

[Easley:] I beg you on the mercies of God to be reconciled with Him. I beg you not to live with the guilt and regret of sins past. I beg you not to become embittered or entrenched in "if only" but do know that He's a God of second chances.

[Lepine:] This in *inContext* with Michael Easley, I'm Bob Lepine. We're studying through the book of Jonah and some of our listeners may be wondering, "Where's Bob? Where's Larry? Where are the pirates who don't do anything?" [laughter] They've seen the Veggie Tales version of the story of Jonah which is a clever retelling of the story, but maybe they've never opened up their Bibles and looked at the four chapters. This is really worth getting out, reading, studying, meditating on because there's a lot here.

[Easley:] Easy to read, it would be a great devotion. Read it every day for about four or five days and see how the word of God will minister to you.

[Lepine:] And the chapters break down pretty easily.

[Easley:] Yes.

[Lepine:] Chapter one, Jonah runs away from God's call to go to the Ninevites and preach to them. Chapter two, he winds up in the belly of the big fish. Chapter three, after being regurgitated, he heads off to Nineveh and preaches his message of repentance. And lo and behold, the Ninevites repent and that's where we are in the middle of chapter three as we pick up Michael's message from Jonah. Here's Michael.

[Easley:] Verse five, I believe, is a summary of what then is explained by the story of Jonah in chapter three verses six through ten. In other words, this is the "what happened," they believe, and this then is the explanation of what those events that took place.

I want you to notice the king's response particularly. There is a lot going on here. For the king to humble himself is very different than for the serf, the public, the general workin' stiff to repent. When the king and his nobles and his officials pay attention, there is a leadership trickle down and so people respond to it. As a king he is a dictator, he's not a democratically elected official. He can execute orders and commands and expect people to follow them unlike a democratic or republican form of government. He is a dictator.

He arose from his throne

The image here is very important. When you are seated on a throne, you are in control. You're the king. You're the one they listen to, so he gets up off. It's not just that he was sitting down and he decided to stand up and do something. The picture is, he's removing himself from the authority of his throne and he's submitting himself to a higher call, to God's call, that he's going to be judged if he doesn't change his ways.

The king actually has some pretty good theology. He lays aside his robes. This is the vestment, the vesture that acknowledges him as the king. It's a symbol of his power. He gets off the seat of his power, he takes off the robe of his power and lays it down and in dramatic contrast, he puts himself in a mourning and a death position, as though he

was attending a funeral. He tears his clothes, he covers himself with ashes, and he sits on ashes. When the king abdicates his position, he's saying, "I'm not the sovereign. I'm no longer the king. There is someone who is bigger than me."

And I give this king an awful lot of credit for understanding who Yahweh is and his response to the message and the warning from Jonah. Sackcloth is a coarse fabric that was used by the poorest of the poor. Some of you might be old enough to remember flour sacks or rice sacks or potato sacks when you grew up, perhaps, on a farm or in a different time those were used. You didn't make clothes out of them. They were too coarse and uncomfortable. You couldn't wash them and make them comfortable. They were used for industry, they were used to put things like tools in or something you wanted to cover and protect outside. You'd never use it for clothing.

The picture is that of you're reducing yourself to repentance. The picture of ashes is symbolic of when you burn something and destroy it down, all that's left is ashes. So you are giving a vivid picture of the worst type of covering and all that's left of life are the ashes of life. No value. And you cover yourself, you sit in these as a demonstration of humility.

This isn't as far out of our cultural context as we think. The idea of when they use caissons or when they use horses to pull people to their gravesites, they would cover the horses in black. They would cover the caisson and the little trailer that took the casket, they would cover it in black. The idea is this is death, we're reducing ourselves, we're not showing off anymore. It's a time of mourning, it's a time of sadness and grief and so even though we are somewhat oblivious to the most obvious things about a black hearse, the covering of these things, it's all the same. There's a response to us that knows this is a time to be somber.

The Persians covered their animals in mourning, it's reasonable to see the Ninevites doing the same thing. The picture of the animals, even the animals will be covered as a demonstration of our repentance.

Now, verse eight he says to call on God earnestly. This is the fourth time now in the book we're going read "calling on God." In chapter one, verse five, the sailors call on their gods, they cry to their gods.

In verse six of chapter one, "get up, call on your God."

Verse fourteen, "they called on the Lord and said."

