

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

The USA is the most blessed nation on earth and, yet, people complain about their lives ... a lot. They grumble about work, income, cost of food and gas, and the list goes on. Life is so "hard." But compared to ancient times, there really is little to whine about. Consider life during the seven years of famine in the days of Joseph:

GENESIS 41:54-57 and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. **The famine was in all lands**, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. 55 So when all the land of Egypt was famished, **the people cried to Pharaoh for bread**. Then Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, do." 56 **The famine was over all the face of the earth**, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And **the famine became severe** in the land of Egypt. 57 So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy *grain*, because **the famine was severe** in all lands.

Those who lived in or near to Egypt could buy food only if they had money or something to trade. But it would have been worse in nations that did not prepare during the seven years of plenty. How many starved to death during that famine? There were other biblical famines, too. Abraham was forced to go to Egypt because of a severe drought<sup>1</sup>. Isaac, too, endured a localized famine in Canaan<sup>2</sup>. Another occurred during the reign of King David<sup>3</sup>, one in Gilgal during Elisha's time<sup>4</sup>, one during the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius when saints in Macedonia and Achaia sent provisions to Jerusalem<sup>5</sup>, and two were the result of sieges by Syria against Samaria<sup>6</sup> and Babylon against Jerusalem<sup>7</sup>. Another famine in Israel was the reason that Naomi and Ruth ended up in Moab<sup>8</sup>.

No one today can imagine the suffering during the 1930-31 Dust Bowl and again in 1934, 1936, and 1939-40. Perhaps you heard stories from your parents or grandparents but that is far removed from living through it. John Steinbeck's epic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* gives a sense of the misery and hardships. Real impact is usually understated in Scripture so, perhaps, this modern story comes close to describing the conditions of people in ancient times, too. One heartrending account is the story of the widow of Zarephath during the drought in the days of Elijah. When he asked her for some food, she said:

1 KINGS 17:12 So she said, "As the LORD your God lives, **I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar**; and see, I *am* gathering a

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 12:10.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 26:1.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Sam. 21:1.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 4:38-41.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 11:27-30; Rom. 15:25-27.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Kings 6:24-25.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Kings 25:1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth 1:1-2.

couple of sticks that I may go in and **prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.**”

Reality was harsh back then. The widow understood that she and her son would die alone of starvation. No Meals on Wheels. No soup kitchens. All around her, people were facing the same conditions so there was no one to help. She knew what was coming and there was nothing she or anyone else could do. Can you imagine? Today, people complain about bad coffee at work or when their steak is not cooked perfectly. The lives of most ancient people were harsh beyond words. Every year they wondered if there would be a drought or if crops would be decimated by blight or locusts. Their life expectancy has been estimated to be a short 30 to 40 years!

Consider the days when Israel was overseen by judges. Even those who obeyed the Law of Moses were not exempt from the punishments of God upon Israel for disobedience. The period of the judges lasted 300 to 350 years, during which time Israel was subjugated by enemies six times: 1) 8 years under Mesopotamia, 2) 18 years under Moab, 3) 20 years under Canaan, 4) 7 years under Midian, 5) 18 years under Ammon, and 6) a whopping 40 years under Philistia.<sup>9</sup> That is 111 years out of 300. Some spent most of their lives under heavy oppression. They had no rights and were treated like slaves. The Philistines forbid them to have iron or blacksmiths and they charged about half a day’s wages to sharpen farm tools for them.<sup>10</sup> These were times of extreme tyranny and they cried out to God in desperation. No one today has endured such cruelty.

Even those with serious diseases today are better off. Hospitals, doctors, and pharmaceuticals were basically nonexistent in ancient times. Some might point to natural products that were supposedly known and used hundreds or thousands of years ago. Even if that is true, how many had the knowledge or access to treatments? Many endured diseases for which there was no help or cure. Today, even those with cancers, autoimmune diseases, and so forth can usually find some relief from the pain and suffering through a doctor. Not so back then. Consider an impassable kidney or gall stone. It is one of the worst kinds of suffering—the pain over time can even cause heart attacks. In ancient times there were no surgical remedies for the excruciating pain and it so severe it does not always respond to morphine. The Bible lists a host of incurable and lifelong diseases in those days: painful boils and ulcers, leprosy and skin diseases, paralysis, deafness, fevers, blindness, infirmities, lameness, and issues of blood.<sup>11</sup> Cases of epilepsy may not sound terrible but there were serious consequences:

**MATTHEW 17:15 “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water.**

Imagine literally falling into a fire or a stream and not being able to get out of it. Normal people would immediately jump out but an epileptic was helpless. If he fell into the fire, he literally burned alive until someone pulled him out. That was a

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<sup>9</sup> Judg. 3:8-11; 3:12-30; 4:1-5:31; 6:1-8:32; 10:6-12:7; 13:1-16:31.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Sam. 13:19-21.

<sup>11</sup> Job 2:7-8; Exod. 9:9 / Lev. 13:2-3 / Matt. 17:15 / Mark 7:32 / Mark 1:30 / Luke 17:11-19 / Luke 13:10-13 / Matt. 11:5, 15:30, 21:14 / Lev. 15:19, 25; Matt. 9:20.

torturous life. Recall also the extreme pain of the ghastly deaths of King Agrippa who was eaten by worms<sup>12</sup> and King Jehoram whose bowels came out of his body:

2 CHRONICLES 21:18-19 After all this the LORD struck him [*King Jehoram*] **in his intestines with an incurable disease**. 19 Then it happened in the course of time, after the end of two years, that **his intestines came out** because of his sickness; so **he died in severe pain**. And his people made no burning for him, like the burning for his fathers.

