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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

WHO'S SORRY NOW?

By Ron Allen

In his 1983 Templeton address, Alexander Solzhenitsyn responded to the question why such terrible disasters had befallen Russia. He said:

"It is because men have forgotten God; that is why these things have happened." He went further to say that the failing of human consciousness, deprived of its divine dimension, had been a major factor in all the major crimes of the 20th century. He said that in World War I, a Europe bursting with abundance and health fell into a rage of self-mutilation. Only a godless embitterment could have moved ostensibly Christian states to employ poison gas; a weapon so beyond the limits of humanity. "Men forgot God," he reiterated.

One hundred and twenty years before Solzhenitsyn's speech, President Abraham Lincoln signed a resolution proclaiming a national day of prayer and fasting. The nation was riven by civil war. The proclamation evidenced a widespread conviction that the catastrophic conflict had been a divine judgment.



"We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand that preserved us in peace.... We have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace.... It behooves us then to humble ourselves before the offended power, to confess our sins and pray for clemency and

forgiveness." —Signed by President Lincoln. March 1863.

Whether it is a massacre in a school or a cinema, a bombing in Boston, or another unexpected and fatal affliction, many are ready to offer the explanation that God is angry and has therefore sent a warning judgment. Not all believers would want to identify with that pat commentary. They would, however, maintain that when God is excised from human affairs, men and women—no longer seeing themselves accountable to a just and wise overseer, no longer subject to the ennobling influences of the divine Spirit playing upon them, removed from the inspiration, guidance, discipline and restraint accompanying the highest notions of deity acquired over thousands of years—they readily find the road to injustice smoother; they discover fewer impediments to inhumanity and the justification of violence.

This was the consciousness that lay back of President Lincoln's proclamation. The National Day of Prayer survives to this day in America; largely according to the discretion and sponsorship of successive Presidents. It reflects the lingering conjecture that when we hold ourselves answerable to a wise and loving father-God, we his children learn to respect one another. Instead of eyeing each other warily and with suspicion, we meet as brothers and sisters. We are more patient with each other's failings, and we regard all men with compassion. Our common life is better when we live as UNDER GOD. As he reflected on the misery that had plagued Russia in his lifetime; mayhem that destroyed as many as sixty million of his countrymen, Solzhenitsyn saw it as an inevitable consequence of the perverse intention to banish God from national life. He predicted that without a return to God on a similar scale, further catastrophe would ensue.

As far as I can tell, there has been no 'population-wide' turning to God in any land in my lifetime; no soul-searching promoted by any government. Perhaps it will never happen. It happened once, a long time ago. A whole nation, its king included, forsook evil, turned to righteousness and placed itself at God's disposal.



I refer to Nineveh, the Assyrian city-state. God instructed one of Israel's prophets to visit Nineveh and preach a warning of impending judgment. Jonah could not think of any group of people to whom he was less inclined to preach. Along with his fellow Israelites, Jonah hated and feared Nineveh. This feeling ran so deep with him that he chose to hide from such a distasteful task, and from God who asked it. In his determination to get away from God's work he ended up in a fish's belly at the bottom of the sea. There, in utter misery and terror, he cried out to God for help and found to his joy that

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...” (Jonah 3:1, 2).

It seems unusual—to say the least—that when God gave Jonah an opportunity to be of service, which had before been so emphatically rejected, that God didn’t say anything at all to him about his extreme shirking of duty. Jonah was not lectured, censured or taken to task. His recommissioning was not accompanied by threats in case of further delinquency; nor did the Lord remind Jonah of the vows he had made while still in the fish’s belly.

The Word of the Lord to Jonah “a second time,” alerts us to something in God which is alien to our ways of thinking and of getting things done. It goes against reason. The story would have resonated better with us if God had spoken along these lines: “I am not going to be so foolish as to re-send Jonah on this mission. That was a mistake. I’ll not be burned twice. I’ll find another man—a better one—to do the job.”

A businessman does not give his best accounts to his worst-performing executive. A sports coach berates the under-achieving person in his squad and soon gives his spot to someone else. There is none of this kind of thing with God. There is no evidence that Jonah’s dismal showing altered God’s approach to him at all. Not at all! God dignifies his recalcitrant and underperforming servant by assuming his

freedom and capacity to respond positively; to do better. He treats him—not as a failure (which he is)—but as a fully integrated person (which he is not).

Though Christians—despite their best intentions—continue to fall short of God’s ideal, and though they often frustrate his plans’ by their lapses, God does not alter his way with them. Even though God is frequently a disappointed partner in his relations with men and women, his temperament toward them is constantly gracious.

Our lack of wholeheartedness in God’s work, and our routine mistakes do not cause God to tone down his plans which include us. He does not rechart his course to accommodate our let-downs, rashes, or stoppages. He holds fast to his goals and purposes; not giving up on his intention to get us involved in them.

