

[Easley:] Don't think God will overlook your sin, but do know He's a God of second chances. He loves you immensely and you have no reason to live with the guilt and regret, "If only," because He's a God of grace and mercy.

[Lepine:] This in *inContext* with Michael Easley, I'm Bob Lepine. And Michael I know you've preached a lot of messages, but I bet you've never been in the position like Jonah finds himself in, in Jonah chapter three which is where we are on today's program; preaching a message that he hopes the people will reject so that God can judge them and wipe them out.

[Easley:] It's so hard for us, Bob, to put ourselves in his shoes, but I think it would not be too far of a stretch to go into an Al Qaida environment, to a group that hates America, hates Christians, hates all that we stand for and try to help them understand who Jesus is. And I believe we need to give Jonah the benefit of that doubt.

[Lepine:] Well, he has been called by God to the Ninevites who were the sworn enemies of Israel and in fact had attacked them on numerous occasions. We have to wonder if Jonah wasn't fearing for his own life.

[Easley:] Sure.

[Lepine:] Although, if God could save him in the middle of the ocean, I guess He can protect him from the Ninevites and he does, as we'll see as we dive in, again, to Jonah chapter three. Here's Michael.

[Easley:] In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, father Maple writes, "Shipmates, this book containing only four chapters, four yarns, is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of Scripture. What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet. What a noble thing is this canticle and officious belly. We feel the floods surging over us, we sound with him to the kelpie bottom of the waters. Seaweed and all the slime of the sea is about us, but what is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches? Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson, a lesson to us all sinful men and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God."

The story of Jonah, way beyond the whale's tale and the fabric of the fish, is full of great theology. It's interesting that we all know the story by the fish tale, Jonah being swallowed, but do we see some of the more subtle nuances and the rich theology that are in the book?

We know the story. Jonah is supposed to go and preach to Nineveh, he goes the opposite direction to Tarshish. Along the way he hires a fare on a boat, the boat nearly is destroyed in the storm, the sailors praying to their gods to no avail, they draw lots, they go down to Jonah, "Wake up! Call on your God. Perhaps your God will help us."

Jonah acknowledges he's a Hebrew, his God is the God of the dry land and the sea. They particularly are interested in the dry land at this particular point and he just, "Pick me up and throw me overboard and the storm will calm."

Well, they don't want to do that. Finally, nothing left to do but to throw him overboard and the sea calms.

We're left meanwhile, back at the ranch, waiting for our, not our hero, but our failed prophet, wondering if he's going to drown if you hear the story for the first time.

The crew comes to Christ, we would say in our terminology, last part of chapter one. The words used to talk about their worship, their sacrifice, their belief in Yahweh to me are a clear conversion account that they have believed and put their trust in Yahweh, this Hebrew God.

Chapter two, then, we pick up with the fish that comes to swallow Jonah. God provides a very unusual way to save Jonah. I believe he's about to draw his last breath. He's about to drown and this fish swallows him and somehow God sustains him in the belly for three days. When Jonah, verse ten of chapter two, when the time comes, God commands the fish to vomit Jonah up on to dry land.

Chapter three begins with:

*the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time*

So, the first part of this chapter I would say, "God wants to use us to accomplish His work, even sometimes in second and third chances." God wants to use us, He wants to use me, to accomplish His work and sometimes He gives us a number of opportunities.

Now, Jonah, if you think through a Biblical theological lens, is really quite fortunate to have been given a second chance. I kind of wonder why he wasn't disqualified. I wonder, and I think through other prophets who disobeyed, what God did to them as a result of their disobedience, unlike Jonah.

You might remember in First Kings thirteen, I was rereading the story this morning, remember there are no named prophets, but the prophet is sent and he's not to eat or drink and he's to go do this mission. And an older prophet comes along and he says, "Come and eat and drink with me."

And he says, "No, God told me not to eat and drink."

And the old prophet says, "Well, an angel told me that you were going to say that and you should come and eat and drink anyway."

And so the guy, he says, "Okay." And he goes and eats and drinks and then the word of the Lord comes to him and He says, "You're going to die."

It's a very sad story because the old prophet helps him get on his donkey and sends him on the way and you go, "What a ride that must have been."

