



# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

October 2009

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## Ripe Fruit

CHRIST ALONE • GRACE ALONE • FAITH ALONE • SCRIPTURE ALONE

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# EDITORIAL . . .

*"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43).*

These ominous words were spoken by Jesus at the end of his parable of the wicked vineyard tenants. It was deliberately pointed. He intended to appeal to the consciences of Israel's leaders. The parable occurs in a chapter where Jesus enters Jerusalem to the accompaniment of shouted Hosannas and much waving of palm branches. It was a scene that awakened the nationalist hopes of the people; many of whom believed they were seeing, with their own eyes, the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy: *"The lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1).*

Jesus' triumphal entry is immediately followed by his appearance at the temple. Far from offering his benediction on all that he saw, he used strong language to drive off the shameless racketeering that was taking place in the temple precinct. He put to flight the greedy moneychangers, claiming they had turned his 'father's house' into a den of robbers.

The temple had failed the high purpose for which it was intended. It had failed the world. It was not 'a house of prayer for all people' as

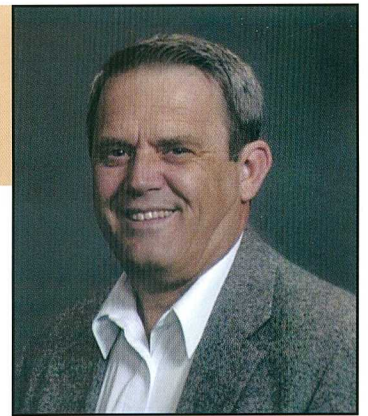


God had intended. It did not represent God's values. Such is the background of Jesus' statement: *"The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation who will produce its fruit."*

Jesus believed that the stewardship of God's truth was about to be re-allocated. Those whose privilege and task it was to tell the world about their God, had failed to live up to their mission. The assignment would now be taken up by others.

Nations, peoples, religious movements and their institutions are not indispensable to God. Having appointed Israel for 'a light to the Gentiles,' God remained free to elect other agencies should his chosen instrument fail. Christians must never forget that they also have no ownership of God. The gifts and blessings God bestows; the comforts and consolations of the faith describe duty as well. They are the measure of our responsibility to others.

If Jesus were to arrive at our 'temple', our church, our Christian institution, would he bless it? Or would he confront us with barrenness of our profession, and warn us that our privileges may be withdrawn and given to someone else; someone eager to bear the beautiful fruit of the Spirit of God?



Pastor Ron Allen

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# RIPE FRUIT

(continued)

By Ron Allen

**T**he deep foundation for personal growth is the existence of God. God intends that men and women grow in concurrence with his personality. This is the perspective of the Bible prophets. Prophecy is moral; not so much about telling the future as about present duty. A personal God implies morality for personal beings. To neglect what is good and right and true is to pursue disaster. Amos' prophecy is true to that premise. *"I will never forget anything they have done" (verse 7).*

There are ways of thinking and doing, ways that people can relate to each other, that offend the Spirit of God. These ways cannot be allowed to stand. God must overturn them.

We do not have to speculate about the kinds of behavior in the human process that will end badly. Amos takes aim at two developments in the public life of Israel which are marks of a rotten ripeness. First, Amos sees a society in which personal values are sacrificed to material ones. Those accustomed to an unprecedented high-standard of living have become addicted to it. Every aspect of their lives is suborned for the sacred business of wealth creation—personal relationships included. Merchants inflate commodity prices, gouging their neighbors. They *"skimp the measure"* using dishonest weights. They fill customer's sacks with dirt-sweepings from the grain floors (verse 6). Tenants who fall behind in their accounts are sold into slavery; even when the amount owing is as little as the price of a pair of sandals (verse 6). Meanness characterizes human relations. Sensitive souls who would rather die than disadvantage anyone find it hard to survive in such a dog-eat-dog environment. They lose, and are soon destitute. The 'successful' man is the one who wins in monetary terms. People grow weary of each other in such a climate. They



*Amos takes aim at two developments in the public life of Israel which are marks of a rotten ripeness.*

learn not to trust one another. Mutual respect vanishes.

Carl Jung says: "In our kind of society, the achievements that are rewarded are those won at the cost of diminution of personality."

In my homeland, there is a famous person who plays the sport of cricket. He is famous because he can do something not many people in the world can do: he can bowl a cricket ball using spin. When he bowls, he uses his wrist and fingers to spin the ball in a variety of ways so that when it strikes the ground on its way to the batsman, its rotation makes it to break sharply to the left or right, or suddenly lose speed, or bounce unpredictably. All this is designed to bamboozle the batsman on strike, so that he is more easily gotten out.

This man is hailed as a hero and a genius on account of this skill, and he has become fabulously rich. No matter that he publicly cheats on his wife; no matter that wherever he goes he gives free reign to his feral appetites. Despite the glaring gaps in his character, his lack of virtue, he can spin a cricket ball and is therefore rich and successful.

Materialism is a cancer on any civilization. When clothes, houses, cars, devices, amusements and access to an ever-increasing array of things becomes the main focus of living; when being able to afford these is seen as the chief measure of human welfare, the human crop is in decay.

It is difficult to live in a society like our own and not be influenced by a pervasive belief that those who can afford the most things are the most successful. Human worth is under siege by the sway of this doctrine. For fifty years, cigarette

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companies manufactured a product that destroyed people; made them sick and killed them by the millions. Because cigarette companies generated so much revenue, they were able to keep government regulators at bay for decades. One of the arguments used was that it is just so 'wrong' for Government to interfere in the free market.

