

Faith through fire part 2: Finances ablaze.

One of the great problems our short-sightedness brings is an inability to see what the potential outcome of our actions might actually be. Now that could sound strange, knowing that I encourage people to focus on the present, the time and the you that you can actually impact directly. We know that being fixated on the past and future can rob us of joy and peace in the present. However, that truth shouldn't steal away from us a considered approach to the future. After all, becoming too fixated on the present can have the natural result that we become so short-sighted that we forget that tomorrow may very well come. Yes, tomorrow may come, and many more tomorrows after it, each tomorrow with tomorrow's own problems. The wisdom Jesus left us with is to concern ourselves with what we can control and place our total faith and soul into the hands of the living God who transcends time. I like to put it this way, "control what you can control, the rest is God's."

We can do what we can do now through God alone. Tomorrow is a matter of making the best decisions in faith and wisdom today and trusting the Lord's hand for tomorrow. The potential outcome of today is more than simply an outcome for you. It's an outcome that effects all those around you. As I have already encouraged, it is an outcome that can impact the generations to come; especially for those whose eyes and minds have already lifted to the generation that endures the horrid seven years. So, let's not be short-sighted. Let's pick up the challenge of asking ourselves, "today, in this day, what example of faith and faithfulness through the fire can I leave for those who will come after?"

So, what does that have to do with our discussion on how we handle the "now" we find ourselves in and the fact that either "now" or "tomorrow" our finances might be totally ablaze? Well, as my mentor used to say, "I'm glad you asked". Truth was, he usually made that statement without anyone asking him anything. He just had a knack for intuitively knowing, perhaps from our perplexed facial expressions or because he had lectured for decades, exactly what we were all thinking and the answers we wanted. God is the same way. If you read your Bible properly (you know, read it, not just clips from here or there) then answers to questions we never even thought to ask emerge from its ancient pages, as if written the other day, even if, I'll grant you, in odd language.

I remember years ago, while minding my own business, reading through the Bible, the Lord answered a question I never even asked. Quite intrusive as it was on my quiet meditation, I have never forgotten the principle. Now not forgetting is quite different from living it out. After all, I am a little bit of a self-willed individual who has to be reminded constantly of my position in this universe by my Father's fatherly hand. "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?"

The principle is fairly simple, not that I was asking. If I am not faithful with what God has entrusted to me then there is no more to be given. After all, if God gives you a little and you scorn and despise the gift, then why would He give you more? If you are not faithful to be a steward with that little you have been given (because after all its only little, not much use, what good is it, “let’s wait till I get the real deal”) then why expect that God will give you anything at all? Remember Andrew’s words, in John 6, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?” That’s precisely our problem. We can’t see what God can do with the little we have. If you don’t have the faith to see what He can do with the little, then what is the point in Him giving you more. Sure, you might use the more to do good, more good, but the faith that is the foundation is lacking. The faith and the skill to be content and at peace with such as you have and the wisdom to use it, yes, those two little fish, barely legal size, and those tough barley loaves, more than day old bread.

So then, the parable we should be exemplifying to the world, and future generations, is the story of people who have little but don’t hold it back from the Lord. That young boy came to the disciples with what he had. The disciples clearly didn’t think it was much, they scorned what the little boy had. That boy didn’t know what Jesus would do with it, but clearly he thought that the right thing to do was the share from what little he had. End result? In excess of five thousand people were fed. Jesus made the disciples pick up what was left. What was left? One basket of left-overs for each disciple. The boy only had enough food to feed himself. Then once it was eaten he would have to go look for more food tomorrow. His concern wasn’t for the food tomorrow, but for “today”. He wasn’t only concerned for what he would eat “today” but what would the others eat. End result? We are still talking about that boy’s faith “today”. We glorify God for what Jesus was able to do with that small gift. For what He turned that “what are these among so many?” into.

If your finances are ablaze, or perhaps they have been for some time, worry is not the answer. Worry doesn’t increase your bank balance or pay your debt. You control what you can today and place your concerns into the hands of your Father. You know, the one who has cattle on a thousand hills? But like that boy, the last thing we need right now in our parable to the world are tight-fisted Christians. We need to do what is right with what little we have; to be good stewards of those five stale loaves and two barely legal-size fish that most of us have in our bank accounts. Yes, even with that moth that flies out every time you open your wallet. By the way this isn’t a call to top up our local church’s bank balance. This is a call to top up the true church’s bank balance. The universal one we spoke about last time. It’s a call to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters as God has given us ability and convicted us to do. We just need to rejig our thinking on “ability”. Like the widow and her two mites. No, not the arthropod kind, two coins that represented the smallest denomination in their currency. “What are these among so many?” Jesus thought it was special! The Holy Spirit moved someone to record it in scripture! We are speaking about that gift “today”!

