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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

FREE—EVEN IN PRISON

By Ron Allen

Frank Serpico was a young policeman who became famous for testifying against large-scale corruption in the NYPD during the 1960's. After joining the police force in 1959, Serpico graduated from patrolman to plain clothes duties. This stage of his career was short-lived however, because he refused to participate in corrupt practices of his fellow officers.

On February 3, 1971, Serpico and three other officers went to an address to make a drug bust. Since Frank spoke Spanish, he was asked to go to the door and pretend to be a buyer. The door was opened to him, but with a safety chain. Serpico pushed hard to break the chain, calling on the other officers to back him up. They failed to do so. Bleeding from a gunshot wound in the eye, Serpico was kept alive by an elderly Hispanic man till an ambulance arrived.



Frank Serpico

Questions were raised about the events of that day, but the incident was poorly investigated and Serpico's colleagues were awarded medals.

Subsequently, Frank Serpico was awarded a "Gold Shield" by the Commissioner. But he paid a high price for being honest. Apart from long-term pain caused by his wound, he endured the rancor, loneliness and bitter reproach of his peers who were supposed to be keepers of the peace, protectors of the weak and defenders of the just. When asked years later, why he was prepared to put himself through all of that, he said: "If I didn't, then who would I be when I listened to a piece of music?"

Frank Serpico ran headlong into a pervasive law in human affairs.

Men and women strive to shape their physical, social, and moral environments to levels with which they are comfortable. Once an acceptable level of security has been established, they will go to surprising lengths to maintain it. They will marshal every tool at their disposal to keep the status quo. They will do and say things they would call evil in other people. This seems to be a pervasive law in human affairs.

Jesus was handed over to the Romans by his own people. They invited Pilate to use a form of punishment against him which they themselves hated; which they despised the Romans for using. Why? Because Jesus had dared to disturb the status quo. He had questioned the law; customs with which they were familiar and comfortable.

After the Resurrection, a believer named Stephen continued to offend against law and custom by insisting that God had spoken a more authoritative word through Jesus. Once more, vested interests were aroused. Zeal for the Law took hold and the same people who arranged for Jesus' death, brought about the stoning of Stephen.

In the book of Acts, the advance of the gospel is traced with broad brush strokes. Pictured is Christ, gripping the lives of men and women, laying claim to their loyalty and necessarily bringing them into conflict with spiritual, social and moral connections to the Law to which they were accustomed. Hard choices ensued. Christians were subjected to social isolation, humiliation and violence at the hands of their erstwhile friends. In Acts 16, the movement shifts from difficulty and rejection, according to the Law of Moses, to further difficulty and alienation according to the Law of the Gentiles.

Under the providential leading of Jesus, Paul and Silas crossed the Aegean Sea and came to the city of Philippi. As they moved around this major center of Roman power, they were followed and harassed by a slave woman who was possessed by the spirit of the python that guarded the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Apollo, the Greek and Roman god was said to be embodied in the snake, and the spirit of this snake was believed to have inhabited the woman endowing her with clairvoyant powers.

Eventually, Paul was so vexed by the hindrance of this woman that he invoked the name of Jesus against the python spirit and immediately she was set free from it. Her clairvoyant gifts were immediately lost to her. Her owners were livid. She had been a great source of income for them. As a slave she had no personal worth. She was an asset only in an economic sense—as in the case of a donkey or an ox.

When the slave-woman's owners realized that their asset had been devalued by Paul and Silas, they dragged the two missionaries before the local magistrate. Interestingly, they did not mention the real reason for their complaint against the two Christians. Instead, they resorted to the hoary old appeal to prejudice: "These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:20, 21). In other words: "These men are not like us. They disturb our way of life. They threaten the Law of Rome."

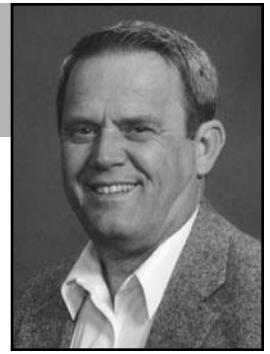
The same argument is advanced over and over again in today's

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions” (Mark 7:9).


