

Talents

A long time ago a man in Judea was going on a trip. He called his faithful servant and spoke to him.

"I'm going on a trip," he said. "And while I'm gone I am going to entrust you with five talents."

"Oh good!" the servant replied. "Can one of them be musical?"

"What?" the man asked. "I don't understand."

"If I had musical talent I could play the lyre and sing at the tavern," the servant explained. "I'd be sure to get free drinks and maybe even pick up a few denarii as well."

"No, no, no," the man said. "Not that kind of a talent. I'm talking about gold talents. Money."

"Why do they call it a talent if it's really money?"

"I don't know. They just do, OK?"

"How many denarii does it take to make a talent?"

"Well, let's see . . . there are sixteen asses to a denarius . . . two denarii to an Antoninianus . . . never mind. It's not important now. You could look it up. The important thing is to take care of my talents while I'm gone."

"Right," the servant replied. "I'll take good care of them."

"I want you to make them grow," the man said.

"Grow?" the servant asked. "My mother always told me money doesn't grow on trees, but you're the boss. If you think they'll grow, I'll plant 'em and see what happens. I promise I'll water them every day."

"Not grow like a plant. Grow through investments. Use money to make money."

"In that case I'll need to know how risk averse you are," the servant said.

"Risk?" the man asked.

"All investment involves risk," the servant explained. "The greater the risk, the greater the potential gain. Passbook savings are low risk, but they pay very little. More speculative investments like olive oil futures might provide a better return, but there's more risk involved. Remember how real estate tanked after Caesar moved into Gaul? They had rivers and lakes and trees in Gaul. Suddenly nobody wanted the dry rocks and sand we've got around here. A lot of investors lost their togas on real estate."

"I don't want to lose my money," the man said. "I want to grow it."

"Low risk then," the servant replied. "Maybe an IDIC backed CD."

"IDIC?"

"Imperial Deposit Insurance Corporation. They guarantee depositors won't lose money if the bank that issues the CD goes broke. How long are you going to be gone?"

"About a year," the man said.

"OK then," the servant said cheerfully. "I'll look for a twelve-month CD. Have a nice trip."

The man returned a year later. "How'd you make out with my talents?" he asked his servant.

"Uh, not as good as I'd hoped," his servant replied. "I was able to get a 6-1/2% IDIC backed CD, which is *really* good. Unfortunately, the bank that issued the CD was heavily invested in promissory notes issued by Marc Antony. They should have been good, right? Personal notes from one of the two most powerful leaders of the Roman Empire? A man who had all the gold in Egypt at his command? I guess he had some sort of a falling out with the other guy, though. And when push came to shove, he came in second."

"But they were guaranteed by the IDIC, right? So we didn't lose anything?"

"Yeah. About that. They were backed by the IDIC. But with Marc Antony out of the way, the other guy became the sole emperor of Rome. He seemed a little touchy about covering Marc Antony's debts. So, he issued a decree that IDIC insurance only protected Imperial depositors. Members of the Imperial class. In other words, Romans. We Jews were left holding the bag."

There was a long silence. Finally, the man spoke. "I hate the Romans."

"I'm not too crazy about them myself," his servant replied.

"The Canaanites, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. How much longer can this go on?" the man lamented.

"Don't forget the Egyptians," his servant reminded.

"That's right! The Egyptians, too. When will Judea be free?"

"I got a cousin who's a soothsayer," the servant said. "I asked him that question. 'How much longer will the Roman Empire endure?' I asked. You know what he said? He said 'The Western Roman Empire or the Eastern?'"

"There are two Roman Empires?" the man asked in astonishment.

"Not exactly," his servant answered. "My cousin said there is only one Roman Empire, but an army of barbarians will capture a big chunk of it in about 500 years. When that happens, people will refer to the captured part as the 'Western' Roman Empire, and the part that remains under Roman rule will be called the 'Eastern' Roman Empire."

"If we went any farther west we'd be in Egypt, so we must be part of the Western Roman Empire, right? So does that mean we have to put up with these swine for another 500 years?"

"You'd think so, but my cousin said the line between the Eastern and Western empires will be as much north/south as it is east/west. Gaul, Germanica, and Rome itself are in the west. We'll be part of the Eastern Roman Empire."

"And that will last . . . ?"

"About a thousand years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire."

The man sat in stunned silence while he thought about this. "So my grandchildren's grandchildren's grandchildren will still suffer under Roman rule. But perhaps their grandchildren's grandchildren will live to see the glorious day when the Roman Empire falls."

"Be careful what you wish for," his servant cautioned. "My cousin said the Roman Empire will be replaced by something even worse called the Ottoman Empire. The Romans tax the hell out of us, but at least they let us keep our religion. The Ottoman's will insist we convert to another religion or die. Thousands of Jews will be killed. And thousands more will flee and be scattered throughout dozens of foreign kingdoms."

"And how long will that empire last?"

"About 500 years, give or take a few decades."

"And what empire will rule Judea after that?"

Here his servant brightened. "Well, technically something called the British Empire. But only for a little while, and they will let the exiled Jews start returning."

"But that's what, maybe 2,000 years from now?" the man said.

"More or less. Let's face it. We're victims of imperialism."

The man sat lost in thought. Finally he spoke. "I should have just buried the money."

"I swear I would have watered it every day," his servant replied.