

Goodness and Grief  
 Proverbs 1:20-33 Mark 8:27-38  
 September 13, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

**Proverbs 1:20 - 2:1** <sup>20</sup> *Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.* <sup>21</sup> *At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:* <sup>22</sup> *"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"* <sup>23</sup> *Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.* <sup>24</sup> *Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,* <sup>25</sup> *and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof,* <sup>26</sup> *I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,* <sup>27</sup> *when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.* <sup>28</sup> *Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.* <sup>29</sup> *Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,* <sup>30</sup> *would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof,* <sup>31</sup> *therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.* <sup>32</sup> *For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them;* <sup>33</sup> *but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."*

**Mark 8:27-38** <sup>27</sup> *Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"* <sup>28</sup> *And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."* <sup>29</sup> *He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."* <sup>30</sup> *And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.* <sup>31</sup> *Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.* <sup>32</sup> *He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.* <sup>33</sup> *But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* <sup>34</sup> *He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* <sup>35</sup> *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,* <sup>36</sup> *will save it.* <sup>37</sup> *For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>38</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words<sup>1</sup> in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

A new family had just joined the church I was serving in Indiana, and I paid a call on them to get better acquainted. It was a lovely summer day, and as I walked up their driveway I had to shield my eyes from the sun's glare off a car that I mentally calculated cost significantly north of nine times my salary at the time. This was the era of chrome, and this vehicle was wrapped in it.

The doorbell was answered by the bejeweled lady of the house, who graciously ushered me into a living room paved in a white plush carpet. Her tanned husband

grinned, shook my hand, slapped me on the back, introduced their lithe and fit children, and placed me in a buttery leather chair which sighed contentedly as I sank into its folds. I was in the presence of plutocrats of the first order, ostentatious in their success and proud to display in person and possession the proof of their prosperous lives. The man said to me, “You know, we never belonged to a church before, but I don’t know why we didn’t join long ago. Ever since we began attending, I’ve made more money than ever, and everything’s just going great for us!”

Fast-forward about twenty years, a different parish. My telephone rang in the middle of the night – never a good sign. One of my session members was calling. She was in tears and asking if I could come over. I arrived to a scene of violation and loss. In a voice hoarse and nearly silenced by shock, she related how she had just discovered that her husband had been molesting their teenage daughter for several years. He was in jail, and her daughter had been removed from the home under emergency order. The world that this woman had known and trusted had just been annihilated.

There are times when the blows life delivers stagger us to our knees, and we wonder, “Why me? Where is God? Where is justice?” And, there are times when good fortune suddenly blooms at our feet as though, somehow, we had accidentally tripped over the mother lode of blessing.

The book of Proverbs was written for the moral and social instruction of young men in ancient Israel. It is filled with ethical advice and pithy sayings: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways, and be wise!” “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without good sense.” “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” “The righteous are delivered from trouble and the wicked get into it instead.”

As a collection of wise sayings which, if heeded, would enable anyone to live a good, moral life, Proverbs is unparalleled. But its tit-for-tat linkage of good behavior with reward doesn’t, as anyone who has lived very long, necessarily hold. In instructing our children, we try to boil things down to their essence; we keep it simple. Do this good thing and you will get this reward; don’t do this good thing, and boy will you be sorry! The prosperous family in my first parish exemplifies that sense of auto-pilot morality. Now that they were church-goers, God was rewarding them. Their spirituality was dollar bill thin, but that was thick enough to their way of thinking.

The story of the devastated elder in the other parish severely tests that theory. In all respects this woman was a person of faithfulness and devotion to the church. She was loving, giving, and kind. She trusted God’s leading; she was grateful for her blessings. “Those who listen to me,” says Proverbs, “will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.” She listened, but she was not secure, was not at ease, and disaster had struck. She had found herself strapped to a cross of pain standing stark in the darkness.