Jonah tried to distance himself from the people of Nineveh, but God’s interest in them remained. Further, despite Jonah’s behavior, God’s interest in him was also undiminished. The man of God and the godless inhabitants of Nineveh; Israel, and the ignorant nations round-about—both were at the heart of God’s concern. Jonah—and the heathen population in Nineveh show-cased, each to the other, God’s undaunted compassions for all mankind.



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God had not forsaken him.

The reporting of Jonah’s troubled career is so unadorned it is possible to miss some of what makes it such a remarkable part of the Hebrew Bible. By any assessment, Jonah proved his mediocrity as a messenger of the Lord. He had no heart for the Lord’s business. In every way he was its antagonist. He blatantly set out to subvert the will of God in regard to Nineveh. Yet, despite all, having salvaged his prophet from the ruins of his rebellion, God sets before him the same privilege of service which had been the occasion of his erstwhile disgrace.

This time Jonah did as God asked. He went to Nineveh and preached a message of impending judgment: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed” (Jonah 3:4). An amazing thing

happened: The Ninevites *believed God* (Jonah 3:5). Men, women and children began a fast and covered themselves with sackcloth—a signal of profound soul-searching. This repentance was so wide-spread that the king joined in adding extra momentum with the impetus of his kingship and the organs of state. He issued a decree that took in the whole population, as well as their livestock. All were encouraged to petition God for mercy. And when God saw the penitence of Nineveh from the king down, he had compassion on them and did not destroy the city.

Think of it. By ancient standards Nineveh was a great city. A modern equivalent would be New York, Tokyo, or London. Imagine a spiritual awakening on a similar scale in any of those modern cities.

The repentance of Nineveh was certainly a great event. This →

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fits one of the motifs in Jonah. Other things are also called great. Jonah is given a big task. He runs from it and encounters a great storm. He finds himself swallowed by a great fish. He becomes the beneficiary of a great salvation.

Consistent with this theme of BIG things, Nineveh undergoes a great repentance; a complete and utter turning—to the Lord. The gigantic motif is a device that draws attention by contrast, to the one ‘little’ element in the book—Jonah. The fact that the population of Nineveh *believed in God*—not in Jonah—seems to have some significance. They saw beyond the messenger to the One who sent him. Their humility before Jonah’s God went way beyond the tone and detail of the preaching they heard. It contemplated that in God which Jonah failed to mention: mercy. They rightly perceived in Jonah’s mission, evidence—not only of judgment—but a divine concern for them.

Though the Assyrians customarily worshiped the god Ishtar, they were conscious of accountability to the greater God of creation. Their consciences bore witness to his law, written on their hearts. Their donning of sackcloth was evidence of true guilt. But the king went further: He understood that the garments of mourning were useless unless accompanied by a renunciation of inhumanity and social crime (the Assyrians were notorious perpetrators of such offenses). The prophet Joel had said: *“Rend your hearts and not your garments”* (Joel 2:12-14). These sentiments were repeated by Nineveh’s king (Jonah 3:7-9). He thereby showed how he and his people entered more fulsomely into the Spirit that lay back of the mission to Nineveh than Jonah did.

It is clear that Jonah is a deeply flawed character. There is so little to admire about him. This perception is heightened when a nation commonly viewed by Israel as crude and immoral, is seen acting honorably and with deep reverence for Israel’s God.

First, Jonah is seen amongst a bunch of pagan sailors. They and their captain turn to Jonah’s God in humility, seeking help and mercy. Jonah appears indifferent to their distress and their awe of his God.

The sailors and their captain reappear in the form of the people of Nineveh and their king. With much skill, the author of the book of Jonah leads his audience past the obstacle of their prejudice, to accept truth that would normally be rejected. None other than a heathen king is seen entertaining the cautious hope that Yahweh will not carry out his fierce anger. His language echoes Moses when he pleaded with God to ‘relent’ and not destroy Israel at Sinai (Exodus 32:12). Key statements, spoken originally to Israel, and believed to be reliable insights into God and his ways, are replayed with reference to foreigners.

An amazing thing happens. A whole people, a whole nation humbles itself before God. Repentance—striking in scope and passion—takes place, not in Israel but in paganism. In a twenty-first century setting we might say: not in Westminster, not in the Vatican, not in the Southern Baptist Convention or the Missouri Synod. Not anywhere like that, but in the ‘great city,’ in the vast agglomeration of organized godlessness—there breaks out a confession of sin and an appeal to God for his mercy.




If revival broke out in today’s world, where might it begin? Perhaps, not where one would expect.

Many years ago I made regular visits to a State Penitentiary. I studied the Bible with killers, robbers, and persons with terrible perversions. I encountered faith, hope, and love in that place. I had previously thought that prison was just a home for hopelessly wicked people, people who were radically different to me, whom I probably would have shunned if they were not caged.

I lost some of my illusions in the prison. I met men there who were certainly damaged by paganism, but in whom were the virtues of contrition, sorrow for the misuse of their life, for the hurt and harm they had caused. I saw humility, thankful relief from the treadmill of immorality, simple awareness of God’s goodness, their lack of deserving and a hunger to know God more.

