

## **Blessings: A Brief History**

Jehovah is the source of all blessings. Occasionally we sing this truth, “praise God from whom all blessings flow.” This hymn draws its inspiration from Psalm 150.

If we open our Bibles to Genesis 1, the scriptures immediately confirm that this is truth, God is the source of all blessings. Regarding the newly finished creation, it reads: “And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” (Genesis 1:22) If we look further at verse 28, in regard to the creation of the first man and woman, it reads:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Established here is the state of the relationship between man and Jehovah, that since the beginning, man is the receiver of God’s blessing while God is the one who knows and provides what is vital to the needs of men.

The scriptures teach that divine blessings are always beneficial, allowing men to flourish, and prosper. In fact, Proverbs 10:22 states, “The blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it.” Divine blessings are desirable because they bestow peace and goodness and work to the favor of all men. The scriptures also demonstrate, by many examples, that men are overtaken by disaster when they forget God.

For example, in the last days before the nation of Judah fell to Babylon in the year 586 BC. At that time Jehovah commissioned the priest Jeremiah as a prophet to save His people from judgement.

Prior to this era, the people of God ceased to be holy to the Lord, turning away from the God of their fathers, who took them from bondage in Egypt and made them a great people. In Jerusalem, they openly worshiped the idols of other nations. Jeremiah called out this transgression, saying, “for as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah.” (Jeremiah 2:35).

While the people contended that they were innocent of this charge, Jehovah said of them, “my people have forgotten me days without number.” (Jeremiah 2:32)

The people of that generation made a conscience decision to abandon God because of their lack of faith. Their independence from God made them dependent on the more powerful nations to the east and west for peace and security and they fell fully under their influence.

The prophet Jeremiah delivered a message they did not want to hear. Jeremiah 17:7 and 8 reads:

**7** “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. **8** He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit

We understand Jeremiah’s statement, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,” aligns with the ancient truth from Genesis 1, that God is the source of all blessings.

This same thought might be conveyed using slightly different words. For instance, rather than “blessed is the man”, it could be expressed as, *divinely favored* is the man who trusts in the Lord, or *happy* is the man who trusts in the Lord, or even, *congratulations* to the man who trusts in the Lord. All of these emphasize the special privilege which Israel as a nation once enjoyed by virtue of its hope in God. When, as a people, they placed their hope in Jehovah and flourished.

The practical advantage of faith in God is presented by Jeremiah. Sincere faith works in favor of those who worship and honor God. The apostle Paul expressed this same truth to the church in Rome, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

On the other hand, to be fearful, or harbor doubt in God results in a disadvantage that cancels His blessing.

Recall that before he was overcome by fear, Peter had the courage to walk to Jesus on the water. From this we know that there will be times when our faith is challenged. To indulge in doubt is to weaken faith. (Matthew 14:31) Yet Jesus is ready to save.

Jesus once reassured a doubting father, "All things are possible for one who believes." (Mark 9:23).

Conversely, Jeremiah 17 also reveals the darker aspect of this same truth:

**5** Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. **6** He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. (Jeremiah 17: 5 and 6)

We should note here that the word translated "cursed" first appears in Genesis 3:14, where it reads, "The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field..."

This reminds us that we have knowledge, we understand and are conscience of the difference between moral right or wrong. To engage in immorality is to turn away from God and become His adversary. In this state, man cannot realize His blessing.

In fact, Jeremiah said those who willfully become God's adversaries should expect bad things. Consequently, life will become harder for them. The scriptures tell us that the nation of Judah, the last remnant of Israel, rejected Jeremiah's call to repentance and labeled him a traitor to the nation.

However, Jeremiah also prophesied that those who returned from captivity in Babylon would return to Jehovah with a whole heart (Jeremiah 24:7). Seventy years later, according to prophecy, this occurred when the King of Persia permitted any captive of Judah to return home. (Jeremiah 29:10: Isaiah 45) At that time a small group, consisting of Jews from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin along with a few Levites, began the task of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. Carefully, they restored the Levitical priesthood and the temple worship as best they could.

It was at this point in history that the Samaritans, a people of mixed Jewish and gentile heritage became enemies of Israel. Considered as foreigners by the returning Jews, they excluded the Samaritans from all efforts to rebuild Jerusalem. In turn, these people became adversaries of the Jewish people. The scriptures reveal that enmity between these groups remained until well into the first century. Recall that on one occasion, unbelieving Jews went so far as to accuse Jesus of being a demon possessed Samaritan.

Although the returning Jews were able to reestablish themselves on their homeland, never again did they enjoy true freedom and independence. The holy city, Jerusalem, rebuilt under Persian authority, in time fell under the control of the Greeks, then the Egyptians, then the Syrians who treated them brutally. Finally the Romans took control in the year 63BC. As the era of the Old Testament came to its conclusion, Israel looked for relief from a promised Messiah, who was to appear and restore the throne of David and return the nation to its former glory.

