

Sharing During Shortages

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 on April 26, 2020

Please read 2 Corinthians 8:15 before going further in this transcript. Today we are continuing our sermon series on “Following Jesus during Tough Times.” Ephesians 5:15-16 urges us, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity....” This isn’t just about positive thinking, or some kind of a motivational pep talk. This is the counsel of God’s Word: make the most of EVERY opportunity. Even during this unprecedented time in history, there are opportunities for us to live wisely. To make the most of these opportunities to live for God. Today, let’s consider three different stories: two of them are in the past, and one of them is in the future.

Let’s begin with a story, from the past, from 100 years ago. Back in 1920, once the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic was FINALLY over, things were just beginning to get back to somewhat “normal.” Only then, was everyone able to finally look back and take an objective look at what they had just been through. As they took stock, there were several different perspectives. One perspective, of course, was one of sadness and mourning over the many lives that had been lost. As many as 50-100 million people had died.¹ Another perspective was one of thankfulness, from those who survived. For the way that God had provided for them and carried them through this incredibly tough time.

But yet another perspective was one that perhaps, wouldn’t occur to us. We might not have guessed this one. Right now, in the midst of our own frustrations and fears over COVID-19, we might not be considering perhaps the most disturbing and unsettling perspective in the midst of all of this. It’s the perspective of looking back with deep regret. Not regret for what happened, but regret for how we responded to what happened. Or, perhaps I should say, for how we didn’t respond. How we failed to make the most of the opportunity. You see, some of those who survived the Spanish Flu Pandemic were deeply embarrassed, and ashamed of how they had acted in the midst of those tough times.² In fact, many people refused to even talk about it, after it was over, because of the selfishness they had shown in their times of fear and frustration. Instead of turning outward to love their neighbors who were in need, they had turned inward and focused only on their own personal concerns.

Let’s be clear, the Spanish Flu and COVID-19 are NOT the same thing. And yet, comparing them can help us to reflect on our human responses to tough times. Both of these pandemics, help us ask some important questions: Will we continue to follow Jesus well, during tough times? A year or two from now, what will our story be? But we’re getting ahead of ourselves now. That future story, is actually our 3rd story, and we’ll come back to it. The 2nd story, is also a story from the past. It is found right here in today’s Scripture reading.

But first, please turn in your Bible to Acts 11. The New Testament contains some amazing stories of how the Early Church kept “Following Jesus during Tough Times.” One of those times was not a time of a global health pandemic, but it was a time of great struggle. Some 2,000 years ago, both the New Testament and other historical writings, record an event known as “The Great Famine.”³ From AD 45-63, The Great Famine swept through the Roman Empire, impacting Christians and non-Christians alike. The Great Famine was actually predicted in Acts 11:27-30, “During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. (*Jerusalem is in Judea*) This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”⁴ “Sharing During Shortages” teaches 3 important things about our faith. First of all, **“Sharing During Shortages” tells a story of**

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu

² Skye Jethani talked about this in a recent *Holy Post* podcast in March or April of 2020.

³ Learn more by reading *The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation* by Daryn Graham. My thanks to Pastor Eric Nygren for sharing this article with me.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>

⁴ Even this week, there is growing talk in the news, about how COVID-19 may threaten the global food supply for millions of people. Most of these millions are living in places in the world that can least afford to deal with it. (See <https://www.france24.com/en/20200422-un-says-food-shortages-due-to-covid-19-pandemic-could-lead-to-humanitarian-catastrophe>) This reality leaves us in the precarious position of choosing between the danger of spreading a deadly virus, and the danger of death by starvation for millions of people. There are no easy answers here. One thing that is clear, is that anyone who has a little extra right now, needs to prayerfully consider sharing it during these shortages.

1) ...grace-filled generosity. Genuine Christian generosity is grace-filled, not guilt-filled. 2 Corinthians 8 begins by telling us about the inspiring Christian faith of the Macedonian churches. Specifically, it records the story of their grace-filled generosity in helping those impacted by The Great Famine. The Apostle Paul notes in 2 Corinthians 8:3, “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own.” Let’s be clear, Paul is NOT RECOMMENDING that we give beyond our ability, but he is REPORTING that the Macedonians did. This was their own decision, between them and God.

