

Blessings, Curses, and the Cross
A Scriptural View of Wealth

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A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF WEALTH AND POSSESSIONS
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Blessings, Curses, and the Cross¹

PASTOR JOE Nelms became an internet sensation for his invocation, partly inspired by a scene from *Talladega Nights*, before a NASCAR race in Nashville. He gave thanks for the blessings of “GM performance technology and the RO7 engines. Thank you for Sunoco racing fuel and Goodyear tires that bring performance and power to the track. Lord, I want to thank you for my smoking hot wife tonight, Lisa, and my two children.... Lord, I pray you bless the drivers and use them tonight. May they put on a performance worthy of this great track. In Jesus’ name, boogity boogity boogity, Amen.”² U.S. Christians talk a great deal about blessings and apparently do it quite regularly. Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s study of religion in America, titled *American Grace*, notes that 44% of Americans say grace (or the prayers appropriate to their tradition) before meals regularly, giving thanks for blessings and/or asking God’s blessing on their meal.³

Bart Simpson, on the other hand, once prayed, “Dear God, we paid for this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.” If about half of Americans commonly pray grace, about another half rarely or never do. In stewardship talk, which is the major if not only language used within the church to discuss possessions, the central concern is getting people like Bart to consider their possessions

1 Wes Arblaster, Jana Bennett, Maura Donahue, Brad Kallenberg, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove all provided helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J74y88YuSj8>

3 *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 10.

(including their “time and talents”) to be blessings given by God, so that they will then recognize an obligation to use those blessings in a way pleasing to God, according to Christian teaching.

Some fine work— as well as some rather poor work— has been done to that end. Many commentators have tried to enrich stewardship into a spirituality that integrates gratitude, generosity, and responsibility before God into the whole of a community’s life. The U.S. Catholic bishops, for example, have tried to enrich stewardship thought by giving priority among the gifts of God to be cared for and used responsibly not only personal wealth, but the environment, one’s vocation, and the church itself. In fact, they have so emphasized these other gifts that the area of personal wealth is not specifically named in their own summary of the teaching.⁴ Throughout the history of stewardship work, pastors have called Christians to more generously and more creatively use their power and wealth to do good.⁵

I remain one of those, however, who finds that tradition on the whole quite theologically thin. Given that the right use of wealth is a deep concern to many Christians and a morally complex matter (though not always as complex as we’d like it to be), it is a significant problem that such important and widely-used theological language remains merely a vague way of indicating God’s relation to things we judge to be good, safe enough to serve nicely in a joke at a NASCAR event, general enough to cover all possessions. I hope, in this paper, to explore ways that an attentive study of scripture on the topic of blessing could challenge us to enrich ordinary thinking and daily prayer about possessions. In particular, I want to attend to ways blessing can be understood in light of the stories of Israel and Jesus, rather than as a generality

4 “To Be a Christian Steward: A Summary of the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Stewardship,” in “Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response,” Tenth Anniversary Edition (Washington, D.C., 2002).

5 For historical analysis of stewardship and a fuller development of my critique, see chapters 3 and 5 of *The Fear of Beggars: Poverty and Stewardship in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

about creation understood to stand apart from redemption and eschatology.

I. 'BLESSING' IN THE PENTATEUCH

What does the language of 'blessing' mean in scripture?⁶ We'll be wise not to search for a single, univocal sense of blessing across all of scripture, but in its most basic and continuous sense, blessing is the gift of God, typically a gift which allows life to flourish more fully. The first blessing spoken in Genesis is God's blessing on the living creatures of the water and the air, that they be fruitful and multiply, and the second is the similar statement to the human creatures. Progeny is, it seems, the principle example of God's blessing as well as the subject of God's commandment in these texts, and the presence of blessing is seen in fruitfulness.⁷ But the third blessing spoken in the first creation account is the blessing of the Sabbath day. Blessing is not simply about productivity, but about the fullness of life which includes rest, particularly rest that God's people share with God. The Sabbath is blessed and hallowed—"blessing" making it fruitful and joyous, "hallowing" giving it a share of God's own fullness already achieved and yet still overflowing.

Within the Pentateuch, land is also a key example of blessing, although it is conjoined to the blessing of progeny and wealth. During a time of famine, God tells Isaac that he will bless his descendants with the land promised to Abraham. (Gen. 26:3); fam-

6 This discussion is deeply indebted to Scott Bader-Saye, "Fear in the Garden: The State of Emergency and the Politics of Blessing." *Ex Auditu* 24 (2008): 2-6.

