



Beautiful Blessings
FROM GOD



Beautiful Blessings from God



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Patricia Raybon



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Introduction



I didn't know I was blessed. Never even imagined it. Never dared to guess it. Not all the time, anyway.

Then one evening, while sharing a dinner with friends, I looked at their photos from a trip to Ghana. A smart three-year-old child—taking a soapy bath in a bucket outdoors in a nice rain—looked in the camera's eye and grinned. On her face? A confident look of blessed joy.

Her humble village had only one deep well. So when the skies suddenly opened and poured down rain, everybody grabbed buckets to catch the water. Then the little girl's mother handed her soap and a towel, and the child tore off her clothes and scrambled into a bucket. Soon she was soapy from head to toe. And laughing about it all.

The child had a job to do in a big storm, but she obeyed and worked through the inconvenience, the downpour—not to mention the lack of plumbing—and she found joy. Showered with blessings.

That's what I was seeking when I started this

devotional: to be showered with God's beautiful blessings—but not as the world thinks, in material ways. I longed to be showered with God's highest, simplest, and greatest blessings, then get refreshed on the journey—even in a storm.

A simple but brave request? In fact, the path I sought was waiting on my bookshelf, ready for me to launch ahead. So I pulled down my Bible to read. My plan? I would launch a deliberate, purposeful journey through the fresh wind of God's Word, turning to the sweet truth of God's great wisdom to uncover His beautiful and quiet blessings.

But God wasn't so quiet. Instead, He wrote in loud words. With exclamation points.

Use common sense!

Be content!

I knew I'd heard such timely advice before, but for some reason on this trip through the Bible, I saw and heard such urgings in a different way.

God seemed to be personally teaching His own rules for beautiful blessings—timeless, smart, life-giving principles of both promise and joy.

I started making notes:

“Gentleness makes us great” (see Psalm 18:35).

“God answers prayers when we trust Him” (see 1 Chronicles 5:20).



As I continued reading, I discovered that with each command to seek His high and beautiful road, God promised a simple but powerful blessing. Not just an ordinary blessing. Instead, to those who followed His virtuous path, God promised His most grandiose, extravagant, crazy, highest, greatest blessings.

This devotional is based on the premise that the secret to every desire of the Christian life—and to every desire of God to bless us—can be found by pursuing His beautiful path of virtue.

What's the best way to find it, using this devotional? Take the journey to blessings one day at a time. Go slow, letting God inspire each day's intimate searching and seeking.

As you read, I hope you will stand under God's downpour and enjoy His mighty rain. Rest in the One who promises to bless your efforts with His presence—and His power—leading you on His passage to a mighty end.

*No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived what God has
prepared for those who love him.*

I CORINTHIANS 2:8-9, NIV

Listening to His Voice



Listen, my child. . . .

PROVERBS 1:8

It's dark, cold, and early. But I'm excited. On this morning, the most important thing I have to do is hear from God. And not just a little bit. I want to hear without limits. Isn't that what we're all saying today? That we want to be blessed by God? So we can bless God without limits?

So I sit, like you, Bible in hand—the first chapter of Proverbs staring up at me—looking for some life-changing secret on how to make such blessings happen.

Instead, Proverbs offers a gracious and quiet word: *Listen*.

It's not a suggestion. It's a plea. Spoken tenderly. Even kindly. "Listen, my child. . . ." The writer, King Solomon, seems to know most of us *don't* listen well. We wake up talking, our voices rattling around in our heads, hollering first and hearing second.

But Solomon says *stop*.

Step off the loud, rusty, ragged treadmills of our



lives. Today, he says, turn from our noise—all the emotional chatter raging in our minds or spewing from other people. And turn it off.

Listening is serious business, to be sure. Listening to God's Word, implanted by God's Spirit in our hearts, "has the power to save your souls," says James 1:21. Why? "My sheep listen to my voice," Jesus answers. "I know them, and they follow me." When we listen, "I give them eternal life," Jesus promises, "and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me" (John 10:27-28). When we listen to God, He knows us. As we silence ourselves, our prayers don't perish. God may hear us better, plus, He grants us eternal life. I'm ready to try that. Quiet my heart. *And* my mouth. Then look what I'll discover: God is speaking.

*A good listener is not only popular everywhere,
but after a while he knows something.*

WILSON MIZNER

Listening for His Spirit



All the people listened closely.

NEHEMIAH 8:3

Curious business, this godly listening. As I try it, I hear all manner of mysteries. Great advice. Honest truth. Deep desires. So I'm hearing less gossip. Less complaining. Less doubt, fear, worry, and false teaching. I see, in fact, why our enemy overwhelms our ears with noise.

