



# Biblical interpretation

**Theme verse:** You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:5

## DAY 1: Abraham

### Bible text

Genesis 17:1-8 (Covenant with Abraham)

### What's going on?

Abraham is one of the central figures in both Judaism and Christianity. Abraham's story didn't pick up until he was seventy-five years old. Called out of his homeland by God, Abraham did not appear to aspire to greatness. Though he followed God's commands to uproot and leave home, the journey was not always smooth. An alien in foreign lands, Abraham sometimes lied and disobeyed God to protect himself. And yet it was through Abraham, together with his wife, Sarah, that God chose to make a lasting covenant.

God came to Abraham, a very old man, announcing that Abraham and his equally aged wife would be the ancestors of a multitude of nations. Changing their names from Abram and Sarai as a sign of the covenant God was making with them (*Abraham* translates as "father of multitudes"), God declared that all nations would be blessed through them. Abraham thought it was a joke. And rightly so! Complicated families are nothing new to our era; desperately trying to produce an heir, Sarah gave Abraham her servant, Hagar, to take as an additional wife. This was an accepted custom to continue family lines in the face of infertility. Hagar bore a son, Ishmael, for Abraham. But Sarah's initial selfless act backfired and her relationship with Hagar turned hostile. God recognized Hagar's plight and made a covenantal promise with her as well. God declared that the Egyptian's son would live at odds with

everyone, but his offspring would number as a multitude as well.

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when God appeared with news that he and his wife would have their own child. They were promised a son and many descendants, land to call home, and most importantly, God's vow that, ". . . I will be their God" (Genesis 17:8). As their names were redefined, so were their identities as the *chosen* people of God.

The covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah was not without expectations. For starters, God instructed Abraham to be blameless. Did Abraham stay blameless? No; but God's covenant remained. It set the pattern in which God continues to enter into humanity: God remains faithful even when we do not.

In Genesis 12:3, God said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, continued the outward movement of this blessing to "all nations." God's love is for all people.

### Living it today

In baptism, we are brought into the covenant that God has already made with us. It is as if God says again, "I will be your God." Since God creates the covenant and brings us into it, what does that mean for us? As individuals, we decide if we are going to live in the covenant that God has provided for us. For Abraham and the Israelites, that was no small matter. The first sign of living in the

covenant for males was circumcision, an outward indication of their faithfulness to God. What would you do to show your love for God?

God makes a covenant that is everlasting, even when humanity messes it up. Surely God knows our imperfections and brokenness too. But when we are brought into covenant in baptism, we come as we are—whether in dirty diapers or as a stumbling adult. God does not wait for us to get it right. (God might be waiting a very long time.) Throughout the Bible, it is clear that we are given God's

love not because we deserve it or earn it. God's promises are unconditional, but our response to God's love is in our hands. How will you respond?

### **Additional biblical references**

Mark 12:28-31  
Deuteronomy 6:4-9  
Leviticus 19:17  
Mark 14:22-25  
Genesis 18:19  
Psalm 105:8

## **DAY 2: Israel**

### **Bible text**

Exodus 17:1-7 (Water in the wilderness)

### **What's going on?**

The Hebrews had spent generations living in Egypt as slaves. Moses, another imperfect leader (this time a murderer) had been drafted into service by God. After negotiating unsuccessfully with the Egyptian pharaoh for the release of the Hebrew inhabitants, God sent a series of plagues to convince the ruler. Pharaoh consented, and then changed his mind, sending his armies to give chase to the fleeing Israelites. At the Red Sea, Moses led his people across to safety as the receding waters rushed over the approaching army.

They were free. But then what? The Israelites did not cross into paradise: they found themselves in the wilderness. After the initial exuberance of their escape wore off, they looked around and realized that they were without food, water, or shelter. The Israelites actually grew nostalgic for their lives as slaves under Egyptian rule where at least they knew what to expect, including shelter and food.

Moses, who didn't sign up for the job, was frustrated with their whining and afraid of their anger. Acting as an intermediary between the people and God, he appealed to God for help.

Despite what God had already done for them, the faith of the Israelites was weak. When they needed a leader, God called Moses into action. When they required signs of God's power, plagues descended upon the Egyptians. When one last straw was needed to break Pharaoh's resolve, God sent the angel of death at the Passover. When the

Egyptian army was in hot pursuit, the waters of the sea parted just long enough to allow the Israelites to cross to safety. When they were hungry, manna rained down from heaven to eat and birds practically flew into their cooking fire. God continued to provide. In this text, God directed Moses to strike a rock and fresh water appeared in the desert.

