

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Agree or disagree: “**Do what is right and you will be rewarded.**” There is a statement that would generate a *whole* lot of discussion in a Bible class. There are a lot of ways to look at that question. I’m guessing if we took a poll of the congregation today, we’d get a greater percentage disagreeing than agreeing. Certainly we are not made right with God by what we do. We will not receive an eternal reward for doing right. That is something God gives us purely by undeserved love for us through Christ Jesus. But how about if we change the wording a bit?

Agree or disagree: “**Follow Christ faithfully, and you will be blessed.**” Do you think we’d get a majority who would agree with that statement? Again, there are different ways to understand that statement, so we’d have to discuss it further. But in general, most would agree that if you follow Christ faithfully, you will be blessed. But really we need to add “you will *ultimately* be blessed” or you will “eternally” be blessed. There’s no question about the salvation of our souls and the eternal life Christ gives us. All who trust in him are guaranteed to receive that blessing.

But here’s the harder question. What if the “blessing” we’re talking about is one for *this* life? Are all who faithfully follow Christ blessed in this world? Tougher question, and again, we’ll want to define what we mean by “blessed.”

As you probably know, there are lots of preachers out there today that proclaim that if you follow Christ faithfully and if you obey God in your life, you *will* experience a good life here on earth. God will give you health. And he will give you wealth. And he will give you good friends and companions. There is no shortage of churches which teach that obedience to God means earthly ease of life. But is this what God says? Both Scripture and life experience tell us “no.”

I know a Christian man who couldn’t find work, so he finally took the only job he could get... working in a collection agency calling up people who weren’t paying their debts. The company he worked for taught him to use intimidation tactics and tell lies in order to get the debtors to pay. After his training class, he refused to use those tactics because he faithfully followed Christ. He was a hard worker and was never late for work. But they fired him. It was a tremendous hardship on his family to lose that job.

Another story: A Christian man worked on a car lot as a car salesman. He was taught to sell cars however possible. He felt bad about some of the sales he was making. He realized how he was compromising his faith in Christ when one day he sold a car with a manual transmission to a 70 year old lady who had never driven a stick in her life. He quit his job and his family suffered.

And one more story. It’s the **story of Joseph** we heard in the Old Testament lesson. Did you know this story took place about 3,500 years ago! That’s a really long time ago! Life was really different back then! People must have been really different, right? I mean, humans have changed a lot and advanced considerably since then, haven’t they? Actually, not. What strikes me in this story is how exactly it portrays human character even today. This is a story that could easily happen in modern day America.

Let’s remember it once again. We’ll keep the story identical, but modernize the setting just a little bit to see how realistic it is even today. A faithful single Christian man becomes a

servant in a rich man's mansion. The rich man becomes so impressed with the organizational skills and work ethic of the servant that he makes him the household manager in charge of everything.

The rich man isn't the only one who has taken notice of the young Christian man. The rich man's wife is also enamored by him... not because of his managing ability, but because he's handsome. In her idle time she watches him as he works. One day when her husband was away, she seduced the young man. No one would know! She tries to get him to go to bed with her.

He flatly refuses. The rich man has always been good to him. But more importantly, he knew this would be a sin against God. He chose to follow God faithfully. The woman was not easily put off. She held on to him and wouldn't let go and got a firm hold of his work jacket. Finally, when he couldn't get away from her, he finally slipped out of his jacket and ran out of the room.

What happens next. Well, according to the theology of many successful churches today, what *should* happen next is that the rich man comes home. He hears both sides of the story. He's impressed with the Christian man's integrity and honesty and so he doubles his salary, taking him now as a business partner and associate rather than a servant.

But that's not how the story unfolded. When the man came home, the wife accused the Christian man of trying to seduce her. She refused and struggled, but he wouldn't let go. Finally, when she screamed loudly for help, he ran away quickly, leaving his coat behind. The rich man believes his wife, calls the police and has the man arrested. He is quickly convicted of first degree rape, and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

This is the story of Joseph in modern terms. It could easily be featured on a modern 1 hour news special. Joseph faithfully followed God. He obeyed God's commands. And he suffered for it, didn't he? He sat in a prison because he did what was right.

