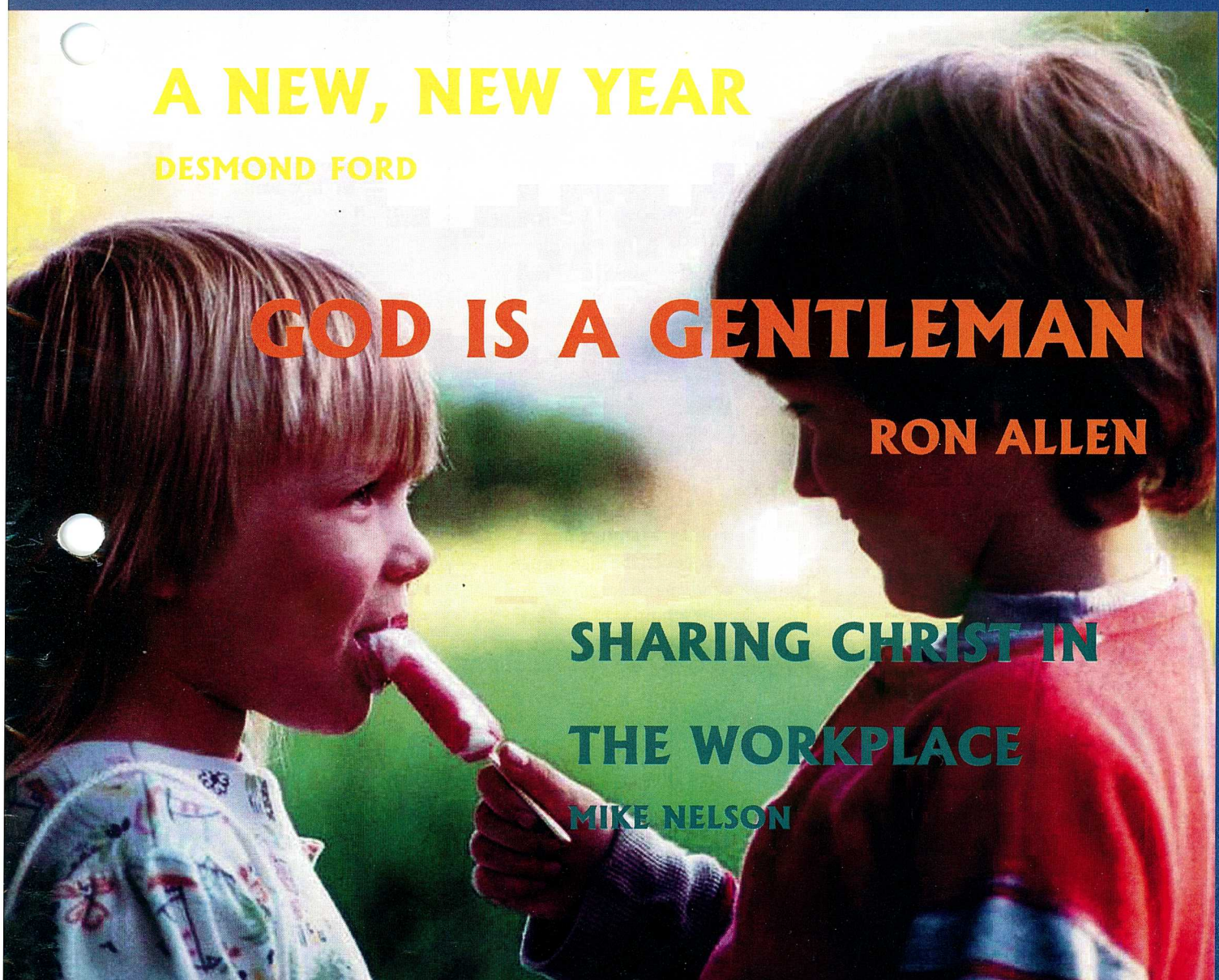
Good News

AUSTRALIA

1999 Issue No. 1



A NEW, NEW YEAR

DESMOND FORD

GOD IS A GENTLEMAN

RON ALLEN

SHARING CHRIST IN THE WORKPLACE

MIKE NELSON

Published by Good News Unlimited

Good News Australia is published by Good News Unlimited Ltd., Unit 2/54-60 Industry Dr., Sth Tweed Heads NSW 2486
Website: www.goodnewsunlimited.org.au
eMail: goodnews@coolgold.com.au
Phone/Facsimile: (07)55245040
Executive Editor: Pastor Ron Allen.
Typesetter: Patricia Tedman.
Layout & Design: Patricia Tedman
Printer: Spartan Press. Queens Park WA.
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Editorial

'Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them' (Hebrews 11:16).

When a weatherman thinks about what the weather will be like tomorrow, he bases his prediction not on today's shining of the sun or the presence of clouds, but on his barometer. When God looks at our lives, he gauges their worth not by whether our hands are presently soiled with some sin, instead, he reads the intensity of our longing for better things—a better country.

Do you desire a whole new setup? A better system? A new atmosphere? If you can say, 'I haven't made a lot of progress but I earnestly desire what is better', be encouraged.

We have to admit that we want Christ one minute, and the things he hates the next. We want his way when we are at worship and our spirits are soaring with the music, the preaching and the prayers of our brethren. But we want our own way next day.