If we listen to ungodly things, we miss one of God's most beautiful blessings: hearing God's Spirit. So I quiet myself to better hear my Bible, feeling that listening seems too pretty a virtue to unlock God's mighty, delivering, trustworthy, Spirit-filled power. Then I see:

Those who refuse to listen to God prefer to go their own way—to trust in themselves. To be their own god. So God asks something simple—*just listen to Me*—knowing that those who listen truly want to know what His Spirit says.

Yet how do we hear Him?

By listening closely. That's what Jesus teaches.

Draw near, Christ says. Why? He doesn't shout. To hear Him, we sit close, see Him better, and then we learn. "The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more" (Mark 4:24).

Theologian Richard Foster, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, describes this close approach to listening to God. "I wait quietly," he says. Tuning his heart to God's voice, he waits as "people and situations spontaneously rise" to his awareness. Letting the Spirit guide his prayer, he then remains quiet for a while, "inviting the Spirit to pray through [him] 'with sighs too deep for words.'" Throughout the day, he jots down brief prayer notes in a small journal.

Dare we do the same? Listen closely enough to hear the Spirit-filled thunder of God's clear voice? Even take notes? I dare you to try it today. Then, in your quiet, God speaks.

If the key is prayer, the door is Jesus Christ.

RICHARD FOSTER

Loving as God Loves



And now I will show you the most excellent way.

I CORINTHIANS 12:31, NIV

It was a high-profile city. Worldly, too. So maybe Corinth was like the place where you live. Or the place you'd like to live. (Or the place you think you'd like to live.)

But Corinth, as “happening” as it was—this crossroads of commerce and culture—was also at the center of corruption. A moral cesspool, some called it. The Greeks even had a name—*korinthiazomai*, “to act like a Corinthian.” What did it mean? To be sexually immoral. Yes, Corinth was that kind of place.

The church there, in fact, was embedded, tainted, and torn with the spirit of the city. So a sexual scandal was brewing at the church. Spiritual pride thrived there too. With church members from across the globe, all speaking various languages, the Corinthian congregation especially prided “speaking in tongues.” It was talking like angels, they said.

But the apostle Paul knew better. So he wrote them a letter. Saying this:

Even if you speak like angels—speaking in tongues—if you don't love like Christ, it counts for nothing. Such fancy talk in God's ears is like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

This surely got their attention. Does it get yours today?

Love is better than talk, in other words.

More than any other spiritual gift, and there are many, love is better. Better than knowledge, tithing, even prophecy. Paul wrote in detail about these gifts and others throughout the book of 1 Corinthians. But in the thirteenth chapter, known sometimes as the love chapter of the Bible, Paul makes a case for love. "The most excellent way."

Why excellent?

Because God *is* love. So love never fails. There's no better way to say it. In any language, love never fails. So bless God today by loving. Then don't forget: Let God bless you by loving you back.

Love first!

KENT HUGHES

Loving with All Knowledge



But the man who loves God is known by God.

I CORINTHIANS 8:3, NIV

“Remember me?” A visitor at our church is shaking my hand. Big smile. Hearty handshake. I’m smiling back. In my mind, however, I’m lost and embarrassed. Her face is familiar. But in truth, I can’t remember how I know her. So we talk awhile. My husband walks up. Greets her too. Knowing him, I can tell he’s struggling to put a name with her face. Finally, in the car, it comes to me. “I know her,” I tell him, explaining. “She rode our commuter bus.” We both smile. Mystery solved.

Or was it? Because I’ve seen the same quizzical look on others’ faces when they can’t remember my name or face. I am amazed and humbled, therefore, to love a God who knows me completely—who promises that the very hairs on my head are *all* numbered (Matthew 10:30).

It’s such a contrast to human knowledge. The famed nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon takes aim at human knowledge this way:

“Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it.” He adds: “There is no fool so great a fool as a knowing fool.” In fact, the apostle Paul warns about it: If I “knew everything about everything, but didn’t love others, what good would I be?” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

So I stop congratulating myself that, finally, I know who the church visitor is. I remember her. But I don’t *know* her. Not as God knows her, and not as God knows me.

How can I bless others by knowing them today? I start by loving God as He pleads. *With all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength* (Mark 12:30). When I love God that much, I know Him more. Then He blesses me with His power so I may love and know others like He does.

There is nothing sweeter in this sad world than the sound of someone you love calling your name.

KATE DICAMILLO

The Gift of Compassion



“Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

LUKE 10:28

My good friend Denise can cry a good river. Openly. Deeply. Sincerely. In a heartbeat, if she sees anybody or anything hurting—man, animal, or child—her eyes well up, and in an instant, she’s reaching out to comfort, wiping away tears—and not just her own. When it comes to compassion—meaning “to suffer with”—she could write the book, and she admits it. “I *know* I feel deeply,” she says.