Chapter two, verse two, "I (Jonah) called out in my distress."

And now the king of Nineveh, "Call on God earnestly."

Can't miss it, short book, repetition is important. There's a time when the bottom drops out and you've got to call on God. You can't do anything but ask Him for help.

As with the sailors, these outward symbols, I think, are the best way to demonstrate their change.

Who knows [verse nine] God may turn and relent and withdraw his burning anger so that we may not perish.

The text says the people of Nineveh believed in God in verse five. I would equate that to conversion. I believe it's very solid, Biblical, theological ground to say the city of Nineveh came to Christ. This is a massive revival. This is a massive conversion. An entire city, in our terminology, would trust Jesus. Of course, they're believing in Yahweh, they're believing in the God of the Hebrews, they're believing in the message that Jonah has delivered.

"I am a Hebrew, my God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land."

That's the one they believe in. Now, history shows that thirty-seven years later the Assyrians are going to destroy Israel. A hundred years later Nahum the prophet will write about this and by then Nineveh will be completely in disrepair and the historical sad part of the story is in one generation the message of Yahweh is lost.

Those of us who raise children, those of you who have grandchildren, we often say we're one generation from apostasy. That if my children don't take the gospel to their children, it's gone. And as a parent and a grandparent, that's your number one concern, obviously, that your children all know Christ, that they own it for themselves and then they will give it to their children.

When my second daughter went off to college, she got into a Christian college but they taught things a little differently than she had been trained and she would call from time to time and she would say, "Dad! What do we believe about the rapture?"

I'd say, "Well, this isn't like a 'we' democratically, we all decide. You have to decide what you believe about the rapture."

"Dad, what do we believe about Jesus' second coming? Dad, what do we believe about losing salvation? Dad, what do we believe about speaking in tongues?"

And it was an extraordinary opportunity to realize how I'd failed as a father training her up until going off to college because you make assumptions, right? That they're catching it along away. So it was a great opportunity to say, "Let's look at these together. Here, look at these passages in the Bible. You dig for yourself. You see what you're supposed to believe. What's the Bible teach? That's what you're supposed to believe about these things."

And Nineveh is a great illustration and Nahum records it, it didn't last very long. I do believe their belief was real.

Now, a good, careful Bible student reads verse nine and has a whole bunch of questions.

God may turn and relent and withdraw his burning anger so that we will not perish

The NIV adds the word “compassion” in verse nine and verse ten. The word is not in the text. They put that there as an interpretive gloss. In other words, the translators are trying to lean you to a conclusion. I agree with the theology, it’s just that the word isn’t there. I believe the motive here is to soften the idea of God repenting. This causes us great grief that God would change His mind. Somehow it challenges the omniscience and the omnipotence and the omnipresence of God that He changed His mind.

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought about that outcome. I guess I should change my mind.”

We don’t like those types of ideas. Well, it’s because we look at it from such a horizontal level. This illustration borders on heresy, so be very careful with it. I’ll try to explain it so that it won’t be quite heresy. I want you to envision a sphere up here and this sphere is infinity. Inside the sphere is string. Let’s say the string is ten inches long just for illustration purposes. The sphere is infinity. It can’t be measured, but we’re just using it as an illustration. That string is a linear piece of time. The string begins with the birth of humanity, with Adam and the woman and it goes on and event and event and you’re in there somewhere. Jesus coming to earth is on that little string, ten inches is all of linear time. The events that happen in linear time are never repeated, right?

The twenty-ninth of June, 2008 is forever gone. It will never be here again. It’s a linear piece on the string. The day you were born, the day you die, the day you lose a friend. That linear, that little ten inches is all of humanity in this giant sphere of infinity. God is in infinity in the sense that He’s beyond time and space. With me so far?

So when these events happen on this little string, all we see is what happened in the past and we wonder what’s going to happen in the future. We have no concept of that string. Christ and God, if you will, can do anything they want with that string from the way they see it because they’re beyond it, they’re not limited by time and space.

So when God changes His mind, we say, “Well, how can He do that? There are sequences of events on that linear string that can’t be undone.”

That’s right, because that’s the way we see, but because God is beyond those constraints, because He sent Jesus Christ in Galatians 4:4 at the proper time to enter the string incarnate. He sent Him under the law, He sent through a virgin, He sent at that time to redeem mankind. That event doesn’t happen again.