All believers have experienced an interrupted and staggered spiritual journey. Many are discouraged by it. Yet even the discouragement can indicate a longing. God looks for our longings. Those who are inhabited by persistent desires for what is better, may take comfort in the thought that he is not ashamed to be called their God.

Remember Jacob, he slid so easily into trickery and deceit. Yet he desired God. In that dreadful night encounter, he clung to God and refused to let go without a blessing. It is possible to be too soon disgusted with ourselves. We mutter, 'I'm just no good at all. I give up.' Jacob knew the depth of his own failure but he did not relinquish desire. He did not cease to want God. Why should we? He is not ashamed to be called our God.

David—how he waded through his lust and treachery. 'I was shapen in iniquity', he said. Still he pleaded, 'Purge me and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow ... hide not thy face from me.'

See Peter, ashamed and sorry, yet groping his way to the Master's side. The oft-failed person who still craves God, is closer to the kingdom than one whose ethical attainment has made him self-satisfied and unloving.

The Scripture says, 'He has prepared a city for them.' Imagine that! God—not ashamed to be associated with us—preparing a place for us to dwell. We may be certain that this city will be to the satisfaction of all those yearnings of ours.

This is a promise that pulsates with good news. Every human life is worth much because God is kindly disposed to it. He looks past the broken promises, the abandoned resolutions, and he is overjoyed to find deep within the moral wreckage, warm embers of desire. Desire to please God. Desire to live his way. Desire to be better. Desire to live in a better world.

And having discovered even a smoking flax of aspiration for goodness, he gladly claims that he is our God and we are his people. The city of God is prepared for us!

R J Allen

God Is A Gentleman

Ron Allen

A glance at the world's famous people will reveal that fame has favourites. It chooses tough and tempestuous types. Timid personalities are less well known. Our culture idolises its sporting heroes—not because they are tentative and delicate, but because they are ruthless.

Let us observe that God is unlike most of the world's celebrities. God separates himself from that which most would look to for getting things done. He does not ally himself with our big-name stars. He chooses to collaborate with little folk. He makes himself the partner of weakness.

Find the frailest, most innocuous person or organisation, and there you will have discovered that which God is likely to utilise. 'The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength' (1 Corinthians 1:25).

This feature of God's character is noted in Jesus' quotation from Isaiah. 'A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out' (Matthew 12:20). A bruised reed and a smouldering wick were common household items in Jesus' day.

Both are things that have served their purpose and are ready to be scrapped. But by them, Jesus means people! What others think is past being useful, God treasures. He takes great pains over 'smouldering wicks' in order to preserve their heat and breathe life into them again.

When Christ came he showed that God is someone who has a soft spot for marginalised or unpopular types. He went out of his way to share a meal with Zaccheus, whom no one respected.

In the temple he had no commendation for those that handed over their large gifts to the temple treasury. Yet, when he saw a widow drop in two mites, he pointed her out and commented on what she had done.

Along the streets and by the roadside, Jesus was thronged with spectacle seekers, opportunists and social climbers. They pressed on him and buffeted him from every side. But when a sick woman, frail from years of suffering, came and clutched at his clothes, he stopped and made much of her.

Two men came to the temple to worship. One was a pious man with a good reputation. The other was a scoundrel. The good man prayed, thanking God that he was not sinful like the scoundrel. The scoundrel prayed and asked for mercy. Jesus commented on these two men and said that only the one of poor reputation went home with God's blessing. God is attracted to those that others overlook.

God treats people equally. He is not more courteous to rulers than to common folk. He pays due regard to the dignity of harlots as well as priests.

In the Gospel, God gathers men and women from every level of existence; establishing them in fellowship based on his equal regard. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

In the old dispensation, every Israelite twenty years of age and over, had to pay half a shekel ransom money at the time of the census. 'The rich are not to give more than half a shekel and the poor are not to give less' (Exodus 30:15). No one was worth more than another. God treats everyone the same.

God is exceedingly patient. He does not quickly tire when people let him down. In Jesus' parable of the fig tree the landowner comes each year looking for produce. When he finds none, he thinks to cut the tree down since it is taking up space and wasting the resources of the soil. But the caretaker wants to give the tree another chance. 'Spare it this year also' (Luke 13:8).

No better illustration of God's patience with people can be found aside from his dealings with Israel. The strain of their unfaithfulness is poignantly expressed by Hosea, whose own wife is an adulterer. God determines to remain patient and forgive his people's shortcomings. But it costs him dearly. How can I give you up? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger ... for I am God and not man' (Hosea 11:8-9).

God grieves for his people. Their failure to realise their human potential causes him hurt. Witness Jesus looking over the beloved city on his last journey to it. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone them that are sent to you. How often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, and you would not' (Matthew 23:37). With those words Jesus identified himself with the rejected God of Israel's long history of unfaithfulness. His language is weighted with sorrow.

On the way to the cross Jesus passed a group of women who were weeping in pity and sorrow for him. His head and shoulders were lacerated and red with blood. He was weakened by pain. Yet, seeing them, Jesus could not feel sorry for himself. He grieved for them and for the sufferings that would soon be unleashed upon them.

