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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## RELIGION—GOOD AND BAD

By Ron Allen

When William Wilberforce was campaigning to end slavery, he became acquainted with a man named Samuel Marsden. His esteem for this young clergyman was such that he recommended him for the position of Assistant Chaplain to the infant colony of Australia.

Once the Reverend Marsden was installed in office, he displayed none of the kindly instincts of the man who recommended him. He devoted his missionary zeal to becoming wealthy through land acquisition, sheep-breeding, and the preaching of hell-fire sermons. Part of his duties required him to act as a judge. Most of the accused brought before him were convicts, a majority of whom were Irish. As defender of the Church of England, he made it his business to dispense harsh punishments to these recalcitrant Irishmen, all of whom were Catholic.

He became known as “The Flogging Parson,” because of his notorious preference for using the cat o’ nine tails to extract confessions. An eyewitness record of one of Marsden’s floggings runs thus:

*They pulled his arms around a tree with his breast squeezed hard against the trunk so that the man had no power to cringe. There were two floggers; one left-handed, the other right-handed. They stood at each side, and I never saw two threshers in a barn move their strokes ‘more handier’ than those two man-killers did.*

*I was to leeward of the floggers. The flesh and skin blew in my face as it shook off the cats. Fitzgerald received his 300 lashes. Dr. Mason—I will never forget him—he felt the victims pulse and smiled and said, ‘this man will tire you before he will fail, go on.’*

*The cat o’ nine stripped the flesh away from the spine and exposed it to the flies. And where the flesh was not so taken, it was reduced to jelly.*

This savage treatment was carried out on a large scale by order of one who bore both civil and religious office; a representative of the Church of England, and of the Christian God.

I have an opinion of the Reverend Samuel Marsden that probably approximates what the Irish thought of him. People

who believe in God and think others ought to do likewise are always going to be scrutinized by the broader society they inhabit. They ought not complain when they are dismissed as irrelevant, if their actions only serve to persuade their observers that God is not interested in them; that he cares not for their highest good, and is indifferent to their ill-usage and degradation.

It is said that a child begins to form a view of God from its parents; the male parent in particular. When you come to think on it, that is the only way anyone could ever build a conception of God: through an impression of him created by people. This is what Christians mean when they speak of the ‘incarnation’— it is God making himself known through the humanity of Jesus.

What impression of God do I give? What do folks think of God having met you, or your church? We are familiar with what happens at a party, a

wedding; someone is there with a camera and takes informal pictures of everyone. Later, these pictures are circulated and some—especially the ladies—are in despair about how they look. They feel that they are not truly represented by the photographs; and now they are out there, in emails, on the web, on YouTube. This common form of outrage illustrates God’s dilemma in the book of Amos. His people: Israel, are very devout. They conduct many sacred ceremonies invoking God’s name, but God is not impressed.

*“I hate, I despise your religious feasts. I cannot stand your Assemblies.... I will not accept them.... I have no regard for them.... Away with the noise of your songs” (Amos 5:21-23).*



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# EDITORIAL . . .

*“Meanwhile the elder son was in the field”  
(Luke 15:25).*

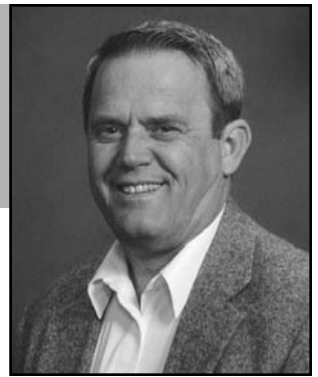
The most beautiful story ever told—the most renowned of Jesus’ parables—is most often referred to as the story of the “Prodigal son.” There is nothing wrong with this, but it does distract from a detail often passed over. Namely: there are two sons in the story, and one of them is his father’s first born; the elder son, mentioned above.

Unlike his sibling, the elder son is hardworking and conscientious. He is without the stupidity and recklessness of his brother. There is much about him to make his father proud. Well might the extra rights, responsibilities, and privileges of inheritance be awarded to him. Others in the family may be delinquent, but he will remain a model of diligence. His unblemished record of service contrasts sharply with the younger boy’s shortcomings, and this is something the firstborn son often thinks on.

One night the ne’er-do-well returns home. The father joins with the whole household in celebration. But the elder son is not present. He remains *in the field*. After all, someone has to take care of things.

When asked what all the revelry is about, the father explains, “we had to celebrate, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again” (v. 32). The elder son is angered. He cannot understand his father’s joyful response to the prodigal’s reappearance.

Despite his impeccable resume, all is not as it should be with the firstborn son. He is exposed as very correct, but quite ungracious; industrious, but loveless. He does not appreciate his privileges. He lives with his father. He enjoys all the comforts and support of a well-run household. Every day he derives benefits from his father’s good name and good will. He exists in an atmosphere drenched with love. Yet, little of this generous spirit has soaked into him. Despite the enormous advantages of living with his father, he thinks that he is yet deprived. Surrounded by ample evidence of his father’s goodness, he judges that he deserves more.



