

## **Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: February 18: The Promises of Jesus**

For Christians (and for enquirers into Christianity) the Jesus Promises are crucial – not promises from on high, or promises via an angel, but face-to-face promises from God Incarnate.

**Reward: Beginning of Matthew 6 (Message Version):** *When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself... acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, but that's all they get... don't think how it looks. Just do it – quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.*

The more traditional translations say something on the lines of “Your Father will openly reward what you do secretly – a translation which perhaps has the drawback of implying that you keep quiet about your good deeds, but go around wearing an “I’m special to God” badge. That still sounds rather like showing off? It is sometimes only at funerals that the rest of us get to know about how much good someone did during their life – despite all the numerous ways of publically recognising goodness. Some people don’t even look for a word of thanks in response to their good works, e.g. the anonymous giver/doer, or the friend or stranger serving the person too far gone in mental health, addiction or pain, to recognise what is being done for them. Would the Saints have welcomed the celebrity that picked them out from the saints and entombed them in gilded fame? On the other hand, you can’t do good on a Bill Gates scale without publicity; and publicity can encourage other? Charities make use of celebrity donors.

**God will meet your basic needs: Matthew 7 towards the end:** *If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers – most of which are never even seen – don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so pre-occupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving.....Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.*

Do we regard someone who says happily “God will provide” as faithful or feckless ? Especially when that person is looking not just at guaranteed basics for the person themselves, but at basic provision for his/her family! The context of “Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on you” was mission work rather than putting food on the table; but are we more comfortable with this approach than with the [relaxed] “God will provide” message. Read the very last bit of this chapter too: ***“Don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes”.*** That message is different from the message that there won't be any hard things, hard times, if you trust in the Lord.

**Strength for the journey: End of Matthew 11: *Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.***

This is a more straightforward and less controversial promise: God won't let us suffer a burden beyond our ability to carry it. So, problems = yes, but solutions also = yes. But think of despair and of suicide. Faith may, and may rightly, condemn despair and suicide. On the other hand, there is no denying that people of faith have felt so burdened that they have "given up". We may think they were wrong; can we say with absolute certainty that we will never join them? I had a civil service colleague, same senior grade as me, who was also an ordained priest. He suffered from sometimes paralysing depression; and said that in the blackest times his faith was not enough to buoy him up. The Book of Job tells of a man who lost everything, to the extent that his best mates advised him to despair and die, and to accept that he had brought his troubles on himself. He determined to soldier on, despite his belief that God was inflicting on him entirely "un-deserved" suffering. Again, does our admiration of job extend to copying him?