To know that you had just broken the very clear command of God and that God was going to kill you along the way. And then, of course, the lion comes out and mauls him and just stays by the body until word gets around that this young prophet was killed. All that guy did was sit down and eat a little bit and drink something and God killed him.

Jonah disobeys flatly. Jonah goes the wrong direction. We can come to the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira. They saw what Barnabas had done. He shared his land, his property, he shared with the common good of the body of Christ. Ananias and Sapphira say, "Hey, this is a good thing. We can share and we can get a little notoriety here."

God strikes them dead. But God is a God of second chances.

I don't understand all I know about Scripture but God gives Jonah a second chance. Let's think of others who maybe should have been disqualified. We think about Father Abraham. Abraham lies about his half sister, his wife. Moses kills an Egyptian. He runs, he flees, he's a premature liberator of the Egyptians. He strikes the rock instead of speaking to the rock. David certainly has his run with disobedience. On we could go. Peter, ready to go to prison swears his allegiance to Jesus Christ and all these men were used mightily and given a number of chances.

Before we get too far in the text, I guess the question is, when you and I disobey, when we lie, when we are slow to obey, he still gives us opportunity after opportunity after opportunity and we're not any different than these people we read about in the Bible. We are no different at all. I think we'd be just as stubborn as the Hebrews. Well, I would be, I don't know about you; maybe you think you'd be like Joshua and Caleb. I think I'd be one of the unnamed ten, you know, the forgotten ten, you know. And when we read about these characters, we need to be careful that we don't judge them too harshly, that God wants to use us.

Let me read verses one through three and we'll get a picture of this second opportunity:

*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,*

*"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."*

*So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.*

*Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

You look back at chapter one verse one for just a second and you'll see:

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah*

Chapter three, verse one:

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time*

This is a formula for a prophet getting a commission from God. There are three calls or commissions in the Bible. There's the call to become a prophet, there's a call to come to Christ in the New Testament and there's a call to discipleship. Those are three very clear and distinct calls to follow God. The call of the prophet could come in a vision, a

dream or audibly. We think of Samuel who heard God calling him. Remember, he didn't know who was calling him and he mistook it as Eli and then he figures out, "Well, God's calling me."

So there are audible calls. There are also dreams and visions these prophets experience. The text doesn't tell us otherwise, so I'm going to assume the text is a verbal call. I think it would say, "The Lord appeared in a vision," "the Lord appeared in a dream." We would have that if that was the record. I think the record is straightforward that Jonah hears God say, "Arise, go to Nineveh and proclaim the message that I am going to give you."

This is a specific call. Now, of course, you know, if a prophet did something that he wasn't supposed to do, the penalty he could incur was to be stoned to death because he made a prophesy that wasn't of God. That's how serious God took it. "You are speaking for Me."

So to the question today, unless we redefine the term prophet, can a person be a prophet today? I don't think so. And if a person claims to be a prophet today, I would stay away from that person. We might speak prophetically, we might speak in moral forth telling or foretelling to a people, but if you follow the clear formula of the Old Testament, these were people that were told be God to deliver a very specific message. They were speaking for God.

Now, this great city Nineveh, it's described three times in the account. Chapter one, verse two; chapter three, verse two; and chapter four, verse eleven, "is a great city," *godol*. It's a "mega" we might say in our term. It's a mega city. Verse eleven in chapter four says a hundred and twenty thousand. Now, when we read the word "greater" or "great city", I think a very careful and good way to interpret that is, we would say, "Chicago," we'd say, "the greater area," or we'd say what? "Chicagoland." Or we'd say Chicago and the west suburbs. Now, the west suburbs aren't Chicago, but certainly there is an economy and a job base and a trafficking from downtown Chicago, the city proper, all the way clear out to what? To Saint Charles, probably. There's an enormous catchment of population. So if that's what the text means, it's far beyond just, notice verse eleven of chapter four, "Aren't there more than a hundred and twenty thousand people," God says.

And I think here we're safe to say this is counting men. Wouldn't split hairs on it, but the point is it's a large population base, God has a concern for these people. Some scholars estimate there was a six to eight mile circumference, the widest part of the city probably about three miles in width.

One person has done some fairly detailed calculations: Eighteen hundred and fifty acres. I met someone here two days ago that has a 2200 acre farm up in the north and he said it would take you about a half an hour to drive around it, the way it's displaced. So you get a picture of the land mass. Greater Nineveh, probably the most generous number you could give it would be sixty miles in its catchment. Doesn't really matter, point is it's a large population.

