

Christian Blessings (1)

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Scripture of Lesson: Luke's Gospel 6:20-23 [NKJV]

*Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said:
"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.
Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you,
And revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven,
For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.*

1. Are persecution and suffering prerequisites for the promised blessings?

When we read this portion of the scripture, we tend to focus on the first part of each sentence, that is, being poor, hungering now, weeping now, being hated, reviled and discriminated by the people of this world because we are Christians. Because the conditions of the promised blessings seem so negative and difficult to bear, our attention is focused on the difficulties rather than the blessings, which the Lord promised will be and can be ours. Who enjoys being poor and hungry? Who likes weeping for losses and unjust treatments by others? Who delights being hated by your supposed friends, relatives and neighbors because you are following Jesus Christ? Who can bravely withstand the reviling, hatred and discriminatory acts hurled at you because you profess to follow Jesus Christ?

So, the first question for you today is, "*Did our Lord Jesus specify these difficult experiences as pre-requisites for the promised blessings?*" The answer is that Lord Jesus did not say, you **MUST** be poor to have the kingdom of God. In fact, there have been many rich people who professed to be Christians and received the promised rewards. Most of us in America do not have to hunger for food and can live as Christians. Being hungry is not a requirement for being a Christian. However, being hungry for God's truth and righteousness **IS** a requirement for God's people. I cannot think anyone can be a professing Christian unless she/he craves God's truth and word every day. We all share that hunger and thirst for God's righteousness and justice in our lives and in the world we live.

Poverty and hunger can come to us because of our profession as Christians. Many Christians have chosen the path of poverty and alienation from the main body of the world where they were living so that they might have the freedom to serve God and follow Christ without being inhibited by the allurements of the riches, fame and honor of this world. John the Baptist, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His apostles and many disciples chose this path of poverty, alienation from the society and simple life so as to devote themselves to faithfully serve God and to fulfill the mission given them by God the Father. And many Christians in the third world are suffering from poverty, hunger and afflictions because of their profession.

Some Christians have never had to experience any suffering or persecution as Christians. But Lord Jesus told His disciples that they had to carry their own crosses to follow Him. So, although such negative experiences do not occur to all believers in the same severity, each Christian must bear his/her own cross, whatever it might be, in this life if he/she were to follow Christ in the true sense.

[Matt 16:24] Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

Many people are attracted by the gospel of Christ and choose to attend a church. However, 'bearing my own cross' is not a welcome idea to many Christians. They do not even wish to think about what 'my own cross' might mean to them. When you see a cross, you see two pieces of wood fixed at right angles to each other. The vertical piece represents the truth of God, who is Jesus, who connects the earth to heaven. The horizontal piece represents a composite of my human nature, the world and Satan put together. These two are crossing each other and can never go together. As we live with other people as relatives, friends and neighbors, we sometimes find it necessary to yield to others, to close our eyes to the evil acts around us, and to make a concession or two just to keep peace. However, when the world and Satan barge into my own life, my own family and our community to become active participants of the sins and evil acts, we must stand up and say firmly 'NO' to them. That is what it means to bear our own crosses. Attending a church and pitching into the collection box does not automatically make us worthy of receiving the promised blessings. Lord Jesus will not welcome those who knowingly rejected bearing the cross in their own lives.

If someone preaches a gospel and tells people that you don't have to experience any of these difficulties and still live on as Christians and God will bless you with good health, material wealth, high positions and long life, there is something wrong with such a gospel. That is a 'different gospel,' which is different from the gospel of Christ preached by Christ Himself and His apostles, because sooner or later you are going to experience the tough experiences of prejudice, discrimination, hatred and injustice that Christ spoke about if you were to live each day with the Lord in the center of your heart and life and to live according to the high moral standards of the kingdom of God. There is no way you can skirt around the difficult things in the Christian life and live on as so-called Christians and expect God to bless you in the true sense. So, any preacher who preaches such a 'different gospel' is not a true servant of God. Be aware and stay away from such false preachers.

