



07 August – 13 August 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

What does it mean to receive God's blessings? That may sound like a silly question, but in the Bible the way blessing works is very different from how we tend to view it in our time. In our world, blessings are seen to be given to individuals for their own use and enjoyment, and we may even fall into the trap of thinking that health, wealth and happiness are signs of God's blessing, while poverty and suffering are signs of God's curse. But, throughout the Bible we see a very different understanding of blessing that undermines this individualistic view. Biblically, those who are blessed are equipped to be channels of God's blessing to others. Blessings are given not *to* individuals, but *through* them to the community.

In worship today, you may have heard the story of God's promise to Abraham that he would have an heir that was his own flesh and blood. As the story of this promise unfolds in the Bible, it is clear that God's call and blessing in Abraham's life was in order that he would be a blessing to the nations. Or, if the Gospel reading from Luke was your focus, you will have noticed that Jesus calls his followers to always be ready to give to those in need, and to be alert to the coming of Christ (and of God's Reign) at all times. These two elements of "readiness" go together, because it is as we give and serve that we help to manifest God's Reign in our communities, and as we watch for the signs of God's Reign, we will inevitably find ourselves participating in its work through giving and service.

This week we explore what it means to be blessed to be a blessing.

SUNDAY 07 AUGUST 2022

Read: Luke 12:32-40

Reflect: In our world, storing up treasure for ourselves is presented as the wisest of truth. We are constantly warned to make sure we

are financially secure. But, for Jesus, security is found elsewhere - in a community in which we all serve and give generously to one another. Building our lives on such mutual generosity is what Jesus called storing up treasure in God's realm, and it frees our hearts to be captured by the values of Jesus instead of being caught up by what we can possess. Then, because our hearts are captured by this new way of being, we automatically live it out more and more each day. This is what it means to be "dressed for service" and to "keep your lamps lit" (verse 35).

When we live with alertness and readiness, it's not that we're waiting to be evacuated from this planet to go to an otherworldly bliss. It's that we've learned that God's presence is always coming to us, and God's Reign is always breaking into our world, and so we must always be ready to see it, receive it, and share it. But, if we're only concerned for our own well-being, we are unable to store up treasures in heaven, we are unable to recognise God's Reign when it comes in surprising ways, and we are unable to give ourselves generously so others can experience God's blessing.

How are you storing up treasures in heaven today?

Do: The simple message of Jesus is to be generous in giving of our resources, and in giving ourselves in service. Today, don't just give a bit of money to some collection in a church service. Be generous with your love, with your resources, and with your abilities, and in this way bless those around you.

Pray: Through my giving, Jesus, I store up treasure in heaven.

MONDAY 08 AUGUST 2022

Read: Hebrews 11:1-7

Reflect: The way of faith is a very different way of living than its alternative - the way of certainty, security, and self-protection through the accumulation of power, possessions, or position. Hebrews 11 gives a brief overview of the lives of various faithful people in Scripture. The beginning of the chapter speaks of many who were saved or protected or who received promises from God. The latter part, though, describes those who suffered, were persecuted, or who died for their faith. The key thought, throughout

the chapter, though, is that the faithful people all placed their trust and their commitment in God's way of living - in a way of being that was very different from those around them.

Although today's short reading only mentions three faithful people, they were all examples of this alternative kind of life. Abel offered God his best, but his brother was jealous of him and killed him. Enoch lived a faithful life, pleased God, and so did not die but was "taken by God." Noah saved his family by trusting God's ways and God's warnings, in spite of the rejection of the people around him. The stories of these three men reveal that they all gave their lives in service of God and others, and based their lives on trust in God's values, as opposed to those of this world. And, while, in these stories some of the people around these men were judged, the men themselves all tried to bring God's life into the world in some way.

Where are you placing your faith today?

Do: To pray for others - especially those with whom we disagree or struggle – is to place our faith in God's ways of love, forgiveness, and inclusivity. When we place our trust in God's ways and pray for God's Reign to come on the earth, we live the life of faith, and we bring blessing to others. Today, take a moment to pray for those with whom you live, work and play.

Pray: May your life and love flood the lives of the people around me, O God.

