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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## JESUS AND THE TEMPLE

By Ron Allen

It was only natural that the first Christians, being Jews, should want to go to the temple to worship (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 4:1; 5:12, 42). The temple on Mount Zion had been at the center of their spiritual life for so long, it was still idealized in their minds as the place to meet God. Many of Jesus' followers who came there to pray may have taken heart when a large number of priests believed (Acts 6:7). The priests were Israel's pastors. Their example counted for something. Would the historic faith and the temple that institutionalized it embrace the gospel? Just think: the potential existed for Christ to make Israel and its religion greater than ever!



really about Him, that he was the Son of David—the Son who would truly set his people free, that he was greater than the prophets, greater than Solomon who built the temple, and that God was his father. Stephen's preaching in the Synagogue echoed the claims Christ had made for himself. In associating himself with Jesus in this way, he linked himself to his fate.

Arraigned before the same tribunal that tried and condemned Jesus, Stephen had his opportunity to deny the charges brought against him. What were other Christians thinking and feeling? Perhaps they thought that Stephen's trial would be a chance for the conversion of the

Sanhedrin; that Stephen would explain that he really was a friend of the temple, a friend of the law, a friend of this place.

But this never happened. He didn't do it. Instead, he pressed on with a reasoned argument in favor of Christ's ascendancy over Moses, over law and temple, thereby validating the accusations against him.

Jewish leaders, and many Christians at the time, clung to their belief that God and the national religion—in particular Jerusalem and its temple—were indissolubly connected. To come to the temple was to draw near to God. 'This place' was God's place. Stephen challenged these ideas. He contended that the gospel could never be imprisoned in Judaism. Christ was too great for it, too magnificent, too good—"wonderful counselor, mighty God, prince of peace"—no institution could contain that!

So Stephen defends himself before the Sanhedrin. His mastery of sacred history is impressive, and his understanding of it is unique. He begins (Acts 7) with "*Our father Abraham.*" God spoke to him when he was "*far away in Mesopotamia*" (verses 1, 2) and told him to leave his country for places unknown. He obeyed and came to Canaan, a land peopled by heathens. God spoke to him while he was in Canaan, promising him possession of the land in which he was a stranger (Acts 7:5, 6).

Abraham was followed by Isaac and Jacob to whom the promise was reaffirmed (verse 8). Then Stephen moves on to

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In addition to the temple itself, there were also several synagogues in Jerusalem. Christian Jews also attended these. One was called the 'Synagogue of the Freed Men', attended by Jews visiting Jerusalem from the Dispersion. Among those who worshiped there was a man named Stephen. He was among the seven deacons appointed in Acts 6 and he spoke there about Jesus. As he taught in the Synagogue, he was heard to say something to this effect: "*That Jesus would destroy the temple at Jerusalem, and in three days build another, not made by human hands*" (see Mark 14:58). These words disturbed some worshipers and they argued unsuccessfully with Stephen. When they could not withstand his grasp of Scripture nor the spirit with which he spoke, they resorted to half-truths and false reports about him. This brought about such an uproar that Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin to answer charges.

The accusations against him were these:

1. That he had blasphemed against Moses and against God (Acts 6: 11);
2. That he had spoken against *this place* (the temple) and against the law (verse 13);
3. That he had spoken of destroying the temple and changing the customs given through Moses (verse 14).

These were serious charges. The temple and the law enshrined in it were thought to be just as inviolable and permanent as God himself. For Stephen to even hint otherwise was to echo the blasphemy of Jesus: that his testimony was greater than that of Moses, that the Scriptures themselves were

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

Asher Lev, the artist son of a leader in a strict Jewish sect, has an angst-ridden relationship with his parent. His father does not understand why a Jew would even want to paint pictures when there is so much more important work to be done to help bring Messiah. “Your drawings puzzle me,” he tells Asher. “Do you deliberately strive to be difficult?”

