

## DIVINE REWARDS

A poor man once heard in a sermon that, whosoever gives to God everything that he has, will receive a hundredfold in return. So, he put all the money he had — which amounted to a single copper coin — in the collection, being absolutely convinced that he would soon have a hundred such pieces. A year later, he was still just as poor as he ever was. Knowing that God was much richer than he was, he set out himself to find God and remind Him of the debt.

At the end of the first day, the poor man came to a house where he asked for a place to sleep. The good people who lived there invited him in, and also to share their meal. Over dinner, he told them why he was travelling, and the lady of the house asked him to ask God a question. She told him “My daughter was supposed to get married tomorrow, but she is ill in bed. This is the third time that this has happened. Every time that we set a date for the wedding, she becomes sick the day before. Can you please ask God why?”

The poor man promised that he would do so, and after a good night’s sleep he set off again, early the next morning. After a very long day’s walk, when it was already dark, he came to a farmhouse next to a vineyard. He again asked to stay the night, and was invited in. After he explained his mission, he was again requested to ask God a question. The farmer said to him “Our vines no longer produce any grapes. Can you please ask God why?”

The poor man promised that he would do so, and after a good night’s sleep he set off again soon after cockcrow. After another very long day’s walk, he came to a cottage where two poor brothers lived. They invited him in, and shared their poor meal of watery soup with him. When he explained to them why he was travelling, the eldest of the two said to him “When you find Him, can you ask God why we are always quarreling with each other, and how we can stop?”

The poor man promised that he would do so, and after a good night’s sleep he set off again early the following morning. He hadn’t gone very far, when he met an old man with silver hair and a long grey beard. When the old man asked him where he was going, he replied “I’m going to find God, so that I can ask him to keep his promises.”

“Then,” said the old man “you have reached your destination. I am the person who you are looking for.”

The poor man dropped to his knees and, looking up into the kindly face, said “If you really are, then please may I have the hundredfold return which you promised me for my only coin?”

“Return home in peace,” answered the old man, “and by the time you arrive, you will have more than the hundredfold.”

The poor man thanked him heartily and jumped to his feet. He turned, and was about to leave, when he remembered the questions asked by his hosts on

the three nights before. Stopping, he asked the three questions and, in turn, received three answers. Then he thanked the old man once again, and hurried off on his return journey.

When he reached the cottage of the two brothers, they asked him “Have you found Him so soon? And, did you ask him about us?”

“Yes!” answered the poor man, “I found our Lord, and He wants you to know that you are always arguing with each other, because each of you wants his own way and neither makes allowances for the other. He says that you should live apart, and each live your own lives in peace.”

“We would have already done that,” answered the brothers, “but we are too poor, and this run-down old cottage is all that we have.”

“Please be patient, and let me finish.” continued the poor man. “Our Lord told me that you should remove the stove from the kitchen, and the rest will settle itself.” The brothers then rushed into the kitchen, and immediately ripped out the stove. Underneath it, they found a large crock filled with gold coins.

The brothers rewarded the poor man with as much gold as he could carry, and he again carried on his way. When he came to the second house, the farmer asked him “Have you found God so soon? And, did you ask him about my vines?”

“Yes!” answered the man, “I found our Lord, and He wants you to know that you shouldn’t be surprised that you have no grapes! God had blessed your harvest, because your vineyard only had a low fence, and any hungry traveller could share in your good fortune. But, now you have built such a high wall, that even the birds have difficulty reaching your grapes. He said that there is no need of a blessing if it cannot be shared.”

The farmer easily understood the meaning of this message and, promising to tear down the wall, thanked God and rewarded his visitor with gold. Early the next morning, the man set off, and arrived at the third house in the evening. After inviting him in, the mother asked “Have you found Him so soon? And, did you ask Him about my daughter?”

“Yes!” answered the man, “I found our Lord, and He wants you to remember that, when she was still a child, you promised that your daughter would be a bride of Christ. So, how can you now give her in marriage to an earthly husband? If you keep your promise, she will remain healthy and happy, and your house will be blessed.”

The parents easily understood the meaning of this message and, promising to keep their vow, thanked God and rewarded their visitor with gold. His rewards now amounted to a sum which was not a hundredfold, but many thousands of times greater than the single copper coin which he had given to

God. He sent the greater part of this fortune back to his wife and children and then, after staying a few days, set off to see a little more of the world.

One day, not very long after, he came to a beautiful garden. As he stood at the gate, admiring the beautiful flowers and magnificent trees, he watched a gardener clumsily trying to prune a delicate sapling, and burst out laughing. The landowner, who was standing nearby, heard him and asked why he was so amused.

The wanderer replied “Who wouldn’t laugh, if they saw the mess he was making of that little tree?”

