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THE PROMISES OF GOD

SIBLINGS OF THE FIRSTBORN

The firstborn male in ancient Israel occupied a privileged family position. He succeeded the father as head of the household and received a double portion of the father's inheritance. This tradition became even more significant on the night when "the destroyer" (Ex. 12:23) struck down all the firstborn sons and animals of Egypt but spared the Israelite firstborn. From the night of this first Passover, every firstborn male (both human and animal) became consecrated to God (Ex. 13:2; 34:19-20).

Israel, the nation that came from Abraham and Sarah's firstborn son, Isaac, was considered God's firstborn among the nations and was entitled to special privileges (including exemption from the massacre described above; Ex. 4:22). Of Jacob and Esau, Isaac's twin sons, Jacob was the favored one and given the status of the firstborn (see Gen. 27). And read the words Jacob used to describe his son Reuben: "You are my firstborn; my might and the beginning of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power" (Gen. 49:3). Indeed, Paul tells us, Jesus became the firstborn of God's family (Rom. 8:29).

For believers in Christ, there is a profound statement of purpose bound up in Jesus' being the firstborn of God: Firstborn, not "only-born" (though Jesus was the "only begotten" Son of God; John 3:16), means that Jesus is the first of many sons and daughters to follow.

God has called us to become brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, as Paul said: Jesus was "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). Spiritually now, and in some mysterious way for all eternity, every Christian is destined to become Jesus' brother or sister!

This part of God's purpose for the believer's life is a profound revelation. What will it mean to spend eternity with an older brother like the Lord Jesus Christ? The best preparation for such a privilege is to spend as much time with Him now as possible. Who wouldn't enjoy the security of having an older brother with the strength, honor, and power of Jesus?

God's Promise:

He has given Jesus to you not only as a Savior, but also as your spiritual sibling

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REFLECTIONS

A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart

TREATING OTHERS THE WAY JESUS TREATED ME

Lord God, it takes little faith to realize that trouble in this fallen world is unavoidable. And now that I have come to faith in Jesus Christ, I know that opposition and tribulation may well increase, especially when I seek to be Your ambassador of reconciliation in the lives of people I meet. When I encounter personal adversity or hostility and when I consider the broader adversity and hostility to the gospel in this world, may I choose to respond in love and

not in fear or hatred. May I remember that people are not the enemy; they are victims of the enemy. Give me the grace to embody love for others in spite of what they say or do, and to express the sacrificial love of Jesus by treating others in the way Jesus treated me. My confidence is in You, and I will steadfastly hold fast to You rather than wringing my hands over the evils in this generation.

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Why Generosity Is for Today

BY KEN BOA

Not only does Scripture demonstrate the principle of consistent giving, but it also exhorts us to give during this lifetime instead of merely at the end of our life in our will or in a foundation. This is the practice of giving with a warm (living) hand rather than a cold (dead) hand, otherwise known as current versus deferred giving.

God hates hoarding and loves lavish generosity—particularly in the context of investing in our relationships. However, many believers choose to give with a cold hand rather than with a warm hand, giving only when they no longer have a use for their stores of wealth. While leaving assets to meet needs through a will is not wrong—indeed, it is wise to write our wishes down for how our resources ought to be distributed when we die—the Bible does not condone hoarding wealth during this life.

We see this principle in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16–21.

“And [Jesus] told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.’”

In this parable, the rich fool kept the excess of his material wealth for himself, choosing to hoard it rather than give it away during his lifetime. As a result, he was poor toward God; he did not leverage his resources for eternal gain. His covetousness and stinginess are two attributes that should not characterize any true believer, yet even Christians, if we are not careful, can exhibit similar tendencies.

Hoarding our resources during this life and only giving them away through our wills when we die stems partly from an illusion of control. We want to provide for ourselves while we are alive, finding temporary security and satisfaction in our wealth. This approach neglects the fact that giving is, at its core, an act of faith, and thus requires us to take the risk of entrusting ourselves and our gifts to God. Releasing earthly treasure now (rather than later)

demonstrates our trust that God will provide for our needs and our recognition that all wealth belongs to Him in the first place.

Moving Beyond the “Cold-Hand” Mindset

A popular rationale behind “cold-hand” giving is that waiting to give will allow our money to have time to grow in major trust, thus increasing the one-time amount we are able to give later. On the surface, this seems sensible; however, if we dig a little deeper, we uncover problems with this mindset.

First, “warm-hand” gifts can be immediately directed to a vetted charitable entity. There is no guarantee that an organization will last until we die, so donating to them sooner rather than later allows us to provide for immediate needs rather than potential needs. Also, just as with other organizations, the mission of a foundation or trust can drift. If we support their current aim, it is better to invest before they drift.

Second, the logic of waiting to give relies on earthly calculations of risk and return rather than heavenly ones. Holding on to our money instead of giving often stems from our desire to retain security for ourselves. The more money we have in our savings account, the more we feel we need to keep in order to have security (Ecclesiastes 5:10). The problem with this attitude is that with it we have succumbed to the gravitational pull of wealth. Money promises a security that it cannot give because there is no guarantee that it will last. There is also no guarantee that investing our money on earth will result only in increase and not in loss. What if, instead of focusing on what we could accomplish with five, ten, fifteen times more than we currently have, we think in the terms of kingdom metrics and ask, “What greater impact would this money have if we invest it in God’s people now?” Who is to say that money given now won’t experience greater growth by kingdom definitions?

The Bible teaches the principle that giving generously now results in greater gain than saving it for later:

“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.” (Proverbs 11:24)

“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6)

The kingdom metrics in these two verses are the opposite of what the world tells us. But because God loves generosity, He blesses it with spiritual growth and a deepening intimacy with Him.

In addition, Jesus makes it clear in the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30 that we grow in direct proportion to the risk we take in the service of God. In this parable, a man going on a journey entrusts his money to three of his servants and expects them to invest this wealth wisely for him. Two of the servants do so, demonstrating faithfulness with what they have been given and doubling the amounts received, and the master gives them rewards proportionate to what they have done. The third servant, however, does nothing with the

resources entrusted to him, and his master rebukes him for not investing the wealth wisely for some sort of gain. If we are to avoid making the same mistake as the foolish servant, we must use our resources wisely during our time on earth. After all, there is no guarantee our legatees will use the money we leave them for God’s kingdom (Ecclesiastes 2:18–19).

Honoring the Prompting of the Holy Spirit

It isn’t always easy to listen to the Holy Spirit, especially when He prompts us to give in a way that is uncomfortable to us—giving a large tip to our waiter, for example, or giving money to a complete stranger. At other times, God may call us to donate a large amount to a charity we’ve been researching or a church we’ve been attending when we would rather give a small amount or nothing at all. He may also call us to give an amount that seems impossible to us, but the truth is that we can’t out-give God. He will provide the resources as we trust in His direction and will reward our faithfulness in participating in His kingdom purposes.

How do we know when the Spirit is prompting us to give? Although there is no set formula, the more we obey God, the easier it will be to hear Him clearly. Unfortunately, the inverse is also true: hardening our heart to God’s promptings will make us less able to hear Him and know what He desires. As a result, we must train ourselves to pay attention to the Spirit, spending time in prayer and in the Word of God in order to become more sensitive to God’s promptings.

The more we pray for opportunities to give, the more God will provide them. Just as He delights to give consistent, generous blessings to His children, so He delights when we act in accordance with His Spirit to do the same.

One Piedmont Center, Suite 130 • Atlanta, GA 30305
info@kenboa.org

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