**Asher:** “Some art is difficult because life is difficult.”

**Father:** “We are not meant to do that. We should make things clear, not create darkness.”

**Asher:** “Darkness and difficulty are not the same thing. When something has many sides to it, it is not easy to show it simple and clear.”

**Father:** “God didn’t create an ambiguous world; we can’t redeem the world with ambiguity.”

**Asher:** “I try to redeem the world through my art.”


**Father:** “We can’t give people ambiguity; we must give them certainty.”

In this way father and son struggles to reach across the abyss that lies between them. One inhabits a world in which everything is settled and clear. The other beholds and feels a world laden with mystery. Asher looks at his father and asks, “Do we understand everything about the people we know?” “Not everything, no,” replies father.

“Then how can we expect to understand everything about God?” Asher asks.

It is a fair question. We do not know everything about anything. Least of all do we know everything about the most complex portion of creation—personality. Family members know that to live at close quarters with another individual is to be frequently surprised, nonplussed, mystified, and wrong-footed by spouse, child or sibling. There is always a new layer of conscious life coming into view in those we think we know. And relationships are all the better when respondents do *not* say: “I’m not ready for this; I wasn’t told about this, or I can’t accept this.” It is far better to enter into the new enrichment and live in wonder.

There is no shortage of persons who claim to know everything about God. They have him figured out; they have his number. But comfortably assured though they are that they have nailed him down in their creed, it is possible—not to say likely—that they do not know much about him at all.

Scripture says that God is “*past finding out*” (Job 9:10). There are advantages, rewards, delight and joy without end for those who freely admit that they have scarcely begun to plumb the depths of God. The best—and ultimately the only—option for humans is to *trust* God; have faith in him. And where faith is, love can grow. 

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Joseph who was sold into Egypt by his brothers. God was with him in Egypt and spoke to him there (verses 9, 10).

Now the narrative reaches Moses. Just as God was with Joseph in Egypt, so is he with Moses in Egypt, in Midian. There at the burning bush, Moses was obliged to remove his sandals because the place was holy; God was there (Acts 7:20-38). Afterwards, God is with Moses in Egypt again, then at Sinai. The God of Israel is certainly very mobile.

Stephen mentions Israel’s rebellion at Sinai. When Moses had disappeared into the cloud atop the mountain, and was gone for 40 days, the people became increasingly restive. Where was Moses? Where was God? They couldn’t even see him. With their own hands they made a god—a golden calf. They sacrificed to what their hands had made. They didn’t want a hidden, mysterious God. They wanted a tangible one whose whereabouts was known; one they could control. So they made one and danced around it (verses 39-42).

Finally, Stephen alludes to the temple that was assembled in the wilderness according to God’s instruction to Moses; the temple that moved around from location to location for 40 years. Not until Solomon did the temple come to a complete standstill. But even then, Solomon himself admitted in his dedicatory prayer that even such a grand, man-made edifice could not house God (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 7:47-50).

Now the logic of Stephen’s long reply to the Sanhedrin gathers force. He is accused of speaking against the temple, against the law represented by it, of blasphemy against ‘this place.’ But his collocation of examples of God’s presence and activity—outside Israel, outside Jerusalem, away from Mount Zion, away from any fixed house of worship, before the giving of the law, before priest ark and altar—implicitly removes the basis of allegations against him.

What the Golden Calf was to Israel at Sinai, so the temple is to Stephen’s accusers. It is an idol to them. By means of it they have God where they can control him, fixed in once place, the →

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work of their hands. The temple makes God manageable. They have the god-business sewn-up. They always know where God is. There is no mystery, no ambiguity. He is confined within the superstructure of their 'place,' their ritual, their teaching, organization. Since they are the temple custodians, they control access to God.



