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Imagine sitting on a grassy flat area, eagerly listening to Jesus teach. A large crowd sits around you, hanging onto every word of this young teacher who has caught your attention for the first time. He speaks about those who are Μακάριοι (Makarios), a Greek word meaning “blessed” or “happy.” His words offer encouragement for the poor, those who are hungry, those weeping in sorrow, those left out and ignored. Since you own very little and life has been difficult, the words are comforting, giving you hope that someone has noticed your struggles, though you never imagined yourself happy or blessed about your situation.

As one modern translation puts it:

You're blessed when you've lost it all.
God's kingdom is there for the finding.
You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.
Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.
You're blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears...your name to discredit me.¹

Jesus suggested that for those who have very little, they will find abundance. Those crying will

find laughter. Those left out will be welcomed. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

But then he continued with a list of warnings: for those who have lots of stuff, that's all you get; for those with filled stomachs, you will eventually be hungry; for those who are carefree and full of laughter, you will in time weep with sorrow.

Oh dear, wait a minute. Might Jesus be speaking to us as well as that crowd 2000 years ago? And if so, what list are we part of? The list of those who don't have much and hunger, or the list of those who have everything they need and will be filled with sorrow?

I don't know about you, but I often find myself in the second list, feeling as though I have everything I need, more than I need. Those of us living in abundance may feel a bit defensive at these words of Jesus, while those living with little may find hope in these words. It feels as though Jesus has polarized us, setting us into groups of us vs. them.

I sometimes see these opposites polarized in the politics of our day:

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- those who support funding for programs for the poor vs. those who want tax breaks for themselves;
- those who have concern for immigrants vs. those who want to protect our citizens;
- those who want to protect the environment vs. those who want to use resources for growth;
- those who want to support teachers vs. those who want to have more control over what's taught in the schools.

You can probably add your own thoughts to this list of issues, but when we create these lists of polar opposites, we all lose, for there's some truth in all sides of these statements. When we hold onto the extremes, no one gets what they need.

And maybe that's the point of Jesus—he highlighted the extremes, but in the end, he suggested that we all experience the struggles of life. Even the rich will experience struggles, even those full will feel emptiness, even those filled with laughter will at some point in their lives experience sorrow. None of us gets through life without struggle, without pain, without loss. If the pandemic

has taught us one thing, it's that we're all in this together. None of us are exempt from the risk of illness or the loss of a loved one, as was the case of a man who had a hard life. When he was 7 years old, his family was evicted from their home. When he was 9, his mother suddenly died. At 22, he lost his job as a store clerk.

He'd always wanted to go to law school, but his education wasn't good enough. He went into business instead, and at age 23 became a partner in a small store. Three years later, his partner died, leaving a huge debt that took him years to repay. At 28, he asked the woman he'd been courting for years to marry him. She said no.

For a moment, his luck seemed to change. At 37, he was elected to Congress on his first try! But then, two years later, he was voted out. At 41, his 4-year-old son died. At 45, he ran for the Senate and lost. At 47, he failed as the vice-presidential candidate. At 49, he ran for the Senate again and lost. Then, at age 51, he was elected president of the United States.²

You might have heard of this president: Abraham Lincoln.

Even in the midst of struggles, we can see a glimmer of hope, a blessing that we might not have noticed before. When I was traveling with a group in Israel 15 years ago, I remember passing a valley and

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tour guide saying, “There’s the Valley of Hinnom, also known by its Aramaic name of Gehenna, what used to be the garbage dump of the Old City of Jerusalem. Gehenna was considered the place where evil people went to die, which was later associated with the idea of hell. Rabbi David Wolpe explained that

In 1979, archaeologists began excavating in the area that is believed to be ancient Gehenna. Not far from the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, they found what is considered to be one of the oldest bits of scripture that exists in the world, more than 400 years older than the Dead Sea Scrolls. It dates from the time just before the destruction of the First Temple, the Temple of Solomon, in 586 B.C. The scorched ground yielded two rolled-up silver amulets that are on display to this day in the Israel Museum. When painstakingly unfurled, the text was almost verbatim to the Bible verses:

“May God bless you and keep you.

May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May God turn His face toward you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)

Do you recognize this blessing? It’s from Numbers 6, often read by Jewish parents for their children on the Sabbath. I offer these words as a blessing at the end of worship each Sunday. As Rabbi Wolpe says, “In other words, the oldest bit of scripture that exists in the world is a blessing of peace that was snatched from hell.”³

Even in the midst of struggles, when life seems to be falling apart, which happens to all of us at some point, God’s blessings are still present...for you...for me...for those struggling every day...for those experiencing joy today and sorrow tomorrow...for those hungry ones who find food...for those who have plenty now but may lose it another day. Blessed are who? Not just you. Not just me. Everyone. No matter what happens in your life, you are blessed.



³ David Wolpe, “The Jewish History of Israel Is Over 3,000 Years Old. That’s Why It’s Complicated,” May 28, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/opinion/jewish-history-israel.html.

¹ Luke 6:20-22 *The Message Bible*.

² HomileticsOnline.com, February 13, 2022.