The Israelites no doubt experienced many emotions. They had been living in a brutal environment in Egypt, but it was home. In the desert, there would have been some measure of culture shock as they got used to a new normal. Could you blame them for questioning not only Moses, but also perhaps even God? Forty years is a long time. Babies would grow to middle age and an older generation would pass away before they reached the promised land. In their upheaval and uncertainty, it was perhaps understandable that their faith faltered.

### **Living it today**

When we recite the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther defined "our daily bread" as "everything required to satisfy our bodily needs, such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property; a pious spouse and good children, trustworthy servants, godly and faithful rulers, good government; seasonable weather, peace and health, order and honor; true friends, faithful neighbors, and the like." Does God continue to provide all that we need? Thousands of children die each day of hunger or disease from contaminated drinking water. Are we right to blame this on God? Would a more

appropriate response to be to evaluate our own whining and use of the resources that God has provided? Do we share our abundance?

In our North American culture, one could argue we are programmed to believe we never have all that we need. If we had enough, then we wouldn't need to buy more. But when does it stop? At what point do we trust that God gives us all that we need without desiring the newest version

of the latest gadget or trendy clothing? If we were standing next to someone who did not have all of his or her needs met, how might that change our desire for more?

### **Additional biblical references**

John 10:1-10

John 6:35-40

Acts 4:32-35

Luke 11:1-4

## **DAY 3: Ruth**

### **Bible text**

Ruth 1:1-18 (Ruth and Naomi)

### **What's going on?**

The book of Ruth is a very short and beautiful Old Testament story. In four succinct chapters, it addresses the predicament of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, as well as the loving bond between them. The story begins as Naomi, together with her husband and sons, moves to Moab to escape famine in Israel. Those days in Israel's history were marked by violence and unfaithfulness to God; a famine made the situation even more miserable. The Moabites were a people hated by the Israelites; moving to Moab was a sign of the desperate situation at home. The Moabites were related to the Israelites through Abraham's son Lot, but disputes over territory and religious practice had long since separated the two peoples.

In their new land, both sons found Moabite wives. These would not have been ideal marriage arrangements for a faithful Jew, but desperate times call for desperate measures. In the course of ten years, the father and the two sons died. In any age, this would be a tragedy. But in biblical times, it put Naomi and her daughters in an extreme financial crisis. Women did not typically have means of earning income. They were considered property of father, husband, or sons; a woman without a male relative was vulnerable. She would have been forced to survive on charity. Furthermore, Ruth and her sister-in-law were without children. Had Naomi any remaining sons, it would have been customary for the daughters to marry the surviving brothers of their dead

husbands. Children born into this union, known as a Levirate marriage, would have been considered the children and heirs of the dead brother. But since Naomi was now widowed herself, there would be no more sons. She urged her daughters-in-law to return to their respective families without shame. There, they could fall back on the protection of their people and have a chance of remarriage and therefore, children. At Naomi's urging, Ruth's sister-in-law returned to her home. But Ruth would not go back. She would only stay with her mother-in-law, though it put her in a risky situation. Her love and loyalty to her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's God was steadfast. In Ruth 1:16-17, Ruth beautifully expresses her determination: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

In following chapters, Ruth and Naomi returned to Israel. Ruth risked being treated as a hated foreigner. The two women wisely determined a course of action that would bring them security. Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law was rewarded by Boaz, a rich relative of her deceased father-in-law. After a series of bold moves planned by Naomi, Ruth and Boaz were married and she produced an heir for her husband. Ruth, the potentially despised alien, would become the great-grandmother of David, the great and revered king of the Israelites.

### **Living it today**

Ruth knew what many learn: family can be anyone, genetically related or otherwise. Once you have claimed your family and your faith, the energy, loyalty, and love you put into them counts.

Naomi and Ruth were in crisis; they stuck together during what must have been very anxious and stressful times. Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and faithfulness to God is a model for our own faith and friendships. Their story is also a reminder that the walls that separate us are irrelevant; even as an outsider, Ruth was a model of the Jewish faith. Who is like Ruth today?

### Additional biblical references

Luke 10:29-37  
Leviticus 19:33-34  
Leviticus 19:9-10  
Deuteronomy 25:5-10

## DAY 4: Jonah

### Bible text

Jonah 4:1-11 (Jonah and God)

### What's going on?

As we enter the last chapter of Jonah's story, we see a representative character that could be any of us, as Jonah acts like a toddler having a tantrum. It wasn't his first tantrum either. Jonah was a man of faith, but when called by God to deliver a message to Nineveh, warning them of their evil ways, Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Though his actions were strange, it's hard to blame him. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the country that had a habit of conquering Israel. The Ninevites were a nasty lot, their sordid ways the stuff of legends. How bad? Not just the usual debauchery and good, clean sin, but really creepy stuff like using enemies' burnt skin as wallpaper in their temples.

