

Faithful in Famine

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~ 1 ~

"The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts." (1 Samuel 2:7)

The sovereignty of God is one of the first things that we should consider when we face lack, poverty, and famine. There are those who place little emphasis on God's sovereignty, and they think that our fascination with it is a matter of private preference. Indeed, some Christians are obsessed with this doctrine for illegitimate reasons. They have a view on the subject, and they do not like to be contradicted. They cannot state a cogent theological reason for making this their chief concern. They are obsessed with it, but they do not know what they are saying or what they are doing. In the same way, some people are obsessed with disputes about the sacraments, some about eschatology, some about covenants, and so on.

Those who accuse us of placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on God's sovereignty must not understand this doctrine very well. If they understood it, they would either forsake their faith in God, showing themselves to be reprobates, or they would rejoice in it with us, and proclaim and defend it with equal vehemence. On the other hand, their accusation of theological imbalance indeed applies to those who are always going on about God's sovereignty as if this is the only teaching in all of Scripture, and who cannot provide a sound reason as to why they give it such emphasis. They exalt the doctrine not because they understand its significance, but it is because they have identified themselves with it. It is a private obsession, and badge of their identity and tradition. They defend this God-centered doctrine from the perspective of man-centered interests. Thus the danger of false piety is real, and we need to examine ourselves, to see if we truly understand this doctrine.

When we say that God is sovereign, the meaning is that God is king over all his creation. He created the world, he sustains it, and he continues to exercise control over it. It is not enough to say that he *can* control all of creation. This leaves room for the false doctrine, affirmed by most of the people who claim to believe in his absolute sovereignty, and even by those who call themselves Calvinists, and who supposedly give the doctrine its strongest and purest expression, that there are some things that he does not directly cause, but that he merely permits to occur. This is blasphemy at the deepest level.

We must rather say that God *can* and God *does* control all of creation. If God can control all of creation but does not, then it leaves room for billions upon billions of events to be decided and caused by influences other than himself, even if these are somehow controlled by being "permitted" – a strange and self-contradictory doctrine. No matter how hard this perspective is defended, we are left with a God who is in direct control only over the "big picture" of what happens in his creation. This God is different from the God of open theism only in degree. This is not the God of the Bible, but one that man has imagined to satisfy his own standard of what God should be and what he should not be.

The agenda is to distance God from being the direct cause of evil, and this is necessitated by the assumption that to cause evil in the metaphysical sense is to commit evil in the moral sense, a standard that is nowhere found in the Bible, and never successfully defended in the entire history of human thinking. So why has this standard been imposed on Almighty God? Is it not obvious? The underlying principle that forbids God to be the ruler over all things and the cause of all events is not reverence but self-worship. That is, if God must adhere to *your* standard in order to remain righteous, when he himself has declared no such standard, then in your thinking, he is not God, but *you are*. You are the one who sets the standard for him.

If we understand the doctrine, then when we say that God is sovereign, it is just another way of saying that God is God. And if he is not God over all, if he does not exercise direct causation over all things, all minds, and all events, then he is not God at all. Thus the idea of permission is only a hidden denial of actual and complete sovereignty, a denial of the true God. And this is why the doctrine of God's sovereignty ought to receive such emphasis.

God's sovereignty applies to things that are pleasant and things that are unpleasant to us. Our verse comes from Hannah's prayer. God had shut her womb, so that at first she bore no children. But she petitioned the Lord for a son, and vowed to offer him to serve the Lord all the days of his life. The Lord granted her request and opened her womb, whom she named Samuel. She brought the boy to Eli as she promised, and uttered this prayer from which our verse is taken. She realized that the Lord could shut up a woman's womb, so that she could not bear children, and afterward he could open it, so that she could bear children. Both are of the Lord.

She says in verse 6, "The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up." This is clear enough, but lest it eludes some people, let me paraphrase it. It means that God can *kill you* whenever he wants, and just as easily, he can make you alive again, and raise you from the dead. He can put you into the grave, and he can also bring you back out. He is the author and cause of both death and life. The same applies to poverty and wealth. God can make a person rich, and then take away all his wealth. And God can make a person poor, and afterward make him rich. He is the author and cause of both poverty and prosperity on all levels – the personal, the national, and the global.