But why don’t we all feel such compassion? As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, why are more of us like the indifferent priest and the uncaring Levite—walking past, if not running past, the hurt we see and not stopping to help?

Jesus understood the problem. When an expert in religious law asked how he could obtain eternal life, the Lord offered a subtle question: “What does the law of Moses say?” The scholarly man shot back an answer: “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself,” much as any churchgoer would say. We know

such love is right, and Jesus agreed. “Right!” But the clever man couldn’t let well enough alone. “And who is my neighbor?” Of course, Jesus replied with the parable—a story so familiar that most of us could repeat it from memory. Like the scholarly man, we know this story and its classic theme: compassion.

But Jesus reminded us of something far greater.

This parable is about eternal life. *That* is the blessing and reward for showing compassion, a deeper life in God. That life factor, indeed, prompted the clever man’s question. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Do compassion, Jesus replied in His parable. Do *this* and you will live. Put others before self, that is—and live. It’s neighborly to help. But even better, compassion allows God to bless us with His life. What a gift for sharing what God has already freely given. His compassionate help and power.

We help, because we were helped.

ANNE LAMOTT

Kindness: To Be Kept by God



*Continue in his kindness. Otherwise,
you also will be cut off.*

ROMANS 11:22, NIV

It's easy to gloat. Too easy. No surprise, then, that gloating Gentiles arose in the early church at Rome. These new Christians realized their special status. They were "grafted into" God's family tree while unbelieving Israelites were "cut off."

Yet the apostle Paul hands these Gentiles a strong warning: "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off" (v. 22, NIV).

Sharp warning. The reminder, however, sheds light most on God and on the nature of *His* kindness. We're not asked to emulate human kindness, not with all of its many shortcomings. Rather the apostle sets a higher benchmark: Continue to be kind as God is kind.

But how is God kind? And when?

He grants us grace, even when we don't deserve it. Paul, in this story, reminds the Gentiles of exactly that by making a critical point: that, yes, the unbelieving Israelites were broken off from the family tree. But he adds: "If they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (v. 23, NIV).

He then uses a provocative image to point out that if God was willing to cut us out of a wild olive tree and graft us into a "cultivated" olive tree, "how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!" (v. 24, NIV).

So we shouldn't be conceited about God's adoption of us, Paul warns. Instead, we are to be kind as God is kind—to continue in His kindness, even when others don't deserve such grace. When we continue in this way, we can be assured of a marvelous blessing: We'll never be cut off from the graciousness, goodness, and power of our God.

Kind words also produce their own image on men's souls; and a beautiful image it is.

BLAISE PASCAL

Generosity with Courage



One man gives freely, yet gains even more.

PROVERBS 11:24, NIV

Money was on my mind when I sat down to try to reflect on generosity. But immediately I knew I was off track. To be sure, money is one component of generosity, but hardly the first or most important. Why? For one thing, God owns everything (Psalm 50:10).

The least of what He owns, however, is money. As well, God's greatest generosity is about the gift of His Son. A priceless gift, for certain.

But what about the rest of us? To be generous, what kind of people must we be? Good-hearted and loving? Or bighearted and kind? Such traits are key. But topping my list, when it comes to generosity, is Spirit-empowered courage. A lack of fear, yes, but also trust in the all-sufficiency of God allows otherwise tightfisted people to let go and give back. When we fearlessly trust God to provide all of our needs, we demonstrate that, in giving, we are confident we won't be left not having enough.

Giving without fear. Are you giving like that? Or are you stingy—believing that, in giving, you'll be left holding a half-empty bag? I'm aware of such people because I've been one myself. Over the years, when I was asked by pastors to tithe or by family members to lend, my first reaction was to question the request. In the end, I might give but always reluctantly. Or with limits. Or not at all.

As my prayer life keeps turning, however, and I focus not on getting things—but on getting changed—I'm surprised to discover that by seeking in prayer to know God, I end up empowered to trust God. And with trusting God comes the courage to trust Him enough to give *and let go*. Should we give wisely? Of course. Should we give prudently? Absolutely. But to give fearlessly—understanding that in giving we gain—is the most beautiful and blessed giving of all.

No one has ever become poor by giving.

ANNE FRANK

Generosity: For the Good



The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.

PROVERBS 11:25

What the world needs now is a bounty of . . . refreshment?

In a weary world filled with poverty, crime, despair, and all manner of evil and sin, why would the psalmist promote refreshment? I ponder this irony: The Bible's teachings on generosity often focus less on the tangible than on blessings intangible.