Human beings have certain non-negotiable needs. They include: clean, breathable air, clean water, nourishing food, adequate shelter, safety, meaningful work, and ready access to all of these. But there are whole nations, and whole sub-groups in our own society that do not have them all. Clearly, if ever these weaker constituents of the body politic are to be assisted, non-material values like, kindness, respect, politeness and generosity will have to climb high in our esteem and soar above the moral apathy of the marketplace.



*A fire breaks out in a multi-level building. People are trapped;...*

Men and women are accountable. This is a stern and wonderful truth. A fire breaks out in a multi-level building. People are trapped; many of them are important citizens. When fire crews manage to get a ladder to one of the windows there is a rush to escape. But one stands in their way. "Women and children first," he calls out. What is this man doing? He is honoring a standard of behavior that is grounded in God. Feebler forms of life are nevertheless more sacred and ought to be safeguarded by those who are stronger. The more susceptible to misuse persons are, the more they are the crucial centers of the divine patronage.

In the sophisticated, developed world, many have come to think that God has no relevance to human life. This is clearly not so. Belief in a supreme person to whom we are accountable is indispensable to our welfare. It is vital that there be a God who takes note of what people do; who *"will not forget what they have done."*

The second evidence of a 'rotten-ripe' society is in Amos 8:4-5.

*Hear this you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat? (Amos 4:4-5).*

Here are people who believe in God. This is proved by their cessation of trade for religious festivals and holy days. But their pause in business activities is not an enthusiastic one. All during the consecrated hours they mutter to themselves: 'when

will this be over so we can get back to what really counts—buying and selling.' Their devotions are a nod to the Almighty, but their heart is not in it. Their religion does not lift and inspire them. It is a load they must carry. It is heavy. They would like to get rid of it, but are afraid to do so. They do not enjoy God. Like store-owners buying protection from a racketeer, their worship is a necessary exaction legitimizing their real interest—namely, the rewards to be had through demolition of human values; trampling on the needy.

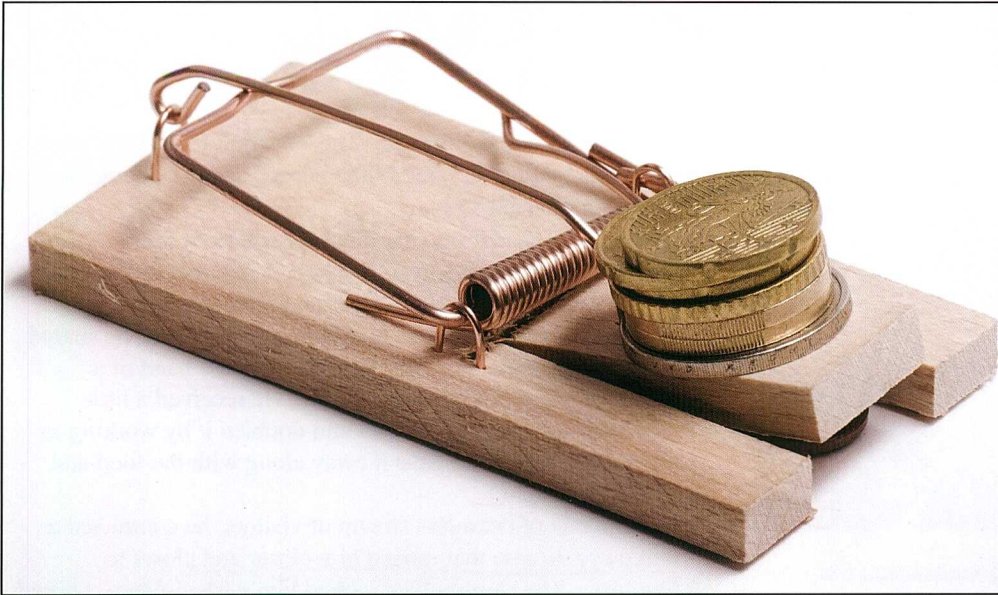
The men of Israel practice a failed godliness. They are too weak to withstand their own greed. The ancient faith is co-opted by the values acquisition. God had given his people a religion enshrining equity, kinship, compassion, and brotherhood. Now, its humiliation is complete. Now, it has become a device for securing the blessing of God on cold-hearted pragmatism, indifference, and a pitiless drive for many goods.

This religious outlook is present in every generation; ours included. Its exponents advise eager congregants that God is sympathetic with their desire to be rich; that he is tuned in to the aspirations of those who believe with all their heart that if they could only be a bit wealthier, everything would be alright. They hear the well-dressed preacher with gold rings on his fingers assure them that God is not pleased with their present mediocre economic state; that he wants them to have lots more money to spend.

If this popular god appeared today, he would not be born in a manger. He would show up at the New York Stock Exchange and ask to ring the bell at the start of each day's trading. He would be like a corporate boss. Instead of saying, "blessed are the poor," he would say, "blessed are dividends." Instead of saying, "it will cost you everything to follow me," he would tell us, "all these kingdoms of the world in all their splendor will be yours if you will bow down to me."