TUESDAY 09 AUGUST 2022

Read: 2 Chronicles 34:22-33

Reflect: The scroll of the law had been lost in the neglected Temple for about seventy years. When it was brought to King Josiah, he immediately recognised how far the people of Israel had fallen from God's ways. So, he sent word to a prophetess to find out how bad things had become. Her prophecy of judgement must have confirmed Josiah's worst fears. But there was hope - Josiah's faithfulness, and godly leadership, would protect them for a time, and the judgement would only come after his death. When Josiah died in a battle that he shouldn't have been fighting against the King

of Egypt, his mistake opened the way for other nations to conquer Judah and bring the prophesied judgement to pass.

The writers of this account believed that God directed all events. They saw good times as God's blessing and bad times as God's punishment. While we may not share the writers' worldview, their message is clear. A good leader, like Josiah, who recognises that his authority is an unearned blessing, will use his power to bring blessing to his people. But, as with the kings before Josiah, a bad leader will use his position for his own benefit and allow the people to suffer. We see this dynamic at work throughout the world. But it also applies to each of us as we exercise influence over our families, our church groups, and our communities. We may not have a position or a title, but every Christ follower is called to be a leader who brings the blessing of Christ's love and life to those around us.

How can you use your relationships and positions of influence to bring blessing to others today?

Do: It is impossible to follow Jesus without proclaiming our faith. This doesn't mean that we must stand on soapboxes and preach. It means recognising that our lives speak to those around us, and we need to be intentional about what they say. If our lives proclaim a Gospel that is nothing more than a way to personal blessing, while ignoring the world's needs, people will be turned away from Jesus. But, if our lives proclaim a Gospel in which our blessings enable us to bless others, people will automatically respond. Today let your life speak of God's great blessing.

Pray: As you have blessed me with life and love, Jesus, so may my life bless others.

WEDNESDAY 10 AUGUST 2022

Read: Jeremiah 33:14-26

Reflect: As the people of Jerusalem witnessed the forces of Babylon laying siege to their city, they were tempted to believe God had abandoned them. In spite of Jeremiah's warnings, they refused to recognise that they had brought destruction on themselves through their lack of justice and their determination to ally themselves with foreign nations. So, they blamed God for their

situation. But God spoke through Jeremiah and assured the people that God would never abandon them. Jeremiah also reminded them of God's promise that there would always be a descendant of David on Israel's throne and that there would always be priests ministering to God in worship. That promise was fulfilled in Jesus, and we are now the "priests" who bring our worship to God in his name.

It is important to remember that the Bible always refers to the people of God as those who are faithful to God's ways. And while the faithful usually suffer along with the unfaithful ones, they know God's presence and strength, and they are often the channel through which God's healing comes to all. That's what happened with the people of Israel when the promises of restoration were fulfilled, and they were finally able to return and rebuild their nation. Notice that it is the righteous leader - the descendant of David - who brings restoration and blessing to God's people. Those who are "blessed" with positions of authority have the capacity to bring blessing on others if they will just follow God's life-giving ways.

Who are the godly leaders in your life who bring God's blessing into your life, and who reflect the justice and grace of Jesus?

Do: We all have people who are mentors or leaders and who leave a mark on our lives forever. The blessing these people bring to us, and through us, is more than can ever be measured. Today take time to remember these mentors and give thanks for the blessing they have brought into your life.

Pray: For those who have shown me your love and grace, Jesus, I thank you.

THURSDAY 11 AUGUST 2022

Read: Joshua 7:1, 10-26

Reflect: Today's reading requires a measure of discernment if we are to grasp its message. The discernment is in recognising the differences between the time of Joshua, and of the writer of this account, and our time. Back then Israel was still learning to be a liberated people who would be different from other nations. They had a specific calling - to follow God's ways in order to be a blessing to the nations. In that time, anyone who strayed from God's ways

was a threat and needed to be eradicated. So, while the idea that God would lead the whole nation into defeat because of one man's sin sounds ludicrous to us today it made sense from the perspective of Joshua's worldview. Also, the punishment of this man and his whole family - a death penalty for keeping the spoils of war - is very harsh for us, but not for an ancient leader who was trying to impress on his people the importance of following God's ways to the letter.

The message of this difficult passage is still important for us today. The value of living a life of truth and integrity cannot be overstated. When we live with deceit and self-centredness, we bring destruction not only on ourselves, but also on those around us. But, when we live in truth, self-discipline, and simplicity, avoiding the temptation to satisfy every addiction, we bring life to ourselves and others.

How are you living in integrity today?

