

To God Alone Be The Glory

This is such a wealthy country, I sometimes wonder: Is there a downside to living in the United States? On the one hand we have more. On the other hand we expect more. So when inflation eats away at the value of our dollars, many Americans feel like they are poor because they can't buy as much as they are accustomed to.

The way news about the economy is framed, you get the impression that we're all supposed to "be afraid, be very afraid. Unemployment could rise above 4%. Be afraid. Our economy might experience a hard landing. Be afraid." Wait a minute! We have plenty of capacity to take care of those in our household and plenty to help each other out. No one has to go hungry. God is good. If we can't afford our own shelter, we might have to move in with relatives. God is still good. He still provides daily bread.

It's not wrong to be concerned about finances. But there's a fine line between concern and fear, between concern and worry. Concern might lead us to be better managers of God's money that he entrusts to our care. Concern might lead us to cut out waste, spend wisely, and save diligently. Fear and worry, on the other and, might lead us to hoard money rather than share it with those who need food for their bodies or with those who need the gospel for their souls.

Trusting in Jesus who saved us from sin can lead us to say, "God made me his money manager. So I set some aside for savings. I want to be prepared for downturns in the economy before they happen." Fear says, "I

have to take care of myself, because, frankly,

God is not taking care of me as well as I want him to. I don't feel secure relying on God." And there's the real problem, isn't it? Whenever we cut God out of the picture or decide we can't trust him, we won't be content. And then we look elsewhere for security. We might try to convince ourselves that we're playing the lottery "just for entertainment purposes," or gambling in some other way—whatever. If deep down we hope that we will be the big winner so that we don't have to rely on God or be nice at work, we're already the big loser. We're losing out on the joy of being content. We can be content in any and every circumstance because Jesus has taken away all our sins and we are right with the God who provides for us. Contentment has value for Christians whether we are rich or poor. Wealth isn't bad. But pity the person who is "independently wealthy," like the man in today's Gospel, because independence from God results the scariest existence known to mankind.

It's so much better, dear friends, to be completely dependent on the Lord for everything we need. Then everything we receive becomes an opportunity to give thanks. And we can talk like the Apostle Paul: ¹¹*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* ¹²*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.* ¹³*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

I have a long story for you called THE RICH FAMILY IN CHURCH. It was written by Edie Ogan. (Edited slightly. I don't know more about the source.)

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My Dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money.

By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. Then we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many yard- and house-cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us baby-sat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark at home and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so we figured that whatever amount of money we accumulated, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor was reminding everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to exchange all our change for three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before.

That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church!

On Sunday morning, the rain was a-pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls ["Smith" was likely the author's maiden name] having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I still felt rich.

When the sacrificial offering was gathered, we were sitting in the second pew from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us girls put in a \$20.

As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes! [Remember, they had eaten potatoes all month.]

Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it

was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 bill and seventeen \$1 bills.

Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk. We just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash.

Up until that point we kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents, and a house full of brothers and sisters, and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives in our house that we passed around to whomever needed to cut up their food.

I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I had never thought we were poor. That Easter Sunday I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor. I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed—I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor!

I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required in those days.

We sat in silence for a long time. Then the sun went down and it got dark, so we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school

and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money.

What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We had never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a bright, sunny day, we didn't talk on the way to church. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in, and she only sang one verse.

At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy tin roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?"

We four looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me. I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering plate.

When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." WE were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again.

This story leaves me with mixed emotions

and rotating thoughts. How about you? Are you maybe a little upset with the church members who thought that \$1 was generous? In 1946 \$1 bought a lot more than it does today. But even so, we don't know the circumstances of those households, so let's not form hard opinions.

But what a great example of sacrificial giving the Smith family set for us! We can say something similar to what the apostle Paul wrote in our text: ¹⁴*it [is] good ~~of you~~ to share in [the] troubles [of others]*. Now I don't want to give the impression that God is pleased with our offerings only when we give until it hurts. Lots of people give away 8, 10, 12% of their income and it doesn't even pinch. But the Smiths show us how joyful an exercise it is to love others enough to give up something for them. What fun to be generous! It gives us a window into the fun God must have every day showering his blessings on the people of earth. And then we realize how true it is when the Bible teaches us that our generosity is really a gift from God to us (see 2 Corinthians 8:7).

Here's biggest down side I see to this story: Where is Jesus? I couldn't find him anywhere in the story. If we changed a few elements, the story could be about a Hindu family, a Jewish family, a Muslim family, a Buddhist family, or even a non-religious family. God wasn't mentioned anywhere in the story. As Christians who have been steeped in the Bible like a tea bag in hot water, we tend to see our wonderful Triune God right there beneath

the surface of the story. But in this day when God is missing from most of the entertainment we experience, I would rather give God the glory explicitly than just implicitly.

For example, the girl in the story felt rich because she and her family were able to give generously. And that's an important truth to hold on to. But who gives us the capacity to be generous? Who gives us the capacity to be content in any and every circumstance? Paul rightly says, ¹³*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*. Let's be generous, yes! And then let's turn to God and glorify him, because our capacity to be generous comes, not from how much money we have or even how much we give, but how rich Jesus has made us by taking our sins away and counting us as children of God. We are rich because we have God's love! And that's true whether we are in an economic upswing or an economic downturn. When the Holy Spirit is kind enough to live in our hearts we can say with the prophet Habakkuk (3:17-18): ¹⁷*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,* ¹⁸*yet will I rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.*