The god of Israel's failed religion has more subtle appeals to make to us. From pulpit and television studio we hear: "Yes, →





*Do not be deceived!*

my friends, it is true that the love of money is the root of all evil, but, you know, God's work cannot go forward without money. The primary Christian task, therefore, is to get God to prosper you so you can donate money."

Do not be deceived! This is the religion of the senior executive; the sales manager. Its article of faith is that until God makes us rich we will not be able to participate in his program. We will not be able to help the needy neighbor, the sick, the lonely, the destitute, the imprisoned—all those who must perish unless they find someone to lean on. We cannot help our fellow man till God gives us enough money to pay someone else to help him!

Religion of this kind shuts its ears to the will of God elsewhere expressed like this:

*Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27).*

It blames God for the inequity in the world—since he hasn't yet made us rich enough to do good. The worst thing about it is that it is loveless. Its disciples dedicate themselves to being as little like Christ as possible. They find other causes to be dutiful in; other value to hold dear. They are conscientious in sacred observances that do nothing to enhance the lives of those around them.


What shall we say then, when we see civilization developing along the very lines of Israel in Amos time? What shall we say when we observe the wholehearted consecration of *things* and the desecration of personal worth? What shall be our response when we see the recruitment of religion in support of this distortion?

It behooves us to acknowledge that no society can last where these perversions are established. Nature itself will revolt.

*Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn ?.... I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight (8:8-9).*

It is as if the earth contorts itself with revulsion at what men and women have become. "*The whole creation groans...*" (Romans 8:22). Unless men and women can find a way to see one another as centers of

utmost value, points of sacred worth, the human story will end in catastrophe. Unless we learn to treasure above all earthly goods, qualities that are uniquely personal—joy, hope, faith, integrity, courage, truth, tolerance and love—unless we count these more to be desired than houses, cars, holidays, share portfolios and all the other bric-a-brac which jumbles our lives, we shall find that, just when we thought we had amounted to something, we have gone rotten; fruit ripe for destruction.

The solution to the human crisis is not a material one. Our crisis is a crisis of the spirit, requiring a spiritual remedy. The only spiritual influence in the world, potent enough is the Spirit of Jesus. He will not lead his adherents in a devotion that sanctifies things and stuff while depreciating souls. He will take his disciples on a pilgrimage deep into the lives of their fellows; making service the highest and most reverent duty known to man. Those willing to be led by Jesus will discover a fruitfulness that will be to their joy, and the blessing of many. 

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# FRUITFUL LIVES

## Kagawa

In 1923, one of the greatest earthquake disasters in history hit Japan and reduced Tokyo and Yokohama to smoking ruins. Millions were homeless; starvation, disease and anarchy were the only things flourishing, and the government and military could do nothing about it. They knew a man who could reorganize and restructure things, but he was in prison. The common people almost worshiped him, but the government, the capitalists, the radical nationalists and the military people hated and feared him. He was in prison for orchestrating a vast, non-violent strike in the docks, and even though the workers got all that he had demanded for them, he himself was thrown into prison for his leadership in the strike action. His name was **Toyohiko Kagawa**. They let him out of prison, and he began the work of rebuilding the nation. The government offered him a huge wage and all the privileges that went with such a role, but he turned it all down saying, "To work with the poor I must be poor."

He was born in 1888, the illegitimate son of a wealthy, high-ranking politician and a Geisha. The father took a liking to the child and adopted him, but before the boy was five, both his parents had died, and although he was officially a Samurai and head of nearly twenty villages, he went to live with his grandmother and a stepmother. The stepmother hated him and his life was one of unrelieved misery until, when he was eleven, a rich uncle adopted him and planned great things for him. If his stepmother's house was the frying pan, boarding school was the fire.

But he met and learned English from Henry Myers, a Presbyterian minister. He learned more than that—he learned about Christ, and Myers baptized Kagawa into Christ. Horace Shipp said, "You, Kagawa, became a Christian. He did a rarer thing: he began to practice Christianity."

He was pacifist to the core. At times, he literally turned the other cheek and insisted on giving away all his possessions, and often his food. In 1904, Japan—without warning—attacked Russian ships at Port Arthur, destroying their whole Baltic fleet. Japan as a nation, hailed this as a great triumph and justified it on the basis of less obvious but threatening developments in Russian foreign affairs. At the seminary where he now attended, Kagawa dared to speak against Japan's act of war. The students took turns in beating him up. Finally, he was expelled. He fell ill (tuberculosis) and went away to die in a little fishing village. But a boat was wrecked on the coast, and Kagawa worked till he was absolutely exhausted, helping to rescue people. This experience made him determined to live,



and later his stated aim was, "The salvation of 100,000 poor, the emancipation of 9,430,000 laborers, and the liberation of 20,000,000 tenant-farmers."

He took a header into the infamous slums at Shinkawa, and for nineteen years lived in a cubicle six feet by six feet, with one side open to act as door and window. As one of the lowest of the low, even by Shinkawa standards, he shared his living quarters. For four years he held the hand of a murderer who could not sleep alone. He received a little income from a training school and doubled it by working as a chimney sweep. He gave it away along with the food and clothes he bought.

From one of ceaseless stream of visitors, he contracted a fierce eye disease that moved him closer and closer to blindness. The slum-bullies robbed him with violence, burned down his shack, knocked his teeth out and challenged his faith by demanding that he give away his clothes. He did that on more than one occasion and had to wear a woman's robe till he could replace them. Once, he was on the verge of taking on a jeering, threatening bully who was going to stop his preaching, but instead he turned and ran. The crowd roared with laughter but he was back the next day in the same place, preaching Christ.