Thomas Traherne describe a Christian as “an oak flourishing in winter.” Actually, the harshness of some of those “winters” can nearly ruin us. Our lives unfold like a roll of ancient parchment – strong enough to survive the years, but yet fragile under a heavy touch. At times we write our stories with bold, confident strokes. At other times we scribble out our desperate hopes in lines made blotchy by our tears. So many episodes of life end not in a period but in ellipses trailing off into indecisive conclusions or

question marks wondering where God went when we were in such need. As Patricia Hooper's *Prayer* suggests:

Lord, I call to you –  
 there is someone  
 I want you to follow home.  
 The night is cold.  
 The wet leaves hide the edges  
 of the dark path. He  
 is lost. I would  
 go with him if I could,  
 put my arms around him,  
 share my coat. He is  
 three hundred miles  
 away. No one else  
 sees him. Do you  
 see him, his step hurried  
 through the black rain?  
 Or are you  
 still busy, as you were when,  
 before he harmed himself  
 the last time, he was the one  
 who called?

What must the disciples have been thinking just before Jesus announced that his destiny was the cross! Up until then the new life with him had been one of spiritual adventure. The hungry were fed, the outcast welcomed, the blind brought to sight, the ill healed. The new realm of God was here in this man, for no one but one in whom God was fully present could say the things he said and do the things he did. Finally, the hopes and dreams of all the years had been fulfilled. Surely goodness and mercy would reign persistently.

But then the cross reared its ugly head. Where Proverbs boasts a confidence in the direct connection between deed and reward, the Gospel knows that life is fraught with contingency. Because the New Testament was written after the crucifixion, it is heartbreakingly honest about suffering and loss. More importantly, because the New Testament is an affirmation of resurrection, it knows about grace, and hope, and a faith not bound to reward and punishment.

A Proverbs kind of faith is simple and direct; but it is also slight and slender. As long as things go well, a Proverbs kind of faith survives. But, such a faith doesn't understand how bad things can happen to good people. It doesn't understand that human history is full of crosses on which the very best of persons have hung. It doesn't understand how tragedy can strike the undeserving, how love can turn sour, how God's rain, as Jesus observed, falls on the just and the unjust. It doesn't understand how even the best of intentions can result in catastrophe, and how every life will have its share (and sometimes more than its share) of loss.

Each of us knows the allure of simple faith, one where the calculus of doing good equals being prosperous is clear and direct. Even when we know better, we still find ourselves praying, "O God, please – just this once – let two plus two equal five!" The

call of Christ is not to the naïve. At work in the confrontation between Jesus and Peter is Jesus' insistence that Peter abandon fear and caution as a way to live his life, and to confront the awful necessity of making a holy witness to what is good, to do the right thing, to say the needed word, to stick to a difficult decision, to shed old allegiances that might make us less the man or the woman, less the parent or partner, less the follower of Christ God has called us to be.

When Jesus talks about the cross, he speaks of it as something inescapable, but not in any mechanical sense. It is inescapable because he chooses it in faith. He chooses his walk toward disaster with the certainty that God will make of it a triumph. Mark's gospel boldly asserts that even the darkest chapters of life become a means by which God's power to renew and reclaim that which is lost is demonstrated. As parents we face the chaotic unknown of rearing children who are, as the saying goes, hostages to fortune. As spouses we face the cloudiness of a future where we may be together or not as life's issues intrude and challenge. Some of us work without pleasure and some without meaning. Many of us feel isolated and lonely, lost in the ache of absence. Each of us recycles old questions of personal adequacy, of decisions and choices concerning roads not taken, of grievances and guilts unresolved. We all carry crosses. Blessed is the woman or man who carries their crosses as a follower of Jesus, trusting that God will make our lives redemptive rather than fruitless.

Cross-bearing is a condition of every life that seeks to be faithful; where crosses are carried, God is at work. Only by bearing that cross to the end do our lives acquire genuineness and depth. "Those who want to save their life will lose it..." Jesus said. There is no life without suffering, no learning without scars, no talismanic word or ritual which can keep hermetically safe all that we hold dear. And, there is no pat, mechanically-assured means by which by our actions or our prayers or our fevered worries or our self-deprecating doubts can purchase our hopes and dreams. That is why the promise of redeemed life rests upon God's grace which triumphed over death's fast hold on Jesus and extends to us each moment with a saving, eternal grace. It is still a grace with a cross at its center, and it is a faith which is vested not in consistently happy outcomes, but in a consistently gracious God who heals our fears and woes, our hurts and our losses, and brings to completion a life that is fraught with hope.