

“Then Who Can Be Saved?”

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Job 23:1-9, 16-17 Mark 10:17-27

Do you ever pray for material blessings? Have you ever asked God for money, a car, a better place to live? Some people say we should never pray for things like that. But there's nothing wrong with asking and trusting God for the things we need. It's just that it can get out of hand. And people tend to confuse the things they have with blessings from God.

Joel Osteen is the pastor of the largest Protestant Church in the United States, Lakewood Church in Texas with 43,000 members. He lives with his family in a 10 million dollar mansion, and his net worth is over 56 million. Is that a blessing? There's a televangelist named Creflo Dollar and his dream was to have a luxury jet worth 65 million dollars. His board of directors went along with it because he traveled a lot and they said (quote) “It's the best (kind of jet), and a reflection of the level of excellence at which our organization chooses to operate.” And Creflo added, “With God, all things are possible to him that believes.”* We call that the “prosperity gospel,” the idea that God blesses with material wealth those whom God favors most. And all things are possible, even 10 million dollar mansions and luxury jets.

Many people consider the prosperity gospel heresy, but it's easy to find it in the Bible. In biblical times people generally accepted that God would reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Psalm 1 says that for those who take delight in the Lord and walk in God's ways, “in all that they do, they prosper.” But there are other voices in the Bible that question that view. We heard two of them this morning.

Michael read from the book of Job. The Bible says Job was a righteous man, “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (1:1). He was also wealthy. The Bible called him “the greatest of all the people in the East.” (1:3). He had a large and close-knit family, and many possessions – thousands of sheep, camels, oxen and many servants. But one day everything Job had was suddenly gone; thieves, bandits, fire, wind storms, one calamity after another took it all away. At first Job humbly accepted his loss. He fell on the ground before God and said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Then Job himself was struck. He came down with horrible sores all over his body, from the bottoms of his feet to the top of his head. And he sat among the ashes in misery, scraping himself. His wife said he should curse God and die. Still Job answered, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Three of Job's friends came and sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. That was much better than his wife's reaction. But then they started to quote conventional wisdom, saying Job must have done something to deserve this. Bad things like this don't just happen to good people. If you are righteous, God will protect and bless you. So, they said, Job should humble himself and repent, because obviously, he wasn't as good and righteous as he thought.

Job knew he had done nothing to deserve this suffering. It simply wasn't fair. So he brought his complaint directly to God. He shook his fist at God and demanded a hearing. And God was silent. So in today's reading Job was left weak and terrified, wishing to be swallowed up in darkness.

But something happened as Job sat in darkness and misery. He looked around and was struck by other injustices in the world. And in the next chapter Job complained to God about these wrongs as well: "The wicked remove landmarks... they drive away the orphan's donkey... they throw people who are needy off the road... the poor have to scavenge for food and sleep out in the cold... In the cities the wounded and dying cry out and God pays no attention to their prayer..." It isn't fair! Even as Job struggled with his own suffering and God's seeming absence, he saw the injustice that was done to others and was outraged by their suffering as well.

Job questioned God and didn't find an answer, at least in these two chapters. But he did find a connection between his own suffering and other victims of violence, oppression and calamity. In his suffering he looked for God, and instead found a connection to a bigger world of injustice and pain. And in the end, he also found God. But first he had to acknowledge that God's ways were beyond his understanding. There's not a direct correlation between goodness and prosperity. Sometimes the way of evil prospers and the righteous suffer.

Like Job, the rich man in the gospel lesson Ginny read this morning was challenged to change his understanding of God and life. This man was also good and righteous. He had kept all the commandments since he was young, and he was blessed with many possessions. And according to conventional wisdom, those blessings should be a sign of God's favor. Still, he ran to Jesus asking if there might be something else he needed to do to get eternal life. And it says that Jesus affirmed his good life, and then looked at him with love and said one thing was lacking.

That one thing was big: "Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me." Eternal life is not about being good, keeping commandments or following rules. It's an invitation to enter into what God is doing on the earth, to be out there where God is acting, among the poor and oppressed, the lonely and the suffering. The rich man wasn't looking for anything like that. He just wanted assurance of life after death. Instead, Jesus invited him to live now. But that was too much for the man, and he went away grieving. Then Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God."

Not exactly the prosperity gospel, is it? Instead, it's a warning of the dangers of riches. We all know the dangers of poverty: deprivation, malnutrition, disease and death. And there are spiritual dangers as well. When people spend so much of their time and energy fighting over scarce resources, or just trying to survive, they can become callous or cynical. But the spiritual dangers of wealth are even greater. When we put too much time and energy into our possessions, we lose our freedom. What we own begins to own us. And when we have more than we need, it's easy to think we don't need other people, that we deserve what we have and can do whatever we want with it. There is a false sense of security and it cuts us off from other people and from God's grace. Jesus never criticized anyone for being poor. But many times he warned of the dangers of riches. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. It is easier

for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.”

This was shocking to the disciples, and it should shock us too. But Jesus wasn't really trying to teach them about making it to heaven. That's the easy part. Just trust God's grace. Whether we are wealthy, or give everything away, all things are possible with God, even fitting a camel through the eye of a needle.

What Jesus wanted was to help people find life now. The real question is, do our possessions and commitments make it hard for us to follow Jesus? Does our position of comfort cut us off from the needs of the world, so that we don't even hear Jesus' call? Would we be willing to get up and leave it all behind? God wants us to be fully alive where we are free to move, free to care and love our neighbors, and free to give, especially to those in need. We don't have to wait for the age to come. Jesus wants us to have life now.

I've told this story before, but it's worth repeating... about a woman in my old church who got up and left it all behind. Or at least most of it. She was single and had just retired from her job as a social worker. Through a series of events and connections she felt called to leave her apartment in New York City and go to Uganda to help with the growing number of AIDS orphans. You might expect something like that from a college student, who wants to explore the world and hasn't already put his or her roots down somewhere. This wasn't even a job she would get paid for. She had to raise the money to do it. How could someone that age do something so risky? Still, she decided to sublet her apartment and stay for two years. She ended up staying four years. And when she came back she had a new sense of joy, and her life was full of new people she had come to love and care for.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age, houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children ... and in the age to come eternal life.”

The rich man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered by telling what he could do to live now. And that's the point. Eternal life is not something we can have, just another possession to keep. It's not about believing the right things, or behaving the right way, or belonging to the right church. It's about life here and now. And we find life by following Jesus, who calls us by name, so that we might be part of God's reign on earth, right now.

May we have the courage and the freedom to follow where Jesus leads us. Amen.

* :Televangelist Creflo Dollar Will Get His \$65 Million Private Jet, Ministry Say,” by Carol Kuruvilla, 6/4/2015, at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/04/creflo-dollar-wcci-statement>.