

I feel like this sermon should come with a Surgeon General's sticker. Warning: the following message might profoundly impact the way you view the world.

We're gonna talk about a core, world-view defining teaching of the Bible. It is also a teaching that a lot of Christians do not understand. In pastor speak we are talking about the Theology of the Cross. In short we are going to answer the question: when God promises to bless us, what does he mean by that?

God's answer to that question will define the way you look at your life and this world. This is a deep and meaty Christian teaching and I'm under no delusions that I will be able to do full justice to this topic in one sermon, but it is a start or another step on what I hope is a life-long study of the Theology of the Cross.

The first thing we need to do is dig deep and get a little dark because we have some misconceptions to shatter.

Ready? Warning: the following has the ability to profoundly impact the way you view the world.

For a few minutes this morning I want us to ponder the truth of this statement: Life sucks.

I know it sounds crass, and I know it's depressing to think about, but for a moment I want you to just take it all in – the suckiness of living in a world ruined by sin. I want you to think about real life, not how you want life to be, not how you hope life will turn out, not the silver lining, but life as it really is.

I want you to think about all the pain – the physical pain, from broken bones to torn ACLs to the slowing rate of recover as you get older. Pain never ends. We are born in a great burst of pain and we often die in pain and most of the time spent in between is in pain.

I want you to think about all the emotional pain –remember when you were in 5th grade and you found out how much words can hurt? Remember when you were in high school and you first learned what heartbreak feels like? Think about miscarriages, special needs parenting, dementia, cancer. There's an old Latin phrase *media vita in morte sumus* – in the midst of life we are dying – and the slow march towards death that we and every one we know are plodding brings unending emotional pain.

I want you to think about all the frustrations – the little frustrations of trying to sleep with a cold, to the bigger frustrations of a job that feels tedious and unfulfilling, a marriage that just isn't clicking the way it used to, or the loss of independence and forced humility of old age.

I want you to think about the last news cycles – hurricanes, flooding, tornadoes, earthquakes, wild fires, missing people reports, murders, drugs.

Life in this sinful world is awful. We can try and sugarcoat it. We can try and look for the bright spots in all the darkness. But stop and think. Is there any amount of sugar in this world that can truly cleanse the palate of all the pain and death we see and experience on a daily basis? Is there anything bright, anything good in this world that will not be inevitably snuffed out by the unrelenting march of time and death?

Don't kid yourself. I know we spend a lot of time, money, and energy trying to avoid the darkness – high thread counts and air conditioning to relieve the discomfort; doctors and drugs to deaden the pain; the tyranny of the urgent that stops us from dwelling on the meaninglessness of so much that fills our schedules. But for a moment this morning, please stop. Please stop and see this world, see this life for what it is. Please stop and realize how right Shakespeare was: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Or perhaps you prefer Solomon: **Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!**

Now I know that the Christian in each and every one of you wants to cut me off: "Pastor, it's not that bad! What about Jesus? What about Christianity? What about the Bible? Doesn't that make life infinitely more bearable? Doesn't that have the power to make it better? Doesn't God promise over and over again to bless us?"

The answer: Yes, unequivocally Jesus makes life more bearable. Yes, undeniably God promises to bless and keep us, to make his face shine on us, and be gracious to us, to look on us with favor and give us peace.

BUT, critical to understanding God's answer to those questions is understanding *how* Jesus makes life more bearable and how we define what it means to be blessed by God.

You see, often we humans tend to define blessings as gifts from God that have to do with comfort and happiness here on earth: God blessed me with a wife, kids, a career that brings purpose and pays the bills, decent health, a car that has functioning heat and a/c. And so when we think of how Jesus makes life more bearable we think of all those tangible blessings that lessen or distract from the harshness of this world.

But here's the thing. When we define blessings that way, we are not defining it the way God does and we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. That was Jeremiah's problem.

Jeremiah had some beef with God in the first lesson we heard today.

Here's Jeremiah's line of thought: God I've done everything you asked of me. **When your words came to me, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight.** I've loved your word. I've shared your word. I've lived your word. I did it all completely alone, like you told me to. But where is your blessing? Here I sit alone because your hand is pressing down on me. **Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable. God you are like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails.** God I've been waiting for you to bless me. Where is it?

Jeremiah looked at his life and he was missing blessings as we humans tend to define them. He didn't have a spouse and family because God told him he couldn't get married. He didn't have a career that inspired and paid the bills, instead his God-given career made him the most hated man in Israel, thrown in stocks, beaten, and persecuted.

According to Jeremiah's definition of blessings, God was failing. So he called his God out.

