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The Gift of God

"Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God."

Ecclesiastes 5:18-19 NKJV

It is tempting to see the meaning of our lives in what we desire, not in what is given, what we already have. In Hungarian we have an expression for it: pipe dream. Pipe dreams frequently embitter our lives, because among all enemies that could disappoint us, and leave a bad taste in our mouths, this is the one that will surely betray us. It places its fulfillment forever beyond the horizon of possibility. Fulfillment is placed on top of an endless golden staircase. Paul Getty, the American multimillionaire cursed his wealth towards the end of his life saying: *I would give all my riches for a happy marriage.*

The path to happiness is full of surprising dead-end streets. Millions of unknown people are dreaming about becoming famous. They look at the celebrated stars with envy. Public figures decry the loss of their privacy. Family men envy the freedom of single people, while singles wish for the warmth of family. People blessed with beauty find their unique attractiveness a burden. People with drab, average-looking faces dream that one day, through some kind of a miracle, they, too, will become beautiful. The stay-at-home mother, while working to the point of exhaustion for her children and her family, looks with envy at the successful business woman across the street, and dreams about a career. The business woman is literally hungry for some free time, because she is missing the warmth of family, and the kindness of children, the very things she gave up for her career. The pace of her hard work does not allow for a break. Observing all this we come to the conclusion that through our own eyes others are better and more attractive than we are; anything others may have is more valuable than what we possess.

We may truly appreciate who we are and what we possess only when we, because of an unexpected change, lose the things we have been taking for granted.

A gambler cannot quit his addictive habit. After a while he goes bankrupt. He starts over from scratch. He hasn't gambled for months now, yet his new life is full of hope.

A woman loses her job. At first, she panics, but then she contemplates what is truly important for her. She tries to relax, to enjoy her freedom, to reconnect with her long-neglected girlfriends. She changes her professional field of interest and begins to look for a new job. She is reborn because she gained control over her challenging situation.

A person struck with illness comprehends anew the preciousness of being healthy, upset with himself that he didn't take care of his health. Then he contacts other people who suffer from the same illness, and they encourage each other during their recovery. And then they begin to educate healthy people so they would consider changing the lifestyles that are endangering their health. People such as these find constructive meaning to their lives in every circumstance.

While the tribulations and challenges of life don't always bring out the best of people, in such circumstances many people become aware of their true strength and abilities. Those undesired events in life bring out hidden capabilities because our pipe dreams come to an end, and we become satisfied with less. In such stages of our lives we always look for solutions that are immediately available. We set goals that are achievable. Small steps with gradual advances in that process become the most important. What we previously took for granted, and considered naturally owed to us, we now think of as blessings.

No one can avoid life's tribulations, losses, or pain, but we do decide how we respond to them. Do we mourn over events we can't change, or do we learn to appreciate what is left?

When Jeremy Taylor, a 17th century English theologian, lost all his possessions he described his condition this way: *I fell into the hands of publicans and sequestrators, and they have taken all from me; what now? Let me look about me. They have left me the sun and the moon, fire and water, a loving wife, and many friends to pity me, and some to relieve me.*

Let us not doubt, however, that at times sadness may crush us! Our suffering can isolate us instead of connecting us. My advice is the following: let us empty ourselves, so we can fill up again. While the process might be painful, let us not forget that psychological anguish may be a sign of healing!

The meaning of our lives does not lie in our losses or in desires that, very likely, we will never be able to attain. The past is over. In our memories the pain lives on but so does healing. With the passage of time, the memory of pain will be less than the original pain. When we single-mindedly wish for something in the indeterminate future, we are distracted from the small but tangible joys of the present. Let us then replace our pipe

dreams with aspirations for the purposefully attainable kind. Let us then affirm the wisdom professed by this preacher: *Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God.* Amen.