

## **Spiritual Understanding**

Psalm 112:1-9  
I Corinthians 2:1-12

We have spoken before of the ancient Hebrews' delight in word games, puns and concrete poetry. Psalms 1, 111 and 112 bear a series of striking resemblances, one of which we cannot see in English. It is that all three are acrostics; each verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Verse one in each begins with Aleph, verse two with Beth, and so forth. One similarity we can see is that each contains a comprehensive list of blessings that flow from praising God. Our Psalm today, 112, tells us praising God leads to happiness, delight, might, wealth and riches, righteousness, light, grace and mercy, everlasting fame, firm and secure hearts, triumph over their foes, and generosity. Whew!

We do not quite hit the mark if we say the Old Testament dissociates righteousness from blessings. From a New Testament perspective we can see that good behavior does not guarantee blessings. But the Old Testament Hebrews did not completely agree. The Book of Job is basically one, long argument that keeping faithful to Yahweh ultimately enriches God's people beyond measure. Though almost the entire story seems to suggest the opposite, in the end God gives Job back everything he had lost and much more beside. So what should we believe about the relationship between whatever righteousness we can muster and having full, rich

lives? For our answer we need to turn to I Corinthians.

And the first thing we must do is define the full, rich life from the Christian perspective. The Apostle Paul wrote I Corinthians. Here in chapter two he sort of quoted the prophet Isaiah. Paul wrote, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.” The first and last clauses appear in Isaiah 51. The middle clause seems to have come from Paul's imagination. The Expositors' Commentary speculates he was working from memory, without a written scroll of Isaiah at hand. Whatever the case, this later version of the quote seems to refer to tangible, concrete blessings very like the ones in the long list contained in Psalm 112. In fact, it does not. The rest of the passage makes it abundantly clear Paul referenced **spiritual** blessings. Paul wrote of bringing a testimony “in Spirit and power”, of faith, of God's Spirit revealing mysteries and secrets, and “the gifts bestowed on us by God.” In other letters Paul would list those spiritual gifts, things like discernment, faith, wisdom, hope.

At a church staff retreat years ago, the senior pastor established that the theme of the entire retreat would rotate around I Corinthians 2:9 (“eye has not seen, nor ear heard...”). He, his staff and the leaders of that church had grown it from about 750 members in 1980 to more than 2,400 in 1989. He saw himself as a church builder. By this he meant increasing the annual budget by more than 300% and stuffing the calendar of programs and events. In tangible terms this also meant building an addition to the church that more than doubled its already large square footage. The

senior pastor stated that God had blessed our church for its faith. The proof was all around us. And based on passages like I Corinthians 2:9 he believed that so long as our church leadership remained faithful God would simply continue building us up in every way.

One of the other Associate Pastors essentially said, “Not so fast. That’s not what that verse means.” And they commenced a barely civil argument about it. I want to stipulate two things about that senior pastor. One, you did not lightly court a disagreement with him. Like many “successful” (in the world’s eyes) ministers he had developed an ego and an assurance of his own rightness. But two, he really was a stunningly gifted church leader. That congregation, which the Presbytery had nearly closed in the 1960’s because it had dwindled to only a few dozen people, had taken off. An awful lot of good missional things happened because of this—both within and without its fellowship circle. It sent hundreds of young people out into the world with solid faith foundations. It produced a steady stream of ministers of the Word and sacrament. It ran an excellent preschool. It became a leader in the efforts to keep the peace within the Presbytery through an era of great national church controversies.

The Senior Pastor provided more evidence of his leadership skill at that retreat. After he and the Associate butted heads for a while he said, “Okay, we have six seminary degrees sitting around this table. Let’s go through that verse together.” Together we worked out what I preach today. Paul’s argument ran like this: “I walked into your city and preached about Jesus, and him crucified. I did not preach with

human wisdom, but with the wisdom God gave me. Because God's power worked through me, you believe in Jesus. But to the spiritually mature, the ones with eyes to see and ears to hear, I can convey a deeper wisdom, the wisdom of God, which remains hidden from the world. Humanity cannot understand much of anything when it relied only on its own knowledge. But those who have received the wisdom of God, which is a gift from the Spirit of God, can penetrate the mysteries and the secrets.”

As followers of that same Christ Jesus, we want to receive that same gift of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual maturity. And here is a not-so-little secret: when any congregation listens to the voices of the spiritually mature within it, that congregation will thrive. As will the people in it. Again, it may not thrive in ways obvious to the world. But thrive it will. So now I have an assignment. In a moment I will fall silent. (I know, that may seem like yet another spiritual gift!) I ask that in the silence each person here think about the faces and the names of the spiritually mature among us. Who speaks truth with grace? Who holds us accountable when we fail to steward all God's gifts? Whom do we love above all others? You might even pray that God would plant these names and faces in your heart. I do not want us to say their names out loud. I simply want us to identify those people whom we believe, if we follow them, we will follow Jesus. Then I want us to follow them. Ready? Here we go. [Silence]

God has gifted us with spiritual wisdom. Some have more than others; all who believe have at least a measure. Let this church become fully intentional about identifying and following the most mature among us. Let us receive spiritual wisdom.