



February 2013



GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

NOT BEING SERVED RIGHT

By Ron Allen

Four prisoners had escaped! They had fled into the wilderness of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania); from the prison outpost known as Hell's Gates. It was a place reserved for the 'worst of the worst.' The discipline at Hell's Gates was so severe that convicts would risk everything to escape. In 1822, 169 of the 182 inmates held there received as many as 2000 lashes with the 'cat-o- nine-tales.' In ten years 112 escaped. All of the 62 that were found were recovered dead.

It was six weeks since the four had gone. As it turned out, three died and one speared his foot on a sharp root. He dragged himself back to the prison, near enough to dead.

The Commandant, Captain Vickers, and his Lieutenant, Mr. Frere, examined the escapee. "I suppose I'll have to flog him again," said Vickers.

"You are too soft-hearted," observed Lieutenant Frere. "We must treat brutes like brutes."

"Far be it from me to find fault with our system," said the captain. "But sometimes I wonder whether kindness would succeed better than the chain and the 'cat.'

"Dear me, dear me," Mr. Frere began, "Such funny ideas. I know convicts; you have to keep 'em down; make 'em feel what they are. If they won't work, flog 'em; if they do work, give 'em a taste of the cat anyhow."

"I know that is the general opinion, Mr. Frere. But think of the terrible life they have. It's horrible to think of."



"Well, they shouldn't get sent here then," said Frere, "It serves 'em right."

There are many who would agree with Mr. Frere. Most people, at least some of the time, subscribe to the proverbial wisdom that you get what you deserve in this world. And if there are some who seem to prosper without their deserving it, they are exception; they are simply luckier than they ought to be.

At work, in business, in civic and interpersonal affairs, most venture on a convention of fair exchange. We expect to get at least as much as we give. Our economic system assumes what our goods and services are worth; we expect to be paid.

International trade is carried forward on the pragmatic notion of 'mutual' benefit'; that we *will* get our just deserts. A young couple may believe their love is a rare specimen of altruism. But it probably isn't. Few can continue to love another person without any returning pay-off.

When Dan was fifteen he fought with his father. He and Dad never could see eye-to-eye about anything on the farm. Eventually, Dad had had enough. He swore at Dan and told him to 'clear off and never come back.'

So Dan went and was gone for a very long time. No one knew where he was. Dad never spoke of him and Mother prayed for him. One day Dad and his younger son Dave were working in the shed. Dave looked out and saw a tall figure striding towards them across the field. "It's Dan," Dave said.

Dan walked straight up to his sire and put out his hand. Dad hesitated. "I know, I know," said Dan. "You turned me out, and you were right to do it. I deserved it. I've had to learn for myself how things should be. I've taken some knocks, I've paid my dues and now, I'm back, a wiser man, a better man, ready to shake your hand, sir."

Dad began to blubber. He shook Dan's hand. They were reconciled and Dad could not have been happier. He took him home and proudly presented his firstborn to the rest of the family. All that evening Dan held everyone spellbound with tales of his adventures. Dad spoke optimistically of the future, and Dan let it out that he might buy a farm nearby 'as soon as his money came through.' In the interim, however, he might have to ask Dad for a few hundred dollars just to see him through till then. "Not a worry," said Dad, "take a thousand."

Continued on the next page

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EDITORIAL . . .




Pastor Ron Allen

“When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form.’ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this they tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd, shouting: ‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth, and sea and everything in them” (Acts 14:11-15).

The two missionaries had fled stoning in the city of Iconium. But that was not as upsetting to them as their being worshiped by the people of Lystra. In Bible times, a person wishing to display extreme emotion would tear his clothes, and this is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did. Far from seeking to benefit themselves accepting an exalted status that was being thrust upon them by the enthusiastic crowd, they insisted that their only motive in healing the crippled man was to “bring them good news.” They had intended to help the Lystrans “turn away from worthless idols” and serve the “living God.”

The worthless things are the gods of paganism which the Lystran people believed in; their false ideas of God. “Worthless things” stand in stark contrast to “living God.” Worth is closely linked to that which is life-giving. Only the Creator God can give life.

The two Christian witnesses tell the good news when they confess that they are only men; men like their hearers; men like all other men. If true worth issues out of an ability to impart life, the apostles—in one sense—are among the worthless things whom men and women worship in vain.

The gospel is only truly taught when its exponents admit they are not the gospel. Like John the Baptist, they “do not fail to confess, but confess freely, we are not the Christ” (John 1:20). God alone is the living God. Human beings are touched creatively by him in their reception of his daily providences which lavishes upon them gratuitously and indiscriminately. Rejoice, therefore, God likes to be generous. Rejoice, God’s kindness gives us life. Be glad, though we are only flesh and blood, brimful of the passions common to all men, yet he asks *us* to be bringers of good news to our fellows; sharers and bearers of his new life. 