It is no surprise that when the earthquake hit and Japan was in awful need that, they let him out of prison and asked him to be chief of social welfare. Once, when he visited an American university, two students went to hear him speak. Unimpressed, one said to the other, "He didn't have a lot to say, did he?" A woman behind them leaned over and said, "When you are hanging on a cross, you need to say a lot!"

He died in 1960. ↗  
-Jim McGuigan.



## Elizabeth Fry

Elizabeth Fry was the daughter of a wealthy banker, and later, the wife of a wealthy merchant. Stephen Grellet and William Forster, prison reformers, begged her to see what she could do; so in 1813, she and a woman friend made their first visit to the women's quarters at Newgate prison. Before long she was going daily. She started a school for children and got a woman thief to teach it. She engaged other willing

helpers from among her acquaintances and amazed the prison authorities by getting such cooperation from the inmates. She went to Ramsgate to see the women off on the convict ships and demanded and got better conditions on board for them. She started sewing classes, daily Bible readings (she was a →



# TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES

By H. E. Fosdick

An organism conscious of its own being that can remember, think, purpose and love, is *personal*. While these attributes in a rudimentary degree are possessed by animals, in man, they have attained a development differentiating him from everything else within our ken, and constituting his essential nature.

While we are presented at birth, however, with the makings of personal life, their successful organization into unified and efficient personality is one of the most difficult, as it is the most essential task in human experience.


In confronting this task, man's situation is altogether *sui generis*. He is the only creature that can consciously help to create itself. The fulfillment of the possibilities of its species may be the primary function of a seedling tree, but the tree is unaware of that fact and cannot deliberately cooperate. Man alone consciously assists in the fulfillment of his nature. Einstein was born over a grocery store in Ulm, Germany, an infant whose inner consciousness was—to use William James' phrase—a big, buzzing confusion. When one sees Einstein today, an extraordinarily unified personality concerning whom one observer says, "Einstein is all of a piece, there is no division in him..."

"Of all the animals," writes Professor William Ernest Hocking, "it is man in whom heredity counts for least and conscious building forces for most.... Other creatures nature could largely finish: the human creature must finish himself."

That human happiness is at stake in the success or failure of this undertaking seems clear. Without exaggeration it can be said that frustrated, disintegrated, inhibited, unhappy people,

who cannot match themselves with life and become efficient personalities, constitute the greatest single tragedy in the world. Wars come and go; economic circumstances alter with time and place; natural handicaps and catastrophes, inherent in human existence, fall with varying incidence on everyone; social inequities are cruel to some, and inherited prosperity ruins others; but through every situation in this variegated scene, in mansion and hovel, in war and peace, wealth and penury, domestic felicity and discord, among the uneducated and in university faculties, an omnipresent calamity is found, strangely impartial in its choice of matrix. Under every kind of circumstance, people entrusted with personality, unable to escape it, but incapable of managing it, are making a mess of it and thereby plunging into an earthly hell....

Mind, memory, affection, and purposefulness, centered in an ego that is conscious of itself—with this mysterious endowment each of us has been entrusted, and to make the most of it, is our primary task. Yet, even in the realm of organized knowledge we know more about the stars than about ourselves. It is man's strange penchant to confront last what lies nearest, and in the practical handling of life multitudes of people become aware of, and wrestles with, every conceivable factor involved in the human situation before they face their primary problem—being a real person.

The insight of Jesus in his parable of the Prodigal is true to the facts—the remaking of that young man's life began "*when he came to himself*." —H. E. Fosdick. BEING A REAL PERSON, pp. 16-35. 

Quaker), cleaning squads, and washing regimes.

She enlisted her influential friends in obtaining further prison reforms. She had Newgate whitewashed and fumigated. In 1839, she established a program for prisoner rehabilitation and sponsored a nightly shelter for the homeless of London.

In case we get the impression that she had nothing else to do, she raised eleven children all of whom rejoiced to call her "mother."

—Jim McGuigan.



## Ashley Cooper


When he was a boy, he saw a pauper's funeral. The coffin—such as it was—was being pushed up a steep hill on a hand-cart by two of the impoverished family. It became too much for them. They lost control; the cart ran back down the hill before turning over. The coffin burst open and the dead person spilled out onto the street. The watching boy swore that when

he got older he would do something for the poor. That was young Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.

About seventy years later, a funeral was attended by 400,000

mourners, almost exclusively from the working-class people. The vast throng moved slowly down the road carrying huge and wide banners. *I was naked and he clothed me*. Then a hundred yards behind that: *I was sick and he visited me*. And further back again: *I was hungry and he fed me*. And even further back: *I was thirsty and he gave me drink*.

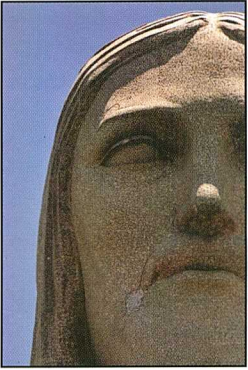
This was old Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.

