

"Blessings and Woes"
(Jeremiah 17:5-10)
February 13, 2022

Are we cursed? Or are we blessed? Human beings have been struggling with this existential question since day one. When the population density is low, a community becomes more vulnerable when facing dangers due to environmental changes, limited supply of labor, and threats from neighboring communities. However, suppose the population density is higher. In that case, the community might be exposed to extreme hazards from within, which exemplifies itself especially in epidemic situations, such as leprosy, black death, smallpox, tuberculosis, measles, polio, HIV, SARS, etc. These were only a few wake-up calls in human history, and new ones keep coming. Unfortunately, we are still in the middle of one, the COVID.

Are we cursed or blessed? Internet connection guarantees that we have access to wealth and knowledge. However, is it easy to distinguish between honesty and scam, or facts and fake news? Democracy protects the value and importance of individual freedom. How come some individuals need to give up freedom more than others in the name of peace and balance? Canada is a rich country. How does one feel, though, living in a rich country but under the poverty line?

It is difficult to answer whether we are cursed or blessed. It seems that the two opposite realities and feelings go hand in hand and cannot easily be separated. So, how do people deal with them? Some pursue their living by following the principle of "reward and punishment," fostering pleasure and avoiding unhappiness. In contrast, some prefer to take good or bad actions

according to a clear set of rules. Why would the people led by Moses out of Egypt observe the Ten Commandments? Why do religious people follow the teachings and regulations written in their scriptures? Why do Canadians agree to abide by the Canadian legal system? I don't think those can't be fully explained by the doctrine of utilitarianism, which dictates human actions through the principle of "reward and punishment. When Abraham was aware of God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he argued against it since the cities had both righteous and wicked citizens. God shouldn't bring the same judgment to both. (Gen 18: 16-33) It's not surprising to see that faithful from different religions share the same humanitarian concerns nowadays. It might be a community garden, a food pantry, or a shelter. They pull people of diverse faith together, even though the attendance to their worship place keeps dropping. According to a GTA bylaw, a person who works for a property maintenance company and is on call 24/7 can no longer park his commercial vehicle in his residential driveway after his neighbor's complaint. He deals with emergency calls after hours with five different fire departments. He needs the vehicle right away when he receives a call. Should he face a fine of up to \$50,000 or take his chances to appeal when he gets a notice of violation? Put yourself into the above situations. What should you do? Do the right thing, avoid the wrong, of course. But who defines the standards of right and wrong?

"Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." It isn't always cut and dry with curses and blessings. It is not a blasphemy to ask if the battle between flesh and spirit is real. Decades ago, some rules said that Christians shouldn't do certain things in the

church settings, e.g., wearing jeans, dancing, praying with eyes opened, flirting, watching movies, watching TV, being unserious, etc. However, I saw those happening everywhere, every day outside the church. Is the so-called battle between flesh and spirit human-created? Different societies have created their own set of rules. As frequent travelers transiting from one group to another, we become so used to the existence of different sets of rules that we might feel just pick one. If we pick one that we are used to, does our choice make ourselves self-righteous then? If not, we might respect them equally or treat them like a legal formality. Would that make us a hypocrite then? Again, there aren't simple answers to those questions.

Why? It's because there's something we haven't looked into. And I mean, our hearts. "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?" This wisdom saying raised a question about the heart that we all have. However, the "heart" here doesn't refer to our vital organ, but the center of spiritual activity, the home of the personal life, and the seat of conscience. It designates a person as wise, pure, upright, righteous, pious, and sound. But, conversely, it's the same heart that sets a person as foolish, dishonest, crooked, sinful, and unacceptable. How does it work? It's a mystery even to us ourselves. Maybe that's the reason why the wisdom saying described it as hopelessly dark and deceitful, like a puzzle that no one can figure out. This question, "Who can understand it?" has a deep meaning to all who have experienced enough difficulties in their lives. When one person tries not to step into another's life, can we determine which of the following is the reason? "Being respectful of another person's privacy," or "It's none of my business." When a person tries not to be involved anymore, can one tell whether the person means "I have done more than

enough" or "I don't care anymore"? I don't think we can find the answer through circumstantial evidence because only the person who makes the decision knows exactly why. It lies in that person's heart.

So, what can we do? We can do nothing, and we shouldn't do anything because it's God's business. "I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings."

It's storytime.

A disciple wanted to thank the master for what he did, and offered to buy him a present as his birthday present. To his delight, the master picked a new shirt as the present. The disciple then called the village tailor to have the master measured. After the tailor did the measurement, he promised, "By the will of God, the shirt will be ready within a week."

A week went by. The disciple went to the tailor, trying to take the new shirt the master was excitedly waiting for. The tailor said, "There has been a slight delay. But, by the will of God, it will be ready by tomorrow."

The next day, the tailor said, "I'm sorry. It isn't done yet. Try again tomorrow. And if God so wills, it will certainly be ready."

On the following day, the master said to the disciple, "This time, ask him how long it will take if he keeps God out of it."

Believe it or not, sometimes, it's good to be an "atheist."

Are we cursed or blessed? It's unreliable to make any judgment by appearances. A shrub in the desert was a place where Moses encountered God. The parched places of the wilderness, the uninhabited salt land were places where Jesus prayed to God privately. Likewise, drought might not be the reason why a tree doesn't bear fruits. The leaves might be green, the roots might be extensive and reach a stream of water, but there'll be no fruit if it's not in the right season.

Trust in God is believing God. Believe that God's standards will work instead of relying on ours.

According to our standards, being poor, having hunger, needing to weep, and being hated are all curses, but Jesus said, "Blessed are you who" have those experiences. (Luke 6:20-22) If we believe being rich, well-fed, and happy are blessings, Jesus said, "Woe to you who" experience those.

"I the Lord test the mind and search the heart." God looks at the reasons behind the so-called facts. That's the foundation of our belief. God knows and will take care of everything. Therefore, there's no reason for us to live in fear. The lovely demands of God in our transforming life are to love God and our neighbors. Keep them in our hearts, and God's Spirit will facilitate the communication within. Don't play God. Give God a chance, and then we shall be blessed. Amen.