

The Rich Man

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money^[a] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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."²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another,^[c] "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."²⁹ 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,^[a] ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Job Is Humbled and Satisfied

42 Then Job answered the LORD:

²"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
³'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴'Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.'
⁵I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
⁶therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes."

Job's Friends Are Humiliated

⁷After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done." ⁹So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

Job's Fortunes Are Restored Twofold

¹⁰And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before,

and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money^[a] and a gold ring. ¹²The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. ¹⁷And Job died, old and full of days.

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Mark 10:17-31; Job 42

“A Happy Ending”

Kerra Becker English

Whether it be two-fold or a hundred –fold, I think we like how being restored sounds. Give up your stuff to follow Jesus and you will receive a hundred-fold, plus eternal life. Trust, like Job, that God can do all things even if you’re stuff happens to be taken involuntarily, and you will receive everything back double.

Well - having worked diligently this week with our insurance agent to get our auto insurance to a reasonable monthly payment and still add on an independent teenage driver, I’m wondering what Jesus and Job could have possibly been thinking to trust in God when it comes to our stuff. Insurance company promises are, in part, easier to understand. They promise that if your car gets hit, or catches on fire, or gets crushed by a falling tree that it will be made as good as new, minus the thousand dollar deductible. That is, if you pay your premiums, on time, every time. That’s the security we pay for – up front! We not only pay for obtaining our stuff, we have grown accustomed to this weird idea that we will pay extra to not have anything bad happen to it. How many companies now offer that extra bit of insurance on the products that they sell? Extended warranties on everything from car repair to TVs and refrigerators. Even \$20 gadgets from Walmart come with added warranty for an extra \$2 and used video games can be insured that they will work – if you pay a little more.

The insurers of all sorts, auto, life, medical, the whole bunch, are banking on the idea that you do not trust in some sort of spiritually cosmic restoration. They know how scared we are as

human beings. Whether they have read Job or the story of the rich man who came to Jesus or not, they have calculated how difficult it will be and how likely it is that we will suffer loss, in both hard numbers and actuary tables. We want to know that there will be guaranteed compensation available if something catastrophic happens to us, so that our loved ones can continue on. We choose not to live in an imagined hope that the divine leveler of the universe will step in if we are sacrificial enough, or trusting enough to believe it.

This is the world that I live in anyway. How about you? I can understand why the man with many possessions walked away. I can understand why Job's friends were so sure that Job was mistaken. I find it difficult to trust in God – but at least I know that my insurance agent's promises are legally binding.

So what is it about this promise of restoration that we are so reluctant to believe? Why do we fail to make this leap of faith when we've already made so many others? I know at least one good reason why I find this kind of promise of restoration suspect. I have seen too many instances where religious authorities have abused and exploited that trust for their own means. The proponents of the "prosperity gospel" are terrible charlatans. There, I said it. Those TV preachers, and not quite ready for TV preachers that promise that God will make it all better – if you just send in your donation, are liars of the worst kind. They take advantage, typically, of the most vulnerable in our society, those who cannot afford the insurance that a lot of us take for granted. Do you realize how many folks in our society are just one sickness, just one accident, just one high electricity bill away from bankrupt? It's that person, hearing how God restores the faithful, who wants desperately to believe that God stands in the gap. While that person takes his or her chances, the TV preacher, the mega stadium preacher, the buy me a jet plane to do my

ministry kind of preacher grows all the richer. Who is God taking care of? Is this really about God, or just about manipulation?

So what kind of promise is this – that Job defends through all kinds of adversity and that Jesus makes to his disciples? Will the faithful be restored? Will we understand that when we see it? If it looks like Joel Osteen getting another mansion, then I'll go with the brutal ways of the world, thank you very much. We know that there's going to be suffering in this life, and insuring against its financial consequences may be the least we can do, and trying to help our neighbors when we've all been hit hard may be the best.

