

Blessings

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Sunling fai luk. Kong hai fai choy. So this is Chinese New Year season.

It's a season of blessings. I think everyone in life searches for blessings, even the little kids out there, right? Like, after service today, you'll see it.

Here's what's going to happen. They're going to swarm around every single married person in here looking for these. And they're going to come up to you and they're going to say, Lai si, dao loi.

Because they want to be blessed, and in their mind, getting lots and lots and lots and lots and lots of red pockets is equal to being blessed. And it's something that doesn't go away as we get older.

We just don't necessarily get it in Lai si. I think every single one of us wants to be blessed in this upcoming year. But I think the way we define blessings could be very different for some of us.

[1 : 06] And I think for some of us, there's not necessarily a fixed standard of this is blessing, this is not. So I think I could come up to six different people one year from today and ask each of them, were you blessed this past year?

And maybe one would say, yes, I made lots and lots of money. And one would say, yes, I was absolutely blessed this past year. I got straight A's in school. One could say, I wasn't really blessed this year because I didn't get that promotion at work.

And another right next to them could say, yes, I was blessed this past year because I didn't lose my job. One could say, no, I wasn't blessed this past year. My boyfriend dumped me. And then another right next to them could say, yes, I was absolutely blessed this past year.

My boyfriend dumped me. It could happen. And I think if we look at the Bible, it paints a very clear picture of blessing. And this story that we just had read to us in Exodus 33 of the Israelites in the desert gives us a very clear picture of this.

Now to give a little backstory, the Israelites 400 years previously had received a promise from God that they would be a great nation, that they would rule over this land, that it would be a land flowing with milk and honey, that it would be good.

[2 : 18] And for the previous 400 years, they have been slaves in a foreign land. Now the Bible doesn't explicitly tell us this, but I'm sure that at some point in that 400 year time period, people started to doubt whether God was actually going to keep his promise.

Maybe he's not strong enough to, maybe he's not reliable enough to. You know, he made this promise, but we don't see any progress towards the fulfillment of it.

And they slaved away and slaved away. And finally, one day, this guy Moses comes. He performs these great feats. And the Egyptians, the people who are keeping them as slaves, say, get out of here.

You're trouble. We don't want you anymore. And finally, the Israelites are free. They're setting off to their new land. Hope has come. They're ready. They're going across the desert towards this land of milk and honey that is soon to be theirs.

And they have a hiccup along the way. You know, Moses, their leader, is up talking to God, and the people build this idol, which God has just told them, don't do that. And God is not happy with them.

[3 : 25] But, you know, they wake up this one morning, and it seems to be a morning like any other. And if you were to go up to anyone in the Israelite camp that day and say to them, what does it look like for you to be blessed in this upcoming year?

I think there are a handful of answers that they would give you. One, we are going to settle in our new land. We're going to take it over, and we're finally going to have this promise that God gave us fulfilled.

We will be able to build houses and live in them and not have to be living in tents as nomads anymore. We will be able to farm our own food and not have to eat the same thing day after day

after day.

We can have variety in our diet. That is going to be wonderful. And God appears to them, and he speaks to them, and he tells them everything that they would have just listed right there, they're going to get.

Listen to this in verses 1 and 3 of Exodus 33. The Lord said to Moses, Depart. Go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying to your offspring, I will give it.

[4 : 40] So he's saying, Go up to the land that I have promised you. I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out all these lands. So I'm going to give it to you.

You're going to take it over. He says, Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you're a stiff-necked people. God says, Go up. I'm going to give you this land. You're going to take it over. It is a good land, and you can have it. But I won't be with you. See, that little incident with building the idol, God was not happy, and he told them, I'm going to keep my promise.

I'm going to give you this land, but I'm not going with you. And the people look at all of these blessings that they were so excited about.

We're going to have our own land. We're going to have our own houses. We're going to have food to eat that's not just bread day after day after day. And when they see this promise in light of the fact that God's not going to be with them, they don't rejoice.

[5 : 47] They don't celebrate. They go into a time of mourning. Because the nation of Israel realizes that all the blessings that God can give to them mean nothing if it's not accompanied by God himself.

The nation of Israel realizes that the presence of God among them is the greatest blessing. And that in comparison to that, everything else falls so miserably short that if you can have it all without God's presence, it's not a cause for celebration.

It's a cause for mourning. So Moses goes up to God, and he begs God, God, please, we are your people. Don't abandon us.

Come with us. And God says, all right, I will go with you. He gives them this wish. God doesn't come to Moses and say, Moses, you have your priorities all wrong.

You need all these other things. You don't really need me. God's like, yeah, Moses, you got it right. You need me. But I think this story gives us an interesting perspective from the Bible that everything they could want, everything they dreamt of, when it was held out in front of them and they were told you can have it, but God's not going to be with it.

[7 : 06] They abandon it. They give it up because the presence of God in their lives is the greatest blessing. You know, it's a simple concept, but super, super deep.

