

Blessed

Ryan Goodwin

If you want a correct definition of “blessed” look no further than the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:1-12: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* The reward is in heaven, Jesus says. Nowhere does He connect a faithful spiritual life to a rich material life. If anything, He suggests material poverty will be the norm for His followers.

Upside-down Blessedness

Contrary to our typical use of the word “blessed”, it is actually in our deprivation that we find the greatest spiritual blessings. This was the case when the Israelites faced a life of wilderness wandering. *“And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord”* (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

“What intrigues me about this text is the means by which God taught Israel ‘that man does not live by bread alone’. God’s way of instructing Israel in this regard was by allowing them to hunger and by feeding them with manna (of which the people rapidly tired). Therefore, by restricting the people’s appetites they would be more likely to rely on God and His word and less likely to become self-indulged, relying on ‘bread alone’” (Berry Kercheville, *Focus Magazine*, May 2006, p. 6). The whole experience was a test for the Israelites. On the one hand, the desolation of the wilderness removed all the crutches that men depend on. Essentially, it forced the people to return to God, who alone could provide. On the other hand, the severity of the experience undermined the shallow faith of those who were not totally grounded in God. *“God led them into the desert where they had no alternative but to trust Him or to murmur against Him”* (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, pp. 277-278).

Similarly, when we face deprivation, we must answer the tough questions about our devotion to God. Do we serve Him at any cost? Do we depend on Him, disregarding all other supposed sources of strength? I suppose the flip side to the deprivation dilemma is how we handle wealth and comfort! In that sense, times of trial actually give us an opportunity for self-improvement – we get to find out who we really are. Sometimes our deepest faults can only be exposed in our darkest hour. We should be grateful when the truth is revealed, and we can honestly assess our faith (James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 1:6-8).

“And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character,

hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:3-5). Now THAT sounds like a blessed life, does it not? This certainly does not mean that we can only find spiritual blessings in physical deprivation, but it does remind us of the challenges that physical security present. Mammon is a hindrance, a distraction, after all, and Jesus said it best when He noted how hard it is for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom (Matthew 19:23-24). Fortunately, I find great comfort in Jesus’ next statement in verse 26: “With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”