



May 2013



# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## JONAH: Man Not on a Mission

By Ron Allen

Reverend James North was a gentleman, a scholar, and a Chaplain to the convicts at the infamous Port Arthur settlement in Tasmania. The Commandant was about to flog a prisoner who had been insolent enough to attempt suicide. Reverend North felt a rush of righteous anger. “If you flog that boy I’ll report you to the governor,” he cried. “I am a minister of God, I tell you, and I forbid you to commit this crime.”

The commandant ordered the Reverend out of his prison and slammed the door after him. “They shall not flog that boy,” he told himself. “I’ll shield him with my own body.”

The man of God went inside his own quarters. He was in a state of extreme agitation. He took his Bible and tried to read, but just then he remembered there was a bottle of brandy in the cupboard in the next room. He held up his hand as if to forbid himself. “No, I must keep my wits about me; the life of that lad depends on me.” He flung himself on his bed. Then he got up and, going to the pantry, quickly poured himself a teaspoon of brandy—just to allay his craving.

He put the bottle back, but then took it out again and put it to his lips taking a long pull. Then he shoved it from him, slammed the pantry door shut and hurried from the room. Lying once more on his bed, he could think of nothing else but having some more. He prayed, he wept, he thought about the boy whose life might well depend on his staying sober. He told himself that what he was about to do was degrading, disgusting, bestial, unworthy of any man, doubly unworthy of a minister of God. Yet, in the midst of his arguments against himself, he went and took the bottle and drank himself into oblivion. Next day, the convict youth was brought out and flogged. He died under the lash.

That incident from Marcus Clarke’s classic tale of the British Penal System pictures Reverend North as an absurd figure. He is a fit example of the kind of Christianity that atheism easily ridicules; one to make conscientious believers cringe.

The prophet Jonah lived in Israel’s Northern Kingdom in the eighth century B.C. The only part of Scripture that tells us anything about him apart from the book which bears his name is 2 Kings 14:25 in

which he (Jonah) forecasts Israel’s expansion during the reign of Jeroboam II.

There is a long discussion as to the historical credibility of the book of Jonah. Though Jonah and the city of Nineveh certainly existed, it is not necessary to hold every detail of the story as scientifically or historically true. In some respects, it has the character of a parable likely to have been first told among a group of men meeting together to share and learn wisdom.

At such gatherings a narrator would tell story intended to impart some spiritual truth. Hearers would be left to draw their own conclusions and lessons from it. The author of Jonah does just that; he expounds no moral lessons, there is no summing up. The audience (readers) must simply contemplate the actions of the story’s characters and deduce for themselves the wisdom intended.

The secret to the story’s subtlety and force lies in the fact that the leading part is played by an individual of stature and importance, a man whose moral authority was customarily accepted as exceeding that of other men—just like Reverend North.

We have noted Jonah’s prophecy concerning the rise of the Northern Kingdom. In this he fitted the national sentimental prophetic ideal—foretelling Israel’s advance and the thwarting of its enemies. Within the book the narrator takes care to emphasize Jonah’s identity and calling as a prophet of the

Lord. In chapter 4:4-8 when Jonah gets into such an unhappy funk, he speaks the same words spoken by Elijah the prophet when he was discouraged and on the run from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:4). In 3:9 and 4:2 the language of Joel’s prophecy is brought in play (Joel 2:12-14).

By this method the audience is assured that the central figure in the tale is a prophet of the Lord God of Israel. Though cast in such an exalted role and charged with such solemn responsibility, Jonah lives out a massive dereliction of duty. When the ‘Word of the Lord’ calls him to preach in Nineveh, he flatly refuses and runs away to become the Lord’s fugitive.

Instead of exemplifying the sterling virtues of humility, fortitude, courage and faithful

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah...” (Jonah 1:17)*

Although the mariners threw Jonah overboard into the stormy sea, that was not the end of Jonah. If Jonah was dismissive of the citizens of Nineveh, the Lord was not dismissive of Jonah. If Assyrian life was cheap to Jonah, Jonah’s life was precious to the Lord. If Jonah was careless about the welfare of Nineveh and its people, and careless about himself, the Lord was far from nonchalant about Jonah. Though Jonah shed himself of responsibility for Nineveh, the Lord took responsibility for Jonah.