It was not rank heathens to whom Jesus addressed these words. He was speaking to people whose life’s mission was to obey the commands of God and thereby prove that they were his people. But Jesus was unequivocal. He said that the Pharisees’ close attention to traditional observances was unsuccessful in its aim. Their religion was a failure.

Jesus went on: *“Moses said, Honor your father and mother... but you say that if a man says to his father and mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban,’ then you no longer let him do anything for his father and mother” (Mark 7:10,11).*

Moses taught that God expected parents to be honored. But according to the Pharisees, a man could dedicate his property to God by using a form of words known as *corban*, thereby avoiding any further material assistance to his parents. By dedicating his assets to the temple, he could place them beyond the reach of his parents needs while still using them for

himself. The Pharisees invoked Numbers 30:1, 2 which stipulated that a vow made to the Lord can never be broken. Using the authority of one precept in the law, they escaped duty in another—and so broke the law of God.

Contemporary heirs of Pharisaism also take refuge in the law. They insist on obedience to their particular way of applying it, even when doing so serves hardship on vulnerable people. Preoccupations with a tradition—even a religious one—can be a way of sheltering from the far-reaching claims of the love of God. In their zeal for one of the law’s precepts, the Pharisees made it possible to view themselves as godly people while leaving their aging parents destitute. Through a species of respect for law, they outlawed love.

How sacred is my tradition, really? Is my accustomed way of ‘doing what’s right’ a reflection of God’s nature? Or is it merely a device to shield me from a duty of care to my fellow man? 

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world. It always expresses a will to maintain conditions which are advantageous for some, but which rest on the continuing disadvantage of others.

Take for example the long-running battle over cigarettes. The toll wrought on human life by smoking is catastrophic. Yet tobacco interests insist that government has no right to regulate them in order to discourage people from buying their product. ‘It hinders the right of American citizens to free trade,’ they say. “We have a fine tradition of doing business in this country; we don’t want do-gooders interfering with our ways.” This, even though the tobacco business destroys people.

Whenever the catch-cry is ‘our way,’ ‘our custom,’ ‘our law,’ there are always plenty who will join in the chorus. So it was when Paul and Silas were accused of threatening Roman Law. A crowd mushroomed in support—not of the slave-woman—but her owners.

Predictably, local politicians were easily persuaded to yield to the chauvinism of the mob. The two ‘miscreants’ were stripped and beaten. By cooperating with Christ in his liberation of an ill-used woman, they ran headlong into the Law of Rome—a law no less revered than the Law of the Jews. Echoes here, of Christ’s trial. His fellow Jews had

said: “We have a law; and by that law he ought to die” (John 19:7).

Law is ruthless. It tolerates no clemency. The law will have its pound of flesh; it will exact its sum.

Consequently, after they had been flogged, Paul and Silas were placed in a jail where the warden was instructed to guard them carefully. In addition to incarceration, they were chained and placed in the stocks. These precautions were a measure of the ‘serious’ nature of their offense. Through their efforts, the citizens of Philippi had heard a message of peace, hope and joy through forgiveness and freedom from guilt. This message was dramatically advertised through the exorcism of the Python spirit. But the liberation of an oppressed woman carried no weight. It was an unwelcome conception. No punishment could be too severe for bearers of a message so inimical to Roman Law.

During the night, sleepless on account of discomfort and pain, inmates in the prison heard two Christian missionaries singing praises to God. Their singing was interrupted by an earthquake. The jail disintegrated. Escape beckoned. But something else happened. The Jailer, taking in the situation, and knowing that his life would be required if his charges escaped, drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul interrupted →

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

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Editor

Ron Allen

Graphic Designer

Debbie O’Brien

Proofreader

Philip Rhodes

OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

Australian office:

P.O. Box 6788
Tweed Heads Sth
NSW 2486, Australia

Canadian offices:

P.O. Box 537
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5
Canada

222 Olive Avenue
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6
Canada

him: “Don’t harm yourself; we are all here” (Acts 16:28).