Verse 4 goes on to say, “they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.” Chuck Swindoll summarizes it well, “The Macedonians didn’t see helping needy believers as an obligation but a privilege. This is grace-giving at its finest. And the following verse shows the soil from which this type of gracious giving originates.”⁵ He is referring to 2 Corinthians 8:5, “...They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.” Giving themselves 1st to the Lord is “The true basis of all Christian giving. God’s grace makes a difference in the lives and attitudes of his people.”⁶ Swindoll goes on to note, “When you give yourself totally to the Lord, giving your time, talents, or treasures is part and parcel of that commitment... if you find yourself giving with a tight fist, the problem is probably deeper than your wallet.”⁷

Becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together, teaches us to embrace the generous spirit of “Sharing During Shortages.” Generosity is the story that we should all want to be part of. The Early Church’s response to The Great Famine, tells the story of an infectious spread of generosity. Generosity is just the kind of infection that we want to see spreading among Christ-followers. 2 Corinthians 9:2 explains, “For I know your eagerness to help (*Corinthian Church*), and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia (*this is where Corinth was located*) were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.” In other words, the enthusiastic giving of the Corinthian church was inspiring the Macedonian churches.

Here’s a map to give you some perspective Macedonia is in the upper left-hand corner. It’s probably hard to read that smaller font, but Macedonia included churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, & Berea. Achaia is just south of Macedonia. It included the church in Corinth. Jerusalem, where these donations were being sent, is over on the bottom right-hand corner. You can just barely see it over there in Judea. So the donations were going from the upper left-hand corner of the map, down to the lower right-hand corner. To give you a sense of the scope of this: if you traveled across the Mediterranean Sea, these churches were over 800 miles from Jerusalem.



(That’s about the distance from Bemidji to Denver, CO) If you traveled by land, they were more like 1,600 miles away.⁸ (That’s about the distance from Bemidji to San Diego, CA) In other words, these were not nearby churches. This infectious generosity was spreading to Jerusalem from Christians as far away as Achaia and Macedonia. And not just in these places, but also in other regions like Asia and Galatia, and many others who likely joined in as well.⁹ ¹⁰ “Sharing During Shortages” tells a story of grace-filled generosity.

Sharing during shortages also tells a story of...

2) ...Christ-like sacrifice. 2 Corinthians 8:2 tells us, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” In other words, the church in Macedonia was dealing with their own local struggles and shortages, and yet they STILL gave. They

⁵ Chuck Swindoll, *A Minister Everyone Would Respect: A study of 2 Corinthians 8-13*, Insight for Living, Fullerton, CA, 1989, p. 4.

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1962 footnote on 2 Corinthians 8:5.

⁷ Swindoll then asks a direct question: “Are you just as committed in your giving as you are to Bible study or to prayer or to worship? If the margins in your Bible are crowded with spiritual notes but your checkbook is crowded only with entries like... Visa and American Express, chances are your life is out of balance.” Chuck Swindoll, *A Minister Everyone Would Respect: A study of 2 Corinthians 8-13*, Insight for Living, Fullerton, CA, 1989, pp. 4-5.

⁸ These are rough estimates. Corinth to Jerusalem was over 800 miles by sea, over 1800 miles by land. <http://distancebetween2.com/jerusalem/corinth>

⁹ See Romans 15:26. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Ed. by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1993, pp. 143-144.

