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Jonah – Part 1

Jonah 1:1-17

[Easley:] Do you run as quickly to what you know of this Word as what you want other people to? Jonah was inconsistent with that and you and I are inconsistent with that; so quick to tell our husband, our wife, how to live the Christian life; so quick to tell our kids how to live the Christian life. Do we? Do you run to obey or do you run the other direction?

[Lepine:] This in *inContext* with Michael Easley. I'm Bob Lepine, and we're going to spend some time over the next couple of weeks looking at one of the characters in the Old Testament that I guess everybody from Sunday School, if you've been through Sunday School and had a flannel board, you probably know the story of Jonah, right? [laughter]

[Easley:] When you think of Jonah, what do you think of? First word?

[Lepine:] First word is worm.

[Easley:] Worm? Really?

[Lepine:] Yeah.

[Easley:] That's because you're a worm theologian like me.

[Lepine:] Worm and the vine in chapter four. Isn't that. . . ?

[Easley:] Okay. Okay. Ninety-nine percent of all Christian population would think of . . . ?

[Lepine:] They'd think of the whale.

[Easley:] Oh, okay.

[Lepine:] But it doesn't even say a whale in the Bible, does it?

[Easley:] It's fish.

[Lepine:] It's a big fish.

[Easley:] Uh huh.

[Lepine:] And that's the thing that comes to mind, the story of Jonah and the whale. Everybody knows that story but I wonder how many people really understand how Jonah got in the whale or how he got out of the whale.

[Easley:] Swallowed, wasn't he?

[Lepine:] He was. But what's the back story as they like to say. And that's what we're going to unpack over the next couple of weeks, right?

[Easley:] Well, for such a short book, it's a fun story but it's also quite profound theologically. We see the providence of God, we see a reluctant prophet, we see how

God is going to accomplish His will in the midst of a pretty difficult individual by the name of Jonah.

[Lepine:] Well, let's dive in, huh? Do you like that?

[Easley:] Ohhhh. [laughter]

[Lepine:] Here's Michael as we begin our study through Jonah.

[Easley:] G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish they have failed to see the great God."

I want you to work your way to Jonah. That might take a few moments. It's in your Old Testament. Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk. You went too far. Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk. Closer to your New Testament, the seam in your Bible about probably three fourths of the way through your Bible. Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk.

Now, before we begin we need to talk a little bit about this issue of the miracle. Now, there are more than one, but we only think of the one of the whale. If you accept the basic concept of a miracle, then you'll probably have little trouble accepting the idea of a whale, a fish more technically, swallowing the prophet Jonah. The complication becomes, of course, the way our minds work and the way those that don't believe the Bible begin to attack and dismantle the notion that a human being could survive in the belly of a fish.

But if we deny the miracle account, it doesn't matter if a person could be swallowed by an animal. That does away with the miracle concept. If Jesus Christ can create a new set of eyes for a congenitally blind man, if Jesus can raise dead Lazarus, if God can create light - this is the biggest problem I have theologically - how does God create light when it's millions or billions of light years old and I have to be a young earth proponent saying the earth is ten thousand, twenty thousand years old at oldest? I know I'm a relic, but I believe that and I'll pray for you to come to the true conclusion. [laughter]

But when you look at miracles, they, at their core, defy the laws of physics. They defy the laws of nature. Ergo: "supernatural." So if we can explain them away through physics or science or the earth stood still or there was some secondary light source, if we explain them away we begin to dismantle the very concept of a miracle.

Now, open your Bible to Jonah chapter one and I'll give you a little bit of an introduction and then we'll look at chapter one together. The story of Jonah, of course, is a prophet. When you read this, and I hope you'll read it in the next couple days, you ought to look at what God says versus what Jonah does. We have very little record from Jonah himself. There is not a lot of vocabulary. If you had a red letter version of the Prophet Jonah's story, there'd only be a handful of words in here attributed to Jonah.

That's where Isaiah and Lamentations and larger prophets, the prophets are speaking a lot of what God says. We hear very little from Jonah's lips. We see a lot from his actions. Unique to the book, Jonah runs away. You know that much of the story.

Other prophets, Elijah, Moses, Elisha, there is a reluctance to their assignment. Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, there is an unwillingness at first an "I can't do this," and "Woe is me," and all sorts of processes; but none of them flat out disobey God and go the other way. Which leads some to call him the disobedient prophet, the prodigal prophet and a number of different names.