The 19th century Catholic scholar said: *"To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."* Temple advocates—defenders of law and place—have their own version of that maxim: *"To be perfect is to have never changed at all!"*

If we followers of Jesus come to believe that God is tethered to our ideas, our interpretations of Scripture, we are in danger of possessing God. If we insist on the preservation of the God we have enshrined in our intellectual and institutional structures, we will stand where the Sanhedrin stood at the time of Stephen. We will have taken ownership of God and thereby drained him of all mystery and wonder. We will be trapped in our religious museum.

If we think of God as the conjoined twin of our organization, our certainties; if in defending our position, our 'place' we think we are defending God, we will have devoted ourselves not to a living person, but to a thing.

Jesus gives us a God who is on the move; a God who is going somewhere; a God with plans and purposes. Not a hidebound, petrified, unblinking, unimaginative idol-god of paganism, but the Living God; full of mystery, wonder and creative unexpectedness.



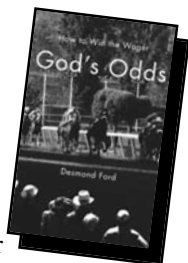
## God's Odds

Our daily choices are governed by our personal philosophy. For all action some hypothesis about the origin and nature of the universe and humanity must be adopted, whether consciously or unconsciously. We act according to prior decisions as to what has value and whether there is meaning to life. The question regarding what is good and what should be is answered by our personal decision regarding the beginning of all things. Are we just dirt plus time plus chance, or are we the children of a loving heavenly Father? This book sets forth the odds that the God spoken of in the Christian Bible are overwhelming, and that therefore the Christian faith is the best basis for every life.

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# RISK

By Peter Cameron

The Old Testament says that we are made in the image of God and the New Testament says that we are called to freedom. This means that we are invited to imitate God's creativity and to share in it.... God is the one who takes risks. You can see this in the abject specimens of humanity he singles out to fulfill his purposes—the cheats and liars and weaklings, like old Jacob and King David and the apostle Paul. You can see it in that masterstroke of risk and imagination and lateral thinking, the incarnation, when God took it into his head to become a human baby. Who else but God would ever have had that idea, or been willing to try it?

And, God, in Jesus, is the one who is open, open to everyone, to criminals and whores and misfits. He comes not to call the righteous (in other words the orthodox believers) who can quote the Scriptures and shelter behind them. Instead of these he comes to call sinners, like the woman of the streets who poured out precious ointment and washed his feet with her hair. It was a crazy gesture, which aroused the horrified indignation of the Pharisee, but which has become an eternal symbol of the imaginative extravagance which lies at the heart of Christianity.

It is this kind of imaginative act that we are called to perform. The teaching of Jesus is full of similar challenges: the merchant is to sell everything to buy the one true pearl; the rich young man is to give away everything he has and follow Jesus; we are to put our hand to the plough and not look back; we must leave our dead to bury their dead; we must imitate the Son of Man in having no place to lay our heads; we must abandon everything—houses, families, possessions.

Always it is a question of risk. We must in principle be prepared to jettison everything; and that means not just material things, and not even mainly material things. It applies much more to the things of the mind, to our presuppositions, to the mental strait-jacket which controls us. We can only really be open to God if we are prepared to accept the possibility that everything we think we know about him and about ourselves is mistaken.

-Peter Cameron: NECESSARY HERESIES, pp.174, 175.



# CHRIST MINISTERS TO THE THIRSTY

By Desmond Ford

Our Lord Jesus cared infinitely for individuals. In John's gospel we have no public sermon of the length of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but we do have approximately nineteen interviews with individuals. Such encounters with the Master are a repository of great riches. Let us consider just one of them—the encounter with the Samaritan woman.

Have you noticed the series of contrasts between John 3 and John 4? One is the story of an encounter with a Jew, the other with a Gentile. In one instance, Jesus speaks with a man; in the other, it is with a woman. The first occurs by night, the second by day. Nicodemus is of spotless reputation, but the woman is despised even by her own kind. With the Pharisee, Jesus seems hard and abrupt, like the law of Sinai; but with the Samaritan outcast, he is distinctly different in approach. He does not tell her that she should be born again but instead offers her a great gift. The emphasis is clearly grace, not law.