This recognition should not lead to despair and grumbling, but to reverence, submission, and gratitude. This is because the exercise of God's sovereignty, whether pleasant or unpleasant to us at the time, is always for the good of his people. Consider the case of Hannah. She was barren, and berated and provoked by another woman because of it. In her plight she petitioned the Lord, who granted her a son. Born out of suffering and prayer, Samuel turned out to be one of the most faithful and powerful prophets in all of biblical history. He brought great honor to her mother, and great blessing to his nation, and also to us, who read about his words and deeds, and who benefit from his ministry to David, out of whom Christ was descended.

~ 2 ~

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD.

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands." (Haggai 1:2-11)

God's people had returned to their land to rebuild the city. This included the reconstruction of the temple, but they were so busy building their own houses and setting their lives in order that the house of the Lord remained a ruin. They cared more about their individual comfort and stability than the honor of the Lord, who was even the glory of the nation. By the mouth of Haggai, the Lord rebuked the people for their neglect and their wrong focus.

It is true that God does not suffer lack, hunger, or discomfort. And he does not really live in any physical building. One can draw the conclusion, "We need our houses, but the temple can wait. The Lord has need of nothing." But consider God's attitude about the matter. He knew that he needed nothing. The people's neglect did not in any way injure his being. Yet he insisted that his people should give his temple the priority, and he defeated their efforts to restore their own lives while temple construction was postponed. He regarded his honor and his program more important than the comfort and prosperity of his people. Those who have the mind of Christ will also prioritize their lives according to this order.

Because they neglected the Lord, their efforts at improving their own lives were frustrated. This happened not because of some natural order of things, but God actively

counteracted their efforts to attain stability and prosperity: "You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it....You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away." You may say, "God has no need of anything. He can wait." The Lord can indeed afford to wait, but can you afford to make him wait?

Most church members are freeloaders. They give very little money to the churches that they attend, and many do not give anything at all. This remark is not targeted at the poor, since some of them exhibit sacrifice and generosity that put others to shame. Jesus said that the widow who gave only "two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny" had put more into the treasury than all the others. He explained, "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on." Now, whatever the motive or context, two coins remain two coins, and usually cannot make a financial impact except through extraordinary providence of God, who calls those things which be not as though they were. But he, who understands the economic realities of men, nevertheless esteems faith and devotion more than dollars and cents.

For those people who contribute anything at all, church giving is one of the first things to be cut from the budget when financial difficulty arises, or when they are told that the economy is not well. This is because church giving is considered an unnecessary expense. They would scheme hard to maintain their standard of living. They strive to keep their cars and houses, to keep eating well, and if possible, to keep on having their vacations and other luxuries. Church giving ceases immediately to make room for these. Even their television sets are more valuable than their pastors and the church workers. What, are they to keep watching the games on their small screens? And of course their children's education, which would translate into careers and earnings, is top priority. Let the pastors' children go hungry, and may the church crumble into dust, but no sacrifice is too great to provide a secular education for their own children.

A time of famine is also a time to reassess our priorities. For many people, it uncovers that their faith is a sham. When push comes to shove, they shove God right out of the door. Some things seem to be necessities. Some things are obviously luxuries. And some things seem good in themselves. But there is no excuse for putting anything before the Lord and his work on the earth. In a time of famine, the temptation of self-indulgence persists, and the instinct of self-preservation is aggravated. But only non-Christians are swept away by the lusts of the flesh and the instincts of beasts. As Christians, God has infused life into our souls, and we have been awakened to the realities of heaven and the powers of the world to come. Thus we are well able to overcome forces that hold unbelievers captive.

