

Treasures in Heaven

“Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”
—Matthew 19:21

MANY OF THE MAN-MADE traditions that have to do with religious doctrine had their beginnings centuries ago. However, one tradition which is rather new, comparatively speaking, is the set of beliefs promoted by some branches of Christianity which has been

termed “prosperity theology.” It is also sometimes referred to as the “prosperity gospel,” the “health and wealth gospel,” and the “gospel of success.”

Prosperity theology holds that financial blessing and physical well-being are the will of God for Christians, and that these can be attained through increased faith, positive behavior, and financial support for those who teach this viewpoint. It is supposed that the more these are put into practice, the more God will deliver health, security and earthly prosperity.

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the television became an integral part of nearly every home in

the western world, and particularly in the United States. With that came the ability to communicate to the general population by means of many different types of broadcasting, such as news, documentaries, movies, comedy and drama series, sports, and various other informational programming. Religion grew to be one of these popular options, especially as church leaders realized the potential for much larger audiences than would ever be possible in a church building.

In the 1980s, cable television became available to the general public. One of the results of this was that many channels, some local and others national, were established which were devoted strictly to religious programming. With this, “televangelism” grew significantly in popularity and began to figure prominently in organized Christian religion. The ability to reach the masses right in their own homes at any hour of the day, seven days a week, seems to have been one of the catalysts for the increase in number of those teaching the prosperity gospel.

Prosperity theology can perhaps also be traced to the general increase in affluence of western society during the last 50-75 years. With that affluence has naturally come the desire among many for even greater earthly prosperity and wealth. If, indeed, this is God’s will for the believing Christian, many have been persuaded to think that they should give heed to the prominent leaders and charismatic orators who promote this teaching.

There are those, however, who have criticized prosperity theology, saying it promotes greed, pride, irresponsibility and idolatry. Others have suggested that, in particular, it exploits the poor. In addition,

some of the well-known preachers of the gospel of prosperity have been involved in scandal, and in a few cases they have been charged with financial fraud.

While these are reasons enough to avoid the relatively new man-made tradition of prosperity theology, our final authority on the subject should be the Scriptures themselves. What is promised in the Bible to the Christian believer in the way of earthly wealth, health and prosperity? What kind of “treasures” are the followers of Jesus to lay up for themselves, and for what eternal purpose should they be sought?

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES

The words of our opening text were addressed to a young man who approached Jesus and said to him, “Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” (Matt. 19:16) In Luke 18:18 this young man is referred to as a “certain ruler.” The record in both Matthew and Luke clearly indicates that he was rich, hence he is often referred to as “the rich young ruler.” However, while he was rich in the wealth of this world, and evidently exercised some degree of authority among men, he realized full well that these advantages would be only temporary, and thus vain, unless he could continue to live. He correctly understood that the rich cannot take their earthly wealth with them when they die.

With this realization weighing heavily upon him, the young man went to Jesus and asked him the question noted above. There is no indication here that this rich young ruler was asking about a future life. This is indicated by Jesus’ reply in which he

referred the young man to the commandments which were given to Israel at the hand of Moses. The Mosaic Law did not promise eternal life beyond the grave, but it did promise that anyone who could keep its requirements would, as Jesus stated, “enter into life.”—Matt. 19:17-19

To the young man’s thinking, Jesus’ statement evidently meant that he would not grow feeble and ultimately die. Being a Jew, and knowing the commandments, he promptly replied to Jesus, “All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?” (vs. 20) Let us conclude that this man had been sincere in his efforts to keep the commandments but realized that he was not gaining the reward which obedience to them offered. While he is referred to as a young man, he was evidently not so young that he did not already sense that he was perhaps slowly losing his youth. Possibly he was not so strong and vibrant of health as he formerly had been, so his plea to Jesus was, “What lack I yet?”

A COMPLETE GIVING UP

Jesus replied to this young man with the words found in our opening text, and the Mark account adds this important statement by the Master: “Take up the cross.” (Mark 10:21) Jesus’ expression in Matthew 19:21, “If thou wilt be perfect,” does not imply physical perfection, but mental and moral completeness and maturity, resulting from a full dedication to the doing of God’s will. Only those who are fully devoted to God and to the doing of his will are pleasing to him and are assured to receive whatever blessings he may wish to bestow.

The record states that when the young man heard Jesus' instructions to sell what he had and give to the poor, "he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions." (vs. 22) In other words, this young ruler, although noble so far as human standards are concerned, was not willing to pay the price of being one of the Master's followers. In addition, Jesus' instruction to "take up the cross," recorded by Mark, may have further steered the young man toward his negative decision. In Jesus' day, under Roman law it was customary for a criminal condemned to death by crucifixion to carry his cross from the judgment hall to the place of crucifixion. Thus, for one to carry a cross would indicate that he was on the way to death. This rich young ruler had asked Jesus what he could do to have eternal life, but Jesus simply invited him to give up his riches and follow him into death. It is perhaps no wonder that the young man "went away sorrowful."