Now, Jonah's supposed to go for three days on this journey. Does it mean that it will take him three days to cover the territory or does it mean he gives the message three

days? I think it's the latter, that he is for three days preaching. I don't think it necessitates that he walked from downtown Chicago clear to Saint Charles and spoke the message. In an ancient culture when a person spoke and preached, that message ran through the culture instantly. We think about IM and internet and texting and information going out.

In 1992 I think it was I went to Nigeria for the first time and this is their no – there's electricity maybe a few hours a week in this village I arrived in. There are no fax machines, no computers. You might have a refrigerator that's dependent upon a kerosene-driven device, but there are really no electrical appliances, per se. The village of about fifty-five hundred people and when my friend Musa Asake and I road into the city we were greeted by all sorts of people. This was word of mouth. We had arrived in Kono, we had driven for many, many hours. There are no telephones, no cell phones. When we hit the city limits, the little village limits, there were all these people that mobbed the car and they sang a little chant welcoming us in to Kaduna and we drove in and within a very short time the entire village knew that Musa was home and he had a *baturi*, a white visitor.

And from the moment we hit the ground until eleven, twelve at night people were coming from the village wanting to say hello to Musa and to meet his friend. There was no electronic communication.

Just to give you a picture, we think about, "Well, how could this message get around?"

It's news. It's the water cooler news, it's the coffeepot news, it's the information. This crazy guy smelling like fish is saying, "God's going to judge us."

And that message runs through the culture of Nineveh for the three days that he preaches. Now, the second proclamation of chapter three, verse one is a little different. Or we should say, at least, we're given more information. We're told in verse two to:

*Proclaim . . . the proclamation which I am going to tell you*

We don't have great detail on that message. We know from chapter one he is cry against it. We know from the message that Jonah preaches that in forty days the Lord is going to judge them, but we don't know the extent of what he was saying on his soap box other than this. There's a little omission here, in particular one, verse two we read:

*their wickedness has come up before Me*

The reason God was caused to first action to have Jonah go and preach the Gospel, we would say, is because the wickedness is so pervasive. We're not given that information in chapter three, verses one and two. It's the message which I am going to tell you.

So he goes and he arises. The last part of verse four:

*forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

This is really a death warrant. The word overthrown is used of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter nineteen, verse twenty-five, I believe. It's used to

describe what happens when God judges a city.

When you go to Israel and when you ride that bus ride down to the Dead Sea, you will come into the area, you know the Sea of Galilee looks like a little harp, Chinoreth up in the north, there's a little trickle of a line, like a phone line, going down, that's Jordan. And the bottom is the Dead Sea which looks like a phone receiver hanging upside down, which is all evaporating now. Even since the time I have been going back and forth for a few years, the Dead Sea is evaporating. Unless they do something, it will be gone probably in the next fifty years. It's just so dry and arid down there.

When you drive down into the Dead Sea region, there's a place that they will stop and they'll point out to you on the side of the rocks by the road, there's a marker from 1957 of when the water was way up high and your many feet below that on the street now going, "Wow, this had that much water in it."

As far as the eye can see just, you know, rolling, dusty, sandy, sort of a light tan colored desert wilderness and the sea, the Dead Sea, continues to evaporate into nothingness. This is more than likely the region of Sodom and Gomorrah and when you go to Masada, which was David's stronghold, you take a cable car up and go up there and spend a few hours. If you're hearty and young and have a lot of energy and testosterone you walk up, but the rest of the sane people take the trolley up and you spend time on the top and then the strong and the zealous walk back down and the rest of us go down in comfort with the cable car. But you stand at Masada and you look and you can envision Sodom and Gomorrah in a geographic place that was fresh water and a lush valley.

Remember Abraham and Lot separate and Lot chose the valley. He chose the verdant pastures, we would say. The lush, green. If you weren't going to live in a city, would you live in the desert, the wilderness, or choose the green watered valley with the potential for growing produce and having livestock? Of course, that's where Lot went. He chose for himself, the text says. He goes south and then Abraham remains in the arid climates.

