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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## To Hell and Back

By Ron Allen

Approximately 2300 persons are reported missing in America every day. A large percentage of them are children, some of whom are abducted as part of fraught custody disputes. Others are teenagers seeking escape from their parents for a variety of reasons. Too often missing persons become homicide statistics, but some, after being located by investigative bodies, make it clear that being ‘found’ was the very last thing they had hoped for.

In such cases, the question arises: what kind of person would want to treat concerned loved ones with such cruel indifference? But a deeper question would be: What motivates a parent, sibling or spouse to endure humiliation and rejection for years on end without giving up hope for reunion?

In the book that bears his name, Jonah is absent without leave but not from domestic constraints. He is hiding from God, and hoping not to be found. So stubborn is he that he chooses death by drowning over a return to God and responsibility. This is how he comes to be thrown from his ship into a stormy sea where he is immediately swallowed by a great fish.

During his sojourn in the fish’s gut, Jonah, for the first time since he began his getaway, has second thoughts. Not once in the long trek overland to Joppa, nor throughout the whole period of the storm when the sailors were praying to their gods—not once did Jonah pray to his God. Now, in his submarine conveyance, enveloped in digestive juices, he prays. Nearly all of Jonah 2 is his ‘fish-belly prayer.’ Within it are terms and expressions which help us appreciate the totality of his peril, the finality of his doom.

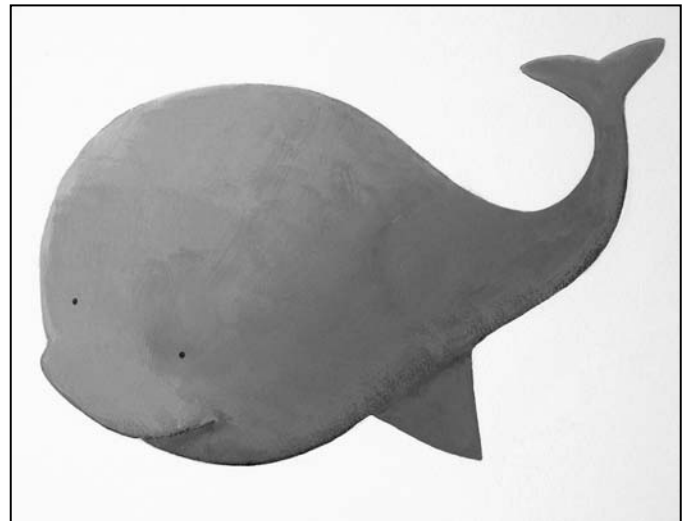
*“In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help...”* (Jonah 2:2). The ‘depths of the grave’ (NIV), or ‘the belly of hell’ (KJV). Jonah used the language of death to describe his position. *“Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights”* (Jonah 1:17). Three days and three nights indicate the greatest degree possible. In 1 Samuel 30:12, an Egyptian man in a state of extreme hunger is said to have not eaten for three days and three nights. On Easter morning, when two disciples were unwittingly accompanied by Jesus on the Emmaus road, they told him how their hopes had been crushed by the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, and that it was now *the third day since these things were done.*

‘They meant ‘these things’ were well and truly done and any reversal of fortune was therefore impossible.

The belly of the fish is, for all intents and purposes, the belly of death. Jonah has arrived in a place from which there can be no return.

The Lord *“prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah”* (1:17). Elsewhere, the word ‘swallow’ occurs as *gulp* or *devour*. Psalm 141:7 pictures the grave with a mouth that swallows people up. Isaiah 5:14 imagines Sheol (the grave) as insatiably hungry. Death has eaten Jonah up.