While Jesus passed through the unspeakable misery of the crucifixion, he continued to offer pastoral ministry to everyone around him. During my primary school years, I know that I had some teachers who went home at night and wept because of the absence of any sign of progress in me, their pupil. God is the same. Our obstinacy and foolishness afflict him deeply.

God is a very sensitive person. That is why he deals so softly with us. He cares how we feel. Jesus, who best reveals God, was unlike some of the prophets before him. Take Elijah for an example. He Summoned the prophets of Baal to Carmel, there to test their god against his. While they chanted and danced a bloody worship around their altar, Elijah could not sit mutely by. He had to say something. He began to taunt the prophets of Baal. 'Perhaps your God has gone on a holiday. Maybe he is asleep.' He couldn't keep himself from giving those people some stick.

Later, when the whole experiment was over, Elijah took the four hundred and fifty false prophets down to the valley and slaughtered them. The difference between Elijah and Jesus could not be more marked.

Christ's enemies brought an adulterous woman before him to see what he would say. Jesus refused to embarrass her or her accusers. Instead, he did something to heal the woman's scars, and further, to lead the others to repentance. Jesus was a gentleman, and for that, we know that God is! Elijah was not a saviour. Only the gentleness of God can save.

A gentleman never takes advantage of one in a position of weakness. A man comes to my door selling wares. Or another comes with a religious message. I have a psychological edge over such a person, because he is on my turf. I can use that edge to my advantage if I wish. This is something Jesus did not do.

People resist those who seem to be above them. God conceals his greatness in order to tempt us to take from him.The Son of God was born in bare circumstances. He was raised in a working class home. He never amassed wealth. He ended his days with no possessions at all.

In Revelation there is a striking picture of Christ taking the part of a canvasser on the doorstep of human life. His position is one of psychological disadvantage. The householder can easily be rid of him. Christ knocks, hoping to be let in. He calls out to the one inside to reassure him that he has nothing to fear. 'Let me in and I will be your guest. I will place myself under your patronage and be at your disposal.'

Jesus displayed the same delicate touch in his approach to the woman at the well. She was a woman not well respected. Yet he asked her to give him a drink. Rather than make her feel her low degree he asked her to do something for him. God makes people feel that there is something they have to give which is worthwhile, and which will be appreciated. Only a gentleman would do that.

The Revelation picture teaches us more. It reveals a God who will not come in where he is not wanted. 'If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in' (Rev. 3:20).

Where in all the other world religions is a God who behave like that? Here is a God who is willing to risk being ignored. God respects the integrity of human personality. He will not invade. He enters only the house of welcome.

Two tired and disappointed disciples were walking westward from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. They were overwrought with grief and confusion because of what had happened to Jesus, their friend. They believed him to be dead and gone forever. But as they walked Jesus drew up beside them and began to talk to them about all that had happened. He did not let them know who he was.

As he spoke, their hearts began to glow with new hope. They came to their lodgings and Jesus did not assume that they would invite him in. He made as if to go on. But when they pressed him he came in and stayed with them.

How beautiful this account is. It shows God's soft and careful style. He does not presume that he will be asked to come in and sup. He waits till he is sure that his company is desired. God will not impose on anyone.

God not only refuses to gatecrash lives. He goes further. He keeps still and holds his peace while his creatures resist him with all their might. He allows them to struggle against his purpose and to set their lives in total opposition to him.

Jacob spent most of his youth resisting God and breaking all his promises to him. A crisis came when all his cunning caught up with him. His life was falling to bits and he was worried.

Then, a stranger accosted him and wrestled with him all through the night. The stranger was a divine being. It was as if God allowed the stranger to engage him in physical combat. During the fight the Angel of the Lord touched Jacob on the thigh and put it out of joint. When that happened, Jacob knew that he was up against someone who could easily have dispatched him, if that had been his purpose.

Such is God's way. He permits human beings to fight him. He lets the contest run, fighting well within himself in order not to harm us. He lets us exhaust our limited resources in the contest, until at last, we are ready to cling to him seeking only his blessing.

God is a splendid character. We glimpse the attractions of his person in the humanity of Jesus. His gentleness is but an aspect of his love. For God's love is patient and kind, not boastful, proud, self-seeking or rude. Not easily angered; keeping no record of wrongs.

By such a person we were made. To such a one we belong. By him we are saved, and before him we are forever safe.

* * *

The Gospel Is Historical

Roy Gee

The Gospel is historical! Not hysterical. (Hysteria, I imagine, is something rooted in the emotions. The Gospel is not rooted there.) The Gospel is something outside of us. Out there—objective.

'Death ruled like a king because Adam had sinned. But that cannot compare with what Jesus Christ has done. God has been so kind to us, and he has accepted us because of Jesus. And so we will live and rule like kings' (Romans 5:17-19 CEV).

For Paul, the writer of these verses, Jesus is an historical figure, as is Adam. Few informed people of today would deny the historicity of Jesus; many would consider Adam as merely mythical. For Paul, Christ was historical and so was Adam.

Everyone was going to be punished because Adam sinned. But because of the good thing that Christ has done, God accepts us and gives us the gift of life. Adam disobeyed God and caused many others to be sinners. But Jesus obeyed God and will make many people acceptable to God.