The risk of serious injury was also much greater in ancient times. Consider the hazards a soldier or stonemason faced. If injured, there was no local emergency room with skilled doctors so they either healed on their own or died; either way, they faced excruciating pain.

Today's physicians can cure or at least provide symptomatic relief for many diseases and surgeons can help with a myriad of issues. Even paralytics have things that make a world of difference. A paraplegic has a difficult life but imagine how much worse it would be without something as simple as a wheelchair for mobility, which also allows them to be independent and hold a job. A huge assortment of assistive technologies is available, everything from orthotics to head trackers and voice-controlled systems for quadriplegics and victims of ALS that translate thoughts into actions such as turning on a light.

Even criminals housed in prisons live far better today than many free people in ancient times. People convicted of crimes back then were brutally punished. Execution by stoning and crucifixion was common and prisons were harsh. Consider the Mamertine Prison in Rome. The upper level chambers were grim enough but the lower dungeons, where Paul was imprisoned for a time, were damp, dark, freezing holes in the ground with no hygiene. Prisoners were lowered into them through holes in the ceiling because there were no doors. It is not surprising that Paul needed a cloak to keep warm.<sup>13</sup> When Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were stripped of their clothes and beaten with rods before being imprisoned and put into stocks.<sup>14</sup> Stocks are a form of torture that cause circulation issues and severe muscle and joint pain from being forced to maintain a rigid position. And remember when Jeremiah almost starved to death in the freezing mire at the bottom of an empty underground cistern.<sup>15</sup> Today's criminals live luxuriously by comparison.

The vast majority of the commoners in ancient times lived in poverty, even if they were healthy. Only a few lived reasonably comfortable lives. People back then would look upon conditions in this country today with extreme envy where even the poorest, most oppressed, sickest, and even criminals live lavishly by comparison. Granted, some brethren are so impoverished they cannot afford food without help and others suffer terrible physical afflictions but they are the few exceptions.

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 12:21-23.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Tim. 4:13.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 16:23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Jer. 38:6.

So, when along comes a Man who talks of a Kingdom that is unspeakable joy, peace, beauty, and prosperity—a place where murder, adultery, theft, lies, envy, bribes, poverty, disease, illness, sickness, war, and oppression do not exist, people in ancient times listened; *really* listened. In large part, this is what drew multitudes of people to the words of Jesus and the disciples—they were desperate and longed for relief from the abject misery of their lives:

MATTHEW 4:24 Then His [*Jesus*'] fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all **sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments [by analogy, torture], and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics**; and He healed them.

They could not imagine the glory and perfection of the Kingdom of God. It was so desirable that many literally gave up everything to seek after and lay hold of God's promises.<sup>16</sup> In the beginning, healings and miraculous signs and wonders were proof the Gospel of such a Kingdom was a sure promise of God<sup>17</sup>:

MATTHEW 9:35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, **preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease** among the people.

Life for many in ancient times was spent simply surviving and suffering so it is obvious why they had such zeal for the Kingdom of God. One of their greatest joys was spreading the Gospel to others and hearing their stories:

[NET2.1+] 1 THESSALONIANS 1:6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord when **you received the message with joy** that comes from the Holy Spirit, **despite great affliction**.

ACTS 11:18 When they heard these things they became silent; and **they glorified God**, saying, “Then **God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life**.”

ACTS 8:6-8 And **the multitudes with one accord heeded** the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. 7 For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And **there was great joy in that city**.

ACTS 13:48-49, 52 Now when the Gentiles heard this [*salvation had come to the Gentiles*], **they were glad and glorified the Word of the Lord**. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And **the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region**. ... 52 And **the disciples were filled with joy** and with the Holy Spirit.

ACTS 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the *ekklesia*, they [*Paul and Barnabas*] passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, **describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren**.

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 2:44-45; 4:32.

<sup>17</sup> Also Matt. 4:23; et al. John 21:25; Acts 2:22, 4:3; 5:12; 14:3; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4.

They even rejoiced when they suffered for spreading the Gospel:

ACTS 5:41 So they [*Peter and the other apostles*] departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.**

True joy was a vision of a Kingdom perfect in love and Good Works. They truly rejoiced for every single convert to The Way. It was their only hope against the wretchedness of this life. The Gospel was everything to them and they dedicated their lives to it and God. Contrast that today with many who think Sabbath-keeping is debating what constitutes work or arguing about eating out. They waste God's time gossiping about others or complaining about work last week. Jesus truly described the *ekklesia* today:

LUKE 8:14 “Now the ones *that* fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and **are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.**

In ancient days, the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God brought enormous JOY to the people! For them, it was truly a GREAT treasure; a pearl of great price:

MATTHEW 13:44 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and **for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**

MATTHEW 13:45-46 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, 46 “who, when **he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.**

Prosperity instills a false sense of perspective. It breeds callousness toward the suffering of others as many do in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It is even evident toward brethren, especially those in other countries. The ones who are truly impoverished, who truly suffer, who are truly ill, have a desire and zeal for the Kingdom of God beyond what most in this country can grasp. Their vision and hope of the Kingdom is magnified by sufferings and they take to heart the saying, “**Rejoice and be exceedingly glad,** for great *is* your reward in heaven.”<sup>18</sup> Of them Jesus said, “**blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear.**”<sup>19</sup>

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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<sup>18</sup> Matt. 5:12.

<sup>19</sup> Matt. 13:16.