7 The same blessing is given to Noah and his family in Gen 9, and Gen 24:60 shows Rebekah's relatives blessing her that she might be the mother of "thousands of ten thousands"; in Gen 28.3-4, Isaac wishes for Jacob God's blessing of descendants. God's blessing of Sarah results in her becoming the mother of nations in Gen 17, and in Gen 22:17, God blesses Abraham after he does not withhold Isaac, saying he will have descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven.

ily, land, and food are connected in one promise of that full life that scripture calls peace or *shalom*. In Gen. 49:25, Jacob says God will bless Joseph “with the blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that couches beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb.” The land is not a blessing on its own, but a land to be filled with descendants who will work it, enjoy its produce and use it to provide still more descendants. Nevertheless, the land is essential to the blessing because land creates the possibility for the growing family to live together in peace. God’s blessing does not only touch individuals; it creates communities who care for each other, networks of reciprocity and gift that ripple out among creatures.

Take, for instance, Gen 32.26-30, the story of Jacob’s demanding a blessing from the one he wrestles. Jacob tricked a blessing out of his father and then during twenty years in Laban’s household built up his own household. But when his herds begin to cause jealousy in Laban’s household, he leaves, makes a covenant of peace with Laban, and sends word to Esau that he is returning. The messengers return with word that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. The night before he faces Esau again, fearful for the safety of all that he has gained, Jacob wrestles (the text says) with a man, although in the end of the episode, Jacob names the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (32:30). The one he wrestled injured him when he saw he could not win. Jacob still refuses to let go, however, and demands a blessing. He does not receive God’s name, as he asks, but he does receive a blessing.

What is this ‘blessing’? No specific content is named. But that morning, limping, Jacob he goes on to see Esau and finds him welcoming, not resentful. In fact, Esau runs to greet him and refuses all the bribes that Jacob had sent ahead to soften him up. Jacob insists on giving them as gifts, saying that seeing Esau is “like seeing the face of God, with such favor you have received me.” (33:10)

The blessing of God, given the night before, was not identified with anything specific here. Jacob already has children and

wealth. The immediate surprise, however, is that Esau welcomes him, easing Jacob's quest for his own land by making peace. Esau becomes God's blessing to Jacob—an end to fear and enmity; fraternity, and a place for all to dwell. Jacob insists all the more on giving his gift to Esau, no longer as a way of buying safety but now because God has been gracious to him. Esau, on those terms, accepts it. The blessing, given by God, bears fruit as it creates and spreads peace—not just an absence of conflict, but fullness of human life—among humans.

Blessing opens up an economy of blessing, as its gift is fertile or is to be passed on rather than hoarded or settled by a payment in return. More precisely, it is not the one gift that is passed on, but a new event arising from the original gift, now coming from the one who was blessed by that original gift in a new way. It draws together those who are different, even those who might be enemies, as between Jacob and Esau. Blessing is the life that binds creatures to each other, a movement originating in God, a gift 'paid forward' "even, perhaps especially, to those who in conventional terms have not earned it."⁸

But while the major examples of blessings given are bodily and social flourishing, it would not be right to say that such flourishing constitutes the meaning of blessing in scripture. Consider, for example, the gift of the law. It is interesting that in the Pentateuch the law itself is not called a blessing, but the Wisdom literature repeatedly refers to the one who follows the law as blessed. Does this simply mean that God rewards those who obey with gifts such as progeny, land, prosperity, security from enemies? It is a not-uncommon understanding of the covenant to say that it is conditional—blessings will be given *if* Israel obeys the law (e.g. Dt. 28: 1-2, 15). Indeed, for the Deuteronomist, looking at Israel's exile, it seems clear that failure to obey the law did result in loss of blessings. But as important as the blessings (and curses, which will be addressed below) are, they are not merely extrinsic rewards for

8 Bader-Saye, 3.

obedient behavior. The blessings are not simply gifts to be gained by pleasing God. Rather, as the late chapters of Exodus make painfully clear, the question is whether God will be with the people. The punishment of exile is not merely the loss of land, as important as that is. It is the loss of God's presence, of the temple, of the ark so joyously and painstakingly constructed to be God's presence. Note the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26:

The Lord bless you and keep you:
The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you:
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

God's being gracious and giving gifts is paired with God's shining gaze, God's fellowship with Israel. This is not an equal relationship— Israel cannot gaze on God to see this face. What Israel will see is God's graciousness, which is *shalom*. Nevertheless, the blessing is not only in the results that Israel and its neighbors can see. The blessing is in God's faithful attention, God's not turning away. Blessings, by definition, are most fundamentally a sharing in God's joyous life.⁹

The move in the Psalms and Proverbs to declare that the blessed are those who love God's law, trust in God, and fear God is not a rupture from the Pentateuch's attention to material blessing, but a development of it. The God who chooses a particular family to bless (for the sake of all) blesses people as humans, as family, as bodies that get hungry and tired. But food, land, progeny can only amount to *shalom* when they are ordered by God's law, as part of a life that returns in worship to God. Blessings are never mere 'stuff'; if they are blessings, then they are part of an unfolding relationship with God and God's people. Blessings are blessings, rather than mere wealth or children, because they draw people further into God's work.