2. Do we follow Christ to win the promised blessings?

Now, the second question to you today is, *"Do we follow Jesus Christ because we covet these promised blessings? Is it wrong to pursue these rewards as Christians?"* We all agree that we are Christians because we aspire to gain these wonderful blessings of God. Throughout the human history God has given covenants, which are promises. God made a beautiful Garden of Eden and placed Adam and Eve there to take care of not only the garden but the entire creation of God. They were to enjoy all things that God made for them if they would fulfill their mission and the responsibilities as the caretaker of God's creation.

God made the promise of salvation from the great flood for Noah and his family of eight people. Noah believed God's word of the coming destruction and obeyed His command to build the ark. After the flood God also promised that He would never destroy the earth again with water and blessed Noah's family to prosper and to multiply on the earth. That was their mission but it came with God's blessings.

God told Abraham to leave his home country and relatives and travel to the land of Canaan. He promised great blessings, which were beyond imagination. Abraham obeyed God's call and left his country and family. In addition, Abraham became God's friend when he offered up his promised son, Isaac, on Mt. Moriah as he was commanded by God.

[Genesis 12: 1-3] Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God's promises to Abraham were fulfilled and are still being fulfilled. Abraham's descendants became today's Jewish people. Moreover, all Christians who became God's children through Jesus Christ in the NT era became spiritual children of Abraham. We partake of the promise that God made to Abraham because we as Christians have become spiritual descendants of Abraham. God gave the land of Palestine to Abraham's descendants. So, this land rightfully belongs to the people of Israel regardless of what other people might think or say. God also promised that He would be their God forever, that is the descendants of Abraham would be His chosen people.

[Gal. 3:29] And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

We became Abraham's seed through the adoption that came to us because Christ paid the price of redemption for us and brought us into God's family. Both the Jewish people and the Christian church constitute the chosen people of God. However, only a remnant of the Jewish people will choose to follow Jesus as their Messiah and come into the everlasting promise of God. In the meantime, God wants us to establish and prosper His Kingdom here on earth—in our personal lives, our families, our communities, and in our nations. We are going through a perilous time in America these days of God's people fighting for God's justice in our society. We will be owners of God's kingdom here on earth if we fight for it, just as the people of Israel had to fight the ungodly people so as to possess the promised land.

3. Are the promised blessings worth our suffering?

The third question to us today is, *“Are these promised blessings sufficiently great to endure the difficulties we encounter as Christians? Is the promise of our reward sufficiently worthwhile that we gladly suffer and endure the negative experiences that come our way as we follow Jesus Christ?”*

When an athlete competes in the Olympic Games, he/she gives his best to win a medal because winning an Olympic medal is the highest honor to all athletes. The promised blessings are like the Olympic gold medal to all Christians. Our rewards will be different based on what we have done during our life on the earth. But, taking part in the ownership of the kingdom of God, having all of our needs filled, and enjoying a life of joy and happiness in the eternal kingdom are all common blessings to all true Christians. Some will receive more blessings such as a privilege of ruling together with Christ in the Millennial Kingdom upon the second coming of our Lord. But, the value of the promised blessings cannot be comprehended now.

[1 Cor. 2:9] But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

It is very difficult for us to imagine how wonderfully magnificent and glorious the heavenly kingdom is. In Revelation 21 the apostle John had a view of the new Jerusalem, which would come down to the new earth after the thousand-year rule of Christ. Based on his description we can picture the grandeur and glory of the new Jerusalem. However, there is a severe limit to our imagination. That is why the OT psalmist sang that what God has prepared for those who love Him can hardly be seen, heard or imagined by a human. What we will receive will be far greater and wonderful in magnitude, value, glory and splendor than anything owned or enjoyed by the richest people here on earth in the present day.

So, if you are experiencing material poverty, poor health, alienation, injustice or sorrow because you have been trying your best to follow Christ and His example, rejoice and be content that your rewards will be much greater than what you can imagine or dream of. Yes, the promised blessings were given to the disciples so that they might open their eyes to the divine values and rewards, not the flimsy worldly values and rewards, which soon pass away. The greatest merit of the heavenly blessings is that we will never lose them once we have

them. God guarantees that we will never lose our rewards and that He will always be our God for ever and ever. And the kingdom of God is ours to enjoy and to prosper here on earth when we open our eyes to see God expecting us to fight for His principles and truth against the forces of evil. All Christians in the land, arise to stand up for God's truth!

[Continued in Part 2]