

[Easley:] I want you to notice this kind, sovereign Yahweh. Again, the fish says “yes” to God. Everything we're going to see in the book says “yes” to God except the stubborn prophet, but it is a great provocative reminder that He is a kind Sovereign. It's one thing to be sovereign, but is very different to be a kind Sovereign.

[Lepine:] This is *inContext* with Michael Easley; I'm Bob Lepine. Michael, we're studying through the Old Testament book of Jonah, four chapters, and most of us when we think about the book think about Jonah and the big fish. I just have to ask you hear the beginning, you take this account literally.

[Easley:] Sure.

[Lepine:] You believe Jonah was actually in the belly of a big fish.

[Easley:] You don't?

[Lepine:] I'm [Laughs]

[Easley:] [Laughing]Yes.

[Lepine:] I'd “amen” with you on that.

[Easley:] Yes I do. Well, I find it ironic that we are ready to embrace certain miracles in the Bible and we're ready to dismiss those we can't believe. If Jesus can turn water into wine, He can break bacteria reproduction ratios. If He can give a man a new set of eyes congenitally blind, if He can raise someone from the dead, I think He could sustain a human being in the belly of some fish for three days. This is small potatoes in the miracle category.

[Lepine:] Well it is in Jonah chapter two where we see Jonah swallowed up by this big fish and Jonah has some repenting to do while he is in his aquatic predicament and that's where we pick things up. At the beginning of Jonah chapter two, here's Michael.

[Easley:] Jonah is not a fish story. Jonah is a story about the kind Sovereign. Jonah is forty-eight verses and six hundred and eighty-eight words; it is 1/25 of one percent of the total Hebrew Scripture, but it's very well known. Along the lines of prophets we mentioned this morning Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah shrank in fear. They were reticent. They were unsure of what they would do as they responded to the call of God. Jonah flat-out disobeys.

Jonah is to go one direction; he goes the other. It is a flat denial of the commission of the command of God to take the word to Nineveh and cry against it. The prophetic commission that God gives Jonah is ten words in the Hebrew text; ten simple words. He goes completely against what God asks him to do.

There are two broad stroke themes in the book of Jonah; the first of course is the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over the wind, He is sovereign over the storm, He is sovereign over the casting of lots, He is sovereign over the fish, He is sovereign over the plant and He is sovereign even over a worm, but He can't get Jonah to cooperate.

God is secondly a God of grace and mercy in the storyline. He's gracious and merciful to the sailors. He is gracious and merciful to Jonah on a couple of occasions and He's even gracious and merciful to the fish. As we'll see, the fish gets to get rid of Jonah. He is gracious and merciful to livestock and most importantly to the people of Nineveh.

We looked this morning at chapter one. Just to give you a quick review of the chapter, the first three verses are the introduction; this commission and Jonah's disobedience, probably twenty-five hundred miles toward the south of Spain. We talked about Joppa being modern-day Jaffa in Israel. If you've not been you can go there and you probably enjoy Jaffa oranges and don't even know it.

God brings a wind to cause a storm. The storm of course invokes the sailors to call on their god or their gods to no avail. They cast lots and you know the story well. He comes up and says, "Of course, I'm the Hebrew. I have a fear of the Lord God who made the sea and the dry land."

These were the two things they were most concerned about at that moment. He tells them he's fleeing from God presence. He tells them to pitch him overboard and things will be alright. They finally in desperation pitch him over and the sea becomes calm. And then in verse seventeen we read, "The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."

This verse, seventeen, and chapter two verse one:

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish

In Hebrew this would be like, "Meanwhile; back last time we saw our drowning disobedient prophet..." Because if you look back up in verse fifteen of chapter one, that's when they've pitched him in the sea. Then we read about the celebration, they offer a sacrifice, they make vows, they are so happy. What's happened to Jonah?

You almost have to remove yourself from the familiarity of the story and think about the thrill of the first time hearing of this.

"Wait a minute, he was pitched overboard and then all of a sudden we're talking about these sailors are being converted."

We would use that language. What's happened to our, while he's not our hero, but what's happened to our prophet? What's happened to our disobedient prophet?

Verse seventeen and chapter two verse one I would call when we disobey God, He may use extraordinary measures to get our attention. If the book is about the kind Sovereign, chapter two is a prayer for the down and out. Chapter two is a prayer from a person who has willfully disobeyed God. God has brought incredible consequences into his experience and if there's an application, and I believe there is for you and me, it teaches us that when we disobey, God may use extraordinary means to discipline us, to get our attention and to bring us back to Himself.

