

## **THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S - The Midas Trap and How to Avoid it - Part one**

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### **WHY SOME CHRISTIANS FIND GOD TO BE MORE SATISFYING THAN DO OTHERS**

It's been a very long time since I've done any extensive teaching on the subject of Christian stewardship. I suppose there's a kind of pride that can creep up on a church that, unlike many churches today, we don't talk a lot about money and giving. It's usually something like, **"Thank you for your faithful support,"** and the ushers come down the aisle.

But maybe we shouldn't gloat. Maybe it's not a good sign when Jesus talked about money more than heaven itself and a church doesn't - except for World Impact Sundays - talk about it very much. Maybe that puts us a bit out of sync with our Lord.

I'm sure this is not a favorite topic among attendees. That in itself, I suppose, only shows how lovingly we're tied to the notion that our wealth is our wealth and isn't anyone else's business. We'd rather have less sensitive areas of our lives probed by the Lordship of Jesus. Thank you very much.

#### **BIBLICAL TEXT #1:**

**Psalm 73:23-28** - "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. [24] You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. [25] Whom have I in heaven but you? **And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.** [26] My flesh and my heart may fail, **but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.** [27] For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. [28] But for me it is good to be near God; **I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,** that I may tell of all your works."

Here are the telling phrases in our opening text. **First**, **"...there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you"** (25). How do we say (pray) those words without feeling like we're either **pretending**, or worse, **lying**? Really? Nothing else on the face of the whole earth we're longing for?

**Second phrase**, **"...but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever"** (26). That word, **"portion"** pictures the sustenance and supply of all we really need - like a **portion** of food - a **piece** of pie. It's a nice sounding prayer but faces the same problems as the first phrase about there being **"nothing on earth"** we desire besides God. I don't know if I trust myself saying those words.

**Third phrase**, and this may be the most intriguing of all, **"I have made the Lord God my refuge"** (28). This is not something **God** did. This is something the **psalmist** did - **"I have made the Lord God my refuge...."**

Here is where I want the rest of this message to go. My thinking is those first two phrases I quoted describe the **ideal** - the **goal** - the **fully-formed heart** of the follower of Christ for whom God has become **sweetly satisfying as an actual experience**. Those warm words - **"...there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you"** (25), and, **"...God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever"** (26), can't be faked. This is **heart life**.

O, I know **others** can be fooled by my bold outward claims as a Christian, but the heart speaking those warm words of God being the all-satisfying **portion** will instantly know if there is an inward reality behind them. These are not mere **doctrinal words**. Anyone can make factual truth claims about Christianity or anything else, for that matter. But **we know** when the God of whom we speak is our **portion** besides whom there is nothing else on the whole earth that compares.

So if those first two phrases are the goal - the destination - the **fully-formed, God-captivated heart**, then that third phrase - **"I have made the Lord God my refuge...."** (28) - describes the path - the action of the psalmist - to free his own heart from all that would **prevent** God being his **portion** and his **all-satisfying treasure**.

But immediately a question arises. It's a question we can't avoid because these three connected phrases create their own momentum. The ideas just come tumbling out one after another. **From what does the psalmist need refuge?** What is his concern? From which enemy is he seeking protection when he makes the Lord his **refuge**?

Fortunately the psalmist tell us. The enemy isn't the usual array of threatening armies described in many of the psalmist's prayers. No Philistines, Amalakites, or Ammonites. No. This enemy is much deadlier - and much harder to track down. The enemy is that one, quietly growing, mutating, deadly inward virus, matasizing against all spiritual life and joy - **Greed**.

That this was the psalmist's concern is no guess. Read the whole psalm. The psalmist is envious of the wicked because they are better off than he. He *tells* us his problem as he looks back in hind-sight - **Psalm 73:3** - "**For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**" Or, **verse 12** - "**Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.**"

Take special note. The psalmist, for all his spiritual hunger, *admired* wealth. He admired the way these people could make *more* wealth. He admits this is what fuelled his envy. Their wealth looked *good* to him. It was inviting and captivating. It fed his dreams for happiness and security. He was envious because these people were getting more and more money - "**...they increase in riches**" (12).

This is the link to this unapologetic series of teachings on *giving*. It doesn't come from a church with a huge mortgage or one trying to dig out from under massive debt. And that makes for good timing because, while those emergencies tend to loosen wallets of caring people, they are, in fact, the **smallest and poorest** reasons for generous giving to this church.

The best reason for generous, proportionate, continuous, and sacrificial giving is the creation of a heart that has been freed to savour **God as its portion**(26). Only sacrificial kingdom giving deepens desire for God to be treasured **more than anything else on earth**(25). You can't *pray* this kind of heart into existence. And only sacrificial kingdom giving provides *refuge* from the heart-cancer of covetousness(28).

For sure, until the commitment to make God your refuge is deliberately *made* - "**I have made the Lord God my refuge....**" (28) - other trinkets will *automatically* be cherished all out of proportion to their true worth.

This is no slight problem, though almost no one *sees* the deadly threat of accumulating wealth. Hence the mention in this series' title of **King Midas**. Though details of the legend vary greatly, once upon a time, around 2000 B.C. loving King Midas took pity on a poor traveller in need of sanctuary. After several months of restoration the strange peasant agreed to grant King Midas any wish. And the greed that swelled up in Midas' heart instantly blurted out the unguarded soul's request that everything he touched might turn to gold. And the peasant said it was granted. Midas instantly tested his wish touching a withered oak branch. It glistened in the sunlight as pure gold. And he couldn't contain his joy.

He called all the leaders in his kingdom to a huge feast. All were gathered as the finest foods were set before them. And, of course, as wealth *always* does, Midas' golden touch had kept him from thinking through the implications of his golden wish. Every piece of food or drink he touched turned to gold. And you can't digest gold.