One of the issues we see unfolding in the book is that everyone seems to obey God except Jonah. Every thing obeys God except Jonah and we'll look at that in some detail as well. Most of the prophets have a story or a line or a symbol that they use to illustrate God's love for Israel and Israel's ensconced, stubborn, stiff-necked rebellion against God. For example, the book of Hosea: Gomer is the wayward, runaway wife; Hosea is the faithful prophet who keeps loving his unfaithful wife. Miniature story of God loving Israel and she keeps running away and throwing herself into the arms of the pagan culture.

Jonah, we have a very different story. Jonah is depicted as Israel being the prophet; the stubborn, ensconced, rebellious, disobedient prophet but there's a whole layer of overtone here of this angst and anger and we'll see some of the reasons of that as we look through the book. Jonah is also unique in that there are only three other prophets mentioned by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. He mentions Elijah, Elisha and Isaiah and he mentions Jonah in Matthew twelve and in Luke eleven is the parallel account where he mentions that and we will perhaps look at that later or you can look at it on your own.

Let's look then at the commission of the prophet beginning in chapter one verses one, two and three:

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,
"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."*

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah's commission is very clear, it's very simple. The words are compact. "I want you to go to Nineveh and I want you to preach against it, to cry against it, to give a message to them that I am going to tell you."

We know little about Jonah. We're told of his father here. We're not exactly sure much of his history. We do know a tremendous amount about Nineveh. The city is archaeologically replete with evidence. We find more and more. Even current day excavations continue to authenticate the place of Nineveh. If you look back at Genesis chapter ten, verse eleven, you'd see the table of nations. Nimrod is the one who built the city at its foundations. The best archaeological evidence shows that it's about eight miles in its perimeter. Therefore, it would take Jonah about a three days walk to go through the city.

If you drop down to the last verse of chapter four where God says it was a hundred and twenty thousand some persons. If we take that at the most strict literal count, 120,000, If we take it at a fairly conservative count we can easily double or even a little more than that because we assume a large part of that population would be married and have

children. Often the Scripture counted men and not the entire body, just like we have on the Sermon on the Mount. The count is of the men, on the heads of household, and so we don't know the precise number. We would say strict conservative, at least a hundred and twenty thousand people.

We also know a little bit about Tel Nabi Yunis. Do you know what a Tel is? A Tel – you hear of Tel Aviv, the Dan Tel. How many of you have been to Israel? You must go to Israel. Every believer in Christ must go to Israel. If you don't go to Israel, you'll understand your Bible at about two percent. You must go to Israel. Make a commitment that you will go. Go with the Moody trip, go with your church, but go to Israel. When you go to Israel, you will see things you've read about and you will go, "Wow, I had no idea." It will come alive to you.

Well, a tel is when they had an ancient city and it fell into ruin either by enemies or marauders or fire. A fire actually can destroy a stone wall. The heat expansion, the way it's mortared together, the wall will collapse and fall over. It will turn to rubble. And you'll come up to all these cities through the old city of Jerusalem, you'll see all these stones tumbled over from decay and from enemy advance, from the Murdochian time, the Turks. You'll see all this great history, but what you'll begin to understand is what the ancients did is when a city fell over they just sort of smoothed it out and built on top of it. That's a tel. You didn't excavate and reassemble the old buildings, you just sort of leveled it out and started building on top. So when you look at the so-called wall around Jerusalem today, you'll see a Herodian Wall, a Murdochian Wall, a Turkin Wall, you'll see the little church where the notches were cut. You'll see all the way down to the Solomonic, Herod's time, below Solomon's time if you go down. Those are the stones Solomon laid and each of those was a very different architecture. You see the structure. Any person can say, "Oh, those are different stones."

Well, there's hundreds and thousands of years between those stones being laid so there was a tel. Well, we know that this Tel Nabi Yunis, the word Yunis meaning Jonahis, in other words, it is the tel of the prophet Jonah. The ancients of Nineveh called that city, we'd say in our terms, that's Tel Jonahis. So the name and the story and the archaeology lend incredible strength to the truth and authenticity of this story.

Now, as you look at those verses, very familiar, let me show you a little bit of the structure of it.

"Arise, go to Nineveh."

We think of a person getting up. This is a commission. I want you to bring yourself together to go do a thing I'm asking you to do. It's not just a "get up off your chair, Jonah." This is a commission for you to go do a thing God is telling you.

He wants them to:

"cry against it."

We'll see more of that message in chapter three, but this is a prophetic announcement of God's wrath is about to come, and so the message is for them to hear this caution of judgment coming to them. Now, you look at verse three, the structure of the Hebrew is very fun here. It says, "I want you to arise and go, but Jonah arose and went the other

way.”