Please notice how Paul is comparing the two. Christ and Adam are both historical personages, both having accomplished an historical work. Adam's is a work of failure. Christ's is a work of success. Paul is writing about what he considers to be history. He's not talking about fairy stories or emotions or feelings—but history.

I must confess that I am deeply impressed by the results of polls. Years ago, just before the United States invaded Haiti, fifty one percent of Americans said the invasion of Haiti should go ahead. Somehow it was decided that fifty one percent made it right. But we've got things backwards. We think that because a majority thinks something, that makes it true.

My sister Doris and her husband David, took a trip to England. They brought me back a key ring that said, 'Liverpool Football Club, probably the best team in the world.' They know I am a diehard supporter of Liverpool. They also bought me some stickers that declare, 'Liverpool, the greatest team on earth.' In the world of sport everyone believes his team is the greatest.

I suppose that in sport it is harmless enough to believe that your team is the best. In the area of faith and religion however, such an attitude is

not good enough. Simply because we believe something, does not make it true. Even if our ancestors believed it!

The Bible is full of history. It tells us the history of Adam and Eve and their descendants. Such a sad and tragic history—but it's true. The Bible tells us the history if Israel—God's chosen people. Yes, Israel had some wonderful moments, but the history of Israel is ultimately sad and tragic.

Now the New Testament tells the history of a New Adam. His is not a history of failure. His is a history of glorious success. Now the true Israel is come. His name is Jesus, and his success is our success.

Susan B. Anthony was so anxious to promote equality for women's rights that she travelled everywhere she could. In 1860 she went to see Horace Greely. Horace Greely was a very influential editor of a very influential newspaper. Susan said, 'Come on Horace. Support the cause. Write some editorials. Promote the cause of women.' Horace replied, 'Oh no. I don't believe in women's equality.' 'What do you mean, you don't believe?', Susan said. Horace answered, 'Because women would be of no military use and anybody with their eyes open can see that a civil war is coming to this country.

I've been writing in my editorials how some states are slave states and other states are free states. The Union cannot survive under such a dichotomy. Civil war is coming to this country and you're talking about women's rights. What good would women be in a war? You, for example, what could you do?' 'Well, I could do what you do Horace. I could sit at my desk and write editorials telling other people to go and do my fighting.'

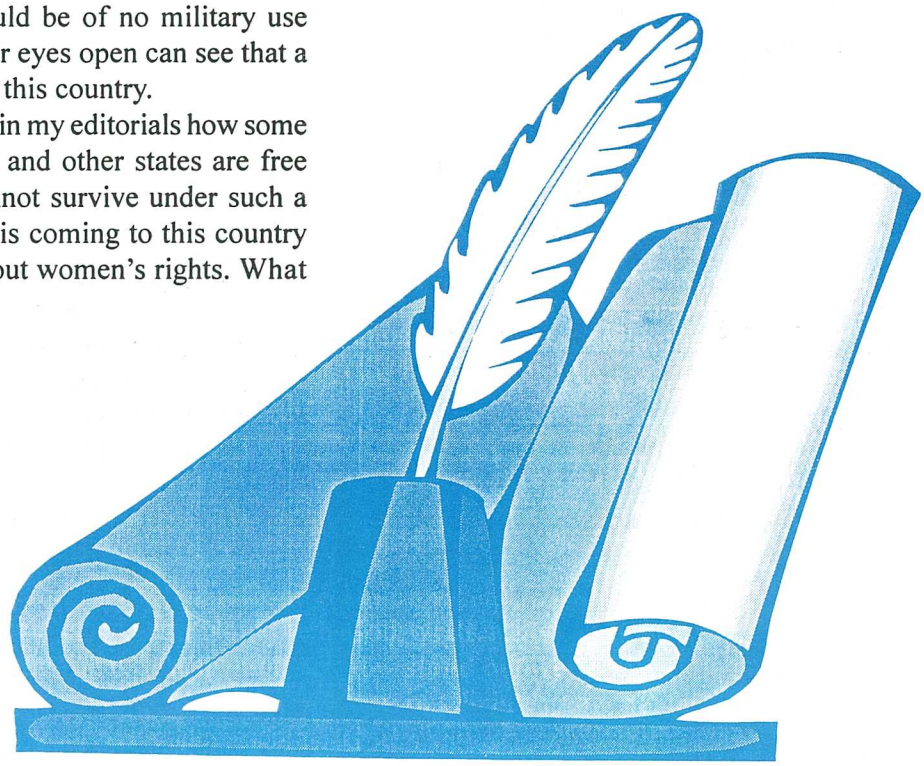
Just as Susan B. Anthony accused Horace of refusing to get involved, so many people ask, 'Where is God? Why isn't he involved in human situations? Why is God silent?'

The Gospel tells us that God is involved in human affairs. God could not be more involved. God became a human being and stepped into human history. You can't get more involved than that.

God rewrote human history. God took a tragic and heartbreaking history recorded in Scripture and rewrote it into a glorious history. The Good News tells us that this new God-written history is ours by faith. We can now stand before God without fear. Our history in Christ is now perfectly acceptable in God's sight.