Where your treasure is, there is your heart also. You confess your faith by your words, but you also demonstrate your true priorities by your actions. You are either vindicated or condemned by them. If you confess the Lord, but contribute nothing to his cause, or if you cut him off whenever your own welfare is threatened, then this betrays that your allegiance belongs to someone or something else. At the very least, it shows that your

faith is weak, and that you trust in the method and system of man rather than the providence of God. You profess that he is able to provide, but by your works you deny it. You profess that the Lord is above all, and that he is the love of your life, and that your utmost desire is for his name to be honored among the nations. But when resources are scarce, suddenly your priorities become clear, and the Lord might not even make the list.

What are you to do? Do not stop giving to your church. And if you have not been giving as you should, now is the time to begin. You may plan, save, organize, and rearrange your finances, but whatever you do, you must support the work of the Lord with your money, and you must do it consistently. At a time when the Lord's people forsake him to appease Mammon, you can give voice to the Lord's remnant by your giving and by your testimony. Resist the temptation of self-indulgence. Control the animal instinct of self-preservation. Walk in the spirit, and act from your higher nature. Establish your faith by reading the Scripture and thinking on its promises. Pray for God to strengthen your inner man with might by his Spirit. Stir up the gift that is within you. Then go encourage your brothers.

You can also support your church in other ways, by offering your time and labor. The church needs money to pay its expenses and salaries, and to continue and expand its projects and outreaches. But it also needs personal participation. Ask your church leaders what you can do for the church, then accept your assignments without protest, and carry out your work with joy, as if you are doing it for the Lord, for indeed that is the case. In this way, you will help encourage morale, and your volunteer work will also lower the expenses for the church.

~ 3 ~

"My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

"For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 2:5-8)

Even when the economy is poor, we must continue to support our churches and other organizations that promote the cause of Christ. This leads to the question of which churches we ought to support, or whether all churches deserve our support. Based on my own judgment, and on testimonies from brothers around the world, it would seem that it is no exaggeration to say that most churches should die. The world would be a better place, it would seem, if nine out of ten churches would perish today, and there are those who consider my estimate too charitable.

However, since there is no actual tabulation, let us say "many" instead of "most." That is, the cause of the Lord Jesus and the welfare of his people would be better served if many churches would perish. This is, of course, a statement about appearance, since the Lord himself controls and sustains all things, and designs the exact proportion of good and evil to advance his own plan. Thus it is a statement made relative to his precepts and not his decrees. His precepts are what we should consult to guide our daily thinking and behavior.

When resources are scarce, good churches suffer as well as bad churches. Even if you are unaffected by dismal economic conditions, many other people are affected, and whether due to their actual inability or to their fearful and selfish attitude, this translates into a withdrawal of support, and thus financial problems for churches. So it is more important than ever for you to withdraw support from churches that are indeed unfaithful and ineffective, and to redirect it to churches that are fulfilling the Christian mission.

Now is the time to decide if the church that you attend is a good church, and if it deserves the support that you give to it. Of course, it should go without saying that no church is perfect, and you will almost always find something to complain about. If your complaints are petty and personal, then the problem is with you and not the church. You are the one who needs to repent and change. But if the church compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, or fails to live up to what is required of it in significant ways, and especially if it is confronted with this and fails to repent, then this is a church that deserves to die, and you

should consider withdrawing support from it and join yourself to one that truly honors the Lord.

Our passage tells us what God requires from spiritual leaders, and thus from the church, since the church consists of people. They must revere God and stand in awe of his name. This alone might disqualify all of the leaders in your church. True instruction must be in their mouths – they must teach sound doctrines. And "nothing false" must be found on their lips. This is said in contrast to "true instruction," so that it refers to false doctrines or heresies. Thus spiritual leaders must teach sound doctrines, and no false doctrines. This disqualifies not only heretics, but also those who teach nothing at all, or who are not diligent in the ministry of teaching, since it is said that "true instruction" must be found in their mouths.

