

Sabbath School Lesson #5 – Stewards After Eden – 27 January–2 February 2018

Christ would have us know that along with the responsibilities of caring for the material world, we are also entrusted to be good stewards of spiritual truths. “But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts” (1 Thessalonians 2:4). Our Lesson study this week is taken from: Isaiah 22:14-18; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Colossians 2:2-3; Ephesians 6:13-17; and 2 Corinthians 5:10.

Sunday: Stewards in the Old Testament – In Genesis 39 is a story of Joseph. Most people who have read the story of Joseph in Egypt, think of him only as steward in the household of Potiphar, and later, after a little experience in prison, as chief warder, and then the head of Egypt; but that is a most superficial view. Joseph did not at once become the trusted head of Potiphar’s house. It was not until “his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand” (verse 3), that “he made him overseer over all his house, and all that he had he put into his hand” (verse 4). A young Hebrew slave, becoming the property of an Egyptian lord, where he was only one of hundreds of bondservants, would naturally be set at first to menial tasks, to the first work that came to hand. He would be a servant of servants, receiving his orders from some other slave who had been longer in the service. Homeless and friendless, Joseph was but a very small item in a great establishment. To all human appearance there was no prospect but that his life would be spent in obscurity – lost to sight among many slaves. But the Lord was with him.

We cannot properly appreciate Joseph’s stewardship, and the principle on which he worked, without first forming a mental picture of the average person in the same situation. It would be something like this: The young man considers that he has been ill treated, and that the one who has bought him has no just claim to his services, and his first thought is that he will run away as soon as he can get a chance. Meanwhile, however, he is compelled to work; but as he receives no wages, he will do no more than he is obliged to. He will shirk every task that he can, taking care only to escape beating for his dilatoriness. His relation to his master is wholly one of antagonism: the master wants to get as much work out of him as possible, and he studies only to see how little he can do. From what we know of the disposition of many people who work for wages, we can recognise this as a perfectly natural sketch of one sold as a slave. There are not many professed Christians who would condemn a youth for not exerting himself when he could hope for nothing.

But Joseph knew that “in all labour there is profit.” He knew that a man is not to work for a living, but to work because God has given him a living, God has made him a living being. He knew that in slighting a task he injured himself far more than he could injure the master; and, moreover, he had no desire to injure his master, for he knew that every ill turn to man is against God. So whatever his hand found to do he did it with all his might; and he did it as soon as his hand found the task, without waiting to be told to do it. Indeed, his hand was hunting for work, for he knew that on only by work could he develop to God’s standard and for Him. Thus Joseph let his light shine. God was with him, and God is light, and light that shines in darkness cannot be hid; and in process of time Potiphar’s attention was arrested by the sight of the young slave who worked as if he himself were to receive all the profit from his work. “And Joseph found grace in his sight.” “And he left all that he had in Joseph’s hand; and he knew not aught he had, save the bread which he did eat” (verse 6).

Joseph was now a master of servants but he was still a slave, subject to the caprice of his master, and suddenly he found himself in a dungeon, in a far worse plight than when he was sold into Egypt. Thrown into prison without trial, there was no time set for his release, and he had no earthly prospect but to remain there indefinitely. But even here Joseph’s principles made him master of the situation. He was not responsible for the situation; but he recognized that his sole business was to work to the very best of his God-given ability, regardless of the situation; so he did, with the result that all know. But it must not be supposed that immediately on his entrance into the prison Joseph found himself appointed governor of it. Far from it. He was there as a common criminal, a Hebrew slave who had offended his master, and he found no easy place awaiting him. His “feet they hurt with fetters; he was laid in iron.” As a prisoner he had his daily routine of work, but he was compelled to work with galling chains upon his limbs. Here, he did not neglect his work, as men in this situation would do. Joseph’s relation to the Lord was so close that he always lost sight of his apparent taskmasters, and worked as the immediate servant of “Him who is invisible.” If no work had been given him, he would have found some; for having life, he must work, and work in such a way as to make the most of his life. So he worked until all the work of the prison was in his hands; “and the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it” (verse 22). As the rest of the story is familiar, that which we have considered on Joseph’s stewardship is enough for our present lesson.