When Jesus came he said to his people: *“The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now, one greater than Jonah is here”* (Matthew 12:41).



In humility, the citizens of Nineveh entered into the joy of God’s mercy. Jesus referenced them as examples of a spirit of repentance sadly lacking in Israel. Clean-living, respectable people then—and now—suppose that God has nothing for them to excel what they already have. Publicans and harlots go before them into the kingdom of heaven. They enter in with singing; knowing they are receivers of gifts that could never have earned, and they are glad. 

TAKING THE INITIATIVE

By Helmut Thielicke

How could people give pastoral care to Nazi war criminals after World War II, and how can people visit terrorists and murderers in their cells today? Pastoral care obviously has something to do with love. It seeks the strayed, the trapped and the guilty because the well “*have no need of a physician*” (Matthew 9:12).

If you do not understand the essence of the love that Jesus preached and praised you can't explain to yourself why anyone would visit a war criminal or a terrorist. You would either consider the visitor a sympathizer with the prisoner or, even worse, an emasculated, indifferent being for whom all alternatives are reduced to a mishmash and all contrasts are blurred.

So the decisive question is: How do I understand that love which seeks the lost, the strayed, and the trapped? Here are just two of its characteristics.

First. In general we human beings live according to the law of the echo principle—what you do to me, I do to you. Whoever serves our interests is our friend; whoever is against them counts as enemy or at least as opponent. We behave “reactively.” Thus, there follows a tendency toward heightening the differences. We are caught in this vicious circle. It is operative in a quarrel over a lease, and in tensions between ideologies and entire nations. It seems to belong to the nature of our world.

Jesus, however, exists literally “outside the framework” of the world because he broke through this vicious circle. He is the liberator because he freed himself and those who belong to him from this curse. He teaches us that loving only those who love us is not enough because then we are still merely on the “reactive” level and have not gotten of the merry-go-round. Instead he takes the *initiative* and makes a new beginning. The other person must not first *be* lovable in order to share in Jesus' love. This love of his is “preventive,” it is prior to the other's. But precisely for that reason it releases the other's love and opens it up. It could be that it thus *makes* the other lovable. Therefore his love is not reactive but creative. It gives a fresh start. It breaks the curse caused by conflicts of interest and aggression.



We can observe the same process occurring when it comes to trust. A group of my students are concerned about released prisoners. Society usually receives parolees with mistrust, tries to keep them at arm's length and thus consigns them again to a life of crime. According to the reaction principle that is quite natural: our trust is usually the response to *trustworthiness* that

is already present, and trustworthiness is precisely what the parolees *cannot* offer.

Trust has a different aspect when it is as part of the love taught by Jesus. It is a trust that takes the initiative. It is risked and applied to someone who doesn't yet seem to be trustworthy at all. But now that person can become so, because the joy of receiving trust reopens the clogged springs of humanity. Here again a vicious circle is broken. Here again a creative newness is at work in the world. God certainly “first” loved us (1John 4:19) before we were worthy of that love—or ever are.

Second. As a rule we humans tend to identify our opponent with an opposition group. He or she belongs to the “other” party, or is my opposite number in wage negotiations; he or she is “the” Arab, “the” Israeli, “the” Communist, or “the” Capitalist. Here, in the bud, is the same tendency that political fanatics take to the extreme: only people of my point of view are “human,” the others are “pigs” or “reds.” When we hear it like that it sounds like gutter language, barbaric and coarse, but it is just the final stages of a process that begins when we look upon living persons as simply bearers of some banner, or as representatives of some movement. When we do that we demote them to the rank of mere tools.

God does not love us because we are so worthy, but we are worthy because God loves us.

Of course, when it came to evil, Jesus called a spade a spade. (He was in fact recklessly blunt about it.) But he grieved over those upon whom evil lay like a curse, and he broke their fetters. Even while he hung on the cross he prayed for the executioners and the blasphemous slanderers who stood there watching the execution. He saw even the rough dice-throwing soldiers as more than mere representatives of a “counter-ideology” of which he himself was a victim. Instead he was troubled about their lost souls, about their blindness, and about their being untrue to their proper destiny. He still saw them as children of his father in heaven who wandered unaware in an alien land and thereby fell prey to self-alienation at the same time. Therefore even in dying he managed to utter a last prayer for his persecutors.

The love that Jesus taught and lived lifts us to a new dimension. It lets us see our fellow human beings as more than tools in the service of interests that either work *for* us or are directed *against* us. We can see them as children of our father in heaven, of value to him and also of concern to us.

That is the new note that is sounded for the first time in the gospel. That is the light that shone in the darkness (John 1:5). From this point on there is no human being who is not called by name—by *name* and not by the cause or movement that person represents. We are now related to God “directly.” That constitutes our worth. God does not love us because we are so worthy, but we are worthy because God loves us.

—Helmut Thielicke: BEING A CHRISTIAN WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN. pp. 64-67.