So time is a constraint and when God changes His mind we get all worried about it because we see it, I believe, with improper language. God does change His mind. He changes His mind with Moses. The problem is, it doesn’t work based on our set of circumstances. If, then.

“If I do this, God will do that.”

No. God is Sovereign.

The other problem we have is language. The way this is communicated, it sounds like, “Okay, I’ll give him another opportunity.”

Because God is Sovereign, He can do whatever He wants. Sovereign is in His hands,

He does what He pleases, Psalm 115, I believe. So he can do whatever He wants, so God is not playing with humanity. It's a problem between communication. It's a problem between language. It's a problem between the way we see life as a series of events and God is beyond all this. The most important part is that the people repented and God withheld this judgment and that does show us a God, as the NIV suggests, of compassion. It shows us a God of mercy. Our problem is finite. That may not help you at all, that's the best I can do.

Grace is never earned. Repentance does not come as the result of proving to God that we're going to be okay and God backs off. God's sovereign, God's merciful and we better be very careful thinking that if we do this, then God might be merciful to us. Sometimes it seems that way from our horizontal string, sometimes it seems God relents in a human perspective, but it's because of our limitations in explaining it.

God can and will affect His judgment later, as we will see in the book of Nahum. Jacques Aloul writes, "In reality, God's repenting in the face of man's repentance is Jesus Christ."

In other words, the very act of sending Christ to be the God man and to die for our sins is in a sense God's repentance. It's a pretty good attempt to explain what is hard to understand.

A couple of lessons. Number one, if you have the opportunity to teach, if God's gifted you or given you a Sunday School class, an AWANA club, you're BSF leader, you're Precept leader, whatever it is; if you have been given this great privilege, I want to admonish you to teach the Bible well. This little story of Jonah is a lot more than a fish tale, as I hope you're seeing. A lot more here than just a story of a couple of miracles that are hard for us to comprehend or try to explain away.

Cindy and I travel enough and sit in enough churches to bemoan the lack of Biblical teaching. I've talked to a number of you in the two days I've been here about, "The church doesn't teach the Bible anymore."

I don't know the ultimate solution to that, but I do know one solution; if you have that opportunity, teach it. Teach it. Open up a little book like Jonah. Open up a book like Amos. Open up Philippians and just go through it and talk about it and teach it clearly and depend upon the Scripture, depend upon the written word. Don't worry about what people say to attack it, assail it; let the burden the burden be on the Word of God.

I don't have to prove that Jonah was swallowed by a fish and survived three days, that's God's problem. I don't have any problem believing it. I am comfortable believing it because He's sovereign and He can do whatever He pleases. And if you're not there yet, we'll just keep praying for you.

But teach it. Encourage your pastors to teach it. Be careful how you do that, but encourage your pastors to teach it. What a great privilege to say, "God said."

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked ways, then God relented. I don't know all what that means, but I know what the next part means. "And He declared He would not bring it upon them and He did not do it."

God withheld His judgment, He withheld, He suspended, His judgment at this time.

Secondly, it is presumption of the worst kind to think that God will overlook our sins and give us those second chances. Our minds, as we have been Christians, become very clever. We know we're not supposed to disabuse grace, but we know First John 1:9 too well.

"Well, if I sin, I just confess and repent and God will forgive me."

And we are very clever and crafty. I don't like to face my sin either. I loathe facing my sin, but what's the alternative? It's going to eat you alive, so you may as well face it. Cindy and I, we try to parent our kids and teach them to own it right away. Just say, "I did such and such."

"And, you know, we're always more merciful when you come clean right away than if you lie and cover up and try to keep it from us," right? And that's a parenting intuition, we know that. I think that's good theology. God is much more kind and gracious and merciful to us when we come clean.

Years ago I stumbled across the phrase, "The Holy Spirit is better than the guilty conscience. The Holy Spirit is better than a guilty conscience."

A guilty conscience just makes me feel miserable. The guilty conscience just makes me doubt. The guilty conscience just creeps up at unsuspecting times and makes me feel like, "Man, I lied, I need to go back and confess, I treated Cindy poorly, I treated my kids harshly, I shouldn't have said this about this person."

What a terrible way to live. The Holy Spirit is a comforter. He's there to help you and me. We think we ignore our sins, we can run away from them, Jonah could not run away. He could run but he couldn't hide. It's overstated. He's going to be tossed in the ocean, God's not done with you. "You can't get away from me. We're going to deal with this."