Much of Jonah’s ‘fish’ prayer is made up from quotations from the Psalms which were the common language of Hebrew worship. Chapter 2:5, 6 however appear totally original with Jonah. *“The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.”*



Genesis 1 speaks of ‘the deep’ as a vast, chaotic, and watery mass overspread by darkness. In creation, Yahweh triumphs over the deep by causing it to fall back as dry land emerges. The life-sustaining atmosphere (firmament) put in place becomes a habitable zone between the watery deep beneath and the water in the sky above. At the time of the flood, chaos threatens to make a return as the ‘fountains of the deep’ are opened and the sky unburdens its watery cargo. At the Exodus,

*Continued on the next page*

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

In 1998 Natasha Ryan was fourteen years of age. After going to a movie one evening, she spoke with friends outside the cinema, and that was the last they saw of her. She never went home. Her parents, who reported her disappearance to police, were gripped by worry and dread. Law enforcement and volunteers searched high and low for her, but to no avail.

At the time, several other young women had been abducted and killed by a man who was subsequently arrested and jailed. Natasha's parents were haunted by the awful possibility that their daughter had fallen victim to the same person. Imagine then, their agony, when detectives questioned the criminal in question and he confessed to murdering Natasha. Police took him under escort from his cell and asked him to show them where he had left Natasha's body. He took them deep into woodland outside the city but was unable to indicate the place where he had left her.


Years passed. Natasha's family, in the absence of her remains, held a memorial ceremony for their little girl. In time, the accused was brought to trial for slaying Natasha. But the trial was stopped mid-course when a message was passed to the judge which bore the information that Natasha Ryan had been discovered—alive. She had been living with her boyfriend a few miles from her parent's home.

For almost five years she had remained hidden; her whereabouts known only to herself and her boyfriend. Every day she stayed inside, watched videos, and surfed the internet. Only late at night did she venture out for a drive with her boyfriend in his car. Sometimes his family would come over for a barbecue. Those times she hid for hours in a wardrobe till they left.

In the first weeks and months, Natasha followed news reports of her disappearance. She saw her parent's tearful pleas for public help to find their daughter. She literally watched them age with sorrow that she had brought upon them.

When news broke in the courtroom and spilled out into the community that Natasha was alive and well, her parents were all at once happy as well as sad. The child who had turned her back on home and hearth, scorned its sponsorship and generosity to choose a lean and fugitive existence, came home. She was received with love and relief. Some neighbors remarked: "There's a girl who needs a good thrashing." But her deeply wounded parents embraced her with tears.

During her years in hiding, there were times when Natasha thought: "I want to go home; I will go home; I must go home." But as weeks turned to months, and months became years, the awful thing that had been done to her Mom and Dad became more awful still. It became too cruel, too stupid, and too monstrous. "My parents will be worse than horrified; they will be outraged, and unable to forgive me." So she stayed hidden while the wrong grew even larger and more revolting. And all the while her parents waited, longing to see her, longing to have her back with them again.

Natasha Ryan—a daughter—reprises the story of the Prodigal Son. Her parents echo the father in that story, who yearned for reunion with his boy. The book of Jonah is similar. All three stories are metaphors for God's love for humanity; a love that suffers long and never gives up. 

*Continued from previous page*

Yahweh dries up the waters of the *great deep* to let Israel pass. In hot pursuit, Pharaoh is drowned as God causes the sea to return and *the deep waters* cover them (Exodus 15: Isaiah 51:10).

In his frantic plea for rescue, Jonah describes himself as surrounded by *the deep*. He thereby conveys an impression of a man who has fallen into the clutches of the primal forces of non-existence; he is in the grip of everything contrary to human life.

*"To the roots of the mountains I sank down..." (2:6).* In ancient times, people thought of the mountains as having roots that penetrated even down to the great deep. *"The earth barred me in forever (2:6).* This expression completes Jonah's portrayal of his journey into the underworld. Death's power was seen as absolute; irreversible. It was a prison with locks that could not be broken. Jesus referenced this view of the grave when he promised the church that *"the gates (bars) of hell would not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).*

Immersed in the caverns of the deep, down among the roots →

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of the great mountains, swallowed by the sea, devoured by a sea-monster, manacled by seaweeds and locked away forever in a prison of nothingness, Jonah has gone as far as it is possible for him to go in his bid to escape God. No more inaccessible place is conceivable to him. His artfulness in avoiding God and duty is exhausted. There is nothing left of his intellect and initiative which he might use to camouflage himself from the divine purview. In a place where there is nowhere else to go and nothing he can do—there God comes to him. No. There God already awaits him to answer the prayer of his renegade, restore him to fellowship, and conscript him once more to his purpose.

