

Scarcity and Abundance

Deuteronomy 8

This morning I want to tell you about a guy. We'll call him "Guy" to protect his identity. He grew up in a solid Christian home and believed in Jesus from a very early age. His parents were very open with him and his siblings about finances. His mom and dad worked hard at their jobs, but money was usually tight. Some months they didn't know how they were going to pay the rent and buy food. And so they prayed that God would provide. Sometimes they would gather around the table as a family and pray for ten or fifteen minutes, pouring out their hearts to God: "Father, Jesus taught us to pray, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' and so we're asking you to provide. God, we need you to come through for us."

God always provided. Sometimes there was extra work that provided needed income; more than once unexpected gifts came in the mail; one morning there was an envelope containing \$200 on the doorstep. Whenever God provided the family gathered and gave thanks. Guy grew up believing that God is real. As a kid he read the Bible with anticipation because he was experiencing the very things described in Scripture. Guy learned how to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, knowing that "all these things would be added" (that God would meet his material needs).

After high school Guy went to K-State. He walked with God throughout college. God even used him to lead others to Christ. He found it very natural to share with others what God had done in him and through him. After college he married and got a good job. Over time a rather subtle thing happened in Guy's walk with God.

Because he earned a good income, he didn't need to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread"; there wasn't any suspense about how he was going to pay the mortgage or buy food. As a matter of fact, as time went on there wasn't much suspense about anything in Guy's life. He settled into a good, stable middle-class existence. If you had asked him, he would have told you, "Oh yes, I still believe in Jesus. I have since I was a kid." But he had quit taking spiritual risks. He didn't talk about Jesus with family, friends, and coworkers; it never really crossed his mind.

Perhaps the oddest thing was that Guy didn't notice people in his church and in his town who were just like he was growing up - struggling financially and in need of a gift. He wouldn't say this, but he really believed, "I worked hard for what I've got; they should too." The Scriptures advocate working hard, but Guy forgot all the help God had given him along the way. He forgot how God had used other people to supply his needs. The sad reality is that Guy had become proud, complacent, and lukewarm. He had a decent standard of living, but little else. He didn't really love God with all his heart, soul, and might; and he didn't love his neighbor as himself.

Who is this Guy? This "guy" could be anybody in this room. Our passage today is Deuteronomy 8. In this chapter Moses tells the children of Israel to think back to their time in the wilderness when they had to trust God every single day for daily bread. He points out that God was teaching them humility during that season of scarcity. Then he

looks forward to the day when they are living in the Land enjoying its abundance. He urges them not to become proud and self-sufficient, abandoning their faith in the God who had provided for them all those years. His concern in this chapter is that they not become “that guy.”

Whether this is a season of scarcity or a season of abundance for you, listen to what God would say to you through Deuteronomy 8.

Learning humility in times of scarcity. (Deuteronomy 8:1-6)

Moses emphasizes how God had been trying to teach them humility in the wilderness. Let's read verses 1 through 3.

1 “All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your forefathers. 2 “You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 “He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

The children of Israel weren't wandering aimlessly in the wilderness; God was leading them. The wilderness was a classroom in which God sought to teach His people the importance of obedience, hanging on His every word. We see here in verse 3 that God's curriculum involved humbling them by letting them experience hunger and then feeding them manna (which He spoke into existence each morning). They were supposed to understand that their life wasn't merely sustained by bread; their life was sustained by God speaking. If God didn't speak manna into existence each morning, they wouldn't eat.

That realization should make them believe that **everything** God says is significant. As verse 1 says, “All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do. . .” Moses continues to describe how God had taken care of them in the wilderness, mentioning that God was a good Father who trains His child.

4 “Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 “Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 “Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

Their time in the wilderness was like adolescence - a time to learn basic truths and lessons that set them up for adulthood. Like the father in the book of Proverbs wanted his son to remember the lessons learned in childhood, Moses was concerned that the children of Israel remember the lessons learned in the wilderness.

If you find yourself in a season of scarcity, I would encourage you to do your best to learn every lesson that God wants to teach you. On the one hand, I want to say to you, “Let’s figure out how you can go from scarcity to abundance as quickly as possible.” We do sometimes connect people who are struggling financially with others who have wisdom that can be very valuable. There’s an amazing organization in town called Thrive that helps people living in poverty, providing relationships and resources that can lead to lasting change (see <http://www.thriveflinthills.com>).

But on the other hand, this passage suggests that you need to make sure you don’t miss a thing God is trying to teach you ***in the midst of scarcity***. Many Scriptures reinforce this:

- James 1 tells us that God refines us through the trials we experience
- In Matthew 6 Jesus tells us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” and to “seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness and all these things” (our needs) will be supplied.
- 2 Corinthians 8 describes how the poor church in Macedonia gave generously to the poor in Jerusalem.
- Galatians 6:2 speaks of bearing one another’s burdens; there may be occasions when you let your needs be known so that others can live out this responsibility.

Nobody wants to live in a season of scarcity, but if we’re attentive we can learn foundational habits of faith that will be valuable for the rest of our lives, even if we never experience abundance.

Avoiding pride in times of abundance. (Deuteronomy 8:7-18)

Beginning in verse 7 Moses challenges the people to think about life in the Promised Land. Specifically he wanted them to anticipate the temptations of abundance. Notice the contrast between the Promised Land they were entering and the wilderness they were leaving.