A HEAVENLY HOPE

Had the young man been able to grasp it, in reality Jesus offered him a far more compensating portion than merely to remain alive as a human, and to continue enjoying his riches. He said to him that if he would sacrifice everything, even life itself, he would have "treasure in heaven." The Old Testament commandments did not promise a heavenly reward, hence the idea of heavenly treasure would be quite new to the rich young ruler. Evidently such a prospect had no appeal for him.

Jesus' disciples were listening to this dialog between the Master and the young man, and there were elements in it which they also did not at the

time understand. Jesus explained further to them: “A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven,” and also, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” The record continues, “When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?”—Matt. 19:23-25

Jesus could have explained to his disciples that rich individuals can enter into the rulership phase of the kingdom of God if they are willing to devote all that they have, and themselves, to the service of the Lord. He partially explained this thought by his illustration of a camel going through the “eye of a needle.” This was apparently a reference to a small gate within the larger entrance leading into the city of Jerusalem, called the needle’s eye gate. Camels could go through this gate, but only on their knees, and after first having their pack removed.

Though Jesus used this illustration, it seemingly was lost on the disciples, and they still inquired, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus did not give a direct reply to this question. He simply said, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” Peter knew that this was not a full answer to his question, so he inquired very directly, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?”—vss. 26,27

It is apparent why Peter asked this question. He had heard Jesus invite the rich young ruler to give up his all and follow him, with the promise that if he did this, he would have treasure in heaven. This was a new thought to the disciples. They had given up everything, and they supposed that they were

to be associated with Jesus in an earthly kingdom arrangement. It seemed worthwhile to give up all in order to obtain a high position of honor like this among men. Now, however, Jesus was talking about treasure in heaven. What could he mean, and how did they, the disciples, fit into such an arrangement? Thus, Peter asked plainly, "What shall we have therefore?"

THRONES AND JUDGMENT

Replying to this question, Jesus said, "Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt. 19:28) This was not the full answer as to what would constitute the promised "treasure in heaven," but it did give some important information. It revealed that the promised treasure in heaven involved "glory" and "thrones," and the exercise of authority with respect to judgment.

These treasures, however, were not to be obtained until after our Lord's return at his Second Advent—not until "the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory." Jesus mentioned this point again in his parable of the sheep and the goats, given just three days before his death on the cross. He said, "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats."—Matt. 25:31,32

The "holy angels" who are shown in this parable as being with the Son of man when he sits upon the

throne of his glory are the faithful followers of the Master during the present age—those who have “forsaken all” and followed him. (Rev. 3:21) The word “angel” in the New Testament is a translation of a Greek word which simply means “messenger.” A messenger may be heavenly or earthly. In this case the reference is to those among mankind who faithfully follow Jesus and are exalted to heavenly glory to live and reign with Christ.—Rev. 14:1,4; 20:4

The Apostle Paul refers to these “messengers,” these faithful ones, saying, “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” (Col. 3:4) Such a prospect is a bright one indeed. It is a prospect of glory and, as Paul adds, also of honor and immortality. (Rom. 2:7) The hope of such heavenly treasure is not a selfish one. As Jesus explained, and as the Scriptures elsewhere clearly teach, the purpose of sitting with Jesus in glory is to participate in the great future work of judging the whole world of mankind. The Bible further teaches that this judgment period will be one of rich blessing for all who then, when given a favorable opportunity, obey the laws of righteousness which will be in force. The world will be judged “in righteousness” by the glorified Christ, not by the unrighteous reasoning of fallen human thinking.—Acts 17:31

The psalmist wrote, “Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the LORD: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.”

(Ps. 96:11-13) What a blessed prospect it is to realize that if we are faithful in giving up all that we have, and following Jesus into death, we will have this precious treasure and joy of associating with Christ to bring blessings to all the families of the earth.—Acts 3:25

JEWES AND GENTILES

In Jesus' explanation to his disciples concerning "treasure in heaven," he said that they would sit on "twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." In his parable of the sheep and the goats he indicates that all nations, which would include Jews and Gentiles alike, will then be on trial, passing through their judgment day period. This larger picture is quite in harmony with God's original promise to Abraham assuring him that through his seed all families of the earth would be blessed.—Gen. 12:3; 22:18

Jesus explains further concerning the position of both Jews and Gentiles, as recorded in Matthew 10:15. Here Jesus compares the position in the judgment day of Jews who rejected him and his disciples with certain Gentiles. He states, "Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city." Whether it will be less tolerable or more tolerable for individuals in the day of judgment will depend upon the amount of knowledge they previously had concerning God and his laws of righteousness, and the extent to which they endeavored to live up to the light they possessed.