However, I think I know Jesus a bit better than this. I've spent time this month trying to understand Job. If these promises are only about payouts, then we've missed something big that scripture is trying to teach us. Because we know that the happy ending, the restoration that makes all the difference, doesn't happen for everyone. Whether it's true in our own experience or in understanding the experience of others, one's net worth and one's faithfulness aren't necessarily given in proportion to one another. Those organizations that would tell someone to keep sending checks until they find faith should be held accountable for their actions, and so far, there's nothing those churches do that is "illegal" no matter how morally terrible it may be. Not too long ago, John Oliver dedicated a show to how much those churches cheat and get away with it on his HBO program "Last Week Tonight."

Like with John Oliver's program that has been incredibly witty in pointing out injustices, it's relatively easy to name the problem. I can tell you what this promise isn't. But, I struggle to name what it is. What is this trust that Job held onto like a life preserver? What is this trust that Jesus claims is so radically life-changing? I'm not going to become a monastic anytime soon and

give up everything I have, though I try to live within our family means. I don't wish for an experience like Job's downfall where everything that can go wrong does go wrong to test my trust in God. Thank you – NO. I try not to let my insurance agent stoke my fear and get me to cover every possible threat with an additional policy. I'll live with a little bit of danger and higher deductibles.

I know that even with all my caution and preparation, that my life will not be free from suffering, and that the more I am attached to my “things” – like the rich man, the suffering will only be made worse, not better. That's the lesson that monasticism has to teach, though its methods aren't for everyone. Having stuff is just a temporary condition. None of it is permanent. There are no guarantees that tomorrow I will have what I have today. It may be a lot more, it may be a lot less. That's the lesson here, and it's not a particularly joyful one – at first. At first, it looks like a kind of fatalism which we don't like in our American narrative. Our American narrative teaches us that hard work is what will be rewarded and laziness begets poverty and difficult circumstances. It's becoming more and more obvious to more and more people that the Puritanical work ethic isn't enough, has never been enough. People can work really hard and not make it. People can be utterly lazy and have enormous bank accounts. This is not new news, though it may be news that doesn't quite fit the picture of what we were taught to believe.

The fresh perspective that these stories bring is that our spiritual lives, our accountability to God, our neighbor, and ourselves may be a whole different thing than the tally of what we have, don't have, or could replace in an emergency. Can we put our trust in God for our survival rather than trust in the fleeting reality of our economic situation? That's a hard one, even for me. And yet, my dog doesn't seem to have that worry. She's not stressed out about bills and taxes. She wants to get let out every now and then, and expects food in her bowl, but her expectations

are quite minimal. Love and food - That's good enough. So her trust in us may be more similar to how we are called to trust in God. It's not about counting on promises to have money come in the mail if we just prayed hard enough. Rather it's that prayer and a little less anxiety is our appropriate response to who God is. God is trustworthy.

That old catch phrase, "Let go, and let God" may be what applies here the most. Job had terrible awful things happen to him. He "let go." He let those things pass. Now, he did not quite let God off the hook. He expected the relationship with God to be his lifeline, and he fought hard for that. But letting God be God was something he did at a level most of us struggle to do. And with Jesus, letting go of brothers, sisters, parents, children, land... for the sake of following him was a trust that would be transformed like no other. Those who put on a Christ-like perspective would find their lives changed one hundredfold. Now, I do believe that's true. And it's not a rejection of this life, but a realization that orienting toward God is a step toward building a much broader life, even if, even if, a parent, or a child might not be able to accept your views on all things.

Wow, a month of Job, and I still have a lot more questions than answers. The answers to this text prove to be rather inadequate. It's the questions that are important. How do I trust in God in the midst of calamity? How do I voice my anger with God over the injustice present in the world? How do I hear God's voice in the midst of societies competing voices, many of which give testimony that feels true even when it's not? How do I let go, truly let go enough to follow Jesus? These are the never fully answered questions of scripture. I'm not sure if that's terrifying or comforting news. But it's better than, "Trust in God and send your check." The reality of faithfulness cannot be bought or sold. That's 100% true. The reality of faithfulness can only be lived one day at a time, or maybe five minutes at a time. The sparrows don't worry. My dog

doesn't worry. Humankind is unique in that we actually know how much we have to lose. We worry, but we don't have to lose our minds over it. Trust in God, see what happens. Amen.