7 “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

Moses let them know that they were going from scarcity to abundance. They would be making a transition from “a great and terrible wilderness” (1:19, 8:15) to a “good land” with abundant water and good soil; it even had minerals such as iron and copper that could be dug. They wouldn’t have to trust God for food and for water the way they did in the wilderness. If they weren’t careful, they could begin taking these things for granted. Therefore, Moses gives this command:

10 “When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.

Notice the appropriate response after eating the fruit of the land and being satisfied with such things: “You shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given

you.” Their thoughts and their praise should return to God. They were to remember that God had given them the land. They were express their gratitude directly to God.

One commentator noted this verse explains the Jewish tradition of giving thanks both before **and** after a meal: “when you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God. . .” (see also 1 Timothy 3:3-5). I’d never heard of that, so I emailed my 86-year-old Jewish mother to ask her if that really was a thing. She emailed me back and basically told me, “Google it and you’ll see that it is.” It is! I would commend the practice. Perhaps during Lent you might try giving thanks both before and after you eat.

Notice how Moses continues to anticipate the temptations of abundance:

11 “Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Moses is painting a picture of people who have gone from having very little to having very much. But instead of obeying everything that God is commanding, they become proud. Instead of being continually amazed that God had delivered them from slavery and sustained them through a great a terrible wilderness and given them a land flowing with milk and honey, they forget God. Their prosperity and abundance would make them proud.

Notice how Moses continues applying the lessons of past scarcity to a future of abundance.

15 “He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. 16 “In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. 17 “Otherwise, you may say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.’

He humbled them in the wilderness so that they wouldn’t become proud in the Promised Land. If they remembered where they had been, they would never “say in their heart, ‘**My** power and the strength of **my** hand made me this wealth.’” But wait a minute, you might be thinking, “Their effort **was** involved; they would build houses and work the land with their own hands.” That’s true. But notice Moses’ point in verse 18:

18 “But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Moses reminded them that God is the one who gave them “power to make wealth.” He gave them life and breath, the will to work, strong bodies, skills, etc. This reflects the biblical idea of stewardship: everything we have has been given to us by God. Everything (see 1 Cor. 4:7).

In Israel’s case, prosperity in the Land was an expression of God’s covenant loyalty. You can read more about this in Deuteronomy 7:14-15. As long as they obeyed Him, God promised to bless everything - “the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil. . . your herd. . . your flock.” If they remembered God, obeyed all He had commanded, and lived humbly before Him, they would continue to experience abundance.

A Positive Example in Israel. King David understood what Moses was teaching in Deuteronomy 8. After the people had brought more than enough to fund the building of the temple, David prayed the amazing prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 29. Listen to a portion of his prayer:

12 “Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone. 13 “Now therefore, our God, we thank You, and praise Your glorious name. 14 “But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You.”

David understood that their wealth was a gift of God. They could give so generously because God had been so generous to them. Everything had come from the hand of God.

A Negative Example beyond Israel. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who had taken Israel into exile in the 6th century b.c., was one day walking around on the roof of his palace meditating on how great he was. We read this in Daniel 4:30:

30 “The king reflected and said, ‘Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?’

That’s exactly what Moses warned Israel **not** to think and say. While he was still speaking, God’s judgment came. He basically became like a beast living in the wild. After a period of insanity, Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes to heaven and his reason returned to him. Instinctively he did what Moses told the people to do: He “blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him. . .” (4:34). In Daniel 4:37 we find this praise on his lips:

37 “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.”

He found out the hard way that God is able to humble those who walk in pride. God wanted the children of Israel to **learn** that same lesson in the wilderness (in their time of scarcity) and **remember** that lesson in the Land (in their time of prosperity).

If you are in a season of abundance, the challenge is to avoid pride (becoming “that Guy”), thinking that you’ve earned the right to be selfish and self-indulgent. The good news is that if you read the Scriptures honestly and prayerfully, you will find many passages that challenge your pride and urge you to see everything you have as a gift from God to be used for His purposes.

- Deuteronomy 15 challenged the Israelites not to harden their hearts toward the poor in their midst, but to be open-handed.
- In Matthew 6 Jesus taught His disciples to give to the poor without fanfare. It’s possible that other people assume that you’re selfish and stingy with your money; it’s enough that your heavenly Father sees what you do.
- The tenth commandments (Deuteronomy 5:21) says, “You shall not covet” anything your neighbor has. Instead of continually chasing after a standard of living others have, be content.
- 1 Timothy 6 addresses directly “those who are rich in this world,” challenging them “not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God.” “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.”

If we are teachable and attentive, God can teach us and lead us in seasons of abundance.

This is a big deal in a church like Faith in a community like Manhattan. Affluence commonly makes people complacent and self-centered and lukewarm. But if we are attentive to the Spirit of God we can learn what Paul did (Philippians 4:12-13):

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Lord’s Table. The Lord’s Table is a time of self-examination. I’d urge you to examine yourself prayerfully in light of Deuteronomy 8. If you are in a season of scarcity, ask God, “How are you teaching me humility? How am I learning?” If you are in a season of abundance, ask God, “Will You expose areas of pride in my heart/mind? Are there ways I am not acknowledging You and honoring You with the abundance You have given?”

The bread and the cup signify the body and blood of Christ. As we eat and drink today, we should be reminded of what our salvation cost Jesus. . . and that He is with us and for us.