So what is God teaching us through this story? I hope you're not sitting there thinking, "I guess it means we should sin or do whatever is expedient at the time." That's not at all the message here. The point is this: **God does not promise that if we faithfully follow Christ, we will have an easy life in this world.** In fact, Jesus teaches us the exact opposite. If we faithfully follow him, we are going to suffer.

How's that for sales pitch? Should we put that message on our church sign! "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will suffer!" Certainly not an attractive teaching from the world's standpoint. But that's what Jesus taught his disciples. He told them plainly while he was with them that he would suffer and die, and on the third day be raised to life. And he said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."**

Being a follower of Jesus means bearing the cross of suffering in this life. But why? Why does God allow Christians to suffer? Why doesn't he give us an easy life? Good health? A couple million dollars? Harmony in all of our relationships? **Why the suffering?**

There are several answers to this question. But the one on top is this: We live in a world that is corrupted and decaying because of sin and rebellion against the creator. So God made a rescue plan for us to save us from this world. His rescue plan is centered around his Son, Jesus Christ. He entered into our corrupt and sinful world and he himself was subject to great suffering. He lived among sinful people and experienced the wickedness of this world. But he didn't live to enjoy this world and its pleasures. He lived his whole life solely and wholly for his Father in heaven. Completely in line with his will from birth until death. Did Jesus reap an

earthly reward for his faithfulness to the Father? Not at all. He was hated by many. He was persecuted. Finally, he was arrested. Mocked. Beaten. Condemned. And hung to die on a cross like a common criminal. This after living a life that was only pure, good and holy in every way.

But this was God's plan... his plan to rescue us from a sinful and corrupt world... a plan to rescue us from our own disobedience and rebellion. For Jesus' death on the cross was the penalty for our sins. Jesus was innocent, but was found guilty of our crimes. He accepted the Father's punishment for what we did wrong. With the punishment paid by Jesus, we are declared innocent by God and holy in his sight.

Now, here's what Jesus promised. You are a child of God. You are a brother or sister of Christ. And Jesus says that just as he suffered, so you will suffer for his name. When you faithfully follow Christ, and serve him and obey him and profess him... expect life to get difficult. Expect life to be hard. Because he obeyed God, Joseph was thrown in prison. You might lose your job. You might be a social outcast. Some day, the persecution might get more physical. Expect it. Your earthly life will not get easier when you faithfully follow Christ. It will get harder.

But here's the thing: our God tell us not to focus on this world. It is sinful, corrupt, temporary, passing. Keep your eyes focused on the eternal reward promised to you. Oh, you will have an easy life of pleasure, good healthy, freedom, joy and acceptance. But not here. Not now. Heaven is your home. Now the cross. Then the glory.

But here's the amazing thing. Yes, we endure suffering, knowing it's only for a time. Heaven is our home. But the truth is, the suffering we endure now is also a blessing now. Through suffering, God is **refining us**. Just as fire refines gold and makes it more pure, through suffering, God purifies our faith and encourages us to trust him and focus on the eternal.

God also may be preparing us for **future service** to him through our current suffering. In Joseph's case, the imprisonment led to an audience with Pharaoh to interpret his dream. Which in turn led to Joseph being the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. Joseph was then able to provide for his extended family when a famine hit. Everything was part of God's big plan for Joseph so he could serve in the right way at the right time. Study the lives of David, and Moses, and many other great people of faith in the Bible, and you'll find a similar story. God prepares us for future service to him through present suffering.

So, dear Christians, faithfully follow Christ. Will it mean suffering? Yes, it will. But only for a time, since eternal glory awaits. And only under God's guidance. And only because of the spiritual blessings it brings us and others. Looked at in that light, may we look at suffering in a new way. And believe God's promise which will never fail: Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Amen.