The Gospel is not something tawdry inside my heart—something merely emotional, feeling-based, hysterical. It is something glorious out there in history in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The Gospel is historical.

Roy Gee is Pastor of Good News Unlimited Fellowship in Auburn California.



A NEW, NEW YEAR

DESMOND FORD

Here is a statement from the Lord about happiness:

How happy are the humble-minded, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. How happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort. Happy are those who claim nothing, for the whole earth will belong to them. Happy are those who are hungry and thirsty for goodness, for they will be fully satisfied. Happy are the merciful for they will have mercy shown to them. Happy are the utterly sincere, for they will see God. Happy are those who make peace, for they will be known as the sons of God. Happy are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of goodness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

What happiness will be yours when people blame you and ill-treat you and say all kinds of slanderous things against you for my sake. Be glad then, yes, be tremendously glad for your reward in heaven is magnificent' (Matthew 5:1-12).

To be told that the happy ones are the humble, those that know sorrow, those that claim nothing and are persecuted, is a bit of a shock. This is the opposite of the world's view of happiness. The world thinks, 'Happy is the one with lots of money; a string of degrees; who is handsome.' But Christ's picture is quite different.

Note that Jesus believed we were made for happiness. That is why so many of his parables are about parties. A certain king made a marriage party for his son; a certain man made a great supper; the prodigal son's father called for a celebration; the shepherd finding his lost sheep called for a party, and so on.

The happiness Christ spoke of does not depend on what a man *has* or on what a person *does*. It depends on what a person *is*. Happy are the poor in spirit, happy are those that mourn. In other words, happiness comes from character. Anyone that pins his/her happiness on anything lower than the heavens; less enduring than God, is courting disaster—not happiness. Only in God is happiness to be found.

Duty, the law of God, character—happiness springs from these and from nothing else. The great reason for our upset of spirit, our bewilderment of mind, our being torn apart inside, is not the circumstances outside. It's the circumstances inside. Our conflicting passions. Our contrasting ambitions. The

civil war within. One of H.G. Well's characters said, 'I'm not a man, I'm a mess.' Abraham Lincoln said, 'Most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.'

There is a legend of an old fisherman's hut that was transfigured when a mystical lamp was placed within it. The lamp turned everything to silver. The Sermon on the Mount is like that wonderful lamp. If we put it in our hearts, it will make everything shine.

The beatitudes need to be contrasted with that other time that Christ spoke from the mountain. It was at Mount Sinai. There were thunders and lightning and sound of a trumpet, and the people trembled, and there was a loud voice. How different it is here. Christ, instead of coming down to a mountain, goes up to a mountain. Instead of speaking in thunder and lightning, he sits and opens his mouth graciously. Instead of people standing afar off filled with fear, he invites them to come close to him.

The Old Testament which has much to say about Law, finishes with a threatened curse. '... lest I come and smite the earth with a curse' (Malachi 4:6). Here, the same Lord of law opens his public ministry, not with a proclamation of a curse, but of blessing. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'

This wonderful sermon is an expansion of our Lord's first word in public, 'Repent.' The sermon on the mount is a definition of true Christian repentance. It tells us the ideals of the life that has changed its mind about self and sin, duty and God.

The first beatitude is the essence of all the rest. What does it mean? In the Greek language there are two words for 'poor.' One of them means to have nothing superfluous. But the other word means to have nothing at all. And this is the word used here. In other words, blessed are the beggars; blessed are the empty-handed; blessed are those who know they are nothing, know nothing and have nothing. This is a blessing on those that do not suffer from self-sufficiency.

Christ does not say, 'Blessed are they that used to be poor.' The Christian never outgrows this business. He remains poor in spirit till the end.

Note also that here is a complete re-evaluation of what constitutes wealth. True wealth can never consist in things. The essential characteristic of material is its insecurity. The man who puts his trust in things he acquires through his own skill, will find he has made a tragic mistake. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

J.B. Phillips translates the second beatitude thus: 'Happy are those who know what sorrow means.' Whoever would have thought that the broken-hearted could be happy? Yet we know at a deeper level that constant sunshine makes a desert. Many of the best things can only be learned by sorrow. We can see further through a tear than a telescope.

Too many people are insensitive. They never experience sorrow for the sorrow of the world, or sorrow for their own shortcomings. Father Damien of Molakai, the leper colony, spilt boiling water on his own foot and it didn't hurt. It was then that he knew that he too was a leper. So the second beatitude is a warning against self-satisfaction.

The third beatitude promises the earth to the meek. Meekness is not a weakness. It is not the passions that control us that make us strong. It is the passions that we control. The person who is meek knows that it is good indeed to have a giant's strength but tyrannous to use such strength like a giant. This is a beatitude about the gentleness of strength.

Christ said 'I am meek and lowly in heart' but he was not weak. Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth but he could kill an Egyptian with his bare hands. The meek neither take offence nor give it willingly. Inherit the earth? Another paradox, and yet an appropriate one because only those that can rule themselves deserve to rule anyone else.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is the only craving on which Christ put his blessing. What do you want most in the world? What do you love and crave most? It is healthy physically, to have a good appetite. Doubly so, spiritually.

Again, note the present tense. The blessing is not for those who used to hunger. You never outgrow this craving, because you never are righteous enough; you always want more.