It's simple enough that even a child can understand it. I was talking to a very proud father from Watermark a week ago. He was telling me a story about his children. A couple months ago, the kids transitioned Sunday school classes up to the next grade and his daughter was moving from stream class to river class, which means she's very young.

And she was scared. She was nervous because all she's ever known is stream class. And what's going to happen in river class? I don't know. Are the people going to like me there?

Is it going to be fun there? Are they going to be mean to me there? And as the kids were dismissed going out into the hallway, she stopped in the middle of the hall and started crying and said, Mommy, I don't want to go to river class.

And her older brother, that same exact day, was moving out of river class into Rapids class, which meant that he wouldn't be in class with her. And he sees his sister crying. He comes up to her and he puts his arm around her and he says, It's going to be okay.

[8 : 20] You're going to love river class. They play fun games and tell us Bible stories and the teachers are really cool and they teach us about God. And God will be with you. And today I'm going to a new class and God's going to be with me too.

And the little girl looked up at her mom and she said, Will God really be with me? And the mom said, Yes. And the daughter had the courage all of a sudden to go to this new class and she loved it.

And I know that's sort of a silly story about this little girl who had this fear that seemed sort of irrational to all of us. But when we think about it on the grand scheme of things, the things that were

scaring her there are the exact same things that we get worried about.

Fear of the unknown for us or people that we love. Fear of stepping out from places where we're comfortable to places where we don't know what's going to happen. Fear of what does the future hold because we can't tell.

It's the same exact issues that we face that this little girl is facing. And it's the same exact solution of God's presence that is ultimately what we need. And I know sometimes it can be sort of nerve-wracking when we hear this.

[9 : 31] You know, I need God's presence but do I have God's presence? And if we're Christians, the Bible promises us that we do. The Bible says that Jesus was born as a baby.

They called his name Emmanuel which means God with us. Jesus came to earth to be God with us. He grew up and he was killed for you and for me to give us this relationship with God that we need. and then he rose again and the Bible says that he met with his followers before going back up to heaven and he gave them this one last piece of teaching and the very last thing that he said to them.

He could have told them anything. The one last thing that he wanted them to remember more than anything else. You know what he said? He said, I will be with you always.

I'm not leaving you. I'm not abandoning you. I am with you. You are my people. I am with you. He could have told them, I'm going to make you super rich and powerful.

[10 : 41] That is the blessing you need. He could have told them, I am going to keep you very safe because that is the blessing you need. But he doesn't say that. He says, I'm going to be with you. And everything else that happens, everything else that could go wrong, it's going to be okay because I am with you.

And if we're here today and we're not Christians, this fact that God's presence is the biggest blessing can be good news for us or bad news for us. Good news because he says anyone who believes in him can be saved.

Anyone who trusts in him can become one of his people and he will be with us. But bad news because if we refuse to trust in him, there's no amount of effort we can put in, no amount of trying that we can manufacture that will give us this blessing through our efforts.

You know, the Bible again and again and again and again talks about how God's presence in our lives is the greatest blessing and we don't have time to go into all of these different places today. but if you look through your Bible, if you read it, you'll see again and again and again that God's presence in our lives is the greatest blessing.

And as we close today, I want to leave us with a little diagnostic for our hearts to see, you know, is God truly our greatest blessing?

[12 : 11] is that how we see the world? And here's the question. If God were to appear to you today and say to you, in this next year, I will give you a billion U.S. dollars but I won't be with you.

Would you see that as a blessing? Would you jump at that opportunity and say, yes, let's go for it? How about this?

If God were to appear to you today and he said, in this next year, you're going to lose your job. Also, you're going to get severely sick. You're going to struggle to make ends meet.

It's going to be difficult. There's going to be some long, sleepless nights. It's going to be tough to feed your family. You'll have to really downsize your style of living.

But through it all, I will be with you. Would we take that over the billion dollars without God? And I know it's not that simple.

[13 : 29] I know God's not appearing to us today, throwing that option in front of us and saying, once for all, you make this decision, let's go for it. Because really, life doesn't happen in those huge moments like that most of the time.

Most of the time, it happens in thousands of small decisions throughout the course of the day, every single day. Thousands of small decisions where we get to make the choice, God, do I truly value your presence more than anything else in my life?

And it's not just something that we do today, it's something we do tomorrow and the day after and the day after, where we choose again and again and again, do I truly value God's presence as the greatest treasure in my life more than anything else?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your presence. We thank you that you are the greatest blessing that we need.

We pray that in this coming year that we would be aware of how amazing of a blessing that is. That like the Israelites, if we have the opportunity for all the wealth and all the treasures that we can imagine without you, that we would say your presence is greater.

[14 : 43] you are the greater blessing. God, please help us to be aware of this. Help us to make choices every day in light of this fact. Thank you that you love us and are with us.

In Jesus' name, amen.