9 Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of brk "to bless" in the Old Testament*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

Therefore those formulations which describe blessing even in the absence of progeny and prosperity must be heard as part of Israel's ongoing discovery of the meaning of God's blessing. Most notably, given the importance of children as a blessing, is Wisdom 3:13-14:

For blessed is the barren woman who is undefiled, who has not entered into a sinful union; she will have fruit when God examines souls. Blessed also is the eunuch whose hands have done no lawless deed, and who has not devised wicked things against the Lord, for special favor will be shown him for his faithfulness and a place of great delight in the temple of the Lord.

Notice that this does not spiritualize the problem away. If the barren woman is to be called blessed, then she must eventually have her role in this unfolding of full life. Nevertheless, it does not say only that she *will be* blessed with fruitfulness— she *is*, even in her present barrenness, blessed because she has kept the law. Likewise the recognition in Habakkuk and Job that the appearance of poverty does not simply equate to evidence that God has turned away or fails to do good complicates thinking about God's blessings. These voices caution against a simplistic claim that blessings of prosperity follow from justice (or that the affliction of poverty results from God's curse). Blessing is about being drawn into God's life.

At the risk of synthesizing too neatly what is clearly a complex and not entirely univocal tradition, we can say that while blessing is God's giving to creatures their fullest lives so that they can share that fullness in dynamic networks of gift with others and enjoy it in rest with their God, still the core of blessing is that it is an element of an ongoing relationships with God. Mere possession of prosperity is certainly not to be equated with blessing.

II. CURSES AND FILTHY LUCRE

Blessing is a rich and complex category in the Old Testament, but if we are going to be faithful to the tradition, we have to talk about curses as well. In Genesis and Deuteronomy, blessings and curses often stand together. The modern sensibility which presumes that God's goodness is incompatible with punishment can blind us to a Biblical vision which speaks frankly about curse as the corollary to blessing.¹⁰

As Scott Bader-Saye points out, drawing on Barth, curses are the flip side of blessings, because they are the result of God's continuing to engage with creatures even when they have rejected blessings. The curses of Genesis 3 do not revoke life or creativity, as would happen if God simply withdrew, but they do endow it with misery, making labor into toil, childbirth into unavoidable pain, and the movement and nutrition of the serpent into humiliation.¹¹ The humans and animals and earth now no longer share blessings but become enemies, fearful and hostile to each other's well-being. In Augustinian terms, we could say that the evil that arises in the curses is not a substance, but the twisting of blessings as they lose their orientation toward God. They cease to be blessings but they remain, nevertheless, good creatures made by God.

Bader-Saye's point seems to be borne out in Genesis 12:3, where God says he will bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him and make him a blessing to all. How can he be a blessing to all if the result of meeting him will be a curse to some? Although God gives a blessing to all, such blessings can, when people reject or abuse them, become curses.

What we learn from considering the proximity of curses to blessing is that the encounter with blessing is perilous. Would we

¹⁰ I recognize that there are serious reasons for shying away from talk of curses. The history of appeals to the curse on Noah's son as justification for the enslavement of Africans, for example, is enough to make one cautious about any use of Biblical curses.

¹¹ Bader-Saye, 5.

truly want God's face to shine on us? Can we bear to be seen in that gaze? Dt. 11:26 does not say that Israel's options are to receive a blessing or be ignored by God, but to receive a blessing or a curse. There is no neutral option. The gifts given for the abounding of human life can be used for that purpose or they can be used against it. Anyone who thrills to the blessings God promises would do well to ponder Dt. 28, where the blessings take up 14 verses and the curses run on for 53 lengthy and gruesome verses. Israel's blessings of land is, in fact, the site of greatest grief when idolatry and injustice pervert that good gift. Although "Woe to you rich" is in only one gospel, warnings about the dangers of personal wealth appear throughout the New Testament, echoing the prophets' denunciation of luxury at the expense of those in need.