“So, you think you can do better?” asked the lord

“If I couldn’t, then I’ve already lived too long on this earth” answered the man.

“Then prove it!” said the lord, opening the gate to let him in. The wanderer took the knife from the gardener, and immediately set about making good the damage and trimming the tree correctly. After he had finished, the astounded landowner, asked him if he would like to stay to look after the garden.

“Why not,” replied the man, “if both the pay and the keep are good?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem” was the answer, and so he was employed, from that day on, as gardener. Under his care, the garden flourished as never before. Both he and his employer, were very happy with his work, and it was a long time before he thought about moving on.

Indeed, it was many years later, before his longing to see his wife, and his family, grew so great that he thought of leaving the garden. But, finally, one day, he went to his employer to give notice. At first the lord was unwilling to let him go, because such a good and loyal gardener would be hard to find, but the man had clearly made his mind up. In the end, he gave way and told him “Then, go if you must, in God’s name. But in parting, I will give you only these three pieces of advice: Firstly, if on your way you have to choose between two paths, an old one and a new one, always choose the old; secondly, if you are in stranger’s house, never ask the meaning of anything you see; and finally, don’t do anything in the heat of anger.”

Somewhat puzzled, but recognising that this was good advice, the gardener packed his things together and prepared for his journey. As he took his leave, the lord presented him with a cake, telling him “This is not for the journey. It is to celebrate when your happiness is greatest, and you should only cut it then.” The gardener thanked him, once again, and finally set off on his journey home.

He hadn’t travelled very far, when a passing carriage stopped. Its passenger invited him to ride with him, and he gratefully accepted. After some distance, the gardener noticed that the coach had turned off the old road and onto a new one. Remembering his employer’s advice, he asked the coachman to let him off,

and went the rest of the way on foot by the old road. When he arrived at the point where the new road rejoined the old one, he asked at the inn if the carriage had passed by. Nobody had seen it pass, but at that moment, they saw a single horse coming from the new road.

They found the coach's passenger, laying some distance along the new road. Bandits had held up the carriage, killed the coachman, robbed and badly wounded the passenger. On seeing this, the gardener, thanked God that he had followed his employer's advice to always follow the old ways.

He then wandered further, until in the evening he arrived at a solitary inn where he took a room for the night. When he looked out of his window, he was shocked to see parts of a body — arms, hands, legs and feet — littering the courtyard. He was about to ask the landlord the meaning of this, when he remembered the lord's second piece of advice. He held his tongue, but he couldn't sleep at all that night, through fear of what had happened and what might happen.

When he paid his bill the next morning, the innkeeper asked him if he had seen what was in the courtyard, and why he hadn't asked for an explanation. He answered "It isn't my way to poke my nose into other people's business."

"It's good that you didn't." replied the host, "If you had been asking questions, you might have also had to leave a part of your body behind."

Thanking both God and his former employer's good advice, the man continued hurriedly on his way. He was, now, not very far from his home and, picking up pace, he arrived the same day. Being thirsty, he first went to the inn to refresh himself, where he sat by the window looking at his own house across the street. As he sat watching, he saw something which made him very angry. He saw his wife open the door to a young, handsome priest, embrace and kiss him, and then lead him into the house. He jumped up in a blind rage, and was about to rush out, cross the street, and confront the unfaithful woman, when he remembered his employer's third warning. Keeping himself as calm as possible, he asked who the young clergyman might be. The answer surprised him.

He heard that the young man was the eldest son of the woman who lived in that house. She was a widow whose husband had been gone many years, and her son had just returned after taking holy orders. Tomorrow, he was going to hold his first mass, and the whole village was going to celebrate. Surely, even now, on the day before, he could already hear the ringing of the bells and the noise of the fireworks. Holding back tears of joy, and thanking God in his heart, the man held his tongue.

The next morning, the young priest's first mass was celebrated, first in the church, and afterwards in the inn, where the stranger sat unrecognised at a table in the corner. But, as everybody toasted the health and long life of the new priest and his mother, he rose and said loudly "And, what about his father?"

Should he be forgotten? Doesn't anybody here know me? Not even you, my dear wife? And not any of you, my children."

For a moment there was absolute silence, and then came shouts of joy from his whole family: from his wife; from his newly ordained son; and from his younger brothers and sisters. Everybody now had another reason to celebrate. The returning traveller cried out "This really is the happiest moment of my life!", and as he did so he brought out the huge cake, which the lord had given him, and set it in the middle of the table. With a heavy knife, and great effort, he broke open the cake and it revealed its hidden treasure. Inside, it was completely filled with gold coins, which the lord had given him for his years of loyal service.

The father turned his eyes upward towards heaven, smiled, and said "See, God's divine rewards are really more than a hundredfold."