He entered politics at the age of twenty-five. His first speech to the house was an appeal on behalf of lunatics. God only knows how many of those poor people were chained together, herded like animals, allowed to lie in their own filth, and used for freak shows. It was Shaftesbury's bill that led to a law that treated these people as "persons of unsound mind" not as social pariahs. He fought to reduce the working day to ten hours. He fought to keep women and children out of the mines. He raged against the use of children as chimney cleaners, and fought to get the government to subsidize low-cost but sound houses for the poor. He headed up schools for the poor, and during his twenty-nine years on the job, educated 300,000 of them. He wrote in his diary: "*By his grace I have stirred the country*." —Jim McGuigan 



# CHRIST THE JUDGE

By Studdert Kennedy



**W**hen Christ, in a lightning flash of vision, saw himself coming on the clouds of glory to judge the world, he summed up the history of the ages and expressed it in one act.... These visions of the Judgment Day are the summing up in vivid and compelling pictures, the essential meaning of the history of the world....

Every day you and I write our records out on the tablets of our mind; every day the Perfect Man stands in

very deed to judge them, good or bad, not by any arbitrary act, but because he is the Perfect Man towards whom the mind must move if it is to find life. He is the judge of the movement of our lives as the harbor mouth is the judge of the direction of the ship that sails.

If the soul continues to move away from Him, away from Life, if we willfully keep it on a wrong course, it can only steer to its destruction. There stands the inevitable Jesus, the inevitable Goodness to which I must come if I am to find life. To Him, my life must move or be dashed upon the rocks.

In the light of this knowledge, the world as it lives today appears to me as recklessly and criminally mad. The way men will fly at once to a doctor when the slightest sign of disorder appears in their bodies, but will allow their minds to go tearing through life and will never make any attempt to change their direction or set them right by any noble standard, seems like the recklessness of lunatics.

The strenuous efforts we make to stamp out diseases of the body, the money we spend, and the trouble we will take to stay the course of a physical epidemic while we allow diseased and morbid teaching to spread among our people; debauching and degrading their minds by continual suggestions of evil... seems like the carelessness of criminals. Only a mad world would spend thousands on curing venereal disease and allow scoundrels to make thousands out of breeding it by ingenious suggestion.

I do not think there can be any judgment sense for a man until he has seen Christ. You cannot drive men to the vision of God by the fear of hell, but you reveal to men the meaning of hell by the love of God. It is the vision of Jesus' order of goodness and its inevitability that makes men see the horror of the gates of hell.

I cannot and dare not picture that Great Assize, but I feel in my bones that it must come, and that every thought word and deed of every man that lives, or ever has lived, makes certain of its coming.

I have my vision of judgment. It is not the fear of a flaming hell, it is the fear of the eyes of Christ, and by the splendor of those eyes, I plead with myself and with you that we live lives in the fear and love of God.

*I saw no thronged angelic court, I saw no great white throne,  
I saw no open judgment books, I seemed to stand alone.  
I seemed to stand alone beside a solemn sounding sea,  
While at my feet upon the shore broke waves of memory.  
Their murmuring music sobbed and sought a way into my soul,  
The perfect past was present there, and I could see it whole,  
Its beauty and its ugliness, its sorrow and its sin,  
Its splendor and its sordidness, as wave on wave rolled in.  
And ever deeper pierced the pain of all that I had lost,  
My dear dead dreams of perfect things, I saw them tempest tossed.*

*They fell like wreckage at my feet, and, as I turned them o'er,  
The solemn waves, in memory's caves, kept booming, 'Nevermore!'  
Their came one dream, more dear than all, a corpse without a head,  
The flying sprayed hissed, 'cowardice,' and it was dead, cold dead.*

*Then suddenly a shadow fell, and I was not alone,  
He stood with me beside the sea and listened to its moan.  
I did not dare to raise my eyes, I feared what I might see,  
A cold sweat broke and bathed my brow, I longed to turn and flee.  
But could not; rooted there I stood, in shiv'ring shame and fear;  
The subtle shadow substance took, and nearer came, and near.  
O was it days or was it years we stood beside that sea,  
Or was it aeons, timeless times? It seemed eternity.*

*At last, compelled, I raised my eyes. Two eyes looked into mine,  
And shattered all my soul with shame, so sad and so divine.*

*It palsied all my pride with pain, the terror of those tears,  
And wrought into my soul the woe of all my wasted years.  
"Depart from me," I cried. "Depart, I cannot stand with thee  
And face the sorrow of those eyes beside this cruel sea.*

*Depart from me, I dare not tread the sands those feet have trod,  
Nor look into those eyes that tell the agony of God.*

*For there is written all the tale of my souls trait'rous tryst,  
The sordidness of sin that seared the splendid eyes of Christ.  
"Depart," I cried. And he was gone. I stood there all alone,  
In silence save the memory's sea still made perpetual moan.  
Night shadowed all, and wandering winds came wailing from afar,  
But out across the darkening sea shone forth a single star.*

-Studdert Kennedy. THE BEST OF STUDDERT KENNEDY, pp. 92-98. 





# MONUMENTS

C. H. Spurgeon

**E**very man should leave a monument behind him in the recollection of his own life by his neighbors. There must be something very much amiss about a man who is not missed when he dies. A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots are withered.