What madness drives a man to isolate himself from a God who refuses to give him up? Jonah's story allegorizes Israel of his day. It lampoons the dumb folly of a privileged people. In its entirety the book of Jonah enunciates God's frustration with a reluctant and careless people. It embodies what is conveyed by the expression: 'stiff-necked.'

But Jonah is more than Israel; he is every individual or group who, professing faith in the one true God, balk at duties implied by such a relationship. Jonah is the very essence of Church folk in their frequent disinclination to do God's work. Many are content to be called Christian as long as it does not involve taking it to extremes like Jesus did. They are relentless in choosing detours, seeking out diversions, endlessly devising ways of to ease themselves of unpleasantly clear and simple imperatives such as: forgive as God forgives, be merciful as God is merciful to you, love as you have been loved. And so on.

Jonah draws attention not only to the riddle of human wrong-headedness, but also to the more astonishing mystery of a God who would risk so much by creating an intractable creature such as man in the first place.

From beginning to end Jonah's story tells of the sovereignty of the God who made heaven and earth. He commands the wind and it blows. He directs, and sea heaves and tosses. At his call a great storm comes up, waxing and waning at his word. A great fish answers his summons.

Primitive peoples thought that human destiny was chiefly threatened by the caprices of the natural environment—storm, tempest, wild beasts and the lurking mysteries of the deep. Yet

in Jonah, these conventional enemies of human well-being do not hinder or defy God's will. On the contrary, they help it forward. They are all agents in God's grand plan to reclaim his delinquent.

Amid a symphony of cooperation with divine working, Jonah is the one jarring note. In creating humanity God brought into being a problem child. Here is a miscreant suckled on covenant mercies; a prodigal, faring sumptuously at his father's table where there is always bread enough and to spare. Jonah is a man who goes to church, says his prayers, pays tithe and takes the pledge.

The most sinister challenge to God's rule comes not from the forces of nature or rampant unbelief. It comes from persons and peoples who say they believe in God and refuse to go on his errands; from them who said: *"I go sir", but went not*" (Matthew 21:30). They—not the vulgar and ignorant—test the scope of the consents and liberties with which God has favored mankind.

*"And the Lord command the fish, and it vomited Jonah on to dry land"* (Jonah 2:10).

Here, many hundreds of years before Christ came, we have the daring proposition that God is able to deliver, even from death. Jonah's arrival on dry land amounts to a resurrection. The wind, the sea, the fates, the ship and crew—all are instruments in God's hands. The fish's belly is not beyond God's reach. At his command, death regurgitated Jonah.

In consideration of the suggestion that death itself is no impediment to God's ability to restore humanity to new life and opportunity, it is not surprising that Jesus inferred a meaningful relationship between his own work and Jonah's experience.

*"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* (Matthew 12:40).

Compare the two: Both Jonah and Jesus are appointed by God to a special task. One *comes* to 'do the Father's will and to finish his work', the other *goes* to avoid it. Both Jonah and Jesus end up in the 'heart of the earth' (Sheol, the grave). Jesus is there because—as God's Son, he 'so loves the world.' Jonah is there because he does *not* love the world. The one chooses hell in order to be lost to God and those God loves. The other (Jesus) chooses hell in order to seek and to save the lost.

Jonah went to hell to escape from God—only to be found by him there. He had some notion of God's mercy, but no idea of its vastness. He had limited views of God's forbearance. At the bottom of the world, in an abyss of his own choosing, Jonah was introduced to conceptions of divine grace which would later burst upon the whole world through the gospel.

The God who pursued Jonah is the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no extremity of ignorance, folly or audacity of rebellion which can brook his intention to retrieve us from our refusal to serve him. When in our recklessness and idiocy, we have coiled ourselves about with so many ropes of difficulty that we are unable to release ourselves, God is close by. He pursues us even into the jailhouse of death—and beyond. For this reason, any man, any woman, can and should live in joy, hope and high purpose.



