

Pentecost 24: November 14/15, 2009

Blessed Be the Name of the Lord

Job 1:21

Job fell to the grounds in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

You have heard the latest economic reports, as have I. Unemployment topped 10% last month, and they have upgraded unemployment projections to exceed 11% before the worst is over. *And that just measures those looking for work.* If those who have ceased looking are factored into the percentage, the number exceeds 17%. That's one out of every six. That could well translate into more than 100 among us this weekend out of work. A staggering number. Little wonder that people are hunkering down, conserving their cash, scaling back on travel plans and Christmas purchases. Into such a depressing climate as this is it appropriate to bring up the topic of (gulp!) stewardship? Or to state it differently: Is stewardship a prosperity teaching?

Worldly prosperity teaching #1: When the Lord prospers us, we rejoice and give thanks. Job chapter one. IN THE LAND OF UZ THERE LIVED A MAN WHOSE NAME WAS JOB. THIS MAN WAS BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT; HE FEARED GOD AND SHUNNED EVIL. HE HAD SEVEN SONS AND THREE DAUGHTERS; 3000 SHEEP, 3000 CAMELS, 500 OXEN, 500 DONKEYS, AND MANY SERVANTS. EARLY IN THE MORNING HE WOULD SACRIFICE A BURNT OFFERING TO THE LORD, WHICH WAS HIS REGULAR CUSTOM. We understand this behavior. A person ought to be thankful when times are good, and generous is his gratitude. Everyone loves a parade, and every lottery winner has friends to spare.

Say what you will about Satan; he is a student of human behavior. "Does Job fear God for nothing?" he asks God. "You have put a hedge around his household and blessed the work of his hands. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you." Corollary to prosperity teaching #1—Worldly prosperity teaching #2: When times are bad, we did something wrong. God permits Satan to strike down Job's livestock, his servants, even his children are killed in a great calamity. What to think of such devastation? Job's counselors try to get Job to blame himself for his misery. How many times have you not felt the same way? You lose your job and ponder what you did wrong. You contract an illness and fear the God is punishing you. You fall upon hard times and wonder where God is. If it gets bad enough, you agree with the counsel that Job's wife gave him: "Curse God and die!"

Is stewardship a prosperity teaching? Does it only apply when time are good? *Stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God in managing all of life's resources for God's purposes.* Put simply, a steward is a manager. It is a role given to each of us in our baptism, although it is learned as we mature in faith. You manage what you are given, be it much or little. I contend that it is much more important during lean years than during prosperous years. Job states it differently: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" We accept both from God, we manage under all circumstances. If we complain that we do not understand, remember that the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of men. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" God demands. "Tell me, if you understand." We bow to God's wisdom and we accept the circumstances of our lives.

We observe Stewardship Sunday today. What stewardship principle should we follow as we deliberate how to respond on Commitment Sunday next weekend? Let Job provide that word. *The Lord gave and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.* "The Lord gave and the Lord takes away." Everything belongs to God. He spoke the word that called forth life in the beginning, and he will be there when the trumpet sounds at the close of the age. He knew you before you were born and will call your name when you die. He fashioned you with great

and many gifts that in the management of those gifts you might acknowledge him. *What does this mean?*

1. We reject the counsel that says “it’s all about me.” You have been bought with a price; glory *God* in your body.
2. We live within our means. “I have learned the secret of being content in every circumstance,” Paul says.
3. We pledge allegiance to God by standing with him. In regular worship. In joyful service. In generous support. Remember Jesus’ commendation of the saints: *I was hungry and you fed me*. How well the hymn writer pens it: “We give you but your own in any gifts we bring; all that we have is yours alone, a trust from you, our King.” *The Lord gave and the Lord takes away*.

The second half of Job’s counsel is: *Blessed be the name of the Lord*. Give thanks in all circumstances. It takes adversity to appreciate prosperity. I have often said I don’t pray for troubles. Yet some of our greatest spiritual growth occurs when we wrestle with financial, family and faith issues. From the depths of woe Job gives us one of the greatest confessions of faith celebrated at every Christian funeral: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” We didn’t pray for this crippling recession and devastating unemployment. But God will use it to renew our perspective and reveal his grace. *Blessed be the name of the Lord*.

I hold in my hand the dreaded pledge card. You received it in your homes this past week. Bring it back signed next week. Leave the finances blank if your situation is uncertain. Of equal importance is your regular worship attendance and willing service rendered. One tangible service you can render is to bring a non-perishable food item next weekend. We will have opportunity to personally present this food item along with our offerings and pledge cards as we come forward in holy procession and declare to each other and to God: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Arrangements have been made to deliver all food items to Feed My People the next day so that they can be distributed to needy families in time for Thanksgiving.

We are all familiar with the phrase, “the patience of Job.” Despite the loss of everything he possessed, despite the pustulating sores that covered his body, despite the bad counsel of his friends and the despair of his wife—Job remained resolute in his faith. “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him,” he declared. Job’s faith was well placed. He did not know what we know. He had not seen what we have beheld by faith. But he believed as we believe. *I know that my redeemer lives*. God pulled back the veil for Job that he might look down through the years to a lonely hill outside the city walls. In that vision he saw his Redeemer. But not in glory and majesty. He saw him without anything to call his own, stricken by stinging lash and pierced by nail and spear, mocked by the crowd and abandoned by friends. Job could identify with his Redeemer in his misery. But not in his agony. For Jesus would pledge something only he could pledge: “Not my will, Father, but yours be done.” That will was for Jesus to drink the cup of our iniquity which he did willingly on the cross. He drank it deeply and suffered mightily as God laid on him the iniquity of us all. Curse God and die, Job was told. God cursed Jesus and he died. But he did not stay dead. Job looked forward in time and saw it. We look back and see the same. We see that our Redeemer lives, that he has conquered death, forgives sins, and lives and reigns to all eternity. *This is most certainly true!*

Blessed be the name of the Lord. Let the stewardship of your lives reflect the gratitude of your hearts. Gratitude is not a function of prosperity. It is a function of faith. Faith which sees God’s hand in all circumstances, trusts God’s provision in all necessities, and rejoices in God’s Redeemer through the stewardship of all of life’s resources. God bless your stewardship resolve. Amen.