In this period, which lasted about four hundred years, God's people paid little regard to the many prophecies about the one who was to come. Consequently, they were unprepared when John the Baptist appeared offering a baptism of repentance, followed by Jesus who appeared among them with His apostles proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

These calls to reform offended the most prominent and influential sects among the Jews. For their own reasons, the parties of Sadducees and Pharisees reacted to the teachings of Jesus with open hostility. Among themselves they doubted His authority, saying, "Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." Of His wondrous signs the Pharisees said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." (Matthew 12:24)

When Jesus told some who professed faith in Him that the truth would make them free, they responded, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" (John 8:33)

Consequently, Jesus Himself warned those who followed Him:

**2** "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, **3** so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. **4** They tie up heavy burdens,

hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Matthew 23:2-4)

While it is true that Jesus had at least one secret disciple among the leaders of Israel, as a group these men did not understand that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah which the prophets foretold. Despite the attesting miracles He performed, the overwhelming majority dismissed Him as a sabbath breaker from Nazareth. They refused to acknowledge Him as a prophet of God. Further, they held His followers in contempt saying, "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." (John 7:49)

In contrast, Jesus traveled throughout the land with His disciples, preaching the gospel daily and healing the sick. He was not afraid to be seen among the tax collectors and sinners, nor did He turn away from the ceremonially unclean. Matthew, an eyewitness wrote, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36)

All of this provides context for the sermon which Jesus preached regarding the kingdom of heaven which begins in Matthew chapter 5. When He finished, those who heard Him speak were astonished by his teaching. If we were to read His sermon in its entirety we would understand that a different standard of behavior was required in the kingdom of heaven, a standard radically unlike any His listeners were familiar with.

In this sermon, Jesus made no mention of repentance or baptism. Instead, He began by enumerating eight qualities that are common among those who follow Him and result in blessings

At least one notable Bible scholar draws a comparison between this occasion at the beginning of Christ's ministry and the occasion recorded in Exodus 19 when Jehovah appeared on Mount Sinai and gave Moses the ten commandments, Matthew Henry wrote:

"observe the difference: when *the law was given*, the Lord *came down* upon the *mountain*; now the Lord *went up*: then, he spoke *in thunder and lightning*; now, *in a still small voice*: then the people were ordered to keep their distance; now they are invited to draw near."

As Jesus spoke from the mountain on that day, He had full knowledge of the events which would transpire before His kingdom was established. For instance, He knew that one of His own would betray Him, and that His own countrymen would deny Him justice. That the Jewish Sanhedrin would subject Him to terrible suffering and a shameful death on a cross where He would bear the sins of all men. He knew, that in taking on sin, He would endure separation from the Father until He rose again on the third day.

It seems highly improbably that all of these terrible events could somehow combine and result in grace and salvation for man.

As we read the first twelve verses of Matthew five, we understand that from the beginning, His gospel established that Jesus is our example, those who would draw near to Him must be like Him. Like Jeremiah, Jesus taught that the blessings of God are not unconditional. In the kingdom of heaven, the compassionate, those who are Christlike in their conduct are the blessed.

**1** Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

**2** And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

**3** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**4** "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

**5** "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

**6** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

**7** "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

**8** "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

**9** "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

**10** "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**11** "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

**12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We noted previously that the spiritual kingdom of heaven is unlike the kingdoms of men. We also noted that the kingdom and the church are one and the same, composed of those called out of this world. It is a kingdom built on faith in Christ which transcends this life.

Christ has restored for us the relationship which man enjoyed with God at the beginning. The scope of this blessing is emphasized by Jesus in His tribute to John:

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:11)

What is Jesus’s meaning by this statement? The people to whom He spoke held John in high regard because they recognized him as a prophet of God. Like the judge Sampson, John was also a Nazarite from birth which means He was one who lived all his days in strict abstinence and prohibitions. He did not cut his hair, or touch the dead, or eat anything unclean. Further he was martyred by King Herod because he spoke against his immorality. For them, John epitomized holiness and they were confident that he would be greatly rewarded in heaven.

Jesus is saying is that no greater blessing can be realized than the salvation from sins which He is willing to provide. This is a privilege that John, who lived and died under the law, did not experience for himself. In this way, John’s circumstance is similar to that of Moses, who at the end of his life could see the promised land from a distance, but could not enter. John met the son of God face to face, but could not enter the heavenly kingdom.

If we confess our faith in Him, Christ will share His greatness with us.

On the other hand, King David is one who sinned against God. Under the old law the punishment for his crimes was death, but he acknowledged his trespass against God. In turn God forgave him. He wrote from experience, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” (Psalm 32:1)

Together these passages define the richness of the spiritual blessings those in the heavenly kingdom enjoy and increase our appreciation of the church which Jesus built by His death and resurrection.

He perfects all those who accept Him and try to live according to His example.

“...whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

By virtue of His Spiritual blessings all who follow His example should be the happiest of all people. Their sins are forgiven. In the present they may approach the Father directly in prayer and make supplication in Jesus name. They look forward to eternity where they will gather to worship Jehovah just as they gather in the present and they will be rewarded greatly.