Continued from previous page

Dan took the money and put it in his pocket. Next day he said he might need to borrow a pair of Dad’s boots; “just till his stuff came through.” “Plenty of boots here,” Dad said.

Dan followed Dad around talking to him all the while. He spoke to him of his plans. He talked while Dad did the milking; he talked more when Dad was digging post-holes for a new fence; he talked while Dad was mending the hole in the side of the shed, and while he was feeding the cows and pitching hay.

A few days passed and Dan didn’t follow Dad around anymore. He sat in the rocking chair on the veranda, watching Dad work. He stopped doing that after a while, borrowed Dad’s horse and rode into town. Next day he borrowed Dad’s best coat and trousers. He never bothered to take them off either, but just wore them into town every day.

After a while Dad stopped talking to Dan. He could never find things he wanted to use or to wear and when Dan came

home drunk and left the horse standing with the saddle on all night, Dad yelled at him, telling him to “clear off and never come back.”

Even in families, love has its price. We expect to be paid. When individuals won’t pull their weight, they should ‘get what they deserve.’

These snapshots from history and family life form the dull background against which the bright gospel should be viewed. Scripture teaches that ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). There is a moral universe against which we all offend. We are all convicts. Like Dan, we have all fought with our father. As regards our relation to God, we are rebels, recalcitrants, absconders, and opportunists all. Yet, *unlike* Frere, and Dan’s father, **God does not give us what we deserve.**

Note the Scripture:

“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven →

GOODNEWS *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.

Good News Unlimited magazine also seeks to keep readers up-to-date on all aspects of GNU’s ministries. This includes news on national and international radio broadcasts; public seminars, congresses, and Bible schools within the USA (as well as

public meetings in Canada and overseas); and the dissemination of literature, audio and video material. (A comprehensive catalog is available free on request.)

Good News Unlimited is a nonprofit religious corporation supported solely by donations from those who believe in its ministries. Gifts are tax deductible in the USA and Canada. An annual review of GNU’s accounts is made by an external auditor. All regular donors to GNU may receive a financial statement on request.

Good News Unlimited is reached by phone at 530.823.9690. Fax 530.823.5338. E-mail gnu@goodnewsunlimited.org.

This magazine is free upon request.

February, 2013
Vol. 32, No. 2

Published by Good News Unlimited

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and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:15-17).

God lets people ‘go their own way.’ He does not prevent us from obtaining what we want. We are able to use our God-given freedom to pursue a God-free agenda. So, the Prodigal uses the fortune obtained from his father to live life away from his father. In Romans, Paul describes a human race which “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (Romans 1:28).

But even as God lets men and women go their own way, they are not set entirely adrift from him. Wherever they go, they are confronted by reminders of the One from whom they would escape. He surrounds them with ‘testimonies’ witnesses to himself.

How does God testify to himself? By ‘showing kindness.’ He sends ‘rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; provides plenty of food and fills hearts with joy.’ It is true that the world is not without famine, and sometimes crops are destroyed by pests. But that takes nothing from the point made by Paul: By and large, the earth is well able to sustain its vast cargo of people with life’s necessities.

And who are they partaking of this largesse? Are they the God-fearers, the church-goers, the holy and true as opposed to the renegade and impious? Is it only those who are careful and prayerful? Is it Christians only? Are Muslims and Hindus excluded? Are atheists, profligates, existentialists and hedonists shut up from God’s bountiful supply? What of those who are convinced that God exists but do not like him; hope to forget about him or escape from him. What does God do for such as these?

He gives them air to breathe, sun to warm their backs



and grow their food. He plants them in an ecosystem dramatically sufficient to meet their need for nutrients. All this God does willingly, cheerfully, not grudgingly or sparingly. He pours out his benefits without stint and without distinction, making no discrepancy at all between those who love him and those who don’t.

Nor is God content to cover the world with gifts that serve humanity’s material needs alone. He cares for their spirits too. He fills their hearts with joy. The hardened atheist is gladdened by the warm sun on his neck, savors the velvet splendor of moonlight, is thrilled by waterfalls, mountains, rainbows, the magic of music, books, art and the satisfactions of creative effort and the gladness of filial and erotic love.

Those who go their own way are never free from God in any absolute sense; they simply cannot get away from his kindness. They cannot escape from God because he “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). Because he will not deal with them on the principle of ‘fair exchange,’ of ‘you get what you deserve,’ no one can live out their lives entirely separate from God. There may be some who believe they have nothing to do with God, but he has a great deal to do with them. He is always investing heavily in his relations with human beings. The fact that they do not deserve it and give nothing in return does not persuade him to curb his liberality.

When Roger Chillingworth arrived home in Boston, he was enraged and grieved to learn that Hester, his wife, had been unfaithful to him. Clearly she was pregnant—by another man. His suspicions fell on Arthur Dimmesdale, the brilliant clergyman no less.