Pastor Ron Allen

For all his good points, the elder son is quite different from his father. He cannot bring himself to welcome his brother. He is offended because his father does not love the prodigal any less for his years of debauchery, and infuriated because his father does not appear to love him more on account of his years of faithful service.

When the father sighted his wayward son in the distance; all disgraced and worn, he ran to embrace him. He acted similarly toward his firstborn. He left the feast to look for him and entreat him to come and be part of the gladness. He did not wish to leave him outside alone and embittered.

Some people are more likable than others. Many are scrupulous and correct. They never scandalize their parents (they are loyal workers in the field), but they are not likable. They are just plain hard to be around; much less enjoyable than the rogues. But God loves them. What is amazing in Jesus’ story, is not just that he loves the rascal, but that he loves the son that we would have found most difficult to love—the one that always did right; the good boy that never disgraced anyone.



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## GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

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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

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Good News Unlimited is reached by phone at 530.823.9690. Fax 530.823.5338. E-mail [gnu@goodnewsunlimited.org](mailto:gnu@goodnewsunlimited.org).

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Editor  
Ron Allen

Printer  
Auburn Oaks Printing, Auburn, CA

Graphic Designer  
Debbie O’Brien

Proofreader  
Philip Rhodes

### OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

**Australian office:**  
P.O. Box 6788  
Tweed Heads 5th  
NSW 2486, Australia

**Canadian offices:**  
P.O. Box 537  
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5  
Canada

222 Olive Avenue  
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6  
Canada

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In the 8th century B.C., the church calendar under King Jeroboam II, included regular pilgrimages to three sacred locations: Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba. All three loomed large in the nation's sacred history.

Bethel is associated with Jacob in the book of Genesis. He stopped there in his flight from his brother Esau, whose hatred he had earned by reason of his own greed and deceit. A fugitive and a wanderer, he slept there and dreamed of a ladder that reached from heaven down to earth. He heard God speak to him, assuring him that he would fulfill the promise made to his grandfather Abraham. When he woke he said, "*Surely the Lord is in this place.*"

Many years later, Jacob came to Bethel on his return homeward. Again, he was given the assurance that God was with him, and would fulfill the ancient promise.

The second sacred site is Gilgal. After Israel had wandered in the desert forty years, they crossed the Jordan River into Canaan. The place where they camped was Gilgal. There they built an altar with twelve stones. The Passover was celebrated, and God confirmed his covenant with them. They inherited the promise first given to Abraham and God said: "*the land is yours, every place where you put your feet is yours, I have given it to you*" (*Joshua 1:1-5*).

The last of the three shrines visited regularly by Israelites was at Beersheba. Beersheba was associated with each of the 'big three' Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When Abraham first came there a pagan king, Abimelech, speaking under inspiration, said, "*God is with you in everything you do.*" (*Genesis 21:22*). Isaac, on his arrival at Beersheba, heard God say to him, "*I am the God of your father Abraham, do not be afraid for I am with you*" (*Genesis 26:24*). A generation later, Jacob was on his way to Egypt; being driven there by famine. God spoke to him saying: "*do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you*" (*Genesis 46:3, 4*).

Attendance at these shrines was accompanied by multiple animal sacrifices and grain offerings with many other kinds of offerings. There were large assemblies, the sound of singing and instrumental accompaniment and much feasting. It was that 'good old time religion'; the 8th century B.C. equivalent of Sunday morning at First Church.

But God despises these religious exercises and the reason is not far to seek.

*"For I know how many are your offenses, and how great are your sins; you oppress the righteous and take bribes. You deprive the poor of justice in the courts."  
(Amos 5:21-23).*

Israel was prosperous, materialistic, and acquisitive. Economic growth was the all-consuming national pastime. There was plenty of money around, but it was not evenly shared. It was held by an elite class at the expense of the poor. In the scramble to get rich, the rights of weaker citizens were sacrificed. A well-known example of this evil is the story of Naboth's vineyard. King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, corrupted the judges so that Naboth was put to death and his vineyard seized.

What incenses God is that this gross unfairness is conducted in a context of saintliness. The trashing of little people's rights is incorporated into a religious lifestyle so that a society emerges in which injustice masquerades as righteousness in God's name.

When God spoke to the patriarchs at Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba, he did not reveal himself as a God who cares nothing for the weak and needy. At Bethel, Jacob was lonely and afraid, a refugee with a sordid past. Yet, God came to him, assuring him of his sponsorship. At Beersheba, God made himself known to three successive generations of patriarchs telling them, "*fear not, I will be with you.*" All three shrines where Israel gathered recalled how God came into the lives of their fathers when they each were all alone in the world. At his



*The ladder was not for Jacob to climb up, it was for God to come down.*

own initiative, God intercepted Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when each of them was at a loss; when they were in disarray; without help or hope. Jacob laid down on his stone pillow and dreamed of a ladder that spanned the distance between heaven and earth. The ladder was not for Jacob to climb: it was for God to come down. It brought God to Jacob, and signified that—vagabond and flawed though he was—God was kindly disposed toward him.