## USELESS DISPUTATION

By William Neil

About the same time as the story of Ruth and Naomi, written in protest against racial intolerance, another skilful propagandist wrote a humorous little story with the same purpose. This was the tale of Jonah and the Whale, which has become famous for quite the wrong reasons. It is not so long ago that the fundamentalists were prepared to argue that, that if you did not believe that Jonah was swallowed by the whale as the Bible says, it meant that you did not believe in God. One staunch defender of the verbal infallibility of the Bible went so far as to say that if the Bible said the whale was swallowed by Jonah he would believe that too.

What nonsense people make of the Bible and of this story when they either solemnly claim that it is impossible for a man to emerge alive from a whale's inside after three days, or equally solemnly maintain that some whales have been found with gullets big enough for a man to slip in and pop out again. Perhaps what would have annoyed the author of the story most in all this dreary disputation would be that his joke had fallen flat. For the whole tale is full of fun and fantasy, and the bit about the whale is only one of the places where the story-teller expected his audience to laugh.

But of course, behind his fun the author is in deadly earnest. What he is really writing is a passionate plea for racial tolerance at a time when the official policy introduced by Ezra and furthered by his disciples was that anyone but a pure Jew was a second-class citizen in the sight of God. He tells this tale of a dour, unlovable man in the hope that his countrymen will recognize it as a caricature of themselves. When he pillories Jonah, he pillories the whole Jewish community in his day. All the characters are as fictitious as those in Jesus' parables of The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. The author might have prevented his story from becoming the center of much stupid controversy if he had made his hero anonymous, as Jesus did. People would not then have been tempted to regard this amusing tale as true in fact, though it is undoubtedly, like Jesus' parables, true to life.

William Neil: THE BIBLE STORY, pp. 105, 106. 

## GOD'S INTERMINABLE DELAYS

By Desmond Ford

Why should Moses wait eighty years before his real life work? Why all those decades in court and desert before undertaking the work of redemption? And Paul, did you know he had a fourteen-year delay before he began to do those other things the Spirit felt worth recording in the New Testament? And you; is your work and life tedious? Are you measuring out the moments with coffee spoons—"tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?"

His thoughts are surely not our thoughts, nor his ways our ways. They are higher, just as the heavens are higher than the earth. It is just as though God is more concerned with making people than making waves; and more concerned with soul-making than casting down the social and religious strongholds of error and evil. Maybe.

Take Moses. "Forty years learning to be somebody, forty years learning to be nobody. Then God could use him for forty years." Exactly. When God wanted to make a world he started from nothing—worse than nothing—chaos, without form and void and wreathed in blackness.

Take Paul. Trained at the University of Tarsus, tutored by the best Jewish teachers of the day, a citizen of Rome, probably a member of the Sanhedrin. He had it made. Did he? He was also a murderer. He held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen and breathed out vengeance against all Christians wherever he might find them. He had some things to learn as surely as Moses did.

So Paul spent three years meditating in Arabia and studying the ancient scrolls of Scripture. Then he gave ten years of Christian service at Tarsus, but if our available reports are to be taken as the last word, he did not do much worthy of shouting about. Paul spent fourteen years of training in solitude behind the real stage before he came into sight. Well, that was quicker than it was for Moses.

Is God in more of a hurry now? No, that can't be it. Remember, his ways are past finding out. But we do hear whispers of his ways. Job says so (Job 26:14). We see through a glass dimly—but we do see. Enough to walk, not enough to boast.

Remember the man who sold a donkey? The buyer came back complaining that the animal was not obedient. "Not obedient?" queried the former owner. He then took a piece of two-by-four lumber and hit the donkey over the head with it. "First you have to get his attention," he told the buyer.

Hmmm! Does God train us with a two-by-four? Yes, and by gentler methods. Wooden heads need wooden attention-getters. When he has our attention, life and service begin. The delay is over. 