¹⁰ The fervor of the Galatian churches proved infectious to the Corinthian churches, whose enthusiasm “soon inspired the churches of Macedonia to give even more than they had been giving.” Daryn Graham, *The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation*, Themelios 45:1 (2020), p. 70. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>

gave in rich, sacrificial generosity! The fact is, generosity is not just for those who are particularly well off, it is for everyone who considers themselves a follower of Christ. Paul makes it clear, in verse 12, that we are only called to give according to what we have. And then, in verse 14, he urges those of us who have plenty, to provide for those who have need. And yet, he doesn't hesitate to lead off chapter 8 with an example of sacrificial generosity. This sacrificial giving was a joyful overflow, from a place of poverty and severe trial.¹¹

Here is something else for us to consider though, we don't have to be poor, in order for our generosity to be sacrificial. As a matter of fact, sometimes being wealthy, gives us an even better opportunity to demonstrate sacrifice. The reason I say this is that Jesus was wealthy. That is, before He left heaven. He was about as rich as anyone could ever be. But that's part of what made His generosity toward us, so incredibly sacrificial. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that **though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor**, so that you through his poverty might become rich."^{12 13 14 15} During His incarnation, Jesus gave up all of the luxuries and comforts of heaven. So, even as we consider Jesus' example, let's take up Paul's challenge to the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 8:7, "But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—**see that you also excel in this grace of giving.**" **Here are some practical ways that we can live this out:**

1 - Declutter and donate. This may not sound particularly "sacrificial," but it certainly is practical. This is something most of us can afford to do. During this time of staying-at-home, go through all your closets and junk piles and declutter. If you have things that are in good shape, that you don't need, donate them to charity.

2 - Support our Benevolence Fund. As we are able, let's continue to give generously. As we have needs, let's make sure to communicate those needs, so that we can get help if we need it right now. Just this month our Benevolence Fund was able to help someone from our Church Family to pay their rent. We've also been able to give out gift cards for food and gas money. We can only help, because of people's generous donations. And we can only help, when people let us know what their needs are.

3 - Donate to a local charity or crisis shelter. There are too many of these, for me to try and list them all. But I do want to mention, that there is STILL time to donate to our local food shelf for the MN FoodShare March Campaign. The March Campaign has been extended through the end of April. So far, donations are already at \$120,000. This is their highest total ever! We can praise God for this ministry partnership between local churches and our community!

4 - Give to the EFCA "COVID-19 Response Fund." There's more detailed information on the website at www.efca.org/covid-19-response. This is a way for us to directly support other churches within the EFCA, who are struggling right now. These are our sister churches who share our biblical convictions, and our commitment to gospel mission. Some of them are hard-pressed financially right now. This leads right into our final point.

Sharing during shortages (also) tells a story of...

3) ...ongoing, mutual support. 2 Corinthians 8:14 says, "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality."¹⁶ The Jerusalem donations came "out of Christian solidarity and love between Gentile and Jewish

¹¹ This makes me think of the Lord of the Rings story when Gondor calls for aid and the riders of Rohan come to their aid despite the fact that they had just finished with their own difficult war.

¹² In other words, "the 'grace of giving' on the part of Macedonian believers in verse 7 "is more than matched by the self-giving 'grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' in verse 9." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1961 footnote on 2 Corinthians 8:1.

¹³ In contrast to the Macedonians who gave out of their extreme poverty, Jesus gave out of His extreme wealth. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2372, footnote on 2 Corinthians 8:9.

¹⁴ (This is the pattern that the gospel gives us for Christ-like, sacrificial giving.) One day in the future, after you are dead and gone, if a historian were to go through your spending records, what story would he put together about your life? Hopefully those spending records would look a lot like Jesus, who though He was rich, became poor for the sake of others. Chuck Swindoll, *A Minister Everyone Would Respect: A Study of 2 Corinthians 8-13*, Insight for Living, Fullerton, CA, 1989, p. 6.

¹⁵ Jesus gave up SO much for us; He gave up the comfort and luxuries of heaven to join us down here on earth. Jesus, in His incarnation, emptied Himself of all of the rich resources of heaven, in order to come to this earth and sacrificially serve us. See Philippians 2:7. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1962 footnote on 2 Corinthians 8:9.