## Carve your name on hearts and not on marble.

So live towards others that they will keep your memory green when the grass grows on your grave. Let us hope that there will be something better to be said about us than the man whose epitaph is:

*Here lies a man who did no good,  
And if he lived, he never would;  
Where he's gone and how he fares,  
No body knows and no body cares.*

However, a plain-speaking tombstone is better than downright lying. To put flattery on a grave is like pouring melted butter

down a stone sink. Where do they bury the bad people? Right and left in our church yard, they seem all to have been the best of folks, a regular nest of saints; and some of them so precious good, it is no wonder they died—they were too fine to live in such a wicked world as this. Better kind words to the living than fine speeches over the grave. Some of the fulsome stuff on monuments is enough to make a dead man blush.

What heaps of marble are stuck over many big people's tombs! What a lift they will have at the resurrection! It makes me feel as if I could not get my breath to think of all those stones being heaped on my bones; not that there's any fear of it. Let the earth which I have turned over so often lie light upon my corpse when it is turned over me. Let John Ploughman be buried somewhere under the boughs of a spreading beech with a green grass mound above him: a quiet shady spot where the leaves fall and the robins play. Let the wind blow fresh and free over my grave, and if there must be a line about me, let it be—

Here lies the body of

**John Ploughman,**

Waiting for the appearing of his Lord and Savior,  
Jesus Christ.

-C.H. Spurgeon. *John Ploughman's Talks.*



... a quiet shady spot where the leaves fall and the robins play.



# THE HIDDEN GOD

By Desmond Ford

**Y**ou have heard of the boy who was cringing in his bedroom during a storm. The mother came up and said, "Just trust in God." He replied: "I want someone with skin on." A fine young woman whom I have known most of my life said to me, "Why doesn't God show himself? He showed himself on Sinai, and with Abraham and Moses. Why doesn't God show himself now?"

Why doesn't God show himself? Why don't we see him in someone with skin? Does he really care? Is God fair? Why is he silent? Why is he hidden? In the Old Testament we read about the hidden God. "*Thou art a God that hidest thyself*" (Isaiah 45:18). "*Surely thou doest hide thyself*" (Psalm 10:1). Life would be much easier if we could see God—we think!

The first thing to say is that our knowledge of the world around us is somewhat of an illusion. We don't stop to think about it very often, but not one of us is really in contact with the world around us in a one hundred percent way. The only contact with outside is what our senses tell us inside our minds. You don't *really* see me. You see an impression of me inside your mind.

The one place where we really get inside the universe is inside ourselves. There we know there is a person. There we can put our finger on reality and say, we know it.

Bruce Barton was a businessman living in the 1920's. He wrote a book called, *WHAT CAN A MAN BELIEVE?* He said, "I can believe that I exist and I can believe that I think. What I think changes the world around me." Further, he said, "if the universe has produced me, a person who thinks, the universe at its heart must be personal; must have a mind. So, if I want what is best for people; want right to be superior, whatever mind produced the universe must want it too." Then he said, "If you were God, would you put people to all the troubles of life that develop character then throw them on the scrap-heap? No. We know there is a life to come."

So there is a summary of what we can know. We know that we exist; we know that we think; we know we have values, convictions of right and wrong. Therefore, the universe that produced us must have all those qualities.

When you face reality there is so much that is irregular, uncertain, and changing like the spokes in a wheel. But there →





is an axle that the heart is drawn to; something beyond itself and beyond the world. It is true that some souls get so weary they just want to lie down and die forever. That is not the *real* thing. Most of us want a life; a life that will measure with the life of God.

We are so finite and we experience what are called the ‘polarities’ of life. The first polarity is my desires versus the facts. The second polarity is the rational versus the irrational. We want to behave rationally but there is much in us that is irrational. Step on my toe and you will find out! Next, there is reason versus emotion. There is so much in us, bubbling up, that has tremendous strength—passion, emotions. Yet we know that these, unless controlled by reason, can destroy. Then there is community versus the individual. I often want something that would not be good for the community. Now, responsibility versus impotence. I know I should always be kind, but I am not. I know I ought to be unselfish, but I am quite selfish. Finally, there is the lasting versus the temporary. There is a natural feeling that life will always be as it is today, yet we know that is not so. We will never meet again just like this. Not ever.

Why doesn’t God reveal himself as someone with skin on? Why doesn’t he show himself? Think about it. You can see the stars well, only when you are in the dark. Don’t hope to see the stars by looking out the window of a well-lighted room. You see out where there no street lights; no house lights. As a matter of fact, if you are down in a deep pit, you can see the stars by day. It takes a certain amount of darkness to see God. Isaac Newton set up a scientific arrangement whereby he could see a reflection of the sun in a mirror. After gazing at it he was

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*“In quietness  
and trust is  
your strength”  
(Isaiah 30:15).*

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blind for three days. We can only stand so much. The eternal stars shine bright enough when it is dark. This applies to God and to truth. The main truths we learn, we learn in pain.

Annie Dillard said, “You don’t have to sit outside in the dark, if however you want to look at the stars, darkness is required.” Would it help if we could see God with skin on? Would it really help? They saw him in the days of the Exodus, but what a bunch of cantankerous, stubborn, ungrateful rebels these people who saw God proved to be. Does power compel love?

You see love complicated even in the life of God; it complicates everyone’s life. Love complicates because it always looks for the best. Love can never be brought about by power, by force. In concentration camps they could and did make people eat excrement, kill their brothers and bury them, curse their mother, deny God. Power, in the concentration camp could do all these things, but it could not make people love the Nazis. There is a limit to what power can do. God does not unveil all his power because it would not achieve what he most wants—our love.