As we approach this story, let us keep in mind that this Gospel as a whole is an indictment of the unbelieving Jews. Every miracle of the book tells of their lost estate. They were without joy (John 2); without health (John 4); without strength (John 5); without spiritual nourishment (John 6); without security (John 6); without the light of truth (John 9); and without life (John 11). In John 1:19, 26 we see a blinded priesthood, in John 2:3 a joyless nation, in John 2:14 a desecrated temple, in John 3:7 a lifeless Sanhedrin.

Now in chapter 4 we read the tragic words, *'The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans'* (verse 9). Intended by God to be priests to the whole world, they had hardened into an elitist society proud of their barriers. Their song might well have been:

*We are the chosen few  
All others will be damned.  
There's no room in heaven for you  
Heaven can't be crammed.*

Too many Jewish prayers, no matter how high-sounding they were, by the time they reached heaven could be reduced to this vein:

*God bless me and my wife  
My son Jacob and his wife  
Us four, and no more.  
Amen.*

Let Christians beware. John, while describing Jews, is addressing believers in Christ. He is saying in effect: 'The greatest religionists of history failed. Beware lest you follow in their wake.' All four Gospel writers make it clear that Jesus and the Jews were almost totally agreed about doctrine, but they had a different view of God. The Pharisees had made God in their own image: cold, austere, legalistic. But Christ's God as in his image, the image of the man, received sinners and ate with them.

Observe that the chapter opens by telling us emphatically that Jesus himself did not baptise. He commanded baptism and endorsed it, but he left the work to others. Right at the introduction to this encounter we are thereby reminded that



outward ordinances and theoretical creeds are not the primary things about the gospel of Christ. No outward form guarantees salvation.

That which comes to us 'without money and without price' was purchased by the blood of Christ. By the symbolic water Christ offers the gift of eternal life to one who apparently did not even merit continued existence in this life. And Christ is there purposely to make the offer of grace. That is why he is first at the well, and why he also is the first to speak. Unless he draws us, we cannot leave the old life. *"We love him because he first loved us."*

The encounter took place at noon-day. The wise Bishop, Ryle, cannot resist warning ministers at this point to heed this 'beautiful carefulness' to avoid even the appearance of evil. The woman, unlike Nicodemus, is not interviewed in the isolation of darkness. Too many men pray, "Lead us not into temptation," and then speed off in that direction.

But even more beautiful is Christ's tact in asking a favor. "Give me a drink" he requests, startling a woman to whom no decent Jew would speak. In the verses that follow, observe the master soul-winner at work. He uses all the laws of the mind, that he, himself instituted. We see him using the psychological principles of attention, interest, desire, conviction, visualisation and action. From the woman's own thoughts and needs, Christ selected the images and concepts that would weld desire and conviction into ultimate saving choice.

The heart of Christ's revelation must be given our attention: *"Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life"* (John 4:13, 14).

The woman of Samaria would rather argue doctrine than have her soul surveyed—and so it is today. We mistake creeds for deeds and beliefs for love. For that reason, the Master showed the woman her sin and then her Savior (John 4:18-26).

None can drink of the water of life till they have known the convictions of sin, guilt and grace that this ancient Samaritan experienced. Those who find nothing external to fill and satisfy their souls, also find nothing internal to meet their need.

The first draught of the living water the woman requested of Christ was conviction of sin. None can value the physician till he feels his disease. Christ frequently *upsets* before he *sets up*. He afflicts before he comforts and convicts before he converts.

Notice how Christ's thrust toward the close of the conversation summarises the relationship between the old and new truth:

*Jerusalem will you worship the father... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and truth. For such the father seeks to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth* (John 4:21-24).

Salvation is of the Jews; yet, the sacred Jewish places are no more. Whatever is limited to geographical sites has no meaning in the Christian era. For Christ has taken away the sin of the world, not just of Judea! 