We move to the fifth beatitude. 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.' The first four beatitudes have talked about the emptying of self. Now we come to the fruitage of that self-emptying.

A story comes from Wesley's journal. He met with Governor Oglethorpe of an American colony, and Oglethorpe said to him, 'Sir, I never show mercy.'

Wesley replied, 'Well Sir, I hope you never sin.' We are forgiven not because we forgive, but *as* we forgive. The mercy that Christ is speaking of here is the outgoing love, the reconstructing action to help those in need about us. Service and giving.

You will recall that a certain man went from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He was beset by robbers, beaten and left for dead. A priest came that way, saw him, and passed by on the other side of the road. Likewise, a certain Levite. But when a Samaritan came, he went over to where the man was, poured in oil and wine and lifted him on to his beast, took him to an inn and cared for him.

That's mercy! Christ himself is the good Samaritan. He showed us mercy. He didn't count heaven a place to be desired. He came to where we were, to sacrifice himself for us.

'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' Pure in heart does not mean the heart that never has an impure thought. It means the single-minded; the sincere; those with a definite purpose to please God.

What I am determines all else. It is the pure in heart that see God. Our vision of God depends on the state of our spiritual sight. The vision begins here. Life can become radiant here, by this most blessed of certainties. The certainty of God.

To see God is to see oneself; to walk in humility and love. Moses, we are told, endured 'as seeing him who is invisible'. Is life hard for you? Are there difficulties at home or at work? See God! 'Because I have set the Lord at my right hand I shall not be moved.' 'Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith' . . . there is the secret of perseverance!

'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.' Peace! We want peace. Peace above, peace about and peace within. Once we have peace with God we can have peace within and without. Only the person who has accepted God's acceptance of him, can accept other people. We have got to receive it if we are to give it. A true Christian, by his very presence, constitutes a benediction of peace.

What will be the experience of a peacemaker? The eighth beatitude says 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.' Vital goodness provokes opposition. That's the way it was with Jesus. That's the way it was with the early church. That's why there were martyrdoms. Notice, there is persecution for 'righteousness' sake. Not for stupidity sake, or for bigotry's sake.

Why is it that the Christian church today sleeps as regards persecution? Because it is asleep as regards righteousness.

At the close of the sermon on the mount Christ says that everyone who hears these things is like a builder that builds a house. Those that build obediently, build on a rock. Those that build carelessly in disobedience, build on sand. The storm will come. And the house not built on Christ will fall.

Is Christ central in your life? If so, you can have happiness now and a new, new year today.

* * * * *

Sharing Christ In The Workplace

Mike Nelson

Yesterday I received a letter from a small business owner who is a committed Christian. He wrote to ask me how he could share his faith with his employees without 'winding up in court.'

While we may be frustrated by the limitations we experience in sharing our religious convictions in the market place, further reflection helps us to appreciate the laws against harassment.

When my sons enter the work-force, I do not want to see them pressured by managers or business owners to adopt their religions. I would not want to work alongside someone who was constantly trying to convince me I should change religions.

I have worked closely with Mormons and Jews, as well as many other kinds of religions, and never had a problem because we respected each other's right to our choice and did not use the workplace as a pulpit.

The Golden Rule helps us appreciate this situation. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' I do not want to be harassed in the workplace; sexually or religiously and I must not do so to others.

We must understand the limitations of our role. As a pastor, I was often asked to say prayers in public meetings or speak in ecumenical gatherings. Some of the members of my congregation always felt that I should have been more explicit in expressing my particular theological slant in these settings. But it was neither the time nor the place for that type of communication.

Our primary responsibility is to create a soul nurturing environment for those who work for us. When we enable people to provide for their families, gain a sense of career fulfilment and work within a genuine community, we are doing them a great benefit.

The worst supervisor my wife ever worked for was a widely proclaimed born-again Christian, who was narrow-minded, controlling and judgemental. Of course, this rendered her attempts at sharing her faith completely useless.

The first thing we are called to do is to be an example to other people. Jesus said, 'Let your good deeds glow for all to see, so they will praise your heavenly father.'

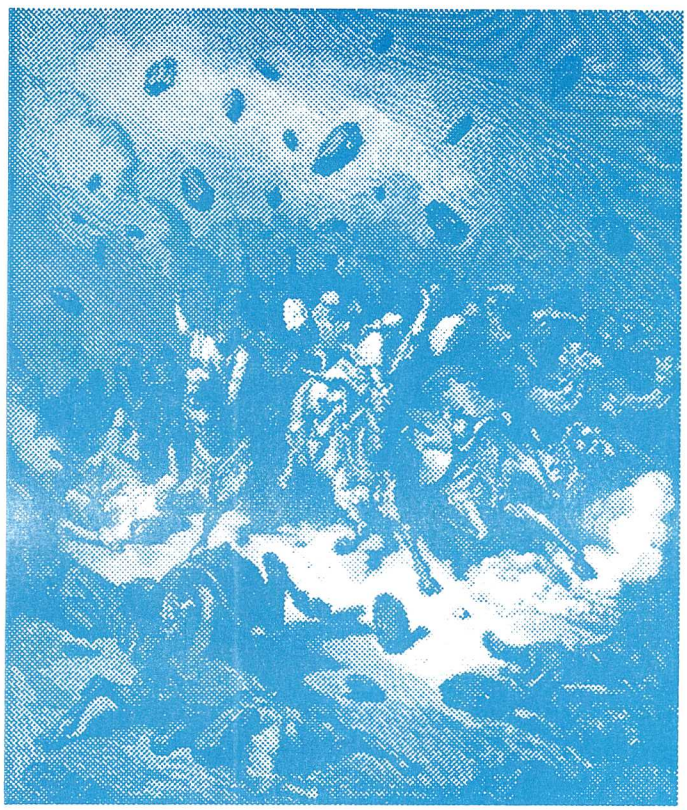
Peter wrote to the early church, 'Be careful how you behave among your unsaved neighbours, for then, even if they are suspicious of you and talk against you, they will end up praising God for your good works when Christ returns. For the Lord's sake obey every law of your government ... it is God's will that