Because Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown, and I'm one who still believes that God rained some type of hail on there. I believe it was a fresh water source in the Dead Sea and has become completely dead. Nothing, no microorganisms live in the Dead Sea. It is a chemical pond, is what it is. And in Revelation, Ezekiel, we have indication that will be turned to fresh again one day. There'll be fish in that water in one day, but when you look at that today and you can envision the verdant green pastures of the northern part of Israel and you see this barren, salty, worthless part of geography, that's what God did when he overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It's the same term used here, that God is going to overthrow Nineveh in forty days.

Leslie Alan writes, "Perhaps Jonah feels small. One man against a vast metropolis, lost like a needle in a haystack inside the gigantic vanity fair, this Sodom of a city. He stops and shouts out the laconic message which he has been entrusted. 'Nineveh's days are numbered and it will soon be overthrown.'"

Have any of you been to the Taste of Chicago before? I guess you should go once just to say you've gone. It's crowded, there's no place to park, it's a combination, it's a cauldron of people. The vendors and the restauranteers love it, the tourists love it, but if

you live in the Chicago area, you avoid it like the plague. It's just one snarl of a traffic jam and a crowd of people and overpriced food that's served on the street. Nothing about that's attractive. Think about standing on a soap box and yelling out, "Forty days and Chicago will be overthrown. Forty days and Chicago will overthrown! God will judge the city of Chicago in forty days."

Today they would yawn. Maybe if you were really annoying they might call the police on you. But street preachers don't get a lot of attention. That was a little bit of what Jonah was up against.

Historians suggest that the message would have gotten traction at the time because the Assyrian's neighbors to the north posed a considerable danger to them. And so maybe it got their attention that, well, after all, there could be a God. I wonder if the story of Jonah and the fish had reached Nineveh. I wonder about the traffic of that information.

So first of all we have the word of the Lord coming to Jonah the second time, the second opportunity. Verses five to nine we have a story that even though Jonah has ignored and disobeyed God, God is still wanting to use him for His own outcomes. Verses five and following:

*Then the people of Nineveh believed in God*

It's almost an anticlimactic sentence. The people believed in Yahweh.

*. . . they called a fast. . . [they] put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.*

*When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe . . . , covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.*

*He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.*

*"But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.*

*"Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."*

Now, first blush, again, it's hard to believe. Three days of declaring that God's going to overthrow the city of Nineveh gets this quick of a response. It is, perhaps, the most remarkable conversion in all of the Old Testament and it's just three little words in verse five. "The people believed in God." The people of Nineveh believed in God.

John Hannah writes, "The official records often delete these kinds of events, especially those events that would embarrass them. For example, the Egyptians do not record the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea, nor do the Assyrians record the loss of a hundred and eighty five thousand soldiers in Jerusalem recorded in II Kings 19:35."

In other words, if you're writing America's history, you don't want to tell all the terrible details about how you were bludgeoned and lost and beaten. You sort of conveniently forget those. So the fact that the Assyrians don't record this event doesn't necessarily mean it's not historical.

[Lepine:] You know, rather than getting hung up, as some might, over whether this is in the Assyrian record or not in the Assyrian record, we need to look at the underlying message; and that is that we're to obey God even in those moments where we think, "I'm not sure I want to obey."

[Easley:] I think it's unfortunate so many of us who love Christ are in a workplace or an environment where we're "the only Christian" don't realize the wonderful opportunity we have to represent Jesus Christ. Maybe he wants you to be that emissary, to be that ambassador. No, he wants you to be that ambassador, to be that emissary, to tell people about Christ, even if you're reluctant. What if he uses you?

[Lepine:] Yeah. I think too often we look at this as a chore or a duty. Something that's onerous instead of saying, "You know, this is a privilege that we have to represent the King. I mean, if you were named Ambassador to the Netherlands, you would go, "Well, that's a great privilege."

Well, you have been named an Ambassador for Christ in your workplace, in your neighborhood and that is a great privilege. And yes, there are responsibilities that come along with that, but what a privilege for God to call us His ambassadors and we need to embrace that and live that out wherever God puts us.

Let me remind listeners real quickly that we have transcripts of each day's programs on our website at [incontextradio.org](http://incontextradio.org) and if you're interested in CDs of these messages you can find information about that on the website as well or call 877-3CONTEXT. And be back with us tomorrow as we continue our study through Jonah verse by verse on *inContext* with Michael Easley.