

“God’s blessing? Really?!” Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.” But Abraham said, “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.” And he said, “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.””

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What does God’s blessing look like? How would you describe it, if asked? Today’s Gospel reading gives us some ideas. And, I have to say, it may not be what we would prefer to hear. One thing is that we may not like to listen to what the Word of God says, then we can ignore it.

But it is very different when God puts us in real-life situations where we cannot just ignore or quit those circumstances, we need to bite our teeth, endure and see what He will do through all of that. **So, what does God’s blessing look like?**

When the Triune God invaded our life, a group of our friends from Pentecostal background was quite instrumental. This is how they described to us God’s blessings: “God is your Father in heaven. He surely wants to bless you. He wants you to be happy. He wants you to have good health.

He wants your business to go well. He wants you to prosper, otherwise, what sort of a loving Father would He be if He didn’t want you to have good things?” According to those friends, God’s blessing is when He helps us to get what we desire...

Great message! Speaks straight to the heart. Everyone can relate to it. This is what most religions teach, this is what, sadly, we can hear in many churches as well. And to be honest, isn’t this how we all, at least to some extent, think about God’s blessings? When we get what we want. When things go great. No afflictions. No suffering. And we have one such person in the parable that Jesus told.

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The rich man. Who wouldn't want to be the rich man from the parable? Honestly! Just think about it! He probably had worked hard; he had put in his time and energy and knowledge to build his business and now he had succeeded.

His prayers were heard, and the hard work and long hours have paid off. He wasn't some lazy bum. He deserved some rewards; he deserved to enjoy the fruits of his labour. His mansion was majestic. Surrounded by beautiful gardens and high walls.

Good security. His whole family was doing well; they cared for one another. He knew how to appreciate beauty. His style was elaborate; his clothes came from the best high-end designers. His celebrations were exquisite. His chefs were among the best.

You cannot have a party every day and have the same food and drinks. Diversity, variety, versatility. He was successful, he was accomplished, he was influential, he had made it. He was not boring; he knew how to enjoy those blessings!

Furthermore, as we can see later in the parable, he calls Abraham "father", he believes that he is a child of Abraham, a true believer. One of God's people. Moreover, even Abraham addresses him as: "Child!" Today he would call himself a Christian.

But what went wrong? How did those good gifts of God become a trap for his soul? How did he become so self-focused and arrogant? He had an abundance of God's gifts. He could have taken care of Lazarus; he could have eliminated poverty in that town! How did that happen, that all the good gifts of God were used for never-ending, never satisfying pursuit of happiness and pleasures? How did those gifts become more important than the Giver?

We have a problem! We are not very good at receiving those gifts of creation properly. Whatever good they are, they seldom do good to our souls or to our characters. We seem to be too weak to receive them as blessings and use them to bless others.

How many do you know who grew rich and closer to God and more generous at the same time? What about us? When we succeed, do we think about others, about how to bless the Church, or about what we can now finally afford?

Anyhow, the rich man dies, and finds himself in the Hades, that's another name for hell. He still has the same character. Arrogant and self-righteous, not the slightest sign of repentance. What's interesting, he knows Lazarus by name.

And he still treats Lazarus as nobody. "Send him to help me, I am uncomfortable here. I thirst. No? Okay, then send him to my brothers to warn them. No? Whatever!" There he goes, a nameless person, seemingly so blessed, now destined to oblivion.

What does God's blessing look like? What about Lazarus? Who would like to be like Lazarus? The very opposite story, living in poverty, in scarcity of food, exhausted by his sickness, sores all over his body, of no status, a beggar. Do you find that appealing?

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The name is significant. Lazarus. Do you know what it means? It means “one whom God helps”. One whom God helps... Isn't this ironic! Such a name and how exactly is God helping him? You may know the famous verse from Paul's letter to Romans:

“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” (Rom 8:28) For those who love God, for those whom God helps, all things work together for good. Surely, Lazarus' situation sucks. Who would want to be in his place?!