your good lives should silence those who foolishly condemn the gospel' (1Peter 2:12-13).

Andy Griffith used to joke that his wife told him, 'You can look at other women but you ain't allowed to touch them.' Therefore he said, 'I have to do a lot of looking to make up for that handicap.'

God has allowed our mouths to be muted in many ways. Perhaps this is so we will place even more emphasis on being good, kind and honest people, to 'make up for that handicap.' ⊛

If you have a story or anecdote of your experience of sharing Christ and making his religion real in your life, please send it to the Editor, he will be happy to receive it.



And You Thought God Was Tough!

Edna Heise

Did you really? Then please listen to this story.

The king had such a horrific reputation, that the royal historian's pen must have almost smoked as it wrote the tale. When a king arouses the anger of the God of Israel by his disgusting practices more than any of his predecessors; then doubles his guilt by leading his subjects to embrace his unspeakable brand of idolatry, (as this king Ahab did) the reporter's groans can almost be heard between the lines.

But there's more. Sinning like Jeroboam—who stands as a benchmark of all ungodly behaviour—seemed not to be enough. King Ahab added to his defiance of Jehovah by marrying Jezebel, a Sidonian princess, then joined her in worshiping her chosen deity—Baal. To further glamorise this abominable worship, Ahab built a temple to Baal in Samaria, his capital. Then he added an altar for sacrifices.

With his obvious obsession for heathen deities, Ahab crafted an effigy of the Goddess Asherah, the female counterpart of Baal. She proved to be a most popular object of worship. It was no doubt at the prompting of her deities, that Jezebel ordered the extermination of all the prophets of Jehovah. And Ahab saw no reason to intervene.

A devastating drought, promised by the stern

prophet Elijah, ravaged Ahab's kingdom. Ahab reacted by despatching spies throughout the entire country carrying a price on the troublesome prophet's head. But no sign of Elijah could be found. Ahab was furious.

Later, when Elijah called for repentance and revival and when he purged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, Ahab and his heathen queen vowed vicious reprisal.

Meanwhile, Benhadad, King of Assyria, sent an awesome message to Ahab. Said he, 'I want your wives and your children, plus your silver and gold—Oh yes, and I want everything of value in your palace and in the houses of your officials. And I'll be there this time tomorrow with enough soldiers to destroy your city if necessary.'

Now, if you were God, how would you react at this crisis moment to a king who had rejected everything you had recommended for the peace and prosperity of his kingdom? Well, if you thought God was tough, just continue to follow the story.

With the king traumatised with the challenge of his mere seven thousand strong army versus the armies of thirty two tribes, it must have been a comforting diversion to receive a visit from a prophet. But what might his message be?

'Don't be afraid of that huge army' the prophet proclaimed. 'God promises you he will give you victory, and then you will know that he is the Lord. Just listen to his battle instructions' (1 Kings 20:13).

In obedience to the utmost detail of the prophet's instructions, Ahab and his army saw an unbelievably glorious victory over Benhadad's vastly superior forces. It is hard to believe that after such a revelation of divine grace the Kings of the day would never embrace paganism again. But they did!

It seems that Israel's kings were notoriously bent toward evil, while Judah was marginally less so. Now, though it gives me no pleasure, let me introduce you to Manasseh, son of Judah's good king Hezekiah.

Only twelve when he began to reign, Manasseh nevertheless used up fifty five more years excelling in wickedness. Ahab's disgusting practices almost paled beside the exploits of Manasseh. His crowning act of wickedness was to sacrifice his own son on the fiery altar of Molech. The historian records that 'Manasseh made Judah to err and to do worse than the heathen—even to shedding innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other' (2 Kings 21:16).

It was then that the king of Assyria, with little bent toward mercy, focussed on the godless Manasseh. He bound him with chain, dragged him among thorns and carried him off to Babylon where he had ample hours, days and years to contemplate the question: 'Was my deep dabbling in heathenism worth it while I ignored the voice of Jehovah's warnings?'

Now listen as Manasseh, with conscience boring into his soul, cries out to God, whom he had constantly defied. Watch as he humbles himself in prayer, and feel his desperation.

And how would Jehovah react to this new Manasseh? God listened to Manasseh's plea; brought him again to Jerusalem out of bondage and restored his kingdom to him. 'Then Manasseh knew that the Lord, he was God' (2 Chronicles 33:13).

