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When Economic Calamity Strikes¹

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~ Scripture: Jeremiah 17:7-8 ~

INTRODUCTION

I've all but stopped listening to "*Morning Edition*", "*All Things Considered*", *et.al.*

Too much bad news!

It seems these days if you tune in to any financial news broadcast, browse any newspaper, note the houses for sale in your neighborhood (or the foreclosures), scan your investment portfolio and retirement funds—bad news seems to abound.

I sense a pervasive FEAR has begun to take hold of us. Like a dark cloud. Like the winter that won't go away (same as what gripped Narnia in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*). You might recall Jadis, the White Witch, who cast a spell on Narnia so that it was always winter but never Christmas. . .and when provoked, would use her wand to turn opponents to stone.

That's what fear does to us—turns us to stone. It causes us either to freeze up and do nothing <OR> to make erratic, emotional choices—which often end up being poor choices.

The economic earthquake rocking America and the world is bringing great change to the financial landscape. We here today are a MICROCOSM (i.e.: we reflect what's going on out there). Just as the unemployment rate has hit double digits:

- There are those among us who have lost jobs;
- Many here are uncertain how long your jobs (or your companies) will last;
- Some of you have had your hours or your pay cut back;
- Almost everyone's retirement & investment funds have taken a huge plunge;
- There's nowhere to turn for work. Forget trying to sell your house in order to re-locate to a more vibrant area economically where a job might be available. Houses aren't selling.

And so we have a choice this morning. Our choice is to become slaves to fear OR to turn to the Lord for wisdom and guidance. I know it sounds simplistic, but.....

According to Chad Moler there are 365 "*fear nots*" in the Bible==one for every day of the year. The Lord knew in turbulent times we would need constant reminders to place our trust in Him.

Paul wrote: "*For God has not given us a spirit of timidity (or fear); but a spirit of power, of love and self-discipline (so we don't lose control).*" [II Timothy 1:7]

Does that mean I should not experience any fear, alarm, or concern. . .I should not worry or be anxious? NO, fear is a normal human response to what threatens our well-being. It might help to differentiate between *healthy fear* and *unhealthy fear*.

- 1) HEALTHY FEAR = The danger is real, but you take stock of the situation to see what you can do to change and improve it. It's good for a smoker to be scared of dying and scared of lung cancer. It motivates that person to take some constructive action.

¹ This sermon draws heavily on FCCI's Business Proverbs by Steve Marr. Go to www.FCCI.org and click on *Business Proverbs*. FCCI stands for *Fellowship of Companies for Christ International*. The other source is a sermon entitled "*How to Avoid the Biggest Money Mistakes*" (#2 in a series of four), preached at Life Bridge Church on 11/14/04 by Reid Thomas.

But a lot of people let fear immobilize them. If you discover a lump, you should get it checked out—not retreat into some kind of illusion (which feels safer), and not take action.

2) UNHEALTHY FEAR = Hitting a deer, and then never driving again for fear of it happening again.

CULTIVATING A FAITH ATTITUDE

The economic threat that we face is very real. But even believers, if not careful, can get sucked into some pretty unhealthy fear that can paralyze and enslave. The question before us today is: HOW CAN WE CREATE A FAITH ATTITUDE (or PERSPECTIVE) that will carry us through these tough economic times? Let me quickly mention four things—write these down! Then I'll press on to a practical application.....

A. We need to turn to the Lord for wisdom, not just the Wall Street “experts” or the talking heads of the financial world. King Solomon wrote: *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.”* [Proverbs 3:5-6] Trust is a choice. Just as we choose to trust our spouse and choose to trust certain news sources, why not choose to trust the Lord?

B. We must remember Scripture’s admonition: *“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”* [1 Peter 5:7] When you are apprehensive, your stomach churns and your heart flutters. Before allowing yourself to become overwhelmed, take the opportunity to cast all your cares upon the Lord. *Throw them all back on Him!* Most of us struggle to release (let go of) our fears. We have to ask the Lord to remove them through prayer.