James 4:17:

Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Numbers 32:23:

Be sure your sin will find you out.

God can and does judge sin in our lives. Now unfortunately I think, some of us, many of us live in a Christian experience where we get away with a lot. We often have questions like my twenty-three year old daughter, probably a year or so ago, asked me a question. She goes, "Dad, why is God so hard in some of the passages in the Old Testament? Why is He just so hard with the Korites and other things?"

And I said, "Well, the bigger question is why isn't He always hard? Why doesn't He always judge instantly and destroy people who disobey Him?"

God does not destroy pell-mell as a megalomaniac. God is patient. God longs for people to repent. God loves His creation but we are ensconced in sin; we entrench ourselves. God will only destroy a people group that has shaken its fist at Him one too many times; that hates Yahweh Elohim; that hates His chosen people. He does not destroy people groups at a whim. So the greater question is why doesn't God judge all the time?

And if you think about it, if you have an angry thought that is out of line or a lustful thought or a vengeful thought; a thought of covetousness or avarice or greed; if God just said, "Oh, that's it" and judged you there would be no one here. We need to understand that God gives us great grace and mercy. We might think of it as a long leash when we live in sin and choose sins that sometimes we don't think of as that big of a deal that they are to the Lord. God may use extraordinary means to get your attention and my attention and the story of Jonah uses this great fish.

The major theological issue here is why a fish? I don't know. I think God just delights to do some things differently once in a while. Why doesn't He have a big jettisoned piece of wood float by? Why can't Jonah swim to shore? Why doesn't Jonah float well? I don't know but God uses a fish to swallow him. It teaches me at least three things.

He's sovereign. When He commissions a prophet, He's going to do something with him whether he likes it or not. And He loves Jonah. And He loves the people of Nineveh. He cares about these wicked Ninevites, these Assyrians that would exterminate the Jew given a moment's chance.

Chapter two verse one:

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God [in contrast to the gods of the Ninevites and the Phoenician sailors and whoever else was on that boat] Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, and he said,

Now the second strophe of verse two all the way to verse nine are debated in scholastic realms as "Is this a Psalm?" There are those who renounce it categorically who say it's not a Psalm. There are those who believe that this really isn't a repentance on Jonah's part. I'll show you some of that in a few moments.

There are those who think it's a legitimate prayer from Jonah's mouth and we take it at face value with a genuine heart response, but then we read the rest of the story and we scratch our heads and go, "Oh, well Jonah didn't learn much."

So from an exacting theological lense it is a very complicated set of questions to understand what is going on in this prayer. Let me see if I can show you some of my assumptions based on the prayer.

First of all I want to show you a few things about Psalms or prayers. You probably know this already. The Hebrew structure used different devices to help people remember. Cindy, when our children were small, had a little song I believe her grandmother wrote to help them memorize the books of the Bible. She would play the guitar and teach the kids the books of the Bible to this little tune that they had made up. Why? Because we can put it to memory.

When our kids were in AWANA one of the children we had to make up songs for the verse. They could never get them any other way, but you put a tune to them and they could get them cold. And then of course when they recited them they had to kind of hum the tune to say the verse because that was how they hooked their memory. The Hebrew mind used structure.

Look at verse two, the first strophe.

"I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me.

This is the first strophe in two stanzas. He called. He answered. The second part of verse two:

*"I cried for help from depth of Sheol;
You heard my voice."*

Now, look at verse two. "I called" is parallel to "I cried." I called out to God. I cried out a prayer. If you continue the first strophe of verse two:

"I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me."

Go back to the second strophe.

*"I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;
You heard my voice."*

So the answer is parallel to what? Hearing His voice. This isn't so hard. You can see this. I called. I cried. My prayer. You heard. So the Hebrew is using repetition and it's a little parallel device. Sometimes they're couplets. Sometimes they're triplets. Sometimes they're a series of couplets and triplets. Sometimes they form a big 'X' and I'll show you one in a few minutes that is called a chiasitic device.

Each of these tools is a structural reminder so that they can understand, all right, not the melodic tune that we memorize, "Hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm" but the structure and repetition would hook it into their memory. So I would argue that this

marshals forth a little evidence that this is probably a Psalmic type of prayer. I called. I cried. He answered. He heard.

Verse three:

*"For You had cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the current engulfed me.
All Your breakers and billows passed over me.
So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight.
Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy Temple.'"*

Let me show you one more:

"I've been expelled from your sight."