Such was the original meaning of Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba. Each was a place at which God came to the aid of humanity when its weakness and susceptibility were writ large.

As Israel goes to its consecrated gatherings, singing hymns, playing music and making many offerings, God says:

*"Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel; do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba.... Seek the Lord and live.... you who turn justice into bitterness, and cast righteousness to the ground"* (*Amos 5:4-7*).

Rituals may be many and spectacular; worship may be carried out with much attention to form and detail, but God is not honored. The worshipers do not care about what God cares about. They are not interested in *righteousness* and *judgment*—two words that each occur three times in chapter five.

God expresses his *righteousness* in his defense of the helpless; those who have no advocate, no helper: widows, orphans, and strangers.

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*Judgment* means something similar to law or statute. People would go to their local shrine seeking a ruling from God on a matter. The priest would seek an oracle from God on their behalf. Once obtained, it was called *torah*, or *instruction*. Thereafter, if another person came asking the same question, a precedent had already been established, and the priest would give the seeker and answer based on the original ruling. These answers based on previous rulings were called *mishpat*, or *judgments*.

Judgment came to mean the revealed will of God, and sometimes carried a meaning almost identical to that of righteousness. Just as righteousness is linked with God's defense of the poor, so judgment comes to mean something like *justice*.

Righteousness and judgment (justice) go to the essence of who God is and what he is like. It is typical of his authentic temperament to take up the cause of persons who are at the end of their rope, in trouble, sinking in life's alarms, overwhelmed by forces much too strong for them.

These core attributes of God's personality are not reflected in those who worship at Bethel and Gilgal. Instead of judgment and righteousness, there is religion that backs a social order that is biased in favor of the strong against the weak; a religion justifying greed and making life harder for those already finding life too hard. Stop your religious noise! *"Let justice roll on like a river; righteousness like a never-failing stream."* (v. 24)

The use of the word *roll* is instructive. It comes from a word similar to that which gave Gilgal its name. Joshua 5 details Israel's crossing of Jordan after forty years in the wilderness. God said, *"Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you"* (Joshua 5:9). So the place was named Gilgal—the rolling.

God appeals to Israel through Amos: "Remember the rolling! Though I am the God that rolled away the reproach of your Egyptian bondage; though I came to you when you were the poorest of the poor, when you were driven, beaten, squeezed and despised, and rescued you; though my righteousness was your salvation and my judgment your deliverance, there is nothing about your ethos that celebrates the kind of God that I am. You come to your grand convocations, then you go home to your real interest—trampling on the weak and the poor in order to make yourself richer."

The people of Israel did not seek God at all. Instead, they brought their materialism and hardheartedness to the sacred places as a way of getting God to endorse their selfishness and their lovelessness.

In Xavier Herbert's epic novel, *Poor Fellow My Country*, Sergeant Dinny Cahoon carries out his duty as "Protector of Indigenous Peoples" with zeal and bluster. His title is a dubious one as is demonstrated when he seizes Prindy the Aboriginal boy, after he had helped Rifkah the Jewish

illegal, escape from custody. Dinny places a steel collar and chain around Prindy's neck and then proceeds to talk to him.

"They're no good them Jews, sonny boy. I was surprised you run away with that Jew-girl. They're tryin to take over our country for the communis' ya know.


"Ya know them Jews killed our blessed Savior. Yes, they killed our Lord Jesus." Every time Dinny mentions the Lord's name he holds his hand over his chest and thumps it where he thinks his heart is so that the chain attached to Prindy's neck rattles. Prindy just stares at Dinny.

"You must always strike yourself when you speak of the blessed Lord ya know," he went on. "You'll learn all about it. You'll be goin' to cath'lic college."

In this way, Herbert succeeds in depicting a man who—for all his swagger, for all his affected reverence and smiting of the breast—has nothing in common with the Savior. He does not share his Spirit and, far from being the boy's protector, is his oppressor.

All religion on earth can be divided into just two groupings. The most plentiful of the two is one where all the attention is on the action of the devotees; on what the worshipers bring to God: prayers, praises, sacrifices penances and respectability. This is religion of the most popular kind; long on ceremony. Like the antics of Mark Twain's, King and Duke, "all full of tears and flapdoodle." They were doing little good and much harm. Leaving the friendless and the weak unassisted, unnoticed. Such arid lovelessness is presented to God with a flourish in the expectation that he would be pleased to be associated with it. He is not.

The other kind of religious faith is so rare as to seem strange when encountered. It is a religion in which what God brings to the worshiper holds center stage. It occupies the entire arena. What God is, what he is like, how he behaves, what he thinks of human beings—this is the all consuming interest and subject of this kind of religion.

Such a religion is life-giving because it fixes the spiritual capacities of human beings on the leading elements of God's nature—which are saving. Namely, his righteousness and his judgment; both are redemptive. They strengthen the weak hands, lift up the bowed down, protect the orphan, the widow and the stranger, grieve with the grieving and stand by the weary and the sick. 



*They strengthen the weak hands...*