All during his ill-advised leave-taking, Jonah was spoken to by God. The Lord sent a wind to blow on the sea; a storm to batter the ship he traveled in. The Lord preached to Jonah when the lots were cast—and Jonah knew it. The Lord preached to him through the merciful intentions of the sailors who sought to save him. Finally, when Jonah shut his ears to all these kindnesses, God would not let him die. He prepared a fish to take care of him for a few days. The God of heaven, earth, and sea engaged his creation in a conspiracy of good will toward this stubborn, foolish man.

If we, by reason of this same good will, are able to see ourselves in Jonah, we may perceive the profound

encouragement and hope spelt out for us in his story. Are we ever reluctant to do right? Do we shrink from God’s generous tendencies? Does it embarrass us to be identified with the limitless proportions of God’s patience and kindness? An honest reply to such questions would be, yes. But even so, we nevertheless live in a world swarming with his providential intention to do us good; to gather us into the joy of caring as he cares, of loving as he loves.

*I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years.*

*I fled him down the labyrinthine ways; of my own mind, and in the midst of tears.*

*But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace; deliberate speed, majestic instancy*

*They beat; and voice beat; more instant than the feet:*

*All things betray thee who betrayest me*

*Nought shelters thee who wilt not shelter me*

*Nought contents thee, who contents nought me*

*The bravest love from thee, who bravest me.*

-Francis Thompson.

*Continued from previous page*

endeavor under duress (so characteristic of Moses, Nathan, Hosea, Amos and many more), Jonah turns out to be a ludicrous, farcical figure like Reverend North. Many of Israel’s prophets were rejected and persecuted in their lifetime but lionized afterward. This would never happen in Jonah’s case. He is a prophet’s caricature; a non-hero; one that would embarrass most Israelites.

It was in 1986, when Jimmy Swaggert, popular Television Evangelist and minister in the Assemblies of God denomination, called on fellow high-profile Christians—Marvin Gorman and Jim Bakker—to repent of their sins of adultery. In this, Swaggert was assuming the unpopular role of Old Testament prophets. Many Evangelicals were mortified, and took steps to disassociate from Gorman and Bakker.

Not long after, however, media ran photographs featuring the ‘prophet’ himself, Reverend Swaggert, in liaison with a New Orleans prostitute. The erstwhile defender of Christian morality became a posterous figure; the personification of

defects which no one ever hopes to see in their Pastor. Similarly, Jonah is the Lord’s prophet but for all that, one who makes a fool of himself.

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). If the Lord had asked Jonah to preach against the sin of Nineveh without actually leaving Israel to do so, he might well have obeyed. Nineveh was hated and feared. It was a great city in the even greater Assyrian Empire. Israel’s Northern Kingdom had been repeatedly invaded and bullied by Assyria. It had slain its men, plundered its treasure and sent Assyrian males to mate with the women of the land. Assyrian fighters were the ‘Nazi Storm-troopers’ of the Ancient world. They were brutal and pitiless. If Jonah had stayed home to rail against their abuses he may have enjoyed an enhanced popularity among his own people. But to travel all the way into enemy territory to deliver the Lord’s Word was to exhibit ‘unwarranted concern’ for foreigners and idol worshippers.

Not until the last chapter does Jonah explicitly confess the →

## GOOD NEWS Unlimited

Good News Unlimited magazine is published every month by Good News Unlimited, P.O. Box 6687, Auburn, CA, USA 95604-6687.

Good News Unlimited is an interdenominational Christian organization proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ and his kingdom of grace. Special emphasis is placed on the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ’s righteousness alone. GNU also links the gospel to the needs of the whole person, to life-style, and preventive medicine.

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This magazine is free upon request.

May, 2013  
Vol. 32, No. 5

Published by Good News Unlimited

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true reason for his unwillingness to preach in Nineveh. It is because he suspects that the Lord might NOT carry out his threat to destroy the city and show mercy instead. He is afraid that God does not share his contempt for these pagans and that given the slightest encouragement, will show them kindness. This prospect is intolerable to Jonah. He will not risk association with any hint of compassion toward such people.

