God to help you repent of any feelings of superiority. And today be conscious of taking responsibility for your own thoughts and actions.*

CLAIRE MUSTERS

## Worshipping a miracle-making God

**Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord. (vv. 15-16, NIV)**

The actions of the sailors stand in great contrast to the superior attitude we have seen in Jonah. Their response to his directive to throw him overboard was to try everything else they could first, showing him more compassion than he had shown them. But when they realised there was nothing they could do, they cried out to God (v. 14) before throwing Jonah overboard (v. 15). When the storm immediately calmed, they responded by praying and vowing to serve God. We may have expected them to shout out terrified promises to God in the midst of the storm, but they actually did this once the sea was calm. They saw and recognised that God is able to do the miraculous.

The other great miracle here is the fish that God supplied to swallow Jonah. This is where the story seems far-fetched – but is that simply because it is so far outside our own experience? Do we question other miracles that we hear about? The beauty of this story is the way it foretells Jesus. Jonah was able to survive in the belly of the fish for three days, providing a picture of Jesus' death and resurrection. In fact, Jesus referred back to Jonah when speaking to religious leaders who were demanding a sign, saying: 'None will be given... except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12:39-40).

While those recounting the story of Jonah often say that being swallowed by the fish was the means by which Jonah was saved, it was, in fact, just the start of his journey towards understanding.

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*How do you respond when you hear news of a miracle? Ask God to keep your heart soft, so you recognise and rejoice when he is at work.*

## A prayer of thanksgiving

**But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'**  
(v. 9, NIV)

Sometimes the most important lessons are learned in times of discomfort when God's mercy is at work behind the scenes. We can see this here: Jonah hadn't actually been fully rescued yet – unless God acted again, he would die inside the fish (so this wasn't a prayer of deliverance). But Jonah did appear, finally, to be beginning to learn something. He wasn't in the place of repentance yet, but he did recognise God at work and, by the end, vowed to do what God had told him to (v. 9). At that point, God commanded the fish to vomit him up. (Note the order: Jonah made his vow before he was saved from the fish.)

God was always in control. It was Jonah who had chosen to run and ended up in a downward spiral: going down to a boat, then the bottom of the boat, then the bottom of the sea. Thank God that, while he allows us to go through these painful journeys, he doesn't leave us. It was when I was back living with my parents that I realised my life had reached rock bottom. I thought I had lost everything: my marriage, my home, my church and possibly my work too. And yet God cared tenderly for me and ultimately delivered me and restored our marriage. It is helpful for me to look back when I'm in the midst of other storms and remember how he was at work.

There are other lessons from Jonah's prayer. He recognised that God did rescue him from inevitable drowning (vv. 5–6). He also commented that he cried out to God when his 'life was ebbing away' (v. 7). How often do we wait until we are desperate before turning to God in prayer? Let's be quick to speak to our heavenly Father.

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*It is a really helpful practice to look back over our days to see where God has been at work. Take time to do this towards the end of today, and then say your own prayer of thanksgiving to God.*

## The God of second chances

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’  
(vv. 1-2, NIV)

At the start of this chapter, God reiterates his commission to Jonah. Pause and let that sink in. Jonah had wilfully disobeyed and taken action to try to ensure he wouldn't have to carry God's message to Nineveh. But God was giving him a second chance. Do you ever feel like you have messed up so much that God can't possibly give you another chance – and then amazingly discover that he does? That is what happened to my husband and me: we had been part of the leadership of a new church when our relationship imploded. Yes, I went back home, and yes, I faced the congregation I had hurt hugely, taking responsibility for my actions. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. But then we wrestled with whether we were supposed to stay in that church (without even considering being part of the leadership again). On holiday and praying specifically about it, God stopped us in our tracks by saying: ‘Didn't I call you there? Have I said anything different?’ His words still held true, even though we thought we had disqualified ourselves through our sin and foolish mistakes. Today, my husband is the full-time pastor of that very same church. It always reminds me that God's plans and purposes cannot be thwarted.

Jonah finally travelled to Nineveh and spoke what God had told him to. If we do the same, we may be surprised at what happens and who responds – but, equally, we may never know the full fruit, as we could simply be part of someone's journey towards faith. Here, the wicked people of Nineveh took note and made an outward sign of their repentance through wearing sackcloth and fasting. God's warning to them had been clear: today we have many clear messages within his word, but how seriously do we take sin and repentance?

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*I have noticed a trend away from using the words 'sin' and 'repentance' in books and talks, for fear of putting people off – but God is absolutely serious about sin and the need to turn away from it. Are you?*

CLAIRE MUSTERS

## Angered by God's compassion

**'Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.' (v. 2, NIV)**

God had compassion on the Ninevites because of the actions they took, which showed their repentance. As James 1:22 says, we can't just pay lip service; we need to take action: 'Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.'

Jonah was certainly angry, but I wonder if he was also concerned about his own reputation: he had travelled far to pronounce judgement on the Ninevites, and it didn't happen. Did he feel that made him look foolish? When we are serving God, whose glory are we seeking? Jonah appeared to have forgotten his purpose, which originated in the words God spoke to Abraham: 'Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed' (Genesis 22:18). God's message was to go out into all the world.

Jonah was all bent out of shape by God showing mercy, but God wasn't going against his word by turning away his wrath – in Jeremiah 18:7–8 it says: 'If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.'

Jonah quickly went from being happy he had been saved to angry when God saved those he didn't like. He didn't want the Ninevites forgiven; he wanted them destroyed. Are there times when we hold a similar view? Have we forgotten that we don't deserve God's forgiveness either?

Jonah was rather overdramatic, but at least he was finally honest. What do we do if we don't understand what God is up to – or we don't agree? It is important to be honest before him, but we must also be open to him challenging us, as he did Jonah.

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*Are there times you can bring to mind when you were angered by the way God dealt with others, feeling it wasn't fair? What did you do? Ask God to align your heart afresh with his today.*

## God's final word

**But the Lord said, 'You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?' (vv. 10-11, NIV)**

Jonah decided to sulk outside the city, where God provided for his discomfort in the form of a vine. Then God took the comfort away to show Jonah how petty and self-absorbed he could be. Jonah was angrier about the withering of a vine than what could have happened to Nineveh. How often do we complain to God at things we think are unjust when he is actually asking us to be more aware of his perspective?

We can be so much more sensitive to our own needs than to the spiritual needs of those around us. Jonah had to learn, as do we, not to be focused on what God can do for us, but to reach out to the world of the broken, forgotten and, yes, even wicked. I am reminded of a prayer meeting I was in recently, where we were praying for our borough and town, particularly focusing on the rise in knife crime. We prayed for protection for those going about their daily business, but we were also led to pray for those who were in the gangs, wielding the knives. Some even prayed that we would be those that do not flee from them scared but walk across to engage and share God's love with them. We need to be sensible and safe, but I found those prayers really challenging. Do I just focus my prayers on the people I feel deserve God's help?

As we finish our reflections, notice that God delivered all those who called on him in this book – the sailors, Jonah and the Ninevites. Their race and background did not matter. Prayer works, and it changes us. But who had the final word? God. We are left hanging, as we don't know how Jonah responded to God's challenging questions. But how will you?

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*Soberly reflect on whether you care more for your comfort than for reaching those God is sending you to. Ask him to make you aware of any prejudices you might have and repent of those.*

CLAIRE MUSTERS



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Published three times a year, in January, May and September.

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UK £4.99

ISBN: 9781800392557



9 781800 392557