Monday: Stewards in the New Testament – There are lessons in the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-15). The steward's plan for providing for his future is that which is especially recommended to our attention. He called his lord's debtors and began to make distribution to them, for that is what his act amounted to. In taking off fifty measures of wheat and twenty measures of oil from the accounts of the two debtors, the steward actually gave them that much. Now there is no reason to suppose that his lord was any loser by this transaction or that the steward was in any way wronging his employer. So clumsy a device as altering bills and defrauding the proprietor is easily detected, and when the lord discovered the fraud he would have punished the steward, instead of commending him. It is quite evident that the steward made up the difference himself, for he certainly had something that he could call his own, after his period of service. 'Why if he would lose his stewardship?' He had some means, but not enough to last him long; so instead of foolishly hoarding up that little, he freely gave it away, knowing it would return to him many times increased when he needed it. By giving to his lord's debtors, they would gladly receive him into their houses, and he would never lack for a home after the settlement with his lord. "The lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely; for the children of this world in their generation are wiser than the children of light." How is this? The children of this world give diligence, as well as they know how to provide for the future as far as they can see. It is true they do not see beyond this present life, but they are wise in their generation. The children of light, however, have eternal life set before them, yet many of them act as though this earthly life were all. In this they are not so wise as the children of this world. They cling to this life and its possessions as though it were all, forgetting that "whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:33). The man of the world, knowing nothing of anything more than this life, holds fast to it and all that it contains; but the child of light, if he be as wise in his generation as the child of the world, he will freely give up this life with its riches, that he may possess eternal life.

Tuesday: Stewards of the Mysteries of God – Paul desired the prayers of the brethren, that utterance might be given him, "to make known the mystery of the Gospel" (Ephesians 6:19). Paul says that he was made a minister of the Gospel, according to the gift of the grace of God, given unto him by the effectual working of His power, that he "should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world have been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:8-9). Here we see the mystery of the Gospel to be the mystery of creation. This mystery was made known to the apostle by revelation. He says, "But I certify you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." And then he makes the matter still more definite, by saying, "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1:11-12, 15-16). The Gospel is a mystery; It is a mystery that is made known by revelation of Jesus Christ; It was not merely that Jesus Christ revealed it to him, but that he was made to know the mystery by the revelation of Jesus Christ in him. Paul had to know the Gospel first, before he could preach it to others; and the only way in which he could be made to know it was to have Christ revealed in him. You cannot be a steward of the mysteries of God, which is the revelation of Christ in men, unless Christ is first revealed in you.

Wednesday: Stewards of Spiritual Truth – God has made us stewards in Christ. "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). "Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ" (Ephesians 4:7). The grace of God is given to us in Christ. He is the brightness of the Father's glory (Hebrews 1:3), and the grace which God bestows is "according to the riches of His glory." This grace is given, not to a few, but to all, as we read that, "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men" (Titus 2:11). But Christ is "our life" (Colossians 3:4). He is not the life of a few only, but of all, for He is "the life" (John 14:6). There is no other life. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). "He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25). "The gift by grace" is the gift of life in Christ. Christ, the life, is given to every man, and His life is the manifestation of the manifold grace of God, of which we are appointed stewards.

Thursday: Our Responsibility as Stewards – We are told: "God desires to bring men into direct relation with Himself. In all His dealings with human beings He recognizes the principle of personal responsibility. He seeks to encourage a sense of personal dependence and to impress the need of personal guidance. His gifts are committed to men as individuals. Every man has been made a steward of sacred trusts; each is to discharge his trust according to the direction of the Giver; and by each an account of his stewardship must be rendered to God" (Ellen White, *7 Testimonies* 176).