

Possessions and Offerings

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 18, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Ezra 2:64-69.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"As soon as they came to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their resources they gave to the building fund..."

Ezra 2:68-69

You've probably heard the saying, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do." Some of us know the truth of that saying from experience. *Your marriage fell apart. Your girl friend left. You lost your job. You have unpaid bills. Instead of pay raises, you had a pay cut. You've known tough times. But many people I know testify that they've come through those tough times, stronger Christians than before and more deeply committed to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Tough times can make us or break us.*

God's people have often known tough times. In 587 BC their temple was *destroyed*. Then, like Jonah in the belly of the whale, Israel was swallowed up by pagan Babylon. Like Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, Israel spent fifty years in the fiery furnace of a pagan nation. Those tough times transformed Israel forever. They cured Israel forever of their idolatry. In Babylon Israel discovered that God was not confined to the Holy Land. In Babylon they became people of the Book. They became committed to the study and application of Holy Scripture. They became more determined than ever to be a holy nation and a peculiar people distinct from all others.

Tough times can also make us better Christians. We've been exiled for three

and a half years. We've faced some opposition and delays in our rebuilding process. What have those things taught us? Tough times can make us bitter or they can make us better. There are three things in our scripture lesson that tough times can teach us.

1. Tough times can help us get our priorities straight. Tough times helped Israel to get their priorities straight. "*As soon as* they came to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site." The very first thing the exiles did when they returned to Jerusalem was to give a freewill offering for rebuilding the temple. They were committed to building a temple for the worship and service of God. That was their number one priority.

"In everything you do, put God first, and he will direct you and crown your efforts with success" (Prov. 3:6, TLB). We show the priority we give to God in tough times when we put God first in our giving. Allan Weenink, writing in the last issue of Presbyterian Survey, shares a memory of his childhood during the great depression. "Every Saturday evening my father would seat himself at the dining room table and take from his pocket an envelope with his earnings for the week. It was a solemn occasion.

"Those were the 'Great Depression' years. The contents of that envelope- \$33 in \$1 bills and coins- represented some 60 hours of hard work at my father's little store, and additional hours of record-keeping and letter-writing at home. It was a modest but adequate amount for those traumatic times.

“Very carefully my father first took \$3.33 and placed that amount in an envelop marked ‘Church.’ That money was his tithe, and it was sacred. It was never touched except to be presented in the house of the Lord on the first day of the week. It always came off the top.

“My father would then place coins and bills in other envelopes- money for mortgage payments, food, clothing. Often a purchase or payment had to be postponed, but there was never any question about his priorities.”

I want them to have that kind of a memory. I want my kids to know where my priorities lie. I want them to know that God comes first even in tough times.

2. Tough times teach us to take stock of all the resources we have. In tough times we sometimes think we have less than we really do. As our spending outstrips our income, we feel and proclaim that we’re underpaid and overtaxed and unable to meet our family’s needs. Even people living in lavish homes bemoan the cost of trivial items.

The returned exiles had great needs. They had to rebuild their homes and cities on limited resources. They may have felt impoverished but when they took stock of their resources they discovered they had a lot more than they thought. They had 7,357 male and female servants. Servants are a sign of prosperity. They had 200 male and female singers. These singers were for entertainment. This also is a sign of relative prosperity, just like the money we pay to athletes and entertainers, even in tough times, are an indication that we’re better off than we think. They were experiencing tough times but these returned exiles were by no

means impoverished. They had hundreds of horses, mules, camels, and donkeys. They had gold and silver and other possessions which are the trappings of wealth.

These return exiles gave "according to their resources". There's a right way and wrong way to figure out how much to give to the church to carry out the ministry Christ has entrusted to us. The wrong way is to total up the cost of the building or the church budget for 1993 and divide it by the number of members we have and say, "That's my share."

But the right way to determine what you should give is to total up your resources: your home, your cars, your boats, your savings, your income, your blessings, in order to determine what share God would have you give. The question is, "What proportion can I return for God's work in order to signify and symbolize and confess before everyone that all I am and all I have comes from God?"

3. Tough times teach Christians that faith is a risk. The Bible tells us that Christians aren't exempt from tough times. There's a kind of popular Christianity, often the kind that we see on the t.v. that claims that if you're a faithful Christian you'll be spared tough times. The preacher tells us that if we tithe, we'll become more and more prosperous. If we only believe, our cancer will be healed, our paralysis will go away, our problems will disappear. That's not what my Bible says. Faith in Christ involves risk.

The returned exiles must have had some anxiety about giving to the building fund. What if their crops failed and they had to buy food? What if they contributed to the building fund only to find that they couldn't finish building their

own homes. Some, apparently, felt they couldn't spare anything. Ezra tells us that "some", but not all, made free will offerings. Apparently the risk of giving was too much for those who didn't give.

Giving is a risk. You may pledge only to lose your job or incur unexpected and necessary expenses. Sometimes people will tell you that the more you give, the more you get. If you give ten percent, you'll get it back, plus interest, every time. I don't believe it. It may happen but I don't think that giving is kind of like a sure investment. That would take all the risk and fun out of it. You can know that God won't abandon you. You can know that in life and in death you belong to God through Christ our faithful savior. But as long as we live by faith, giving will be a risk (Albert C. Winn, *Tithing Is More Than the Number Ten*).

So, tough times can strengthen our faith in Christ if we dare to put God first and take stock of our resources, and risk giving in proportion to our resources.

Money is a vital part of the mission God has entrusted to us. It pays for electricity, heat, telephone, paper, envelopes, Sunday School books, Bibles, stamps, and many other things. Money is especially important in tough times when the needs of so many people to whom the church ministers are increased. Apart from the church's ministry through people and their gifts, God has no other plan for the world's salvation. Stewardship and mission are inseparable.

Next week we'll be asking you to make a pledge for the work of the church in 1993. Making a pledge is an opportunity to glorify God and reach out in ministry and mission to others, not only here in Oxford, but around the world. Yes, I know

we're living in tough times but I want you to reconsider your priorities. In our list of priorities, does the God we know in Jesus Christ come after our mortgage, car payments and the money we spend on entertainment? Or does he come in first in our priorities?

And then, are we aware of all the resources God has entrusted to us? In tough times do we see the glass half empty, or half full? List your resources: cars, homes, boats, bank account, stocks, and toys. Do we give in proportion to what we have received?

And finally, are you willing to put your faith in Christ on the line? Faith is a risk. Are you willing to take that risk?

Let us pray: Help us and all people, Lord, to understand the purpose and place of possessions and money in our life. Keep before us the peril of loving it. Help us to make it our servant, and never our master. Let neither the lack of it, nor the possession of it, in any degree undermine our faith in you through Christ. You have called us to have no other Gods before you. Grant that you may be the number one priority in our lives. Let us take stock of all the resources you have entrusted to us. Let us risk believing and obeying your promises in Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.