Like refreshment.

Like the phone call I received yesterday from a church friend. She'd missed me at the Sunday service because I stayed home with a head cold. Her call, late on Sunday afternoon, to say kind things—*I missed you, I'm praying for you*—lifted my spirits and, in fact, refreshed my soul. The next day, I felt measurably better. Refreshed, indeed.

Did it cost her anything to pick up the phone and call? It took time. But as we chatted, she shared a concern about one of her adult children—and

I offered the answer she seemed to need. “Thank you!” she said as our chat drew to a close. “That’s just what I needed to hear!” That is, she’d called me to offer her generous concern, but by the end of our chat, she was refreshed in return.

Theologian John Calvin explained the ironies of generosity this way: “There cannot be a surer rule, nor a stronger exhortation to the observance of it, than when we are taught that all the endowments which we possess are divine deposits entrusted to us for the very purpose of being distributed for the good of our neighbor.”

Jesus said this: “Give as freely as you have received!” (Matthew 10:8).

Can we give all the time? Or give all we have?

Of course not. Yet we each can give more—more consistently and with a greater appreciation for Him who gave His all. When I give that way, somebody else will get blessed with refreshment. But often the first somebody is me.

For it is in giving that we receive.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Peace with God



Submit to God, and you will have peace.

JOB 22:21

First she lost her house. Then she lost her job. Then a long-standing health problem flared up, leaving my friend's body weary, her bank account empty, and her spirits broken. In this storm she dared ask God an angry question: "Why *me*, Lord?" Her tears fell hard. "I mean, why *me*? And how much more am I supposed to take!" Her questions, she realized later, echoed those asked by Job when the "blameless" Old Testament man lost everything—his sons and daughters, his livestock, and his good health. In painful skin sores, head to toe, he pleaded to God: "What have I done to you?" Or as he put it: "Why have you made me your target?" (Job 7:20, NIV).

With that, Job cried his way through a tortured discourse on the nature of God and the futility of man: "How can a mortal be righteous before God? . . . Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?" (Job 9:2, 4, NIV). Or as he added: "Who can say

to him, ‘What are you doing?’ . . . How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him?’ (Job 9:12, 14, TNIV). The book of Job is, indeed, a classic exploration of the questions that mere mortals dare to ask an unquestionable God. The journey, however, leads to a vital conclusion:

That despite God’s love for us, God is still God. God alone. Or as the Lord said to Job: “Who has a claim against me that I must pay?” (Job 41:11, NIV). To be sure, God isn’t some arbitrary, capricious dictator. Job finally repented for daring to suggest it. Instead, as he heeded the advice of his friend—to stop quarreling with God and be at peace with Him—things went well for Job.

With a renewed heart, Job even prayed for his friends. Then “the LORD restored his fortunes,” giving him “twice as much as before!” (Job 42:10). My friend, as well, stopped asking, Why me? Making peace with God, she started praising Him again—not for fixing her problems, but for blessing her with the power of His Son—our peaceful Solution.

Any hurt is worth it that puts us on the path of peace.

EUGENE PETERSON

Peace of Mind



But the LORD said to him, “Peace! Do not be afraid.”

JUDGES 6:23, NIV

Mighty warriors aren't wimps. We're not supposed to be, anyway. But in this story, the doubting wheat farmer Gideon is skittish, frightened, and nervous. First, the local bad guys, the Midianites, are running roughshod over his people—camping on their land, ruining their crops, racing their camels over hearth and hill and home, and scaring Gideon half out of his wits.

In the midst of it all, an angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and addresses him as “mighty warrior” (v. 12, NIV).

Is Gideon honored? No. He answers with doubts. “But sir,” as he puts it, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders?” (v. 13, NIV).

The complaints are another way for Gideon to say what he truly means: *I'm a wimp—and I'm afraid*. A mighty warrior? *No way*. Or in Gideon's case, he keeps begging for proof, finally crying, “I'm doomed!”

Fear sounds like that, and it's at the heart, for sure, of much of our worry.

So God Himself finally cuts Gideon off with one word:

Peace.

When we heed this order—choosing peace despite feeling everything but peaceful—God responds by calming our situation. Notice the order here. God doesn't step in to calm us before our problems turn to peace. In reverse order, we first invite in God's peace. *Then* God steps in, calming our fears—easing our troubled minds.

We see that same lesson in the New Testament when the apostle Paul tells the church at Philippi to turn from worry by thinking instead about good, pure, and noble things. “Then the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:6-9).

Not the other way around. Think peace first. By faith. Invite peace in. By faith. Walk in peace. By faith. Then the God of peace makes His empowered presence our blessed reward.

The war is over.

JERRY BRIDGES