The picture is that he is in the deep water. He's on his way to drowning and God can't see him. Now of course God can see him but the picture is that he has been thrown away from God because He's abandoned him to the water. But then the structure flips and says, "But I'll see You again."

"Nevertheless I will look at You. You have expelled me from Your sight but I am going to look at You again."

And so these little devices that the Psalmist uses we would work hard to get a meter or a rhyme; the Psalmist, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, used a repetition; a flipping of terms; a restatement and many other devices structurally so that they would hear and remember the prayer.

Now let's think about this for a moment. Did Jonah compose this with a pen and a paper inside the belly of a fish? Was he like Geppetto? Was he like Pinocchio in the belly of the whale with the table and the lamp and a little light and writing, you know, a sonnet? Probably not.

I believe this is written after he is expelled from the fish but I do wonder if it was committed to his memory before he was out. Because these devices would be common in the Hebrew brain and some of these come right out of other Psalms that we have good reason to believe Jonah may have known already.

Number one, when we disobey, God may use extraordinary means to get our attention; to pull us back to Him. Number two God wants our attention but He also wants our response. That's what we are reading in chapter two; this prayer; this response from God.

How many of you are Paul Simon fans? Any of you? Three of us. Okay. Paul Simon. Simon and Garfunkel. You may remember those two hippies. They wrote some wonderful music. Paul Simon wrote a story called *Jonah* on his album *One Trick Pony*. I doubt anybody in this room has ever heard Paul Simon sing *Jonah*. Has anyone in here ever heard? See, no one, so I've proved my point.

Here's the phrase.

“They say Jonah was swallowed by a whale
but I say there is no truth to that tale.
I know Jonah was swallowed by a song.”

Now forget his theology for a minute, but he's onto something because this Psalm that he has written consumes him. That's what Paul Simon's theology is saying. The song consumed; it wasn't that he was swallowed by a fish but this song consumed him. And I think Paul Simon probably had some good Jewish training and he knew a little bit about Jonah chapter two.

Do any of you perhaps know a person who was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam, perhaps? Do any of you know anyone? While I was in graduate school I had a friend who was a Prisoner of War. The school I grew up in as an elementary student, one of my friend's fathers was a POW for seven years in Cambodia and we would hear these people tell stories.

That they lived, number one, is remarkable but a very common thread are songs that they had committed to memory that they would sing; pieces of the Bible that they had memorized as children that would come back to them. The one that I knew in grad school, you would find him hunkered in a corner in the library with his eyes winced closed. You would think he was sleeping but if you watched him he would be moving enough that you would know that he was not asleep.

One of my professors had the courage to ask him one time what he was doing. And he had been a Prisoner of War and he said, “The one thing I miss about being a Prisoner of War was that I recited and prayed like never before.”

And he said, “I wished I memorized more of the Scripture as a boy because I needed it when I was a prisoner.”

I think of Jonah for three days being prisoner as he pulls some of the shards of these Psalms together and he is worrying about will he live in this context.

It's clear that in chapter two verse two he is anticipating a rescue. I called. I cried. You heard. So the first strophe of the Psalm obviously has to be written after he is saved. “I cried.” So it would be like a summary of the whole prayer which again is a common structural feature in many of the Psalms.

Psalm one verse one is a picture of the whole outline of the whole Psalter and so you see these types of images and structures throughout the prayer. Let's read verses five and six:

*“Water encompassed me to the point of death.
The great deep engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.”*

Now the language here is that of drowning and of death. Water encompassed me. I was about to drown. How many of you have a fear of drowning? I hate the idea of drowning. It just creeps me out. I don't mind swimming. I don't mind swimming too much, but not enough to get wet. [Laughter]

How many of you have been to Israel? I asked this this morning. How many of you have been in the Dead Sea? The first time I was in the Dead Sea they tell you how to do it. They tell you to back up into it and not to dive in. The last thing you want to do is get it on your face.

If you shave as a man, even with an electric razor or if you're a woman and you shave your legs, you don't want to get in the Dead Sea. It will burn like fire, even if you shave the morning of. And then they tell you if you get in your eyes, don't touch your eyes or you'll make it worse. So you have to get all the rules before you get in. The calcium and magnesium and sodium are at such high levels that they really will irritate your face, eyes and glands. So you back in and you sort of do like this. You sit down.

