

"Blessed"

OT: Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Exodus 16:2-15

Read Exodus 16:2-15

I came across a letter this week that reads:

During my review for the medical boards, I gained 10lbs in a span of 4 months and promised myself to exercise when all of this is over. I successfully passed the medical boards with the help of the LORD, the oath taking is over and now I must face the music (as my friend Joni always say).

One early morning, I woke up and decided to go to the park for a walk and to start my work out. I got out of bed and changed into my jogging outfit, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and tied up my rubber shoes. I got into my car and drove off to the park. While going there, I decided to set a goal for myself, that, I must finish 10 rounds before I go home.

Upon reaching the park, I got out of the car and started my exercise and joined the people there. So, there I was enjoying every step, inhaling, and exhaling fresh air, appreciating the green grass, and looking at the dried leaves falling from the trees while listening to my iPod. As I continued to walk around the park, I uttered a prayer to the Lord thanking him for the wonderful morning and asking God what the message is for me that day.

On my 5th round, I felt fatigue, hunger and thirst setting in. I entertained the thought of giving up, going home, and sleeping again. As the idea battled in my mind, I was reminded about the goal I have set just a while ago. I kept on walking and as I looked around, I saw myself amid men and women decades older than me who continued to move on. Some even suffered from a stroke that had difficulty walking, some took on small steps with a cane on hand and some took on pauses before they continued their walk but still, they kept on walking.

God made me realize that each of us have set our own goals in our lives. Be it about having a family, pursuing a career path, correcting a past mistake, reaching a dream, passing a board exam, starting a business, or even moving on from an unsuccessful relationship. The process will not be easy. We will or we may encounter a lot of stumbling blocks, obstacles and hurdles that may push us to just give up, cry and feel sorry for ourselves.

Let us stop and look around. Let us remember that God is always there the moment we open our eyes in the morning, accompanying us in every step of the way until we reach our goals. Let us consult and entrust to the Lord all our plans because God is the creator of all things and God knows what is best for us.

And lastly, let us be inspired with the people around us who had experienced the same or even a greater amount of difficulty but still did not give up and continued until they reach their goals and now is savoring their success with the help of our LORD. I guess you know now what their secret is.

Amazed by the men and women whom I walked with that morning, I finished my goal, had the Lord's message in my heart and went home after my 10th round of walking. It felt good. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

I hope you and I can apply what God made me realize this morning. Have a blessed day everyone! God bless us all.

*The signature of the letter included two scripture texts. One from Proverbs 3:5-6: **"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."** The other from Philippians 3:14: **"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."***

I like this letter and particularly these scriptures because I believe they speak to us in a similar way as the Exodus and Psalm texts do. The struggle experienced with getting up and getting in gear to exercise and the observation of those struggling alongside the man on the track is something I can see with the early Israelites. They had made a covenant with God. Better yet, God initiated a covenant with them. The Israelites were trying to figure out life and move on from the unhealthy relationship with Egypt: a relationship of slavery and bondage to one of freedom and salvation. They had a goal of forging ahead to the place God was calling them. Best of all, what did the Israelites discover along their journey in the wilderness? *"God is always there the moment we open our eyes in the morning, accompanying us in every step of the way until we reach our goal."*

Moses was guiding the Israelites but many of them were tired and stopped seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. They began to doubt, and question and their doubt and question became paralyzing to their progress. The Israelites became so hungry, they even began to believe the best choice for them was to go back to Egypt. At least there they got food. The Israelites accused Moses, the one God sent to free them, as leading them further into the wilderness just to kill them by hunger. I believe the Israelites win the award for the definition of "hangry", with all their complaining and struggle.

This part of the Exodus only portrays one request, one prayer, from the Israelites and that was for food, but as we quickly learn from their journey in the wilderness, Food = Life. So, what the Israelites were really praying for was life? They did not know what it would look like, how they would get there, or who would provide it. They just knew they needed something to eat before they could do anything else.

I want to stop here and ask: In your prayers to God, are you asking for or hoping for something to be fulfilled? And you do not have to be complaining about something like the Israelites. What is your prayer? What is something you feel you need before you can do anything else?

For the Israelites, what they needed and prayed for most was bread. Is what you need right now food? Is what you need right now assurance? Is what you need right now strength, courage, or hope?

This past Monday I was upstairs with the Study Club and Lyle Handy was telling us about his birthday, which was going to be on Tuesday. His 5th. And he was pumped. He told us he was going to bring cupcakes to share and that the cupcakes were going to be raining down on us. What Lyle needed on Monday and what Lyle prayed to God for his birthday was cupcakes. Other things too I am sure but definitely cupcakes.