For us it is a blessed source of encouragement to know that if we are faithful, even unto death, we

will have the joy of dispensing the blessings of the judgment day and of the kingdom to the sin-sick and dying world of mankind. This was one of the joys set before Jesus which enabled him to endure the cross and to despise the shame which was heaped upon him because of his faithfulness to his Heavenly Father. It is likewise one of the joys which is set before us. To the extent that our faith can lay hold upon the many promises of God which assure us of this high position of honor and rulership in the kingdom, we too will thereby receive strength and courage to continue in the narrow way of sacrifice, laying aside all encumbrances, and running with patient endurance the “race that is set before us.”—Heb. 12:1,2

OTHER TREASURES

It is impossible for our finite minds to grasp clearly just what the glories of the kingdom will be like, but of a certainty they will be far beyond any temporary glory or satisfaction that could possibly come to us from earthly riches or treasure in the few short years of this present life. The Apostle John wrote: “It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” (I John 3:1-3) As John declares, we have no earthly frame of reference to help us conceive of what our heavenly condition will be, but we do know that we will be “like him,” and we shall see him in all his divine glory. What an eternal treasure this will be!

We have rejoiced in our relationship with Jesus, calling upon him as our Advocate, Elder Brother, High Priest, Good Shepherd, and Friend. (I John 2:1;

Heb. 2:11; 4:15; John 10:11; 15:14) This association with him has been upon the basis of faith, for we have never seen him, yet our faith in the promises of the Scriptures has brought him very close to us. However, if we are faithful unto death, we shall see him face to face, and behold his glory. We will behold the glory also of the Heavenly Father. Indeed, we will share in these glories, and participate in that joyous work of dispensing blessings of health and life to all mankind. What a treasure!

The psalmist spoke prophetically of Jesus' express desire to be in the presence of his Father: "In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." (Ps. 16:11) Paul informs us that Jesus is now "set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:2) At that position on God's "right hand" Jesus stated in his vision given to John that the overcomers of the present age will be granted the privilege of sitting with him in his throne, even as he was with the Heavenly Father in his throne.—Rev. 3:21

The thought of meeting and being with the great Creator of the universe, the one who is from everlasting to everlasting, is far beyond our capacity to grasp with any degree of reality. Thinking of this as being one of the heavenly treasures, it is so great that we can comprehend its implications to but a small extent. Though we can understand it only in part, we know that this is part of the spiritual riches promised to the faithful. Paul wrote, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."—Rom. 5:1,2

THE BRIDE

In Revelation 19:7, Jesus is referred to as the Lamb, and in this text, we are told of the time when “the marriage of the Lamb” comes, and when his “wife hath made herself ready.” The wife, or bride of the Lamb, will be his glorified church, and is depicted in Revelation 21:2 as a “holy city” which comes down from God out of heaven “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” The foundations of this symbolic city are “garnished with all manner of precious stones.”—vs. 19

We may not understand all that is depicted by these precious stones, but they do represent riches of heavenly glory, and obviously a part of the “treasure in heaven,” which will become ours upon the basis of our giving up earthly riches in demonstration of our zeal for the Lord and for his cause.

NO PROFIT WITHOUT LOVE

While it is true that the way into the treasures of heavenly glory is the “narrow” way of sacrifice even unto death, this sacrifice must be motivated by love or else it will not be acceptable to the Lord. It will be remembered that Jesus called upon the rich young ruler to bestow all his goods to feed the poor, and take up his cross, that he might gain “treasure in heaven.” The Apostle Paul was evidently acquainted with this expression of the terms of the narrow way, and wrote, “If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing.”—I Cor. 13:3, *Revised Version*

Here Paul built upon Jesus’ instructions to the rich young man by explaining (Continued on page 36)

(Continued from page 31) that in order to obtain this “profit” of heavenly treasure, love must be the motive which causes us to sacrifice, to suffer, and to die. Thus, gaining heavenly treasure is not merely a matter of sacrifice, but sacrifice inspired by the inward force of love. If we are filled with the love of God, the love that prompted the Creator to give his Son to be man’s Redeemer, and the love which prompted Jesus to suffer and die that we might live, then we too will gladly follow in his footsteps of sacrifice faithfully unto death. May this indeed be our response to the Master’s invitation to follow him, and may the glories of the kingdom, and the future privilege of blessing others, continue to be the great treasure before us, encouraging and strengthening our faith in every time of need. ■