God's response helps uncover a deep misconception Jeremiah (and many people today) have. Does God say: "Oh, you're right Jeremiah, my bad, I promised to bless you and just I forgot! Woops..."

No, (verse 19) The LORD says, "**Repent.**" Jeremiah, you've got it all wrong. This isn't how it works. When I promised to bless you, this is not what I meant.

God refused to make Jeremiah comfortable. God refused to remove the suckiness of Jeremiah's life. Why? Because God didn't want to or couldn't follow through on his promise to bless? No, because God was defining blessing differently.

Jesus summed up this misconception of Jeremiahs, this difference in defining blessings, this way, "Having in mind the things of man, rather than the things of God."

Jeremiah wanted what every other human on the face of this planet wants: a comfortable life here and now And he wasn't asking for much. He wasn't asking to be rich and popular, he just wanted what everyone else wants – to feel loved by someone, to feel like he had some kind of a place to call home, and some people that supported and loved him.

Jeremiah had in mind the things of man. Not the things of God.

God's answer: "Jeremiah you have it wrong. Jeremiah, I *am* going to bless you, but here's what I consider a blessing: saving you from this world, not making your life in this world comfortable."

And this friends is the critical truth we need to see today. This is the point of that little excursion into the suckiness of this world. God does not promise to make this sucky world better. If we think that is what God is promising when he promises to bless us we are setting ourselves up for disillusionment and heartbreak – because we will be wondering, like Jeremiah, where the blessing of God has gone.

God does not promise to make this sucky world better, but he does promise to save us from this world. He does promise that because of Jesus we can have hope of an infinitely better world after our time on this sucky world has ended in death.

And so, God defines blessings differently than we often do. We often define blessings as things that bring comfort here and now. God defines blessings as things that strengthen our faith and desire for the better life to come. From God's perspective a blessing is anything that draws us closer to him and increases our desire for heaven. This is the Theology of the Cross friends. Let me say that again: From God's perspective a blessing is anything that draws us closer to him and increases our desire for heaven.

So my kids and my wife *are* blessings from God's perspective in so far as they help me grow closer to God - they do that in a ton of ways. They bless me by reminding me how much I need forgiveness because I fail as a husband and father every day. They bless me by functioning as my first church, the group with whom I most regularly spend time with reading, discussing and rejoicing over the word of God.

My career and possessions are blessings only in so far as they draw me closer to God by reminding me how much I depend on him for everything, and teaching me how good he is as at caring for the world he created even after sin has ruined things.

He gives me these things not to make my life more comfortable, but to draw me closer to him.

And this redefinition is crucial because then do you know what else is a blessing?

My bad back – it is a blessing because every time I throw it out I am reminded of one more reason that heaven is greater than anything I will find here.

My 19 days at Children's Hospital and my still undiagnosed special needs son Ezra is a blessing – because it reminds me of how little control I have over my life and how much I need to trust in the God who has control.

My father's Parkinsons is a blessing because it reminds me that I too will one day receive a terminal diagnosis of some sort and so my relationship with God is of utmost importance. It reminds me that even my favorite people in this world – the ones that bring so much happiness and comfort – can't be my ultimate source of happiness and comfort because sin sucks.

Do you see it? Do you see how changing the definition of what a blessing is changes the way we see the world – and how we react when our lives start to play out like Jeremiah's? Every bad thing you suffer, every cross you carry, when they draw you closer to Jesus, remind you how much you *need* him, and how awesome heaven will be is a blessing.

And do you see the silver lining?

It's not in a promise that God will make this life less difficult. It is in the promise that no matter what God allows to come, no matter how heavy the cross gets, three things will happen.

First, God will make us a fortified wall of bronze. God promises that no matter how the awfulness of sin hits home he will give you the strength (not to overcome it), not to thrive despite it, but to endure it, to survive it, sometimes by the skin of your teeth.

Second, he will be with us the whole way. Jeremiah may have felt like God was a deceiving brook and a spring that fails, but appearances can be deceiving. We may feel like God is far away, like he doesn't see us, or he doesn't care, but nothing could be further from the truth. His word, his sacraments, his Son's cross prove that.

Finally, he will rescue and save us. And that friends is the greatest promise of all. That is why Jesus willingly entered this sucky world, that is why Jesus willingly marched to brutal suffering and death, so that we could know that one day a crown will replace the cross.

The plan for your life is clear.

First the cross. Then the crown.

God grant us wisdom to define blessings the way he does – to see blessings even in the wages of sin – to deny ourselves, carry our cross, and know that because Jesus carried his cross, the crown will be ours.

Amen.