Jonah's deliberate attempt to remove himself from possible involvement in God's propensity to show mercy is remarkable for its energy and persistence. He first makes a long journey overland to the port of Joppa. He boards a ship bound for Tarshish; for all intents and purposes, the far side of the world. Once aboard he finds a place below decks, out of sight, beyond the notice of the crew, hoping to find refuge from the Lord in sleep.

Alas. The Lord "sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4). After Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of the Lord they found a world of thorns, thistles and painful toil. Cain went away from the Lord and came to the land of Nod—the land of wandering, land of the fugitive, land of dread, land without peace. Jonah runs from the Lord and embarks on a journey lashed by storms.

And do we not prove over and again our belief that we could do better for ourselves by getting away from God, distancing ourselves from his wisdom and ways, and avoiding duties he places before us? Isn't it true that we, having sought to live independently of God—without prayer, without the stability and comfort of his strong presence—that things are not better? We do not achieve more peace, we have less. We do not escape from things that are unpleasant or annoying to us; we run headlong into them, and they are doubly grievous because we must face them without the reassurances to be had in the presence of Him who is the giver of all joy.

The sheer tenacity of Jonah's revolt is breathtaking. As the storm rages the sailors are afraid—Jonah is not. The sailors work with might and main to keep the ship intact—Jonah does nothing. The sailors pray—each man to his own god—but Jonah is prayerless. Finally when the ship's captain wakes Jonah from his stupor to demand an explanation for his apparent indifference to their peril, Jonah asks to be thrown into the sea. Fully aware, as he is, that the storm is directly related to his rebellion against his God, he drives his defiance further by preferring death to compliance.

The sailors are aghast at Jonah's belligerence (1:10). They cannot imagine anyone being so foolhardy as to indulge in such a flagrant provocation of the gods. Their notions of the supernatural world are superstitious. Their views of divinity primitive and magical. To them the gods must always be kept happy. Jonah has an enlightened conception of God. The creator-God is not capricious or erratic, but gracious and slow to anger. Despite an informed conception of God's true nature, Jonah does not reverence him. He is not in awe. Whilst claiming to be his worshiper (1:9), he disobeys him. With God's name on his lips, he disregards him.

The heathen mariner's 'fear of the Lord' is in some ways in advance of Jonah's. They ask Jonah to tell them what to do to make the sea calm (to placate the Lord). They pray to Jonah's God to not hold them accountable for Jonah's life. When the

sea is quiet, they greatly fear the lord and offer their version of worship to him.

Further, while the sailors respond to the Lord with a mixture of wonder and respect, Jonah's 'fear' of the Lord amounts not to a fear that a mission to Nineveh might fail. What he fears most is that the mission might succeed. What is more, the sailors show more fellow-feeling for Jonah, than he shows for the people of Nineveh.


Who cares most for his neighbor? Not Jonah. Similar lessons emerge from this story as from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The hero in that story was of kind routinely despised among those who heard Jesus tell it. And those in the parable who were shown to be hard-hearted were the ones accustomed to being admired.

Jonah was a religious man but he was narrow in his relations with people. He cared about people—provided they were his people; provided they were not people he didn't like. Like some who are religious today, he was happy, even proud, to profess allegiance to God—as long as God let him be, and didn't try to expand his circle of concern.

Who cares most for his fellow man? Is it me, a professed Christian, or is it my happily heathen neighbor? Christians do not have a monopoly on virtue. The fact is, if deeds of kindness, the saving of lives, compassion for victims and many other humanitarian efforts around the world—if these were left only for church members and ardent theists to carry out—a great deal of good and necessary work would be left undone.

This is not to plead for an end to faith. Though Jonah had something to learn from people he had little time for, the real hero in the story is God. Jonah's God is seen as God of the whole world. He is the arch-lover of human beings of every stripe, every culture, every nation and every religion. When it comes down to it, it is God's illimitable and indiscriminate love for all creatures that Jonah cannot stomach. The great irony, however—indeed, the genius of the story—is that Jonah in his desperate bid to dissociate from God's reckless grace, becomes its object and its focus. Jonah might divest himself of God's interest in Nineveh, but God does not shed his concern for Jonah. In his futile getaway, the recalcitrant prophet is pursued relentlessly by a love which he begrudges other men.