Moreover, given that injustice is not all that uncommon, it should be obvious that not everything people have is given to them by God. And yet this matter tends to be ignored in conversations about "the blessings God has given us," which operate on the presumption that whatever is in a person's possession is presumed to be given by God. Scripture—both Old and New Testaments—provides many examples of ill-gotten gain. We read of wealth taken contrary to God's command in battle (Joshua 7:15-26), gained by oppression of the poor (Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 and throughout the prophets), cheated out of buyers by use of false scales (Micah 6:10), and so on. Usury, understood as wealth gained through taking advantage of someone's need, is consistently condemned through the scriptures. Proverbs repeatedly warns against wealth gained unjustly (see 1:19, 10:2, 21:6, 22:16).

A particularly forceful condemnation of ill-gotten gains can be found in James 5.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept

back by fraud cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man, he does not resist you. (James 5:1-5)

Such holdings of property work against the logic of blessing. Rather than establishing a ripple effect of more full life, these possessions arise when people deny that life to each other. They are not blessings gone wrong and turned to curses; wealth earned in an unjust way was never a blessing as it was not given by God.

Ched Myers' reading of Luke 19 provides a striking example of how rarely Christian talk about wealth pauses to ask whether someone's wealth is in fact a blessing.¹² In this chapter, Zaccheus's conversion results in his agreeing to make restitution to those he has defrauded. He recognizes and confesses that his wealth is ill-gotten gain, and so he acts not as a good steward but as a penitent, redistributing what he has taken in order to restore justice. And thereafter, as the people "supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately" (19:11), Jesus tells the parable of the talents, the parable that is central to contemporary claims about our need to be good stewards of the blessings God gives to us.

Myers points out that in this version of the parable, the king who entrusts wealth to his slaves is not a likely figure for God, but one who has to gain his power from a distant authority, one who "gathers where he did not scatter, reaps where he did not sow." This ruler sounds more like Herod or Pontius Pilate— an imperial underling who uses violence to extort wealth for himself from colonized people. Once we entertain the idea that this nobleman is not an image of God, we can pause to consider whether his expectations of his slaves are in fact in keeping with God's law. While the law certainly does not forbid doing business, it is full of requirements about how business is to be done. One of the best

12 Eric DeBode and Ched Myers. "Towering Trees and 'Talented' Slaves," *The Other Side*, May-June, 1999.

known is the prohibition of usury. Yet this ruler demands that his slave should have at least, if nothing else, lent the money at usury, so that it would have made a profit. The slave is punished because he did not violate Israel's law. And the result is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (19:26, paraphrased). Then those who had tried to convince the distant power not to appoint this tyrant are slaughtered.

DeBode and Myers argue that this story is about how those in power act when confronted with justice, and it is intended to temper the optimism of those who think that Zaccheus' conversion means that the struggle is over. This is, in Luke, the last parable before Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The parable serves then more as a prediction that Jesus will be rejected than it is general call for people to use wealth to make material or spiritual profit.

This reading is not common in the tradition. In fact, in my unscientific searches in the history of exegesis, I have never found any treatment of this text which read it as Myers does. And yet, this reading is at least worthy of consideration and all the more notable because it points out to us how easily we can pass over the question of whether all gain in wealth is to be counted blessing.

III. BLESSING AND JESUS

Myers' reading of Luke 19 brings us to what is the most difficult part of scriptural thinking about blessing: the relation of blessing to Jesus and especially to the cross. Directly following the parable of the talents, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, and the crowds cry out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Lk. 19:38) Jesus is recognized and acclaimed as the blessed one. This is surprising, given the Pentateuch's account of blessing, because he is at this point homeless, childless, and riding on a colt. Soon he will be condemned, tortured, and executed. What does Christ as the blessed one have to do with creation or with Abram or Jacob?

The problem of blessing in the gospels as compared with blessing in the Pentateuch is most obvious in the beatitudes.¹³ Luke's "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20) strikes a discordant note in much talk about the blessings God gives us. Certainly, the Beatitudes can be read as expanding the Wisdom tradition that associates blessing with faithfulness (to be rewarded later) rather than with present material gain, and in the case of the rewards promised to those who are persecuted wrongly, this connection seems quite clear. The most difficult point to reconcile with the earlier tradition on blessing is the first beatitude, where the verb is in present tense. Rather than entering into the centuries-long exegetical arguments over this passage, I want to reflect on the Lukan version in the context of the many references to poverty within Luke and Acts, not simply to reconcile this understanding of blessing with earlier texts but to see how the gospel's account of blessing can illuminate the development of the whole tradition.