And so instead of following the commission of God he follows this rebellious streak in his heart.

Notice he goes to Tarshish and he goes by way of Joppa. Any of you ever eat a Jaffa orange? You go to the grocery store it has a little sticker that says, “Jaffa.”? J-A-F-F-A. Those oranges are from Joppa, current day Joppa in Israel. If you look at the maps in the Bible, in the back of your Bible, you’ll see a Joppa and that’s a coastline area where the orchards are just – the food there is extraordinary in Israel. And you’ll see these orange groves depending on which time of year you go and that’s where Jaffa oranges come from today. That’s a port.

So he went down to Joppa, modern day J – A – F- F- A, and he took a ship probably a couple of thousand miles in the opposite direction. Now notice twice in verse three:

From the presence of the Lord

Last strophe of verse three:

From the presence of the Lord

So the word comes to him and Jonah says, “I’m going the other way.”

It’s a direct, complete disobedience to the command that God has given him to go to Nineveh and preach this message. Now, let’s give a little color as to why.

The Assyrians were hated by the Jews. It is not too far fetched to think, post 9/11, the way we reacted viscerally to what we now call extreme Muslims, there are those who hate Iran, Iraqis, Al-Qaida. This isn’t just a racial tension, this is a loathsome, “I will kill you,” type of hatred. And that is not unlike what the Israelites would have felt toward the Assyrians.

The wickedness of Assyria had come up before God. Not unlike Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin had come up and God notices this is getting out of hand. “I’m going to judge them if they don’t repent.” There is a fierce anger, a fierce hatred, between the Israelites and the Assyrians and if those of you in this audience, some of you perhaps, served in World War II. The way we hated Nazi Germany in World War II, there was an evil power behind the Nazis and we hated that. That would be more in line with what Jonah is feeling.

We have cultures today that want to eradicate and erase the Israelites, right? They want to deny the holocaust, they want to deny Israel has a right to the land, they completely exonerate any ownership of the land to Abrahamic covenant. That falls to the Muslims, not to the Jews. The Jews aren’t really the Jews anyway. Let’s exterminate them. Let’s wipe them off the face of the earth. And the Jews have felt that unlike any group of nationality, at least in Biblical history.

We have other groups like Rwanda, the butchery there. Bosnia-Herzegovina. We don’t understand this stuff when we read it in absentia. Why did Jonah go the other way? He hated the Assyrians. Why in the world would we go send missionaries to try to reach Al

Qaida terrorists? Why in the world wouldn't we just nuke them?

Cindy and I were in Israel a couple of years ago. Had a delightful trip and this thing in Bagdad was cooking up a little bit at that point and one of the gentlemen on the tour said, "We should just go over there and just bomb them all."

And I got to know this gentleman a little bit and talked to him and he says, "You know, we should just kill everybody."

And I said, "Well, do think maybe Christ wants us to maybe try and share the gospel with them?"

"Oh, just kill them all," he said.

Big rifle buckle. He's a wonderful man. He's a dear friend. [laughter] He really is, he's a dear friend, but we understand that too, don't we? Sure. There's a part of us that understands that. I love my country. But Christ loves all of us. It's hard for us to accept that sometimes.

Jonah tries to flee from God not simply because he's obstinate and stubborn and he doesn't like God and he doesn't like the job God gave him. He tries to flee from the presence of God because he has this inkling of what's going to happen, as we'll see in the story, of the kind of God God is and Jonah doesn't want God to work that way. Jonah wants God to work a different way.

Well, the commission of the prophet is verses one to three and, of course, we have the consequences of Jonah's disobedience. Follow as I read verses three to six:

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the [drop down to verse four]

The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.

Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

Jonah disobeys his commission and now we begin to read the consequences of his disobedience. Again, this is probably about a two thousand, twenty-five hundred mile, journey from Joppa toward Tarshish. In Southern Spain he boards a Phoenician ship. As he's going on this journey our mind runs to a lot of stories in Scripture where, when you're in the sea, you're in a storm, what men do in desperation. In Acts chapter twenty-seven you remember that they're being violently storm tossed along the Aegean Sea and it says that jettisoned the cargo and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands.