God commands every person in every place to repent and to believe in Jesus Christ. He requires all men and women to become Christians, and then to grow as Christians, and to serve and worship as Christians. Those whom he has chosen for salvation will obey this command, but those whom he has actively chosen and created for damnation will reject the gospel. It is written of Eli's sons, who sinned against the Lord, that they "did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death" (1 Samuel 2:25). In other words, the Lord does not forgive or punish because of men's response; rather, men embrace or reject the Lord Jesus because of God's foreordination, or God's predetermined plan concerning them. In any case, it is the church's mission to declare the doctrines of the Christian faith to every person and in every place, and then to shepherd and educate those that God adds to the church.

If any church or ministry does not make specific and explicit effort at pursuing this purpose, then it is nothing more than a show of godliness, if even that, and a camouflage for negligence and rebellion. There is no legitimate reason for its existence as a Christian organization. Unless the leadership and the people repent and wholeheartedly commit to the propagation and the establishment of the Christian faith, that church or ministry must die without mercy. It is a waste and a drain on the resources of God's people. It should perish without delay. Anyone who helps it survive shares in its sin, and also incurs the guilt of failing to support faithful churches and ministries.

A church that honors the Lord is one that teaches sound doctrines, and also *applies and enforces them*. God, by the mouth of Malachi, defines the qualities of a spiritual leader, even one who serves before him as priest. And he states that he is one who walks in peace and uprightness. A Christian minister must exhibit personal holiness and integrity. He must live up to the gospel that he preaches. Then, he must also apply and enforce it when it comes to other people's lives. In the words of our passage, a good minister of Jesus Christ is one who turns many from sin.

A minister who turns people from sin needs to do a number of things. He needs to explain the nature of God, that he is holy and righteous, and that he does not tolerate transgressions. He needs to talk about judgment and hellfire. He needs to talk about sin, and to tell people that they are sinners. Then he needs to talk about God's forgiveness,

and that it is found only through faith in Jesus Christ. And if it is found only there, then it is not found anywhere else. Thus all non-Christians remain condemned, without forgiveness, for their many sins, and God will forever punish them in hellfire that cannot be quenched.

Again, to turn someone away from sin, you need to define sin. And sin can be defined only in relation to God and his commandments. Then, you need to explain the evil of sin, of transgressing the laws of God, and the consequences of sin, that of everlasting suffering in hell. Moreover, a true church must enforce what it teaches about sin. It must practice church discipline. This means that it must directly confront those who have sinned, and demand their repentance. If they refuse to repent, they must be expelled from the church. It is again crucial to define sin, so that the private preferences of the leaders are not enforced, but rather the holy precepts of God. Sin must be defined also because so that nothing will be missed. For example, to affirm and spread heresy, to adore images, and to use God's name in vain are sins just as much as murder and adultery.

If the above paragraph alone speaks more clearly and abundantly about sin than your church does over an entire year, if not longer, yours is not a Christian church, but a gathering of demons. You need to confront your church and call the leadership to repent, or you need to take your support to another church, which is not another, since yours is not a church in the first place. You must not support a church that refuses to turn people away from sin, since that should be one of its chief duties. This is not an insignificant difference of opinion – revolt or leave, but do not share in its guilt.

If your church is not founded on the perfection of the Bible, its inerrancy and infallibility, it should die. If your church denies the sovereignty of God, that God is God, it should die. If your church shuns the penal atonement of Christ, that he died a bloody death at the hands of the Jews to pay for the sins of his people, it should die. If your church shrinks from the doctrine of hell, a place that punishes all unbelievers with acute and extreme agony forever, it should die. If your church does not practice church discipline, calling out sinners for their sins, imploring, admonishing, rebuking, threatening them, and expelling those who refuse to repent, it should die.

And if your church endorses abominations like abortion, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and other such things, it should die. If your church holds yoga classes, palmistry workshops, and astrology seminars, it should die. Churches are called to fight these things, not to teach and applaud them. Churches are called to confront sinners, and to shame those who refuse to repent, and not to glorify them, or to make them into heroes. God's wrath is poured out upon all those who practice evil, and also on those who approve of these people.