The book of Revelation speaks of a time when people will not be able to buy or sell without a special mark. You can still buy and sell, many of you have a job or a government giving you money. In those days, still to come, they will have nothing. So, what will they do? What kind of people will they be? Who will meet their needs? How will their needs be met? Will those who have share with those who don't? Will those with only a little hold onto it for self-preservation? What example will you leave these people in your time of struggle and need?

I asked you all to consider 2 Corinthians 8-9. It is a powerful passage on giving. The gift, from giving, is a beautiful and fragrant offering to the Lord when its given by a wilful giver with full faith from what the Lord has blessed them with. In return, the promise is that God will continue to give so that there is always something to keep on giving. Now this is not a get rich quick scheme. God can sniff out that kind of offering like a bloodhound. You don't offer to God to enrich yourself. You do it because you know and believe it is right. You don't do it with regret and worry. You do it because you have the faith to believe that God can use what little you have and still take care of your tomorrows.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, Paul uses the churches in Macedonia as an example of gracious, faith based, giving. They gave to other churches even though they were suffering through their own trials. Even though their own little world was hurting and falling apart they didn't forget the bigger world and needs that were out there. Their own finances were ablaze, they were in great poverty, but still found something from their little to graciously give. Paul champions the fact that they even found more than they had ability to give, an idea he will raise later in chapter 9. They didn't let their little hold them back, begging Paul to be given the opportunity to give to the needs of others. The churches in Macedonia gave freely and graciously with great joy, not begrudgingly, totally trusting that God would be faithful with the money they had given and that it would meet the needs of those who were blessed by it. Like the widow with her two mites, they didn't give from their wealth but from their poverty. Why? Because they cared.

Paul holds Christ up as the example of this kind of grace giving. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 we are reminded that Christ, rich beyond measure, became poor so that He could enrich the lives of others. Does that mean we need to sell all and become paupers to please God? No. Paul tells the Corinthians in verses 12-15 what is expected; a willing mind and what you have, not what you don't have. Your heart must be right, and it must come from what you possess. You shouldn't give to the point where you instantly require aid from others to bail you out. So, what about the Macedonians? How did they give above and beyond what they possessed? We will get there shortly. Paul also tells the Corinthians that this is how the body of Christ is meant to function. We give to the needs of others, then when times of need arise we receive their blessings.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Paul gives us the challenge; a challenge that was exemplified in the Macedonians. The person who sows sparingly will reap sparingly. If you are tight-fisted with your finances, then God is tight-fisted with the harvest. If you are open-handed with your finances, then God can make the

harvest abound. Now the harvest may be better finances as God blesses you but that is not necessarily Paul's point. I know, we like that idea but let's not miss the point. The harvest might be people brought to the Lord, more people fed in a third world country than you could have ever imagined, churches struggling in faith being enlivened by your faith, compassion and concern. The fruit of your two cents, five stale loaves and two barely legal fish depends on your willingness to offer them to God. But like the Macedonians, with their unnatural ability to give above their means, God is able to give graciously to you, the faithful steward, more. To give you more so that you can faithfully steward that more that He has given you. That could be more money, more ministry, more chances to meet physical and spiritual needs. But He controls the "more" depending what you do with the "less".

But the heart must be right. You have to be a cheerful giver because you are so full of real joy to see needs met even though the received may never know which hand gave it. You can't do it grudgingly. Your faith has to be strong enough to see what is right and to see past your today and your tomorrow. The choice is yours. You can sit there rubbing your two seeds together wishing God would give you more seed, or you can hurry up and plant the two seeds you have and see what harvest the Lord can bring.

Your finances are in the hands of God, they always have been. It's time to place your faith in Him and do what you know is right. Care enough to see the need, plant into that need the seed you have and let the Lord work His harvest. Imagine if the widow, in 1 Kings 17, had told Elijah to take a hike.

Please share in the comments your favourite scripture on giving and the Lords faithfulness