The blessing named in the first beatitude is not poverty, but the kingdom of God, and yet inevitably some connection between poverty and that blessing is being named. In Luke, this beatitude is addressed particularly (though not necessarily exclusively) to the disciples. Luke 10 sheds light on that connection, when Jesus says privately to his disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that have seen what you have seen." What they have seen is Jesus himself, of course, but in the context, they have just returned from being sent out in pairs, poor and unarmed, to all the towns Jesus intends to visit. What they saw there was this: welcome in Israel for wandering strangers; healing of the sick and demons subject to Jesus' name; or in a word, the kingdom coming near. The blessed are those who see the in-breaking kingdom. They are not to rejoice in the power they have in his name over demons, but to rejoice that they are citizens

13 "Makarioi" is not translating "bārûk" but "ašrê". Nevertheless, 'ašrê refers to a person who has been blessed. While brk has a wider range of application and meaning, 'ašrê is a synonym in its particular contexts.

Mitchell, 180.

of that kingdom. He himself rejoices, thanking God for revealing “these things” to the little ones rather than to the wise.

This passage suggests something about how being blessed, receiving gifts from God, relates to wealth, but particularly to wealth as power. The disciples rejoice because they have found power in Jesus’ name to give victory over every evil. Yet they find this when they are sent out without purse, bag, or sandals, depending on the faithful of Israel who will care for the stranger. They are blessed because they witness not simply the power of God to defeat all opposition, but the peace of God, which comes barefoot and without cash, unarmed. It is precisely when the vulnerable disciples are welcomed that the cycle of gifts overflows in healing and triumph over evil spirits. As Gerhard Lohfink put it in a commentary on Luke 10 and Mt. 10, “the renunciation of staff and sandals led to defenselessness and entailed nonviolence; it had to become a demonstrative signal of absolute readiness for peace.”¹⁴ The readiness for *shalom* initiates a cycle of *shalom*, as a blow can initiate a cycle of violence. Jesus teaches the disciples that God’s peace and God’s power are not at odds with each other. The kingdom is proclaimed by messengers who arrive with power not to dominate but to invite into peace.

In contrast to the Pentateuch’s blessings of progeny, wealth, and land, the blessed—the disciples—are still homeless, still a minority, and still headed for Jerusalem. Yet the blessing the disciples receive in seeing the kingdom can still be understood to be about those things: Jesus tells them that those who leave family and land get them back, a hundredfold (and eternal life), as Israel is called back to God. (Lk. 18.29-30) Blessing, as different as it may look here, is still about the fullness of human life. Rather than being given homes and lands and families for their individual ownership, however, the disciples are given all this because God’s peace is breaking out among the people of Israel. What is given to them

¹⁴ *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of the Christian Faith*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 55.

is not individual security of possession, not a power they can own to use, either for good or ill. They are taught to enter as supplicants and in that way to initiate a cycle of gift giving which provides them with all they need. They seek shelter. When it is given, they offer their peace. They accept food and offer healing and news of God's kingdom. This is the pattern of blessing as we have seen it from the beginning— not a static gift, but a gift which opens out into cycles of fuller life, drawing creatures into networks of mutuality.

To be blessed, then, and in a position of sharing God's blessing with others, is not to be in a position of what we would ordinarily recognize as power. While the disciples have power over demons and all that would harm them in Jesus' name, they do not have food for tomorrow or weapons or money. They have gifts, the greatest of gifts, to give, but they must also receive. They are practicing what political theorist Rom Coles has called "receptive generosity."¹⁵ They are not givers who come in strength to deliver to passive recipients. Such a relationship can all too easily become domination. They give their gift but in the context of a relationship in which they also must receive. The blessing of God comes not as power or wealth that the blessed one must deliver to passive others. Rather, it creates relationships of giving as it creates full life. That can only happen when the blessed ones are also vulnerable ones.

It makes sense, then that Jesus is the blessed one, God's beloved to whom all lands and all people are given, and also the one who comes in poverty, meekness, riding on an ass. His poverty initiates a cycle of gift-giving. Family expands, property serves its function of providing for God's people, the land becomes a sign of God's peace— not because God has showered wealth and power on good people who cared for it and used it responsibly to make it work out so, but because God has sent the blessing of a vulnerable

15 *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

one, asking for shelter, for welcome, bringing gifts of peace. Even when these messengers of peace are not welcomed, when they are left hungry and grieving, they should still rejoice. Promises that they will be full, that they will laugh are not only rewards for them, but encouragement that God does not cease to offer blessing, even—particularly—by means of messengers who come in weakness. Blessing does not eliminate vulnerability but heightens it, as the vulnerable are sent to make peace.