From the position of the jailer’s own world-view, Paul had less reason than he to go on living. Yet Paul, and not he, was living life to the full; in prison yet utterly free! In a bad place, in trouble, sore but not morbidly obsessed with his problems. Rather, Paul was thinking about his jailer. He valued *his* life. He knew that the jailer had worth of which he was yet unaware.

Think further on the complete contrast between the two men. On one hand, an officer of the greatest civilization on earth, an enforcer, upholder and protector of Roman Law; one with authority and sovereignty over the lives of others. Yet, in an instant, life for him was not worth living. His world had collapsed along with his prison.

On the other hand, a man beaten and jailed in connection with an action which had brought into question laws and customs which helped preserve the power of some over the weakness of others; a system that valued economic success more than persons. Under pain of that system, Paul was concerned for the well-being of a man who personified it. Roman Law collided with Christ. The Law of the Gentiles met with the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus—and was shown to be its inferior.

Where the slogan is heard: “*These people are foreigners; they are suggesting practices against our law,*” there, very likely, is a will to preserve a situation which is profitable for some, and hard for someone else. There will be found a lack of compassion cloaked in respect for ‘law and order.’



The Law of the Gentiles met with the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus—and was shown to be its inferior.

But zeal for the law is no sure place to stand when your life is coming apart at the seams; when your position in society, your reputation, your institution is falling down around you.

The jailer represents every man and woman who is not governed by the Spirit of Jesus. For ultimately, it is either the reign of God in us through his Spirit, or the reign of law; any law. The law of our nation, our

religion, that of our peers, our team, our colleagues.

If the ruling principle of our lives is a law of some kind—a law of political correctness, or a long revered tradition, we will sooner or later find ourselves hardening our heart against fellow human beings—for ‘moral’ reasons. But—and here’s the rub—an individual whose concern for law or unperturbed convention enables him to shut off the wells of compassion against disturbers of his creed, will learn, when the chips are down, that his ordered life has no value.

In his moment of despair, the jailer beheld in his Christian prisoners, life as he had never known it. Here were men possessed of excessive purpose and hope. Life spilled over from them even when it seemed all lost. Clearly, such life was much to be desired. Hence the desperate enquiry: “*Sirs, what*

must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). “*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved,*” was the reply.

So saying, the missionaries set before their jailer the one genuine alternative to his customary values. Not another law, but a new Lord and Master; a personal loyalty that would truly set him free.

In a recent court-case, an accused man was brought to trial for graft and corruption. The case against him was strong. Video evidence was brought showing the accused in the very act of receiving sums of cash in bribes. The case was thrown out however, because the evidence was ruled inadmissible.

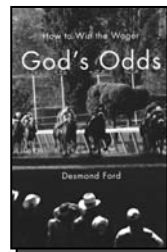
The case attracted much public interest since the accused was an elected public figure. There was an outcry when he walked free. Most ordinary folk could not understand how their legal system could effectively protect a manifestly guilty man.

The courts are a mystery to many. They are inhabited by officials who persist in a bewildering array of procedures, arguments, solemnities and forms of words that make no sense to them. The only people who appear to take the seeming mummery seriously are those who work in the courts—the judges, clerks, lawyers. By and large *they* regard it all as important and not to be changed. Meanwhile, criminals are let go free. More important, apparently, that the laws concerning evidence be upheld, than for justice to be served against theft and the corruption of high office.

While the common people cannot be expected to understand all there is to know about jurisprudence, it is possible that their instincts are on to something in this case. Law, statute, custom, ‘what we have always believed and done’ has serious deficiencies. Men and women who have no higher guiding-star to steer their lives with, live poorly. There is a more exalted existence: Life lived out of the consolations, assurances and eternal security of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Life liberated, abundant, dedicated to grand purposes, and full of joy. A saved life—and a saving one!



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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ACHIEVEMENT

By Desmond Ford

Which of us does not rejoice in getting things done? But there are many traps for young players and older ones too. Have you ever noticed that it is easy to be fooled by an erroneous sense of achievement? Most people mistake activity for achievement, but they are far from being the same.