You cannot sink in the Dead Sea. It is impossible. Now you can go underwater if you're foolish, but you won't sink, but you can drown. I was with another gentleman and it was a choppy windy day but it was the first day and so we were idiots and we got in. We were swimming and backstroking; we were way out and all of a sudden we kind of had this panic how far we were from the shore trying to swim back against the wind. We were both getting pretty excited and Andrew said to me, "Michael, as long as we keep our head above the water, we are okay. You can't drown."

That was an overwhelming comfort at the time, sorry to tell you that story. I didn't want to drown in the Dead Sea. Wow! How terrible.

"He died in the Dead Sea." [Laughter]

That's pretty grim. The lowest spot on the planet, literally. Jonah's language is of drowning. It's encompassed me to the point of death. It engulfed me. Weeds wrapped around my head.

There are several prints. Gustave Dore and others have made plates and wood carvings and engravings of Jonah and I can't recall, I tried to find it this afternoon, one of these artists. It was like a Salvador Dali-type artist who did a futuristic painting of this picture and it had seaweed wrapped around Jonah's head where you can just kind of see his eyes and his nose. You think, "Okay, he's already drowning. Now he's being suffocated by seaweed."

It's this image of, "I'm encompassed; I'm wrapped; I'm engulfed in the water and if that wasn't bad enough, there is seaweed all over me. I'm going to die."

When you heard it and read it it should kind of creep you out. It should make you feel like you've got one last chance to take a draw of air and you're going to fill your lungs with water. That's how the structure feels.

"Water encompassed me. I was about to drown. The deep engulfed me. I was too far down. I couldn't get back up. Weeds are wrapped around me on top of it." Verse six:

*"I descended to the roots of the mountains.
The Earth with its bars was around me forever,"*

The ancients had a picture of the chambers of the deep holding back things. So there were bars in the deep; there were chambers of water that kept things in control and God sort of put the roots of the mountain, that's the picture of the ancients and their mindset of how they understood things.

There is a modern-day illustration of this in our current situation with the levees. Some of us were talking at lunch about one of the challenges with the Mississippi River is that the man-made levees were put over the top of the river banks and they weren't built well so the water doesn't overflow so much as it undercuts the levees and comes back around. Man can't build, the best corps of engineers couldn't anticipate that type of water force cutting through those channels. So they're now saying we should never have built that close to the water. Well duh. That's easy to say in retrospect, right?

God has put the roots of the mountains; God's put the bars that hold the oceans in place and Jonah is giving a vivid picture that "I was at the bottom of the ocean where God has held things together and there was no way for me to get out."

[Paul Simon:] [singing] They say Jonah he was swallowed by a whale but I say there's no truth to that tale. I know Jonah he was swallowed by a song.

[Easley:] Okay Bob, what in the world does he mean by that? [Laughs]

[Lepine:] I don't know if he knows what he means. Did you have to twist these guys' arms to make them play Paul Simon?

[Easley:] Don't you love it? What a great song. Yeah, I just have no idea what it means. I was hoping you'd tell me.

[Lepine:] There is a verse in Jonah chapter two that I look at and I think this is maybe the central verse in the Bible. At the end of verse nine in chapter two Jonah says:

*"I, with the voice of Thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You.
What I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD."*

[Easley:] Mmm hmm.

[Lepine:] And there's a lot wrapped up in that short phrase, "Salvation is of the LORD."

[Easley:] But we know, and by the way Jonah is probably not penning this in the belly of the fish.

[Lepine:] Do you think he wrote it later?

[Easley:] A little bit later. Yeah.

[Lepine:] [Laughs]

[Easley:] They could have had good pens. But it is true. There is no place he's going to go. He can't escape Nineveh. He can't escape the storm. He can't escape the fish.

[Lepine:] Which is part of the lesson for us in all of this that we need to remember to be obedient to what God calls you to. Because you can, well Paul called it taking against the goads in Acts, you can resist God's purpose for your life but ultimately God is going to win that tug-of-war. That's what Jonah finds out and that's what each of us finds out as we try to resist God's purpose for our life.

Let me encourage our listeners to get the four CD set of these messages from Jonah and have them available to listen to again. We will be featuring them this week and next week on *inContext* but you can get the four CDs by going to our website incontextradio.org and pull down the resources tab; the information about the CDs is available there.

Or call us at 1-877-3CONTEXT, 877-326-6839, and ask about the Jonah CDs and we can make arrangements to have them sent to you. Then join us back tomorrow as we continue looking at the time John spent in the belly of the big fish and his ultimate repentance. That's tomorrow on *inContext* with Michael Easley.