These are only some of the necessary characteristics of a true church, and to fulfill them makes one nothing more than a minimally faithful congregation. It is a description of a normal church. It is how every church should begin and continue, and not some extraordinary spiritual height to be aspired to and attained after many years, if ever. Yes, most churches should probably die. Today. Let it not be your fault that they live one

moment longer. Whether any given church survives is God's hands, but your duty is to support those that are good and oppose those that are evil.

Good churches suffer partly because bad churches thrive. Bad churches thrive because people are gullible and rebellious. And people are gullible and rebellious because most of them are not even Christians. They support leaders and churches that tell them what they wish to hear, so that they may appear to seek God, but still believe and behave the same as before. And they are able to get away with this because Christians have failed to declare God's inflexible standard with clarity and boldness.

What you sow, you will also reap. If you support unfaithful churches, they will grow stronger, and you will reap destruction. If you sow fear and compromise, sins and heresies will increase. But if you support faithful churches, those that preach, apply, and enforce the doctrines of Jesus Christ, and if you join them in doing these things, then the Christian faith will thrive and take root, and the harvest will be peace, righteousness, and prosperity.

~ 4 ~

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

As Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians, he considered the prospect of death and said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Whether a person thinks this way depends on who he is and what he values. He was a Christian, so that for him to live was to serve Christ, and to die was to be with Christ. Although he was eager to serve Christ by preaching the gospel and strengthening the church, he much preferred the death of the body, so that his soul might ascend to Christ. He was a Christian, so that he had a relationship with Christ. And he valued Christ, so that he desired the presence of his Lord above all else.

Surely this is the correct way to see things. When a Christian fails to think this way, it is because his mind has not yet been renewed. He needs to be taught, not just by men, but by the Lord. And he can be taught, because the life of God is in him. But a non-Christian cannot do it at all, because of who he is and what he values. He is a non-Christian, and so he has no peaceful relation with God, and rather than holding Christ in high esteem, he values the indulgence of the flesh, and other abominable desires and prospects.

The Christian perceives the value of suffering. Now, there is no value in suffering itself. Some people suffer and become bitter. Some people suffer and blaspheme God. Suffering is constructive only when it is dealt by God to a person in a loving manner, for the purpose of training and discipline. In other words, suffering is meaningless in itself, and it is destructive for the reprobates. On the other hand, suffering provides the occasion for Christians to consider their ways, to strengthen their faith, to rekindle their compassion, to renew their resolve to overcome all distractions and temptations, and to express their dependence on God by their worship and persistent petitions. It provides occasion for them to reevaluate their habits and their priorities, and to lay aside every weight that hinders them.

James writes that we should rejoice when we face different kinds of hardship, because the testing of our faith develops perseverance, which in turn is able to lead us to become mature and complete. This can apply only to Christians, because only Christians have faith to be tested in the first place. And only Christians will develop perseverance and other fruits of the Spirit when faith is tested. The students of Christ can rejoice when facing hardship because they want to develop perseverance; they want to become mature and complete. Who we are and what we value distinguish us, and enable us to face hardship with the right attitude and benefit from the suffering.

Job said regarding his ordeal, "When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). This is appropriate in a time of famine, for gold is what people lack in the first place. Job was in a destitute condition, but he recognized a higher treasure. What a blessing it is to have our faith refined and purified. What a blessing it is to have our weaknesses exposed and removed. What a blessing it is to know where we stand with God, and that we stand with God. What a blessing it is to gain self-understanding, to perceive where we have deluded ourselves about the greatness of our faith, if we have indeed deluded ourselves, but also to obtain the assurance that there is a genuine foundation, that God has indeed performed a work in our hearts, so that even though we struggle, we endure, and become stronger because of it.

~ 5 ~

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

We are confident that Philippians 4:19 applies to us because we know the same God and the same Christ Jesus that the Philippians knew. We have a common faith, and therefore common promises and blessings. Thus it is only right that we are to find consolation and encouragement from it, and it has been used for just this purpose by countless believers as they faced financial hardship and various worries. However, as we embrace this verse as God's word to us in a time of famine, we should be aware that Paul mentions two things before this verse that provide context to his statement.