The ‘good’ minister was indeed *the* man. Roger found this out by sheer cunning. He judged the minister his enemy but did not reveal to him that he knew. Instead he sought his friendship and confidence. He moved into the minister’s residence and asked to be his sponsor and benefactor. Day after day, month by month, he prepared Reverend Dimmesdale’s meals and went for long walks with him. To onlookers, it seemed that minister had no better friend in all the world than Roger Chillingworth.

But the friendship was a sham, a subterfuge. It was a cloak for reprisal. It was revenge in disguise, illustrating by contrast the way God treats those who betray him. He lets them go their own way. Yet his feeling for them never freezes over. He does not withdraw from them. Sorrowfully accepting their rejection of him, he nonetheless follows them around solicitously. The elements essential to normal life he supplies: Nourishment, shelter, the delights of human companionship. But—and here is where God and Mr. Chillingworth part company—these kindnesses God generously provides are not a preparation for revenge. They are the forerunners of grace more abundant, which he has prepared especially for them that believe.

Those who aim to live as if there is no God are up against a formidable reality. They cannot stop themselves from being beneficiaries of an immeasurable kindness which fills the universe in which they find themselves. Scripture says that this kindness is life-giving; it leads men and women to repentance. The realization that God loves us; that we can do nothing to make him stop loving us is the beginning of life—life more abundant.



NEW BEGINNING

“May I try?” said Sissy, emboldened to raise her hand to the neck that was insensibly dropping towards her. Louisa answered: “First, Sissy, do you know what I am? I am so proud and so hardened, so confused and troubled, so resentful and unjust to everyone and to myself, that everything is stormy, dark, and wicked to me. Does that not repel you?”

“No.”

“I am so unhappy, and all that should have made me otherwise is so laid waste, that if I had been bereft of sense to this hour, and instead of being as learned as you think me had to begin to acquire the simplest truths, I could not want a guide to peace, contentment, honor, all the good of which I am quite devoid, more abjectly than I do. Does not that repel you?”

“No.”


In the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming-up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light on the darkness of the other. Louisa raised the hand that it might clasp her neck and join its fellow there. She fell upon her knees, and clinging to this stroller’s child, looked up at her almost with veneration. “Forgive me, pity me, help me! Have compassion on my great need, and let me lay this head of mine upon a loving heart.

-Charles Dickens: *HARD TIMES*, p. 261. 



ROCK RELIGION

According to Jesus it isn’t good enough NOT to do bad, we must look for opportunities to actively do good. We must look for opportunities to express the practical care and loving concern for others that we would want expressed to us. This is a radical reorientation of morality for many people, religious and not. To put the emphasis of one’s morality on *not* harming anyone, as many religions do, is to help people graduate to the morality of stone. A rock doesn’t hurt anyone—it just sits there doing nothing. But we are made to love.

-Bruxey Cavey: *THE END OF RELIGION*, pp.188, 189. 

TURNING EVIL INTO GOOD

By Dr. Bing Wall

If evil’s been done to you (ah, that would be all of us), then Evil has a voice in your head. Here are a few scenarios:

Your wife greets you when you come home with a frown of disgust and you’ve worked hard all day and you are sacrificing for the family: so you shut down and withdraw, and either don’t come home or stay at work or go drinking with your buddies.

Your husband never talks to you and he works all the time, and when he’s home he’s into himself and just does his own thing, and there’s no place for you in his life so you make sure he knows how miserable he’s made you, and you remind him frequently of his shortcomings because he’s hurt you and he needs to know. Maybe if he knew how bad you are hurting he’d finally get it and treat you nice. So you remind him in no uncertain terms of his disregard for you. You decide not to do his laundry or you run up his credit cards for him.

This is evil telling you that if your spouse is evil to you, you need to be evil back. That’s the ticket. That will get your point across that you cannot be trifled with. But be careful. If you are evil to your spouse because she was evil to you, she will be tempted to listen to evil and decide that evil is right.

But what if you returned good for evil? Remember Joseph? His brothers sold him into slavery after seriously considering killing him. Through a maze of events, Joseph became the second in command in Egypt and was used by God to prepare Egypt and the whole region for a seven year famine. Nearly starving, his brothers came seeking grain and bowed at his feet, not knowing he was their brother. He could have had them legally slain on the spot. But he blessed them instead and gave them many undeserved things. He showed them many acts of kindness.

God is in the business of turning evil into good. What if you returned good for evil? What if instead of scoffing at your husband, you showed a genuine interest in him? What if instead of withdrawing from your wife, you called her up?

The cycle of evil would end. It’s sure possible and, believe me, it happens, but it’s hard. It puts the responsibility for evil back on the other person. If you are mean to me and I am nice to you, and you are still mean to me and I’m still nice to you, you can’t blame me for the fact that you are mean to me. Sooner or later you’ll get it.

This is not being a pushover. This is stopping the cycle of evil. This is planting seeds of love, patience, kindness, forgiveness, goodness, tenderness and graciousness. And then we get healing and change and growth. 