*O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee.  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.*

*-George Matheson.* 

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## TO JUDGE OR TO SERVE?

An unmarried, eighteen-year-old woman, whom I'll call Becky, became pregnant. She was afraid to tell her strict Christian parents because she was convinced they would disown her in disgrace and make her move out of the house. This in turn would jeopardize her plans to attend college. Consequently she planned to have an abortion.

Becky confided in a friend of the family, whom I'll call Dorothy, a middle aged, divorced woman who over the years had developed a special relationship with Becky. When Becky told Dorothy of her plan, Dorothy didn't give her a moralistic speech or perform a moral interrogation. She offered to help. If Becky chose to have an abortion, she offered to help her in the post-abortion recovery. But, believing that it was in everyone's best interest to refrain from a violent solution and to rather go full-term with this child, Dorothy lovingly encouraged Becky to think seriously about her planned course of action. Even more importantly, she offered to do whatever it took to make going full-term more feasible.

If Becky's parents kicked her out of the house (which they actually did), Dorothy offered her basement as a place to stay. If Becky wanted to give the baby up for adoption, Dorothy would help her with this. If Becky wanted to keep the child (which she ended up doing), Dorothy would help




her with this as well. She became the God-mother.

As a result, Becky went through with the pregnancy, moved in with Dorothy, and pursued her dream part-time, while both she and Dorothy raised an adorable daughter.

Dorothy's decision wasn't rooted in any of the complex, ambiguous issues that pro-life and pro-choice groups argue over. She frankly didn't claim to know what the metaphysical status of the unborn child was at a given state in its development. She only believed it is better to affirm life whenever possible rather than terminate it, and she was willing to communicate this conviction in any way she could—by paying a price.

The price Dorothy paid is much greater than the price of a vote, carrying a picket-sign or signing a petition. The church is called to be a church of Dorothy's, not just on the abortion issue, but on every issue. While others posture and holler, we are to be a holy people who, knowing we are the worst of sinners, simply live in the question: How can we bleed for others? How can we sacrifice for and serve the gay, lesbian and trans-gender community in a way that communicates to them their unsurpassable worth? How can we collectively and individually bleed in service to the homeless, the poor and the racially oppressed?

-Gregory A. Boyd: THE MYTH OF A CHRISTIAN NATION. pp. 144-146. 

Every judgment that I make of a man, even if I am careful to say nothing to him, even if I hide it deep in my heart, and even if I am almost entirely unaware of it myself, makes between him and me an unbridgeable gulf, and hopelessly prevents my giving him any effective assistance. By my judgment I drive him more deeply into his faults rather than free him from them.

What I am contesting here is a very widespread illusion. The illusion that it is possible to help people by denouncing their faults without even being asked to do so. We seek to persuade ourselves that by denouncing a man's faults we are going to bring him to his senses, to make him recognize his guilt and to reform his conduct. What a hope! Just the opposite effect is induced!

-Paul Tournier: GUILT AND GRACE. p. 80. 

The ideal of 'love of humanity' was first expressed in antiquity by the Greek word philanthropia. Within the Christian tradition, philanthropy was supplanted by the religious notion of agape love. In the words of historian Darrel W. Amundsen, "Christian philanthropy was the expression of agape, an unlimited, freely given, sacrificial love that was not dependant on the worthiness of its object since it was the manifestation of the very nature of God who is himself agape (1 John 4:8).

By associating love for humanity with the very nature of God, agape love added urgency, spiritual depth, and cosmic significance to what was only a half-born ideal in pagan antiquity. Greek philanthropia clearly lacked this sense of urgency and depth. Perhaps it was closer, in practice, to what we would nowadays refer to as noblesse oblige, in which the very privileged provide an occasional moment of casual generosity.

The Good Samaritan reaches out to help the neighbor who is a stranger; this act demonstrates a moral idealism that those unable to transcend ethnic, religious or familial circles cannot achieve. Since all human beings are equally valued as children of God, unlimited love views them as worthy of protection from harm and of the provision of goods. There is no person who lacks this basic value for it is bestowed by the Creator independent of any inherent capacities or talents.

-Stephen G. Post: UNLIMITED LOVE. pp. 142-144. 