But not all is bad. He still has his friends who bring him to the gates of the rich man. Obviously, they care for him, they haven't abandoned him. He probably gets some food, even if not enough. Despite all his afflictions, he may be quite a likable person.

It's been pointed out that even dogs, who may be guardian dogs for the rich man's property, treat Lazarus as their friend and try to heal him by licking his sores. He is humble and unassuming, grateful for every next day. One whom God helps...

When after his death Lazarus is taken to the place of honour, and when the rich man arrogantly asks Abraham to send Lazarus over, it seems that Lazarus wouldn't mind going and helping, he doesn't hold any grudges against the rich man; it is Abraham who explains that no one can cross that chasm.

What does God's blessing look like? It's clear that Lazarus suffered a lot, but it seems not so much from sickness or scarcity of food, as from disappointment seeing injustices of this world. Abraham doesn't say that Lazarus was hungry and now he will eat to his fill. He doesn't say that Lazarus was poor and now he will be so, so rich. No!

Abraham says that now Lazarus will be comforted. Remember the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”**

Was Lazarus blessed? **What does God's blessing look like?**

It's not about being rich and being able to spend your days in pleasures. It is not about being poor and sick and suffering daily either. It is about being one whom God helps, waiting for God, trusting in Him above all things.

When that happens, when our Lord assures that He is always with us, when we seek the Kingdom of God first, then whatever else happens in our lives, will indeed work together for good. Our Father may choose to pour His earthly gifts upon us, sure.

He often does. But the abundance of good gifts – good work, prosperity, success, influence, pleasures, etc. – they seldom shape us in a good way. Unfortunately. You know that. Afflictions and sufferings, on the other hand, tend to be God's finest tools to sculpt us more into the Image of Jesus. Humble, gracious, thankful.

Sufferings without God as our helper won't help much, but if we know God as our God, as our loving Father, as our Redeemer and brother, that's different. Then they bring us closer to God, purify us, shape us in the likeness of Christ.

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So, what does God's blessing look like? What about this? When you are like Lazarus, when God helps you. When He convinces you that regardless of who you are, and what your circumstances are, you are precious to Him. That He delights in you.

When you experience His presence, the peace that He brings, despite what your life may look like at that moment, when you can be at peace and put all your trust in your Father in heaven, even when the world may seem a hopeless place.

When even being at your lowest and most desperate, you know that your Lord can relate to you, that He has suffered as much as you do and so much more, that He was rich and that He left His heavenly glory, He emptied Himself. Why? For you.

You are blessed when you get to experience God's presence as deeply as Job did, when he proclaimed: "I had heard about you, but now I have seen you, now I have experienced your presence, and I rest my case. If only I have you, I have everything."

You are blessed when the presence of the Lord enables you to confess as Paul did: **"We consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."** (2 Cor 4:17)

You are blessed when your heart and your mood and your outlook at your life and yourselves is not defined by what you have or have achieved, or by what you lack and wish to have, but by the knowledge that you are valued beyond your comprehension by your Creator and Redeemer. That's what true blessing looks like.

Concluding just one last question – how can we obtain this wonderful assurance? Practically? How can we be trusting like Lazarus, regardless of whether our lives look like a disaster, or abundantly filled with God's good gifts?

Abraham gives us the answer in this parable. **"Listen to Moses and the prophets."** Listen to God speaking! In our case it would be – listen to the Word of God as you have received it in the Holy Scripture. Listen and let it fill you!

For this living Word is what renews our heart, this life-changing Word is what makes us desire the Kingdom of God more than anything. That is how we receive God's greatest blessings. Ultimate and everlasting blessings.

When the Word of God together with God's Spirit brings us into the very presence of the Triune God. As we listen... how privileged we are, dear brothers and sisters, to still have this Word – proclaimed, taught, accessible. How blessed you are!

May the Spirit of God help us to discern what true blessings are and appreciate and keep God's Word so that it leads us through this life and on our last day into the very presence of our Lord to rejoice with Him forever.

Amen.