In many of the accounts Midas dies of starvation - trapped by his love of gold to the point that he was blinded to the *future effects* of his golden touch. In other accounts he celebrates his granted wish by hastily hugging his child, who, of course, instantly ceases to be a living being and is turned into an image of lifeless gold. The message of the legend is the same. Gold can never substitute for what gives life its truest meaning and joy.

While just a legend, the story describes the *default* position of every human heart. Now move away from the legend to the absolute Biblical revelation in our psalmist's words. And the heart cherishing anything but God and His kingdom will have no *protection* - no *refuge* - will be *refuge-less* - in terms of not selling out to *covetousness*. Something other than **God** will become the heart's *self-destructing portion*.

We shouldn't take lightly the fact that the psalmist actually had to *make God his refuge* to win this battle with a naturally greedy heart. We know this is not an easy battle to win because the psalmist *tells us* he almost didn't win it - **Psalm 73:2** - "**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.**"

No automatic victory here. Making God the *refuge* isn't a simple, one-time win. Greed has to be rooted out at great cost. It has to be ripped out like an abscessed tooth. And the psalmist had to do it *himself*.

But he paid the price and looked back with great joy that he found a better way. That's what he is saying in his prayer in Psalm 73. When God is made the portion of your life (26), nothing else will feel as essential for inward contentment and joy. Everything else in life gets measured down to its true scale. Like the gravitational pull of the sun over the earth, the desire for God orders and controls every other possession for His glory alone.

Now, either the Psalmist was right or wrong. Either life will work this way or it won't. Either God is ultimately good and satisfying and the proper end of all our energies or He isn't. Does the teaching of Jesus shed any light on these old dusty words from the Psalmist?

**BIBLICAL TEXT #2:**

**Matthew 13:44** - "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

When **gold** is the ultimate delight you end up with the curse of King Midas. Something greater than gold must be pursued for the soul to be safe. But delight in God can't be expressed in mere **words**. Delight in God is expressed in **joyful material sacrifice** - "...Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." And, just to be clear, we know from Jesus' parable the **field is God's kingdom** - "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure in a field...."

**Smaller loves will only yield to greater loves.** And greater loves are only sustained by **deeper sacrifice**. In other words, greater love for God can't be **verbally** established or **musically** established or **emotionally** established. A greater love for God must also be **materially** established. Whether you have great wealth or less one thing is certain of us all. Money lies to all of us. It tells you and me we will have greater joy if we **spend it** rather than **give it**. It tells you and me we will find the better life if everything we touch turns to gold.

**And God has so ordained it that we can only sacrifice our way** out of this deadly deception. **Only radical regular giving provides refuge from the slow death of universal covetousness.** Love of the world and its treasures will not yield to sermons, warnings, lectures, or exhortations. The smaller loves that cling so tightly to all our hearts will only yield by obediently responding to the call of a Greater love. Giving is always the **ultimate act of faith**. And that's why many miss life's greatest reward.

But once people get a taste of God, once they taste true joy, once they have had His presence free their earthbound hearts, they experience a new level of spiritual discovery. A greater joy displaces the old. **A momentum starts to build in following Jesus.** Preachers don't have to beg to get involvement in extending and expanding and sacrificing for God's Kingdom. The heart has been set free by the power of a greater love. People give **for joy** - "...in his joy he goes and sells all that he has...." (Matthew 13:44).

**BIBLICAL TEXT #3:**

**Philippians 3:7** - "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

Here is Paul's record, preserved like a fossil for all to see. There were things he held dear, things he treasured and fondled as the joy producers of his life. Nothing could change his outlook. Then he discovered Christ, or Christ discovered him. And everything changed. He left his possessions. He gave up his plans for the future. He gave up a life of learning and religious studies, his reputation and the respect of his peers, to say nothing of the affluence that would have been his portion. He left it all.

And he left it with joy. None of it mattered anymore. None of it mastered him. You can almost hear Paul praying with Asaph from our Psalm, "**Besides You, I desire nothing on earth.**"

Here's what needs to be said in this message. **There is a fine line between joy and sorrow.** And the line isn't drawn where most people think. Most people think the line is drawn between the **haves** and the **have-nots**. But that's not even close to what the Bible says.

The fine line between joy and sorrow is drawn between sacrificers and hoarders. It's between **givers** and **keepers**. It's between those who invest with joy in the eternal kingdom of Christ and those who try to keep as much as they can for themselves - those who dream of the Midas touch.

Let me show you what I mean in our last text. We've already seen the **joy** of the man who sold everything he had to gain the treasure buried in the field. Now look at the **sorrow** of a man who kept everything he owned for himself:

**BIBLICAL TEXT #4:**

**Luke 18:22-25** - "When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." [23] But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. [24] Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! [25] For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of

God.”

Those are the words of a man who never had to give away a penny. He was **“extremely rich”**(23) and could spend every dollar anyway he wanted. And he could, with effort make lots more money to boot. Wealth almost always makes it easier to get **more** wealth. The carrot always dangles just a little bit in front of the nose. So this rich man chose not to obey when Jesus called for his sacrificial discipleship. He could do whatever he wanted with the rest of his life.

O, and one more thing - when he left Jesus, he was **miserable**. His wealth could buy everything but a happy heart. He crossed the line between joy and sorrow and didn't even know it. That's because he wasn't looking for the line in the right place.

Only a passionate, all-consuming love for God turns the material things of this life into what they were meant to be all along - **instruments for spreading God's glory**. And once that secret - **the** secret of all giving - has been discovered, there's no telling just how fruitful, how godly, and yes, how **joyful**, the rest of your life will be.