

## THE PAY-OFF FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; Psalm 73

In Fannie Flagg's novel *Standing in the Rainbow*, set in the little town of Elmwood Springs, Missouri, the main character, a woman named Dorothy, is talking to her mother, and her mother says, "According to Presbyterians, everything in life is preordained, or at least that's what Norma's mother says."

Dorothy says, "Norma's mother? How would she know? She's a Methodist."

"Not anymore," her mother says. "As of last week she claims she's a Presbyterian. Right in the middle of the bridge tournament she announced it."

Dorothy says, "But there's not a Presbyterian church within a hundred miles around here. Why would she want to be a Presbyterian all of a sudden?"

Her mother replies, "I suppose its all part of her plan to move up in the world" (p. 57).

I bet you didn't know that becoming Presbyterian is a way to move up in the world. According to Proverbs all forms of faithfulness to God can help you move up in the world.

Proverbs 3:33—"The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the abode of the righteous."

Proverbs 10:3—"The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked."

Proverbs 12:21—"No harm happens to the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble."

Proverbs 19:23—"The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm."

Proverbs is not talking here about a reward in heaven after we die. You have to look very hard in the book of Proverbs for any reference to life after death. Proverbs is not concerned about heaven. It is concerned about life here on earth. Notice Proverbs 11:31—"If the righteous are repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner!" According to Proverbs the pay-off for righteousness is in this life, and not just in heaven.

About a year and a half ago there was an article in the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper entitled, "Religious Benefits." It said,

Late last year, a commission convened by Dartmouth Medical School, among others, studied years of research on kids, including brain-imaging studies, and concluded that young people who are religious are better off in significant ways than their secular peers. They are less likely to smoke and drink and more likely to eat well; less likely to commit crimes and more likely to wear seat belts; less likely to be depressed and more likely to be satisfied with their families and school (*Spokesman-Review*, April 3, 2004).

This fits with a newspaper article I quoted several years ago with this headline: “Immune system benefits from going to church.” The article said, “In a study of more than 1,700 North Carolina adults, 65 and over, Duke University researchers found those who attend religious services at least once a week have healthier immune systems than those who don’t” (*Spokesman-Review*, November 1, 1997). I am waiting for someone to come out of church and tell me, “Pastor, I think that sermon lowered my cholesterol.”

Unfortunately, it does not always work that way. Last week Robin reminded us that the observations about life in the book of Proverbs are not guarantees, they are probabilities. Bringing your children to church increases the likelihood that they will live in healthy ways, but it does not guarantee it. In the same way, living a life of righteousness, living in a way that respects God and treats other people with fairness and compassion, will probably make your life better, but it does not guarantee that things will always go well for you.

Philip Yancey has written a powerful book called *Disappointment with God*. There are two copies of it in our church library. In this book Yancey chronicles story after story of Christians whose faith has not been rewarded with blessing. He begins with Richard, a devout Christian graduate student studying theology. After graduating Richard was passed over for a position given to someone less qualified, leaving him with huge loans and no income. At the same time his fiancée broke off their engagement with no explanation. At the same time Richard developed a series of medical problems, aggravated by depression. Richard said that he wanted to believe the Bible. He wanted to believe, as Proverbs says, that “The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm.” He wanted to believe that, but in his case it did not seem to be true.

Even worse was the story of Meg Woodsen. Both of Meg’s children, a boy named Joey and a girl named Peggy, had cystic fibrosis. Joey died at the age of 12. Peggy defied the odds. She graduated from high school, went to college, and seemed to get stronger. She developed a deep Christian faith through which she hoped to glorify God even in her illness. Peggy’s faith held fast, but her health did not. Eventually she died a painful, agonizing death at the age of 23. Her mother Meg said she wanted to believe the Bible. She wanted to believe that “The fear of the Lord is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm.” She wanted to believe that, but in her experience it just didn’t seem to be true.

This morning we heard an incredible story of healing in the life of Sandy Riebe. What an amazing gift. At the same time, however, I remember other people in our church with cancer, people for whom we prayed fervently, people who were faithful followers of Christ, people who were not healed, who died even while Sandy was getting better. Proverbs 12:21 says, “No harm happens to the righteous,” but in my experience that does not always seem to be true.

Which is exactly the point made in our first scripture lesson from Psalm 73. Take out a pew Bible and turn back to Psalm 73 (OT, p. 534). Psalm 73 begins much like the book of Proverbs. Verse 1: “Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.” That is a wonderful thought, but to the person who sang Psalm 73 it does not seem to work. Verses 2-3: “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” The psalm goes on to talk about how proud

and self-confident are the people who pay no attention to God. Then the psalm writer looks at himself—verses 13-14: “All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.” That sounds like Richard and Meg Woodsen and all the other people in Philip Yancey’s book who have been disappointed with God.

Believing in and serving God does not always bring you health, wealth, or success. Even Proverbs recognizes this. Look at the “better than” Proverbs quoted on the insert. Proverbs 15:16-17—“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.”

Do you notice how those verses assume that being righteous may not always bring you great treasure or abundant possessions? Those who fear the Lord may end up eating beans instead of steak; they may live in subsidized housing instead of a large mansion. Nevertheless, Proverbs says, faithfulness to God is still worth it. Proverbs 16:8—“Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.”

The ultimate pay-off for righteousness is not found in health, wealth, or success; it is found in relationships, starting with your relationship to God. The word righteousness means “right relationship.” The best thing you can get from righteousness is right relationships, starting with your relationship to God.

Notice how Psalm 73 comes to that conclusion. Look at verse 21: “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.” Perhaps that is how Richard felt, or Meg Woodson, or others who have been disappointed by God. But that is not the end of the story. Look at verses 22-26:

Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor. Whom have I heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

At the end of his book *Disappointment with God* Philip Yancey writes, “The alternative to disappointment with God seems to be disappointment without God” (p. 311). Sooner or later all the other things in life for which you strive will disappear. The day will come when your house, no matter how nice it is, will be sold to someone else. The day will come when your job, no matter how prestigious it is, will be given to someone else, or phased out. The day will come when your body will let you down, and so will your mind. When that happens, only those who have nurtured a relationship to God will have something for which to rejoice. And that is the great gift God has given to us in his Son Jesus Christ.

The reason to serve God, the reason to commit your life to following Christ, is not to obtain a bigger house or a bigger income or a bigger reputation; it’s the relationship to God itself. Because when everything else in your life is gone, that relationship will turn out to be the greatest blessing you have had all along.

- Ken Onstot