We act like children thinking our parents will forget about it or overlook it. God does not work that way. We cannot dodge our sins and it's better to go ahead and deal with them and ask Him for forgiveness and ask whoever we've offended to forgive us and for repentance and work through it.

I came across a story recently of an individual who lives with regret. It was quite a tragic account. It was an interview of Mike Wallace, 1975, and for his, I believe it was his twenty-fifth anniversary they brought this guest back on the Larry King show. Let me read you part of the transcript.

"Mike Wallace was the first to interview Clint Hill. Clint Hill was the secret service agent who was on the limousine behind the one where JFK was in the convertible the day he was shot on November 22, 1963.

"Wallace: Can I take you back to November 22, 1963? You were on the fender of the secret service car right behind President Kennedy's car. Was there anything the secret service or that Clint Hill could have done to keep that from happening?"

“Clint Hill: Yes.

“Mr. Wallace: Clint Hill – ‘Yes’? What do you mean?

“Mr. Hill: If he had reacted five tenths of a second faster, maybe one second faster, I wouldn’t be here today.

“Wallace: You mean, you would have gotten there and you would have taken the shot?

“Hill: The third shot, yes sir.

“Wallace: And that would have been all right with you?

“Hill: That would have been just fine with me. Had I turned in a different direction, I’d have made it. It’s my fault.

“Wallace: Oh. No one has ever suggested that for an instant. What you did was show great bravery and great presence in mind. What was on that citation was given you for your work on November 22, 1963.

“Hill: I don’t care about that.

“Wallace: ‘Extraordinary courage and heroic effort in the face of maximum danger.’

“Hill: Mike, I don’t care about that. If I had reacted just a little bit quicker, and I could have. I guess I’ll live with that to my grave.”

Now, twelve years after the assassination he’s still distraught, he’s almost on the verge of tears. He lives with the guilt that he didn’t take a bullet for JFK. The fictitious movie with Clint Eastwood, what was it called? *In The Line of Fire* was the fabrication of the story. Clint Hill went on to finish a fairly prestigious career with the secret service. He’s later interviewed by Mike Wallace many years later.

“I have you to thank for asking me to do that interview because it caused me to come to terms with things and bring up emotions that were under the surface. It is because of his questions that I have started to recover.”

To live with the regret that, “I did something wrong,” which in his case – was it wrong? I mean, you understand the man’s bent. I wonder if Jonah ever felt that way. Did Jonah ever feel, even if we know the story too well, “You know, Lord, you gave me a second chance but –“

I’m not much for begging, but I beg you on the mercies of God to be reconciled to Him. I beg you not to live with the guilt and regret of sins past. I beg you not to become embittered or entrenched in “if only.” He is a God of second chances.

And certainly we cleave to our New Testament grace and mercy we so love and say, “God will forgive you. God will forgive you. God will forgive you.”

Don’t think God will overlook your sin, but do know that He’s a God of second chances

and that He loves you immensely and you have no reason to live with the guilt and regret of “if only” because He is a God of grace and mercy.

[Lepine:] Michael, First John says, “If we confess our sins He is faithful, just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Is that verse about salvation or is that verse for a believer who confesses his sin to be cleansed by God?

[Easley:] Yes. [laughter] I would go with the latter. I think it is the confessional statement that we all sin, we all fail as Christians and part of the sanctified life is to ask God and to confess our sins.

[Lepine:] And our confession is necessary in order to restore the relationship. You know, in Psalm 51 when David confesses his sin he says, “Restore to me the joy of my salvation.”

It's not because God has abandoned you and unless you confess you will be estranged from him, it is because until we acknowledge our sin and until our relationship with God is restored, we will be missing out on the joy of our salvation.

Let me quickly invite our listeners to stop by our website, incontextradio.org. Each day we make available the transcript of your messages, Michael. And if folks would like to review those or print those out, if they'd like to listen again to the program, maybe they missed a portion of it, the audio is available at incontextradio.org as well and we hope you'll stop by.

We also hope you will tune in tomorrow. We're going to begin looking at Jonah chapter four and we'll see how the prophet who just experienced great spiritual success in his ministry winds up pouting. I hope you can join us for tomorrow's edition of *inContext* with Michael Easley.