Given the contemporary uses of ‘blessing’ to name wealth and power which must be administered responsibly and used to make good come about, it is useful to consider what happens as Luke’s story continues in Acts, in the community to whom the greatest of God’s gifts, the life of the Spirit, has been given. Peter and John have no gold or silver (Acts 3:6) and no political power. But when a lame beggar asks them for alms, they are able to heal him, only to be led then into giving testimony about the blessing God offers to Israel in Jesus, a testimony that gets them arrested so that they can offer further testimony, – such that “all men praised God for what had happened.” (Acts 4:21) What they have is not any resources or influence but instead the Spirit of Jesus which calls all people into reconciliation, if they will hear. The text continues after that episode to tell us that the whole community used their wealth not as an endowment to be prudently administered, but as something to be put at the disposal of the community, laid at the feet of the apostles. They use wealth to meet the needs, but they do not mistake its ownership for a blessing that rests on an individual or a kind of power to be treated with reverence. Rather, they claim nothing as their own. The building up of community requires a vulnerable trust in each other, of the sort that Ananias and Sapphira were unwilling to embrace.

All of this ought to cause us again to approach blessings with both joy and a healthy fear of the Lord. Consider Elizabeth’s claim that Mary is “Blessed among all women” and Mary’s own claim that “all generations will call me blessed.” God’s favor and gift to

her, given after waiting on her consent, is to bear a child, which is hardly unusual as blessings go. But this child becomes the cause of her near-divorce, her homeless labor in Bethlehem, her having to leave home to seek shelter in Egypt, and the greatest pain a mother could know, watching her child be tortured and executed. Blessing is not safe or easy.

But blessing is still the gift of God for full life, and Mary is the queen of heaven who rejoices that “the son whom she merited to bear, Alleluia, has risen as he said, Alleluia.” But the triumph given in this blessing is not about safety, comfort, or power, as we would ordinarily conceive it. Being blessed by God sets her off on a road of uncertainty. Luke gives to Simeon a blessing over the holy family that tells us much: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword shall pierce your own soul too.” (Lk. 2:34-35) The blessing, when rejected, can become a curse and it does not give security. Rather, it draws Mary into the vulnerability that is God’s way of working in the world. Blessing is no guarantee of certainty or security. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

IV. BACK TO THE BEGINNING

We can return, from this angle, to re-visit the Pentateuch, to see how this understanding of blessing in the gospels could illuminate the blessings there. This is particularly important because in the common use of ‘blessing’ in our churches, whether in graces or in stewardship appeals or in prosperity gospel materials, it is the Old Testament that provides the major scriptural warrants. In offering blessings or advising people on responsible use of their ‘blessings,’ texts from Genesis or Proverbs are more commonly used than the beatitudes. But if we begin from understanding how blessing is related to Jesus and his living and calling his disciples into a trusting vulnerability, what might we recognize anew about

blessing in the Pentateuch? We have already seen that the blessing of God, as described in the Pentateuch, does not end a story, but opens it out to new participants and new circles of life. But does the blessing of God, on its way to fostering *shalom* throughout the world, arrive in power and strength or does it come in patience and vulnerability? Is there any sense in which the poor are blessed in the Pentateuch, or is that asceticism only a Christian innovation?

This is, in many respects, a matter beyond my competence and surely a topic on which Jewish-Christian dialogue might be very fruitful. Nevertheless, without denying that scripture holds a multitude of voices and a tradition of argument and development, I will make a few suggestions on how Christians may see the one Word of God at work in Genesis and Luke alike.

We might note, for example, that that the mighty gifts of creation come through the peaceful word of God, and the blessings of fertility and Sabbath are gifts which demonstrate God's power by making room for others to live, which leaves God's work vulnerable, for humans can—and do—abuse them. Such blessings draw humans into the full life of God's *shalom*, but they neither guarantee nor control it. Moreover, the peace of God's rest is a promise and hope to humanity, but it is also practice which demands Israel accept a certain weakness. That is, they not only do not have to work, they may not work on the Sabbath. They learn in the difficult Sabbath training of the wilderness manna that keeping the Sabbath is about trust in God and each other, not simply possession of time off. To become God's own people, they must become little ones or lose themselves, not as an end in itself but because God's power is shown in human weakness.

