

# THE PLEASANT VIEW PLUMB LINE

"...then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel..." (Amos 7:8)

## BEING CONTENT

How would you like to make \$8,000 dollars for throwing one pitch in a baseball game? After signing a \$28 million contract with the New York Yankees, that's approximately what Roger Clemens makes every time he throws the ball. If you prefer football, in 2004 Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning averaged \$70,000 per pass. For those basketball lovers, Michael Jordan made roughly \$10,000 for every minute he stepped onto the hardwood in a Chicago Bulls uniform.

In less than five minutes, a sports superstar can make more money than most people will earn in a year. Careers in music and film can be just as lucrative. Because this wealth is so fabulous, so unreal, the average bystander is often left in wide-eyed wonder thinking: **What would I do with all that money?** Television is there to answer the question for us. Shows like MTV's *Cribs* take us on personal tours of the homes of music, movie, and sports icons. We are given a backstage pass to see the near vulgar opulence of the rich—which cars they drive, where they eat and sleep, what activities they enjoy. We get to live vicariously through them, admiring their wealth in a 30-minute show that takes us to the doorstep of fortune, even if we will never step inside.

Believers have approached wealth in different ways. Many a preacher has railed against the dangers of worldly wealth, lauding the poor while excoriating the rich. Others have given up fame and fortune, trading in worldly goods for the simplicity of poverty. On the other hand, some have amassed fortunes and done incredible work for the church out of their generosity, showing that having money is not inherently evil. There are plenty of people in Scripture who enjoyed prosperity and still lived godly lives.

Joseph is one of the greatest rags-to-riches stories ever told. As a teenager, his brothers sell him into slavery. He's later thrown in prison after being unjustly accused of sexual assault. By the time Joseph meets Pharaoh, he is nothing more than still a prisoner when he meets him in a foreign land with no hope of making anything of himself. But with a God-given ability to interpret dreams and a little creative ingenuity of his own, Joseph becomes the prime minister of Egypt. In a land where the pharaoh is god, Joseph finishes a close second.

The account of Solomon is like an ancient episode of Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. He is a major player on the international scene, ruling a mini-empire situated on important trade routes running between Egypt and Mesopotamia. For the average person his income would have been mind-boggling. Imagine having 700 wives and 300 concubines to buy for on Valentine's Day when the average person barely had enough to eat, and you get the picture.

Not everyone was so magnanimous with his money. The prophets frequently indicted the Northern Kingdom for its failure to treat the poor fairly (cf. Amos 4:1-3). One face of Israel's luxury can be seen in some important artifacts called the Samaria ivories. These beautiful works of ivory have a variety of animal and floral designs. Some are in the shape of a window with the face of a person gazing outward. The ivory trade seems to have done well in Israel. I Kings 22:39 notes that Ahab had built an "ivory house," probably a palace decorated with expensive ivory inlays. Despite his power and fortune, Ahab went down in history as one of the worst rulers in the Bible, and the people he ruled were guilty of abusing the poor for the sake of their own gain (Amos 8:5-7).

Centuries after the glory days of Israel had come and gone, Jesus tells his disciples, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25, ESV). Many people assume that Jesus couldn't possibly mean the **literal** eye of a needle. Many popular sources insist there was a gate called the "Eye of the Needle" somewhere in Jerusalem. It was small, and a camel would have had an extremely difficult time making it through, but it wasn't impossible. The fact is that no such gate has ever been found, and the earliest sources that mention

TOMORROW HOLDS HOPE

Text: \_\_\_\_\_

I. Because Truth \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

II. Because Opportunities \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

III. Because Heaven \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

OVERCOMING SIN

Text: \_\_\_\_\_

I. \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

II. \_\_\_\_\_

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III. \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

it come from over eight hundred years after the time of Christ. Jesus really is talking about the eye of a needle. Sound ridiculous? You bet.

**That's exactly what He intended.**

People in Jesus' day believed that material wealth was a sign of God's blessing, almost as if there were an inseparable link between piety and prosperity. Indeed, believers throughout history have thought affluence to be a sign of God's favor. Going against popular belief, Jesus focused the attention of the disciples on a correct understanding of wealth. He used an exaggerated illustration to open the discussion, to which they asked, "Then who then can be saved?" In other words, "We know the rich are blessed by God, so if they can't be saved, who can?"

The answer is simple: material wealth is not an indication of membership in God's Kingdom. Jesus wasn't teaching that there was a salary cap on who can enter heaven. He was highlighting the fact that wealth can bar a person from heaven not because of having it, but because of his or her attitude toward it. This was illustrated beautifully in the episode involving Zacchaeus. Tax collectors often abused their power in order to line their pockets with extra cash, and this "wee little man" was no exception. After Jesus ate at his house, he at last confessed to cheating other people (Luke 19:8). It is only after he promised to repay his ill-gotten gain that Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Clearly in the case of this man, wealth was an impediment to his spiritual standing with God.