First, Paul indicates that he has attained the beautiful quality of contentment: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (v. 11-13).

Verse 13 is taken out of context even more often than verse 19. When Paul says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength," he is not talking about self-serving things such as professional exploits or something petty like athletic achievements. This is how many people use the verse. Of course, God can give you strength to achieve these things, but Paul refers to something much more precious. He is saying that, by the strength of Christ, he can remain content whether he is well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. In other words, he has learned to endure hunger and poverty, and to do this with an attitude of contentment. He has the power to suffer with grace and gratitude. Thus Paul writes verse 19 as a person who values the virtue of contentment and realizes the spiritual power it requires to remain in such a state of mind.

Second, the Philippians have repeatedly sent financial support to Paul: "Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need" (v. 15-16). Paul is writing to a group of Christians who faithfully supported him by sending him money "again and again."

Let these two points temper your sense of entitlement to verse 19. If you are a whiny and ungrateful weakling, you must learn to depend on God's strength to endure suffering, even hunger and poverty. If you are unable to suffer, you should probably not prosper. And if you only think about your own needs, and have no concern about the condition of your church or other ministries that publish the gospel, laying claim to verse 19 would be an act of presumption rather than of faith. These two items do not nullify the verse – it

says what it says – but they remind us that it is written within a broader context of a vital Christian life, and life that is alive to God, a life in which God is at work to develop strength, contentment, and sacrifice.

There are two things to note regarding verse 19. It tells us that God will meet all our needs, but it also tells us about the basis and source of his provision.

The basis for God's supply is "Christ Jesus." God blesses us not because of any merit that we have on our own, but because of his sovereign love, so that he sent his Son Jesus Christ to secure for us an everlasting salvation. Paul wrote, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Commentators suppose that the statement refers to spiritual wealth, that Jesus suffered the humiliation of his ministry on earth in order to obtain an inheritance for us. However, it would be a mistake to spiritualize the entire inheritance, as if God would grant us material provisions and blessings on a basis other than the work of Christ.

Rather, our inheritance includes the redemption of the body, and not just the soul. And even our present corruptible flesh has become the temple of the Holy Spirit. So the effect of redemption extends to the corporeal realm, and carries ramifications for the present. Jesus taught his disciples to ask for their "daily bread," and instructed them to request the forgiveness of sins in the same prayer. It would be senseless to suppose that forgiveness is granted to us because of Christ, while our daily bread, or material provision, is granted on some other basis. No, all blessings come to us on the basis of Jesus Christ, and we receive these from God because of our affiliation with our Lord. Jesus became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich in every way.

This in turn provides a foundation for unshakable faith in God's provision. I have no confidence in myself, but I can have absolute confidence that God is pleased with his Son, Jesus Christ, and that he has regard for the work of redemption that he performed. To the extent that I think God favors the Lord Jesus, that is also the measure of my confidence in his provision for me, since that has been secured for all his people in the work of redemption.

Then, the source of God's supply is his "glorious riches." The state of the economy has nothing to do with it. God is neither helped nor hindered by the condition of the world, because he does not depend on it. Here is where faith or unbelief makes all the difference. How is the provision going to come? Will God rain money from above? Perhaps he will, but that is none of your concern. He did not supply for the Israelites out of an abundance of resources in the wilderness, for resources were scarce, which led to much grumbling and rebellion. Rather, he was able to provide because of his command over all of creation. And if the earth does not have what is needed, he can always make it.

Christians are accustomed to the idea that God works through ordinary providence, and indeed God works in such a manner. However, this does not mean that he is limited by a situation that he himself has created. That is, when the economy is poor, it is because

God has willed and caused it. But this does not mean that he is now unable to provide for whom he wishes until he reverses the entire scenario.

An implicit deism has poisoned the thinking and the theology of so many believers that it is difficult for them to conceive of God's power as active and present. The doctrine of ordinary providence is an affirmation of God's active and present control over all things in a regular and consistent manner. It is not meant to be a cover for unbelief. Jesus said that God had never stopped working (John 5:17). God can and God does prosper his people regardless of the state of the economy. He will meet the needs of his people according to his glorious riches that is in Christ Jesus.