Do: Integrity does not mean that we never do anything wrong. It means that when we have done wrong, we are quick to admit it and make it right. This is the power of the discipline of confession - it quickly heals what is broken. Today, if there is anything in your life that compromises your integrity, confess it and make it right as quickly as you can.

Pray: When I fail to live in your truth, O God, forgive me and lead me back to your way.

FRIDAY 12 AUGUST 2022

Read: 1 Samuel 5:1-12

Reflect: Today most scholars believe that 1 Samuel was written during the exile to explain to the people the causes of their defeat and capture by a pagan nation - Babylon. It forms part of what is known as the Deuteronomistic History which also includes the books of Kings. One of the main reasons that is given for the conquest of Israel and Judah is the people's unfaithfulness to God and God's ways, and their determination to follow the gods of their neighbours. In the light of this, the reason for the story in today's reading becomes clear. The Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of Israel's enemies the Philistines, who installed the Ark in the Temple of their god, Dagon. But, each day, when they came to their temple,

the Philistines discovered the idol of their god lying face-down before the Ark - the third time with hands and head removed. Finally, after a series of plagues, they realised that Israel's God was against them, and they decided to return the Ark to Israel.

The point of this story is to show the Israelites how they had chosen to worship gods that were not real - like that of the Philistines - while they ignored or neglected their own God, who was real and active in their lives. Like the Israelites we too easily allow ourselves to be taken in by gods that are not real and that bring no life. We follow the siren call of pleasure, power and possessions, and then wonder why we are defeated by the challenges and struggles of life. Yet, if we would stay faithful and true to Jesus' way of simplicity, sacrifice and service, we would not only find the resources to navigate the world, but we would be equipped to bring life to others as well.

What idols are you tempted to follow today?

Do: It can take discernment and wisdom to recognise when things that lead us away from the values of God's Reign are capturing our hearts. The temptations that confront us each day can be very subtle, which is why we need the Holy Spirit's conviction to guide us. Today, invoke the wisdom and presence of the Spirit as you navigate your life and the temptations you face.

Pray: Holy Spirit, when I am tempted by idols that bring no life, guide me back to God.

SATURDAY 13 AUGUST 2022

Read: Matthew 24:15-27

Reflect: Jesus was brilliant at reading the times in which he lived. He knew that the passion for a revolution against Rome was growing, and that, if it happened, Rome would crush the nation with swift and violent action. The religious leaders had seen the same thing, which is part of the reason they crucified Jesus - they thought he would spark the revolution that they were trying to avoid. However, the way Jesus responded to the times was very different from the religious leaders - or any of the other groups who were active in the nation. Jesus taught that God's Reign was not about engaging in power struggles with Empire, or in gaining influence by

collaborating with the powers that be. Rather, God's Reign was about living in a completely way that stepped out of all the games of power, status and wealth that drive human society. However, as we live out the values of God's Reign, this does not mean that we will avoid the power clashes and revolutions that happen around us. This is what Jesus is speaking about in today's apocalyptic reading. The prophecies spoken here were fulfilled in the 60s AD when revolution broke out and Rome retaliated, sacking Jerusalem and destroying the Temple. In this turbulent time there was much that could lead followers of Jesus away from the peace-making, serving, sacrificial way of Jesus, and so Jesus warned the believers not to follow false Messiahs or to be drawn into the struggles. They would need discernment and integrity to remain faithful, but Jesus prepared them in advance so that they would have his words to remind them of how to respond.

A lot of what Jesus spoke about could have been uttered yesterday. The same power struggles and conflicts remain in the world, and there are still many false "Messiahs" that call for our allegiance. We still need God's discernment to navigate our turbulent times, and we still need to remember the teachings of Jesus in order to stay faithful to the values of God's Reign. The call to integrity and discernment is a strong theme in tomorrow's worship, but for today you may want to reflect on how God is calling you to respond to the power struggles and turbulence in your part of the world.

Do: It is so easy to get caught up in party-political conflicts, in power struggles in our workplaces and communities, or even in religious disputes between churches and creeds. But the way of Jesus is to avoid all of these very human dynamics and embrace the way of peace, sacrifice and service. Today, as a commitment to the integrity and humility of Jesus' way, seek to serve the people around you - especially those with whom you disagree.

Pray: Teach me to stay out of human power struggles, and to be a servant to all - as you were, Jesus.