As the week went on, I began to think maybe Lyle was on to something bigger than he probably imagined. I was talking with Erik earlier this week and he reflected on something he had read that manna, that is the manna God provided from Heaven to the Israelites, was not just bread. We might think it must have been some basic bread- perhaps dry, unleavened, and without much taste- but manna is known to contain a sweetness within. A side note: I do not know if you like King's Hawaiian rolls or not but that is what I think God's manna might be today- yum. Nevertheless, that got me thinking about Jesus' declaration as "the bread of life" and that our following him and believing in him is not just a simple nourishment like that we get from regular bread, but an enriching and fulfilling nourishment that includes a sweetness to life. When we eat God's manna, we want more. It also caused me to reflect on Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine. He did not just provide the cheapest of wines, but the best of wine. That is what God does. God provides the best and enough of it for all.

Back to our question: What are you praying for today? What are we, as a church, praying for today? If God could bless us with "bread from heaven" what would our "bread" be?

With one broad stroke, I think our prayers to God focus on one main thing, blessing. God, bless us- bless so and so- bless this circumstance- give us, bless us, this day with our daily bread. Isn't this what we want? To be blessed. And to be blessed means one has received a blessing.

As understood in scripture, "Blessing" is the act of pronouncing good things upon the recipient. "Blessing", or being "Blessed" by God, is central to the life of God's covenant people. The source of "Blessing" is God. God, not just anything or anyone, is the ultimate source of blessing. When God blesses, it is the empowering and transforming word that accomplishes its purpose. To pronounce a blessing carries a sense of inevitability such that, once it has been uttered, it cannot be retracted. At the heart of God's blessing is God's very presence. Reminds me of the popular words spoken as a blessing to crowds as they prepare to depart: "May God bless you... May God make his face to shine upon you... May God lift up his face upon you." God's presence then implies God's protection. God's blessing highlights the relationship God has with God's covenant people. With God in their midst, people are either blessed because of obedience or cursed as a part of disobedience. This teaches us that there are consequences to our actions (Deut. 7 and 28).

Something else we learn about "blessing" in scripture is that God's character is revealed to us as God determines to bless the creation and an undeserving and often rebellious people. That certainly was the case when God rained manna from heaven. Our blessing is that even when we are disobedient, God does not just give up. God finds a way to offer us a way, and there is no greater blessing in our lives than that.

Through our blessings, which God will surely provide, because God has promised to never leave us or forsake us, we come to know who God is in our life. We come to know the Lord our God. Because of God, all God is and does, let us always remember we are truly blessed!

I know I opened with a letter, but I came across another one I felt was too good to pass up for today. It brings together beautifully the nature of being blessed.

I am one blessed beyond measure in life. I do not mean to infer that I was born with a "silver spoon" in my mouth. Being born amid the Great Depression, as the middle of seven children, to a carpenter Father and a home keeping Mother was not a "silver spoon" experience.

Our family readily used hand-me-downs. We had a large garden, raised two hogs each year for their meat, and had a family cow, for our milk. In fact, when construction work ceased and Dad could not find work during the Depression, we started a family laundry service in our home. This employed up to seven girls at one time. Dad also leased 12 acres of nearby land and we truck farmed to earn a few extra dollars.

I have been blessed with good pastors and a good church to grow up in. I was blessed with good teachers to help in my learning. A special friend encouraged me to give college a try and showed me how I could afford to go.

Following graduation, I spent two years in the Army, allowing me to see Europe and build on life's experiences. I returned home, got a job in the local bank, married my sweetheart, and thought I was on my way to a normal lifestyle. But we never know what life has to give us.

I was called back into the Army when they built the Berlin Wall, just six months after completing my tour of duty in Germany. That too, turned out to be a blessing, as I hadn't worked long enough at the bank to begin health insurance. So, our oldest son, Ken, was born in an Army hospital. Cost = \$8.25.

Following a year at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, I returned home to work at the bank again. I worked my way up through the ranks to become, Chairman, President, and CEO of the bank before retiring at the end of 1997. I was blessed to have had good employers and employees in my work. I have been blessed to have a devoted wife and wonderful children and grandchildren. I am truly grateful to all I have met along the way. God bless them all.

Today, I look back on those grand experiences and see they were my possibilities to grow. Within my dreams and aspirations, I found abounding opportunities. All my family learned to work to survive. We learned to take care of each other. We learned family values and societal views, which I treasure today.

The times taught me to save for a rainy day. It taught me to help those less fortunate than me. It taught me the joy of being a volunteer and of meeting other's needs. It taught me that success breeds success; that you build on your accomplishments. It taught me to put others first if I wanted to be successful in life. And, it taught me that God does provide a way if we lean on Him.

Most of all, those experiences taught me that God is the most important authority in all of life's endeavors. God can lift you up when all else fails. God can raise your spirits when life seems in despair. God gives comfort in times of desperation. God brings joy to quell your grief. God can carry you on eagle's wings to your greatest highs. God brings love to those who seek God. God gives wisdom and courage to those who follow God. God knows every intimate detail about you and yet, God still loves you. Stop now and count your blessings. Yes, I know I have been blessed, and I hope you have too.

God is with us. God is right here. And with God present, we can have blessed assurance of God's protection, God's care, God's strength. We can have blessed assurance that God hears our prayers and knows just what we need before anything else. With that assurance, I pray it will be so, according to God's will. Let all God's people say... Amen.