If God appears tough to you, remember Ahab and Manasseh. Did they deserve such mercy? Do you or I merit it? Let's reflect on these stories and marvel at the amazing, pardoning grace of God.

Edna Heise lives in retirement at Cooranbong NSW. She and her husband were in pastoral ministry for many years.

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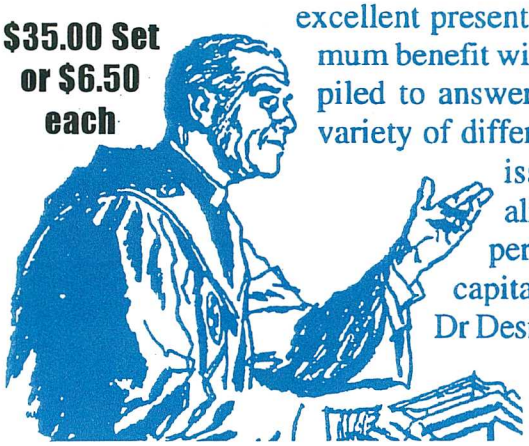

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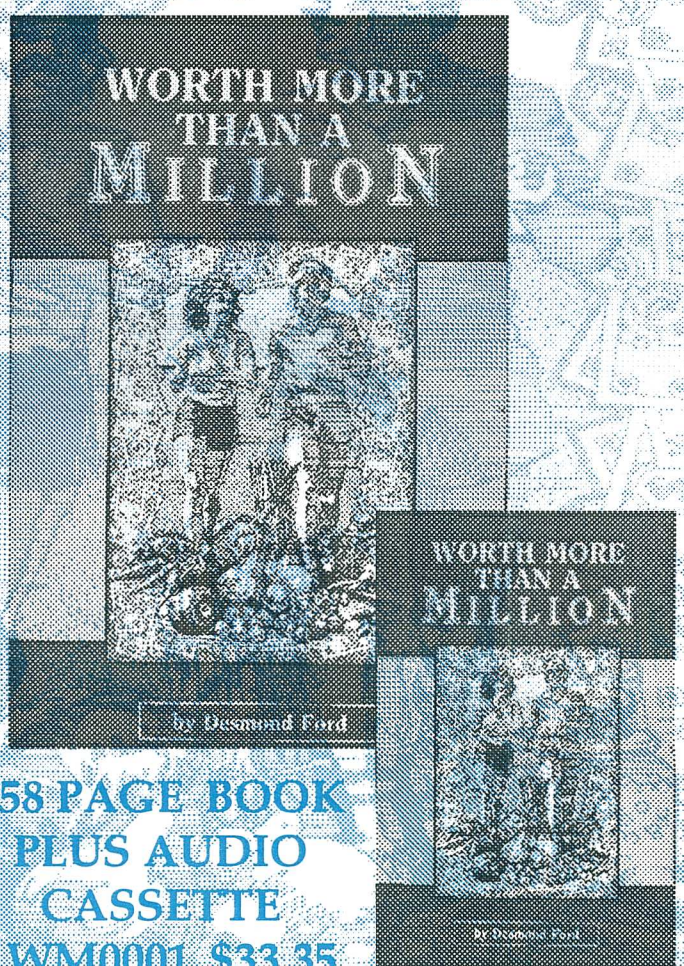

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BRISBANE: March Friday, 5th at 7.00pm and Saturday 6th, 10.00am to 5.00pm at the Mercure Hotel, 85-87 North Quay, Brisbane City.
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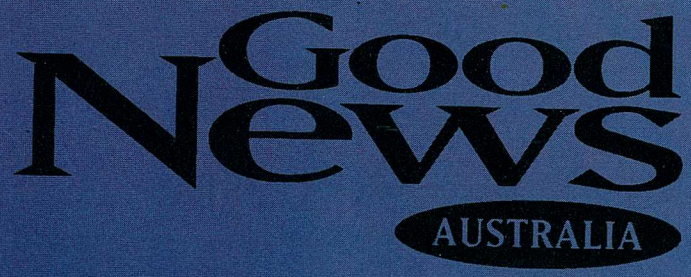
SYDNEY: March 13th from 10.00am to 5.00pm. At the Thornleigh Community Centre, cnr. Phyllis Ave. and Pennant Hills Rd., Thornleigh.
PERTH: March 20th, 10.00am to 3.00pm at the Dianella Uniting Church, 450 The Strand, Dianella
ADELAIDE: March 21 at the Glandore Community Centre, 25 Naldera St., Glandore.
Programme: 11.00am Dr Ford 12.30pm Lunch provided. 1.30pm Dr Ford 2.30pm Questions & Answers.
MELBOURNE: March 26th at 7.30pm and March 27th from 10.00am to 5.00pm at the King Village resort, 137 Mountain Highway, Wantirna.
MANGERE NEW ZEALAND: Friday, April 2 at 7.30pm, Mangere Bible Chapel, Cnr., Vonsturmer and Robertson Rds., Mangere.
Saturday, April 3 at 9.55am, New Life Centre, 24 Akoranga Drive, Northcote. Bring food for lunch and stay for afternoon meeting.



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