For example, though I detest being incarcerated in motor vehicles for long periods, I have driven sometimes all day and felt at the close of the day that I had achieved something. Well, I had, but not much! I had moved from point A to point B, but there was no one on earth the better for it. Even if you tell me

that someone at point A was glad to have me gone, and I had achieved *that*, I would answer that the goal could have been achieved by my going a few miles off rather than several hundred.


There are many such things. Within me I find the tendency to think that so long as I am doing I am achieving, though there is no logical connection. Should we not often stop and ask such questions as: Why am I doing this? Who is benefiting by what I am now doing? Or who will be benefited? Is it the best thing to be doing right now?

Perhaps the last question is the really vital one. It's not a matter of being always busy—that, ultimately, is a form of suicide. But it is a matter of priorities. At times the best thing might be to lie on the grass and watch drifting clouds, or play with the dog or cat. But do I know what I am doing and why I am doing it now? Am I doing what I am doing in order to avoid another matter which is more truly my present duty? I have often done that, but God was not pleased.

Part of the reason for our being here is identical with the reason for the existence of fruit trees. We are here to produce. We are here to contribute, to make the world better, to ease the burden of others, to glorify God by letting a light shine for some in darkness. I am not here just to amuse myself, to get by, or to fill in the time. Those who kill time are violating the reason for their existence.



Again we repeat: It would be the greatest of follies to be *ever* doing something with effort and care. We are made on the same principle as the seasons, as day and night, as the tides. Change, work and rest, go and stop. The earth rests at night and throughout the winter. Even the mighty ocean waters regularly draw back. Who are we to play God as though we never wearied had no physical bodies to nourish and preserve? Talk about Nero 'fiddling' while Rome

burned! It probably never happened, but its equivalent happens with each of us frequently. We haven't learned that the essence of life is a good sense of priorities. 

CHRIST IN A NAZI PRISON

By Corrie ten Boom

Corrie ten Boom was detained in her native Holland and set to Ravensbruck concentration by the Nazis. In that place of cruelty and suffering she saw the futility of hate and experienced the love and grace of God. Following is an excerpt from her book.

After two months in the cell I was brought in for interrogation... I prayed for wisdom to answer all the questions of the interrogator, and there were many questions. I had to give my whole life history, even what I did in my spare time.



I told him I taught a Bible Class for feeble-minded people who could not go to church because they could not understand sermons. "They need the Lord Jesus just as much as you and I do," I said to the Nationalist Socialist judge. He replied, "What a waste of time! Isn't there far more value in converting a normal person than an abnormal one?"

My answer was, "If you knew Jesus, you would know that he has a great love for everyone who is despised or in need. It is possible that a poor feeble-minded child has more value in his eyes than you and I together."

The next day I was brought again before my judge, who said, "I could not sleep during the night. I was thinking over what you said about Jesus. I don't know anything about him. We have plenty of time for the interrogation. First tell me what you know about Jesus."

Boy, was that an opportunity! I began, "Jesus is a light come into this world. No one who believes in him remains in darkness. Is there darkness in your life?"

His answer was, "Darkness? There is no light at all in my life. I hate my work. My wife is in Bremen, Germany. I don't even know if she is still alive. The town is being bombed heavily every night now. It is possible that she was killed this very night."

Suddenly the contact between us was on a totally different level. He was no longer the judge but simply a man in great need, and I, his prisoner, could give him real encouragement as I brought him the gospel.

I had a good talk with that man, and from then on he was no longer my enemy, but my friend. He helped to save my life and did his utmost, though unsuccessfully, to set me free.

Of course he still had to do his job, and so he showed me papers found in my house. To my horror I saw names, addresses and particulars which could mean not only my death sentence but the death of my family and my friends as well.

The judge knew even better than I how dangerous those papers were. Suddenly he turned around, opened the door of the stove, and threw all the papers into the stove. At that moment it was as if I understood for the first time the text in Colossians 2:13, 14.

"God has now made you to share in the very life of Christ. He has forgiven you all your sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it, nailing it over his own head on the cross."



-Corrie ten Boom: HE SETS THE CAPTIVE FREE, pp. 20-23. 