Similarly, regarding the blessing of progeny, Adam and Eve are not the only parents who can reflect that the adventure of parenting is no easy and safe possession of joy, but always a cause of new vulnerability and new relationships in which trust may be returned and again may not. The gift is a call into an unfolding and uncertain venture, a gift that waits to see what return the child will or will not make. We can reflect as well that Jacob's blessing leaves

him wounded, and all of his attempts to parade his wealth as bribes to his brother do not achieve what he desires, peace. In fact, that peace is given in a way beyond his control and only when he is face-to-face, at the mercy of his brother's understandable anger. The blessing that Jacob sees when he sees in Esau God's own face comes to him not because he was given the strength or wealth to turn the meeting to good, but as a surprising gift given to him in his fear of the unknown.

But most important is the story of God's blessing Abram with, of course, progeny and land. That blessing, again, comes not as secure possession to be administered for the good of others. Being blessed by God does not grant Abraham power and strength to use to promote the worship of God. Instead, it comes with a call to abandon home and to enter into trust. That trust eventually demands even that Abraham sacrifice the child of the promise, that he claim in his blessing no security, no guarantee of home and safety, but only a clinging to a promise because the one who made the promise is to be trusted.

God's blessings in scripture are about full life, but they are not about a comfortable life. Most importantly, they are not gifts which grant to some people power which they must use responsibly for the sake of others. Rather, they are gifts which leave us limping, vulnerable, and therefore calling for peace and inviting trust from others.

V. CONCLUSION

This survey, quick as it is, leads to a number of conclusions about how Christians could improve talk about 'blessings.' First, not all wealth is a blessing. Searching questions that discern the difference between blessings for which we should thank God and ill-gotten gain for which restitution should be made and penance performed must be part of our ordinary Christian talk about wealth. To praise God for ill-gotten gain is not only irrev-

erent and dishonest, but also scandalous, as it encourages others likewise to neglect examination of conscience and repentance for wrong-doing.

Second, blessings are given to initiate cycles of gift that promote well-being for all. They create dynamic communities, rather than static individuals. The particularity of blessings on a person, a household, or a nation in scripture refer to beginnings of such economies of blessing and ought not be taken as warrant for claiming blessing in a way that would serve, for example, American exceptionalism. The blessings given to Israel in scripture are given that they may become blessings for all; Jesus is the fulfillment of that blessing, for all nations.

Third, curses and woes have a role in talk about blessings. God's presence does not disappear when gifts are used to impoverish or dominate, to shut out the needs of others. Even goods which begin as blessings can become the source of curses, when they are not rightly used. Although "Woe to you rich" is in only one gospel, cautions about the dangers of wealth abound in the New Testament. Insofar as receiving blessings may put one into a position of power, clinging to that power or claiming it as one's own rather than sharing it out to the upbuilding of all turns it on its head. Nothing in Luke's story suggests that the wealth of the rich man who neglected Lazarus was ill-gotten. But his using it for his own comfort and neglecting the needs of the poor man at his door means that in the end, only a fool would call that wealth a blessing. One of the great problems in the use of 'blessing' to talk about wealth is its banality. Restoring a proper sense that blessings are, as Bonhoeffer might put it, free but not cheap will be one part of the work of disciplining that language.

And fourth, those who would share the blessing of God's *shalom* must do so through a vulnerable, receptive generosity, initiating cycles of peace by arriving in trust. That means that bearing blessing into the world is not the triumphal march of strength battling against evil, but the trusting and risky confidence of lambs

sent out in the midst of wolves to meet up with those God wants to call into the fullness of peace. Blessing is not safe; it can and, according to the gospels, will lead to the cross.

By way of highlighting the significance of such reflections, I'd like to consider a particularly influential view of blessing among US Christians: *The Prayer of Jabez*.¹⁶ I select this work because it is has been very influential and because it does attempt to be a particularly Biblical reflection on what God's blessings are. The comments that follow are not meant to deny that many people may have been challenged by the book to enter more seriously into their callings. God can use many tools. Nor is it meant to single this work out as though its claims were unusual. In fact, it seems to me that much of my critique of *The Prayer of Jabez* could also apply to the USCCB pastoral letter on stewardship, although the faults there are considerably less flamboyant and paired with some admirable strengths. At any rate, the problem is not the one book, but a discussion of the one book can display much about the problem.

The Prayer of Jabez resonates at a number of points with my analysis. First, Wilkinson is quite clear that blessing is not a tame category. God's blessings "sweep you forward into the profoundly important and satisfying life He has waiting." (15) Blessing is not static but dynamic and growing, ever-reaching out to touch more people. Receiving God's blessing involves not merely receiving a gift but entering into a profound relationship of "trust in God's good intentions." (23) Wilkinson's treatment of the prayer that God would "expand my territory" in particular leads to reflections on the growth implicit in God's blessings and the sometimes-terrifying challenges that come with that, challenges which lead us to understand our dependence on God. That is, blessings lead us not to independence but to further humble dependence on God, even as the blessings draw us out into further adventures.