~ 6 ~

"For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Genesis 18:19)

A time of crisis provides the head of the house a golden opportunity to teach his family about faith in God. This does not mean that day to day instructions are less important. Indeed, a man who consistently speaks well of the Lord, who faithfully passes on his doctrines, and who persists in obedience to his precepts exhibits beauty and strength that is bound to make a positive impression on the elect members of his family. Nevertheless, how he responds to a crisis situation provides a different kind of opportunity for him to honor the Lord in his word and deed.

There are those who appear pious for long periods. They are able to handle the pressure of time, and can persist in the same type of belief and behavior. But unless they can maintain the same trust in the Lord in a time of great hardship, all it means is that they are talented at being hypocrites for great lengths of time. Thus a worthy legacy of faith is one that has been tested not only by time, but also by the heat of urgent troubles.

Abraham instructed Isaac both by word and by example. Even as he brought Isaac before the alter to be offered to God as a burnt sacrifice, he told him, "God himself will provide." This foreshadowed God's provision of Jesus Christ as a sacrificial lamb to atone for the sins of his people. In any case, the entire experience, which was verbally interpreted by the Lord as he commended Abraham's obedience, must have impressed Isaac with the way that a man should and could place God above all else, even his most beloved son, in order to follow his commands and instructions.

It was an informed and intelligent trust. Abraham knew this God. He knew of his great wisdom, limitless power, and unbreakable promises, so that in order for this God to fulfill his promises, he would have had to raise Isaac from the ashes. Thus he marched toward the alter with Isaac, fully intending to offer him up, and fully expecting to receive him alive again, so that although the Lord stopped him at the last moment, the Scripture states that Abraham indeed symbolically received his son from the dead. In this sense, it made no difference that Isaac was not slain – to Abraham, he was as good as dead, and it was as if God raised him from the ashes and returned his son to him. How Abraham honored God with his faith! And what a gift it was to Isaac, who was able to learn that this kind of faith was right, beautiful, and possible.

Now it is our turn to show our families that we are the children of Abraham, and to honor God before them by an exposition and demonstration of intelligent faith. You have been telling your wife and children that God is faithful, that a man cannot serve both God and Mammon, that the progress of the gospel in this world is more important than our

personal comfort, and that as Jesus said, life does not consist of the abundance of possessions. Do you believe any of it? Now is the time to show them.

There are many who say that they have strayed from the faith of their parents because of the hypocrisy that they saw in them. However, only stupid people stumble over the failures of others. Just because some people claim to be Christians but fail to live up to their profession of faith does nothing to show that the Christian faith is false or that Christ is unworthy of their allegiance. In fact, the Christian faith itself insists that there are many such hypocrites. Your children's faith should rest on divine revelation and not on human example, but this does not release you from the duty to honor God before them, and to be before them a picture of what it is like to be a godly man, full of faith, love, knowledge, patience, and all kinds of spiritual graces and virtues.

Some of what you impart to your children will occur naturally in casual conversations and daily events. Of course, examples in themselves teach nothing, but they must be explicitly interpreted. They serve as illustrations and reminders to verbal instructions. In any case, it is necessary to take a more deliberate approach to educate them in the faith. Hold a family meeting and explain the financial situation (or any kind of crisis) to your children in terms that they can understand. If you are afraid that this would traumatize them, let me assure you that your weakness and unbelief, and an overall pathetic attitude, are much more likely to traumatize them than a calm explanation of a problem followed by an exhortation to trust in God.

Then, tell them about the God who controls all of creation and who controls all things for the display of his glory and the good of his people. Pass on to them the promises of God, and the greater importance of faith and integrity over financial stability and career advancement. Follow through with consistent and relentless trust in the Lord, with frequent thanksgiving and petitions. Such a legacy of faith is worth much more than any financial inheritance that you can leave to your children, for whereas earthly riches pass away, in the legacy of faith is an everlasting salvation.