The Lord isn’t always in the things that are most stimulating to the senses. Remember Elijah and the earthquake, wind and fire (1 Kings 19:11-12). The Lord was not in those. But after that there was “*a gentle whisper*.” The Hebrew says: *the gentle sounds of stillness*. There is a voice in Isaiah that says, “*In quietness and trust is your strength*” (Isaiah 30:15).

Apparently God speaks best when things are quiet, calm, and still. When the layers of the experience of the senses are interrupted, then we can hear.

-To be continued. 

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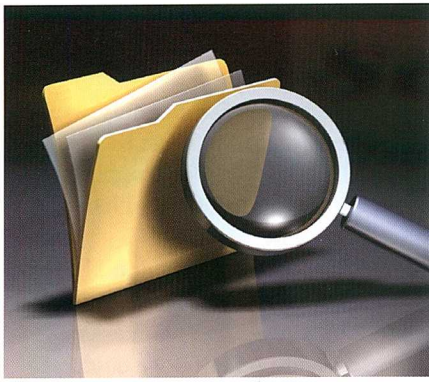
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# Scripture Search...

*"These are the Scriptures that testify about me..."*

## Ripe Fruit

### Introduction:

When I was a small boy, my mother would—in an effort to dissuade me from bad habits—say: “You don’t want to grow up to be a nincompoop!” I had no idea what a nincompoop was, but it sounded bad. So it was my mother who first planted in me the soil of my mind, the idea that persons are ‘works in progress.’ In life we grow. It is within our power to determine what kind of a crop we produce. We are responsible; answerable to God. This is not a scary and unfortunate aspect of our existence. It is what gives it meaning. How we live matters.

**Read:** Jeremiah 24:1-10; Isaiah 5:1-7;  
Jeremiah 2:21.

- Note: God’s disappointment and frustrated expectation.

**Read:** Matthew 3:1-10.

- How does John the Baptist’s message identify spiritual values as the fruit God expects?

**Read:** Matthew 7:15-23.

- Note: Jesus’ use of metaphor to illustrate both a bad and good growth result.

**Read:** Luke 20:9-19; Mark 11:12-14, 20, 21.

- What did Jesus mean to teach by cursing the fig tree? Compare: Mark 11:15-18 with Luke 20:9-19.

**Read:** John 15:1-8.

- What interpretive commentary does John 15:9-17 make on the preceding passage?

**Read:** Galatians 5:22-23; James 3:17; Isaiah 61:3.

**Finally:**

*All over the world this gospel is  
producing fruit and growing,  
just as it has been doing  
among you since the day you  
heard it and understood God’s  
grace in all its truth  
(Colossians 1:6).*

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# TO and FRO with the Editor

## Question:

What does Jesus mean by “blasphemy against the Spirit” in Matthew 12:31?

B.T.

## Answer:

Many sincere Christians of tender conscience are troubled by Jesus’ language about the unpardonable sin. Some are aware that of instances in their past when they have literally blasphemed the name of the Spirit of God. They, therefore, worry that this may place them beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness. They need not worry! If attributing God’s work to the activity of the source of all evil was the one sin that could shut people out of God’s kingdom, no one would be saved. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” This means everyone has—during the career of their unbelief—called good evil, and evil good.

In Matthew 12, Jesus is interacting with the Pharisees who steadfastly refuse to recognize the work of God in Jesus. They were resolute in their unbelief. They refused to repent. They resisted the abundant offer of forgiveness and grace that was presented to them in Jesus. They were in danger of a refusing to be pardoned. That is the one sin that God does not forgive—rejection of the forgiving love of God. He will not force himself on anyone!

## Question:

Why did Jesus condemn the fig tree for having no fruit, when it was not fruit-bearing season (Mark 11:12-21)?

V.S.

## Answer:


In Mark’s gospel, Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree is sandwiched around his clearing the temple of the money-changers and racketeers. The ‘meat’ interprets the ‘sandwich’ and vice-versa.

The fig tree is used in the Old Testament, to symbolize Israel in its standing before God. See Jeremiah 8:13; 29:17; Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7. The fig tree destruction is also a metaphor for judgment (Hosea 2:12; Isaiah 34:4).