¹⁶ Paul refers to Exodus 16:15-18 as an illustration of this: "...Moses said to them, 'It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'" The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed."

believers... and genuine concern for their brethren suffering from the effects of [the] famine sustained in Jerusalem.”¹⁷ Paul is not suggesting a long-term plan here, for the other churches to continue carrying the Jerusalem church’s financial needs forever. He is talking about a 2-way street. This is a call to Christian solidarity. He is calling these fellow believers to God-honoring reciprocity. One believer’s extra at this time, supplies the needs of another believer’s shortage at this time. Put another way, next time the giving/receiving, may be the other way around.

I just mentioned the EFCA “COVID-19 Response Fund.” There may also be a point where we need to consider helping other local churches right here in Bemidji, or helping churches on the other side of the world. Many churches lack the reserves that we are currently enjoying. Or perhaps, a few months from now, WE will be the ones needing help from our Bros/Sis in Christ overseas. I know that may sound hard to imagine right now, but we dare not be so arrogant, as to think that financial hardship couldn’t happen to us.¹⁸

When I think about this idea of “ongoing, mutual support,” I can’t help but think of Bill Withers’ song, “Lean on Me.”¹⁹ This is NOT a Christian song, but it does contain some very good advice. Consider some of the lyrics. It starts out, [Verse 1] “Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow.” (Isn’t that the truth!) [Chorus] “Lean on me, when you’re not strong. (sing it if you know it!) And I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you carry on. For it won’t be long, ‘til **I’m** gonna need somebody to lean on.” [Verse 2] “Please swallow your pride, if I have things you need to borrow. For no one can fill, those of your needs, that you won’t let show.” That last verse is especially good advice. Swallow your pride! No one can fill those of your needs, that you won’t let show!

One of the greatest challenges to our church’s Benevolence Fund right now, is learning where the needs are at. One of the ways that God provides for our needs is THROUGH the local church. It brings God glory when we accept his provision.²⁰ In fact, 2 Corinthians 9:13 says, “Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”²¹ In other words, it wasn’t until the collection for the believers in Jerusalem was RECEIVED, that God was PRAISED. As fellow believers, we can’t fulfill God’s plan to share RESOURCES with one another, unless we are willing to share our BURDENS with one another. When we share with one another during shortages, it tells a story of ongoing, mutual support.

So, how about it Efree Bemidji, what will our story be? The third and final story is a story that will be told in the future. These tough times can either make our faith or break it.²² During this COVID-19 Pandemic, let’s make sure that the story that each one of us is writing, is “**a story that brings God glory**.” Christ-followers in the 1st century lived out a story for us to learn from this morning. We’ve really only had time to do a brief overview, but their story leaves a clear witness of “Sharing During Shortages.” It’s a story of “Following Jesus during Tough Times” and demonstrating generosity, sacrifice, and mutual support. I urge you to think about this. If you have the means, watch this brief video from Navigators called, “During this Crisis, What Will Your Story Be?”

Simply click on this link: <https://youtu.be/yrvuL00xUiA>

“**What will our story be?**” Brother or Sister in Christ, Galatians 6:9-10 says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Amen!

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on April 26, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

¹⁷ Daryn Graham, *The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation*, Themelios 45:1 (2020), p. 58. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>

¹⁸ Let’s note that “in biblical sources, God is sometimes referred to as a protector from famine, but in most cases God is a harbinger of famine and divine punishment. See Psalm 37:19 and Ezekiel 34:29 but also Leviticus 26:26 and Deuteronomy 28:22-24. Daryn Graham, *The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation*, Themelios 45:1 (2020), p. 63 and footnote. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>

¹⁹ Universal Music Publishing Group, 1972.

²⁰ The New Testament teaches us that generosity is just “as beneficial to the giver as to the receiver.” Daryn Graham, *The Genesis of the Jerusalem Donation*, Themelios 45:1 (2020), p. 72. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-genesis-of-the-jerusalem-donation/>

²¹ 2 Corinthians 9:7 says that “God loves a cheerful giver.” But that cheerfulness is sabotaged when others fail to receive the grace-filled gift. This is not all that different from when we choose to accept Christ’s gift of forgiveness or not to accept it.

²² Proverbs 24:10 exclaims, “If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength!” It’s not a question.