¹⁶ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2000).

There are, however, as many before me have noted, significant problems that cause even those good insights to go awry. In relation to the reflections I have just offered, it is clear first, that this book (like most discussions of blessing) lacks attention to problems of ill-gotten gains. In the U.S. economy, the history of genocide against Native Americans and enslavement of Africans is a fundamental question that any account of wealth as blessing must confront. But in much more direct and recent ways, the global economy complicates questions of the innocence of wealth dramatically. To discuss praying that God would bless a business with expansion as long as “you’re doing it God’s way” (30) without entering into any discussion of what that would and would not mean in our day is to undercut any validity of the language of blessing. I wish that we could take for granted that “doing business God’s way” would include discussions of workers’ rights, environmental responsibility, investment practices, and production of products and services that promote genuine human well-being. I do not think that we can.

Second, this prayer lacks the ironic sense of power and vulnerability so important to the New Testament account of blessing. As we’ve seen, particularly in the New Testament and also in the Old Testament as read through Christ, blessing flourishes when those initiating God’s outpouring of gifts arrive in vulnerability and need, inviting others to join in a cycle of giving. Wilkinson treats dependence as a quality one needs to have toward God, but when it comes to other people, ambition and boldness to draw on God’s strength are what is called for. When Wilkinson says, “...for the Christian, *dependence* is just another word for power” (59), he seems to mean dependence on God and power—influence, effectiveness, larger numbers of respondents—in the world.

This is a crucial difference. In both the Old and New Testament, time and again, those who are blessed by God appear in the world as weak, small, unimportant, and poor. Their power to bless by drawing others into God’s peace arises within that posi-

tion of vulnerability. It is when they gain armies and palaces that things are much more likely to go awry. While Jabez speaks of trust, dependence, and humility, those are spiritual attitudes oriented toward God. What blessing looks like externally, however, is large numbers, larger influence, more power (including more money) to be used to advance the march of the good news. That is, blessing looks pretty much like any other material success.

Perhaps the most surprising point of contrast between “blessing” as I have been exploring it and as Wilkinson develops it is that his account is more ‘spiritual’ than mine. The content of blessing, when named explicitly in Wilkinson, is growth in ministry, success in preaching or counseling. Because Wilkinson does not explicitly distance himself from the presumption that ‘blessing’ refers to personal property and because of passages such as the one affirming prayer that business should expand, he can certainly be read as implying much about blessing and wealth, but his specific illustrations are about blessing as expansion of ministry. Given the nature of blessing in scripture, my attention has been drawn much more to material prosperity.

In fact, I would argue that the tendency to spiritualize questions about blessings (and stewardship) is not a way to make such questions more in tune with the tradition. Rather, it can allow us to sidestep the concrete questions about possessions, wealth, and the power they give. Thinking about the blessings of land, food, wealth, and family makes us much more aware of the danger—or the reality—that such blessings become woes because in our hands they do not serve their function of building up networks of gift that promote full life of all, giving room for others to grow together, sharing in the expansion of God’s *shalom*.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Wilkinson lacks a sense of sin. He recognizes that “blessedness is the greatest of perils because ‘it tends to dull our keen sense of dependence on God and make us prone to presumption,’” (63) and he even warns that people can easily be misled and deceived about the nature of blessedness:

“We’re steeped in a culture that worships freedom, independence, personal rights, and the pursuit of pleasure. We respect people who sacrifice to get what they want. But to be a living sacrifice? To be crucified to self?”(69) But because these cautions are presented as a matter of internal struggle—with examples relating to episodes of doubt and the temptations of pornography—the crucial questions about how material goods will be used so that they are part of God’s economy of blessing never gets raised. Neither, then, do the scriptural accounts of how wealth can become curse.

God’s blessings bear fruit in the peaceful interchange of gifts, in welcome and thanks, in requests for help and generous material sharing to provide it. Such blessings are powerful, and all of them are rooted in the great blessing, the Word who became flesh as a poor man in a dominated nation. This blessing may be frightening, especially for those of us who have personal wealth that seems to provide us independence and security. God’s way of blessing the world shows the strength of his arm by bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. The challenge is that we let our sense of blessings and stewardship be shaped by the sense of the gospel that characterizes Bonhoeffer’s famed 1934 speech at Fano.

There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared, it is itself the great venture, and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war. To look for guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God’s commandment, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying down the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God. They are won when the way leads to the cross.¹⁷

17 Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life*, transl. K.C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 31-32.

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