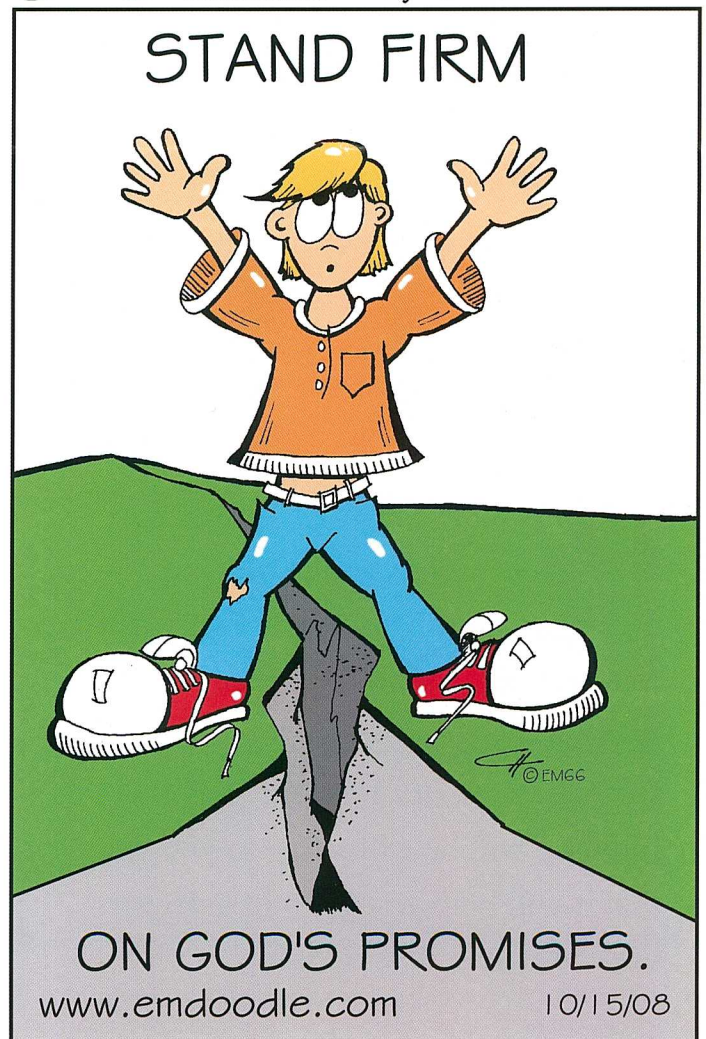
Jesus arrives at the temple to find that its stewards (the priests and their corrupt dependants) have subverted God’s purpose for establishing it. Instead of a place for the world to come and meet with Israel’s God—to find refuge and hope in him—it is turned into a “cave of marauders,” a house of oppression.

The fig tree is contemporary Israel, and Jesus cursing it corresponds to his judgment on the temple traffickers. That

which God had given for the benefit and blessing of mankind has failed to live up to its mission. Just as the fig tree withers, never to bear fruit again, so Israel is removed from its place in God’s scheme.

The shocking solemnity of this divine judgment signaled by Jesus’ clearing of the temple is underlined by Mark, who notes that Jesus cursed the fig tree at a time when no one would have expected the tree to be bearing figs! 

*Em* doodles by Chris Hambrecht






# Did You Know?

...that among Iran's sixty-six million people, there is a small but important Christian minority. Most of Iran's Christians are Armenians and Assyrians who are relatively free to follow their faith. The number of Evangelical Christians is growing in the Islamic Republic.

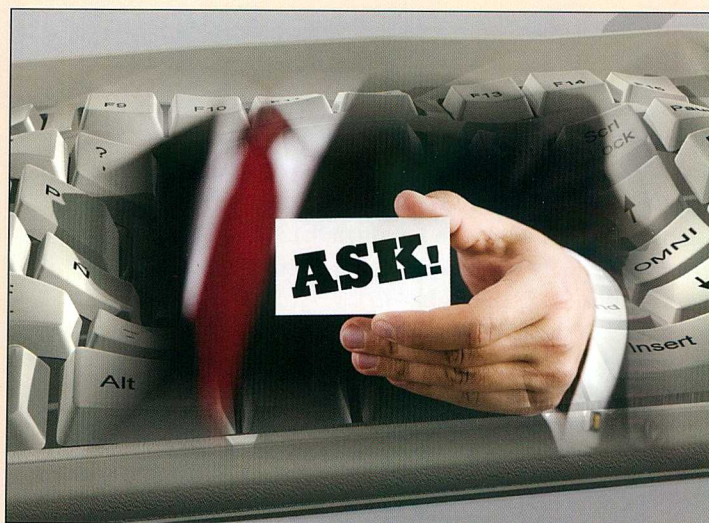
- The number of Armenians, Iran's largest Christian minority, was estimated at 300,000 in 1979. Armenians have two seats in the Iranian parliament. The Assyrian Christian population numbers 10,000. They have one seat in the parliament.
- A relatively new phenomenon is the rising number of Iranian-born Muslims who convert to Christianity. Their number is not well documented; possibly as many as 100,000. These

Christians run a risk. Under Islamic law as practiced in Iran, a Muslim who converts to another faith can face the death penalty. The government has refrained from executing people for this in recent years but has taken measure to prevent Christians from proselytizing. Despite this, many Iranians are not content with the rancor, hatred, and killings that came in the wake of the Islamic revolution. They see that the message of Jesus is one of love. They are attracted to it by means of satellite TV and through Christian friends.

- Iranian Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus like other Christians around the world. They decorate Christmas trees, exchange gifts, and attend services. Armenians and Syrians celebrate Christmas on January 6. Others on December 24. 

## Ask the Pastor!

**D**o you have difficult questions about scripture that you need help understanding? This is just a friendly reminder for you to log onto [www.goodnewsunlimited.org](http://www.goodnewsunlimited.org) and click the *Ask the Pastor* link. We pray that this ministry will be a blessing to you, and that it will help you grow in a deeper understanding of scripture.





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*Dear neighbor,*

*Everyone needs encouragement sometime. Even though our quiet neighborhood seems a haven in an often troubled world, some times trouble does distress us, making encouragement good and even necessary. This is the purpose of our sharing this recorded Christmas message with you.*

*The speaker, Dr. Ford, is well qualified to bring a message of hope and peace. Himself the victim of tragedy and loss, he has nevertheless brought renewed faith and courage to thousands around the world, through his expositions of the Christian gospel.*

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