Now, if you know anything about boating, this would be sort of like throwing your ropes,

your sail and your motor overboard and just holding onto the gunnels, the boat, for dear life hoping eventually you'll find some sand or shore. You've thrown away your controls. The cargo? Forget the cargo! This is a matter of life and death so we get rid of the cargo. Now we've got to get rid of the way we actually control the boat. The word in Hebrew for sailors in verse three, verse five, is a word related to the Hebrew word salt. The King James rendered it "mariners," it's kind of a great term, "the salts." In other words, these proven, chiseled sailors couldn't handle this storm. It was beyond their control so much so they feared for their lives, they're throwing away the tackle, they're throwing away the cargo and it's gotten so desperate it's become a foxhole prayer.

"Let's call on God. I mean, we can't do anything to stop this, we may as well get religion. We're so desperate, we may as well pray."

By the way, you never get that way, do you? You never work so hard to find the solution to our own problem, work so hard to make it happen, fix the marriage, to fix the son or daughter who's taken a left turn, fix our in-laws (that's futile anyway) [laughter], to fix our husband, to fix our wife, fix the job, to make the thing better. We try every resource we have and we throw it overboard, if you will, and then, "Wow. Why don't we pray?"

I have a good friend that used to say, "Why pray when you can worry?" [laughter]

We live that way too much. I do. I think in my own resources, in my own ability, in my own intellect, in my own friendship, connections, "I can get this thing done. I can make it happen."

Maybe not.

Luther said, "Jonah was content to snore in his sin."

The irony of the account is that they cry each to their God. So, you know, just envision this. In our terminology, have you seen the little bumper sticker, "coexist"? Have you seen this on the back of – ? How many of you have seen this? Oh my? Google this this afternoon and look at this bumper sticker. "Coexist." Each letter is a religion. If I can remember them . . . the "C" is the Islamic crest, I believe. I forget what the "O" . . . Each one has . . . the "T" is Christianity. But it's the idea that, you know, can't we all get along in religion?

So, it's like each one comes up. "Let's try his approach. Let's try Hinduism. Let's try –"

And all of them fail. "Well, what else?"

"There's a guy sleeping in the bottom of the boat."

Maybe his God can do something for us. So it's a great set up in the Sovereign's plan. He's going to let them exhaust. It's like the prophets of Baal and they're just going to burn this sacrifice, here. "Just call on your God to burn the sacrifice." And they cut themselves and they wail and they beg and their god doesn't do anything and Jonah is asleep.

Verse seven and following:

Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

[Lepine:] Well, and, of course, as we'll find out tomorrow, without actually finding out who has the short straw, Jonah comes forward and says, "I'm the guy here."

Right? Isn't that how it happens?

[Easley:] Absolutely. He steps up to the plate. Not hardly. [laughter]

[Lepine:] You know, I have to tell you a quick story. I've actually taught through this book myself back in 1992. I'll never forget because the Sunday that I opened the book of Jonah at our church was the same Sunday that after I was done preaching I got on an airplane and flew to Little Rock, Arkansas to have my first conversation with Dennis Rainey face to face about the possibility of moving to Family Life.

[Easley:] Was that Nineveh?

[Lepine:] There was an irony in the fact that I didn't want to leave San Antonio and go to Nineveh, Arkansas, as I've said.

[Easley:] Yeah. Yeah.

[Lepine:] But God had prepared my own heart to say, "You know, if this is where God wants you, it's better to be there than to be running in the other direction."

And that's a powerful message that we get from the story of Jonah.

[Easley:] You don't want to be where God doesn't want you to be or the optimistic view, you only want to be where God wants you to be. And this is a lesson for all of us no matter how ensconced we are in our particular profession or place in life. But the Lord may want to use us in a place that's not comfortable.

[Lepine:] And we are always better off being in the will of God than out of the will of God. When you're out of the will of God, then the Lord will correct you. He will discipline us. The Bible says He disciplines those He loves and that discipline is always good for us but not always fun for us. When you're in the will of God you may still experience suffering as a part of His plan, but better to be suffering in the will of God than to be outside the will of God for any reason. And of course, if you're going to be in line with the will of God, then you've got to be in the Word because that's where God reveals His will to us.

And here at *inContext* we try to make sure that we're providing helpful resources so that you can better understand God's Word. The transcripts of today's radio program are available on our website, incontextradio.org. If you're interested in receiving the audio CDs of Michael's messages from the book of Jonah or from other series we've featured here on *inContext*, again the details are on our website, incontextradio.org. Or call us toll free at 877-3CONTEXT. 877-326-6839. When you contact us someone can let you know about the resources we have available and how you can have them sent to you.

And we're going to continue our study through the book of Jonah tomorrow and I hope

you can be back with us for *inContext* with Michael Easley.