Living in a well-to-do capitalistic society where few people want for necessities of life, it is easy to be sidetracked by the lures of affluence. There is a series of credit card commercials asking the question, "What's in your wallet?" It joins the veritable chorus of worldly voices begging us to focus on our mortgage, checking account, or retirement fund. Everywhere we look, there are ads to refinance our homes and take advantage of lower interest rates. Lottery commercials inspire financial fantasies about fabulous wealth to be had for virtually nothing.

**We are taught to be discontent with what we have, ever striving to stay ahead of the Joneses at all cost.**

The message of contentment is an ancient one that should be reexamined in our culture of prosperity. A four thousand-year-old Sumerian proverb says, "He who has much silver may be happy; he who has much grain may be glad; but he who has nothing can sleep." This message is echoed in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells His audience to store their treasures in heaven and let God handle the concerns of the world. Some chase after food and clothing, but Christ says, "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33, NIV). The message of Jesus is a simple one: serve God first and contentment will follow.

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FAMOUS LAST WORDS

The last words of dying individuals tell us much about who they were. It gives us insight into their hopes, aspirations, character, and how they generally looked at life. At times they can be poetic, such as the last words of Emily Dickinson who said, "I must go in, the fog is rising." With some those last words can be filled with hope as George Washington said: "I die hard, but am not afraid to go." Among others there is humor, as illustrated by Lou Costello saying, "That was the best ice cream soda I've ever tasted." And the last words of others ring with irony, such as a Union Commander during the Civil War named General John Sedgwick who stood with his men looking afar at the enemy and did his best to calm their nerves by saying, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist..." But while the last words of mere mortals can provide insight to their lives and personalities, when we turn our attention to the famous last words of another, we find insight into the eternal wisdom and love of Jehovah God.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He used that occasion to present some final words that allow us a glimpse into His very being—not only pertaining to His divinity, but also pertaining to His humanity. Take a few moments to examine those famous last words and allow the meaning behind them to impact the way you look at life and the provisions God has made for it.

First, just after being crucified, Christ prayed, "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34). If Jesus ever showed anything during the course of His life, He showed mercy. In fact His very purpose in coming to earth (Luke 19:10) was to show mercy upon a world that was sinking deep in sin. And as these Roman guards at the insistence of the Jewish authorities nailed Him to that rugged cross, He saw this not as a refusal of salvation, but as man's further need for salvation. And that fact was reflected in His hope that these men would be shown mercy for something that they were clearly doing out of complete ignorance of who He truly was.

Second, after an exchange between the thieves crucified with Him, He said to the one who showed faith, "*To day shalt thou be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43). God has promised eternal life unto all that believe in who He is and stand in obedience of what He has done, and this thief is an example of it. His recognition that Jesus was the Messiah He claimed, and that He would establish the kingdom He has promised showed His faith, a faith to which Christ reacted favorably by providing him with hope.

Third, looking down upon those gathered at the foot of His cross, He saw His dear mother and displayed His affection for her. To her He said, "*Woman behold thy son;*" and to the disciple He loved He said, "*Behold thy mother*" (John 19:26-27). With these words He showed a natural love that all families should have specifically among themselves. He wanted assurance that she would be cared for, and placed that care in the hands of one whom He knew He could trust. Even as He was dying for the sins of the world and suffering to an extent we shall never comprehend, still He had a concern for His mother whom He was leaving behind.

Fourth, feeling the full weight of sin pressing in pain upon His body and in stress upon His spirit, Jesus cried out in agony, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46). Sin brings consequences that those in Christ shall never fully know because on that day and with those words, Jesus bore that burden for us. It took divine courage to suffer that burden, but His humanity is displayed in the distress He felt as the result of it. These words show the consequences we should have suffered, but those which Christ suffered instead.

Fifth, after having hung on that cross for some six hours, Christ stated, "*I thirst*" (John 19:28). Yes, He had to be thirsty, but that was not the full reason as to why He said it. Rather that verse reveals that it was said to fulfill scripture. Jesus was in the midst of accomplishing a purpose, a purpose He knew had to be fulfilled in its entirety. Thus to satisfy the demands of prophecy Jesus called for something to quench His thirst, receiving vinegar instead. Yet, by stating such He showed the universal need to abide fully according to the word of God.

Sixth, just before His ultimate death, Jesus said, again to the Father, "*into thy hands I commend my spirit*" (Luke 23:46). He was at peace with what He was doing. There were no regrets and no hesitation because He could look back on His life and know that everything He had done was done right and done in order to bring about the eternal good for which reason He had come to earth in the first place. And it is because of His life and sacrifice that peace can be enjoyed when we cross the vast horizon of death.

Then, seventh, Christ finally looked at all He had done, knew that He had completed His work and just before He gave up the ghost said, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30). Yes, His life was finished, but more importantly His work was finished. He had done what was needed to seek and save the lost. And because of the fullness of His sacrifice man could in faith be cleansed by His blood and be heirs of the great redemption promised by God.

No last words could be more sobering, or more enlightening. These statements by Christ are not only expressions of a dying man but intentions of a living Savior. And as they were spoken in hope and expectation, we read them and acquire the same hope and expectation. May each word we speak and deed we do have the same intention of providing hope for man and displaying the character of a New Testament Christian.