So it was no surprise that God wanted to send a clear message to Nineveh to shape up, and also no surprise that Jonah didn't want to become interior decorating material. So he ran away—as if you can run away from God. He tried using a ship, but a great storm came. When the sailors figured out Jonah was the cause, they threw him overboard. Jonah spent three days in the belly of a big fish until the fish spit him out on dry land. Again, God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Reluctantly, he went. He announced God's message and to Jonah's surprise, the people repented. God forgave them and spared their city.

And that really made Jonah mad. We enter Jonah's story here in chapter four. He didn't want the Ninevites saved; he wanted them destroyed. They had been endlessly cruel in their domination of the conquered Hebrews; he wanted to see them

punished, not offered a second chance. But Jonah wasn't in charge; God was. And though grace and mercy given to the enemy is seldom a crowd-pleaser, God believed the city capable of remorse and transformation.

Full of righteous indignation, Jonah wants his "I told you so" moment. Instead of rejoicing at Nineveh's salvation, he found himself a spot to sit in misery. His frustration was so great that he wished he were dead. The irony more obvious to us is that Jonah was given several "second chances" when he 1) disobeyed God when refusing to go to Nineveh and 2) was saved from death in the belly of the fish. God's grace is great when it is applied to Jonah, but not so when given to the Ninevites.

The book ends abruptly (with today's text). It is left unclear as to whether Jonah accepted that God's love extends to all people and that God's mercy is available to all who repent.

### Living it today

Sometimes we like to think of the world in very black-and-white ways: we're good; they're bad. The reality, of course, is that most of us are very capable of both good and bad. If we all got what we deserved, we would be in a heap of trouble at some point. The challenge of faith is accepting and modeling the idea that God's love is for all people. That includes the friend who turned against you and the terrorists in the news. We are challenged to consider what it means to love and be loved by a God who is essentially unfair, offering love and grace to even the worst among us. God's grace is easy to accept—except when it's given to others. Like Jonah, we have to come to terms with the

idea that our enemies might not get what they deserve, but like us, they get what they need.

### **Additional biblical references**

Matthew 18:21-35

Luke 11:1-4  
Proverbs 3:5-6  
Mark 1:16-20  
Romans 3:22b-24

# DAY 5: Jeremiah

## **Bible text**

Jeremiah 1:4-10 (Jeremiah's call)

## **What's going on?**

Jeremiah enters history during very tumultuous times. Israel had once been a very powerful nation. Then, conquered and divided, everything changed. Israel was split into two countries: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The Northern Kingdom of the new Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians. Now, in Jeremiah's era, the kingdom of Babylon threatened to conquer Judah. Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet—not to predict the future, but to warn God's people about what was surely coming. He brought a message of caution and repentance, urging God's people to end their wrongdoing and repent.

It was a scary job to be given. Jeremiah's response to God calling him into service was to remind God that he was just a boy. It seemed a role for an army, not a kid just equipped with words. God's message to Jeremiah was not one of gentle prodding: God informed young Jeremiah that he had been chosen for this challenging task of being a prophet to the nations before he was even born. Jeremiah did as God commanded. As a result, his life was not easy: he was arrested and imprisoned, commanded not to marry or have children, and mistreated. His writings were destroyed and at times, he cursed the day he was born.

It was understandable that Jeremiah's message was not well received. He was called to publicly condemn others, often with scathing words. He warned that the worst fears of those living in Judah would come true: that the Babylonians would conquer and oppress them like the Assyrians had done to Israel in the north. No one wants to be criticized or threatened with destruction.

Unfortunately, Jeremiah's words held truth and his warnings became true.

## **Living it today**

God is calling you. What's your excuse? Not a good speaker? Don't know much about the Bible? Too young? Scripture records a long list of those who were dramatically called into service at a young age: from Jacob, Joseph, Miriam, and David to Timothy and Jesus. Others have certainly been called in less dramatic ways, both then and now. A call from God can take any form, from working at camp to being the kid who speaks up for someone being picked on at school. It might be a call to drop everything and go, or it might be a call to witness to God's love exactly where you are. Sometimes God's call might sound strange; just ask Jeremiah! He was commanded by God to bury his underwear for a week, dig it up, and then put it on again (Jeremiah 13:1-7). God was making an analogy to the stinky way God's people were acting, which probably wasn't appreciated (on several levels) when Jeremiah explained it. But whatever the task, God has promised to go with us. In witnessing to God's love and justice, youthfulness is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

As the week of camp ends, new opportunities to answer God's call begin. God's truth will need to be spoken, sometimes in difficult situations. We are all invited to love God and love others and to witness in the way that only youth can.

## **Additional biblical references**

John 15:12-17  
1 Timothy 4:12  
1 Samuel 3:8-10  
Exodus 4:10-11  
Matthew 4:18-22