C. We need to ask God’s peace and direction. James wrote: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”* [James 1:5] Ask the Lord to give you wisdom, direction, and peace even when others are confused and full of fear. Ask Him to help you sort out “fact” from “fiction”. There’s plenty of both out there. Wait on the Lord! Get all the “expert” advice you can. . .but then with prayerful discernment let Him “direct your paths” in terms of specific steps to take.

D. When the pressure builds, we need to take hold of God’s promise as Paul expressed it: *“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”* [Philippians 4:19] Remember that the Lord is faithful to provide all our needs; however, that doesn’t take in all our desires. He will see us through this time of financial hardship; but we must be prepared, as we likely will experience a certain level of personal difficulty.

So, what is a “faith attitude” or a “faith perspective”?

✚ It is NOT: Pie in the sky (everything’s cool). . .false optimism. . .denial of severity.

✚ It IS the realization that this is too big for us to solve (on the individual, corporate, government level). . .that we serve a God who is bigger than all the problems we face (personal or social). We hope BARAK OBAMA (et.al.) will be able to go a long way toward bringing us out of this tailspin; we will PRAY for him as he is inaugurated this week. But ultimately, no matter what happens, it is God who will take care of us.

✚ That brings us to the main text—a wonderful promise from **Jeremiah 17:7-8 [NLT]**—*“Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.”*

PREPARING FOR SETBACKS

Now, let’s be practical for a moment. We know that we are stewards (i.e.: managers) of money. Some do a very good job; they seem to have a knack for it. Others struggle.

All of us are called to manage the money God gives us. How we manage our money reveals what's in our hearts. [In **Matthew 6:21**, Jesus says "*Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be*" (NLT).]

Many of us have a wrong relationship with money. We are reckless with it. We are obsessed by it. We are ignorant about how our spending habits are driving us down. We are in bondage to it (meaning we are up to our neck in credit card debt). God wants us to manage our money in a way that it doesn't manage us. [That's the focus of the rest of this sermon and next week's.]

BUT. . . Try as we will, the truth is life is uncertain. Stuff happens. Cars break down. . . refrigerators go out on us. . . WE break down (become incapacitated). Life happens. And when it does, it usually hits us in the wallet. We get a medical bill that our insurance didn't cover. We get laid off. It doesn't even have to be a negative thing; maybe your wife gets pregnant.

On and on the list goes. Life is always changing.

But here's the question: Are we prepared for those changes? Most of us aren't. Dave Ramsey in his best-selling book *Financial Peace Revisited* quotes *Money Magazine*, saying: "75% of families will have a major negative financial event in any 10-year period" (p. 111). Yet most Americans are not prepared for such financial setbacks. Says Ramsey: "We live in one of the richest countries in the world, yet the average family does not have over \$1000 in the bank. . . the typical American saves 2.2 % of after-tax income, compared to the Japanese who average 27.9%" (p. 107).

Proverbs 22:3 (NLT) says: "*A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.*"

Funny thing, people who don't "foresee danger and take precaution" (i.e.: who don't prepare for the rain) seem to get wet more than those who do have an umbrella (e.g.: an emergency fund). It's almost like they are a magnet for trouble. I think that's why the Bible calls the unprepared person a "simpleton".

How can you tell if you're making the mistake of being unprepared? Dan Benson in *12 Stupid Mistakes People Make With Their Money* gives us a little checklist. **YOU ARE UNPREPARED:**

- If you find yourself thinking that, with all your monthly expenses, there just isn't enough money left over to save.
- If a family member has to undergo expensive tests or surgery and you can't readily handle the deductible and copayment without debt.
- If your car suddenly goes *caplooe*y and you have to carry the \$650 repair bill beyond the 30 day grace period on your credit card.
- If you lose your job and your present non-retirement savings will not cover at least three months' regular living expenses while you search for work.
- If you presently have no program in place that automatically shifts money from your paycheck or checking account to a savings plan.

All these situations bring stress. They can throw us off. . .distract us from what God wants us to be focusing on. I believe God's message to us this morning is this: **YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO CONTROL EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS TO YOU, BUT YOU CAN TAKE CONTROL OF SOME THINGS.** And one of those things is being prepared for financial set-backs. Part of being a responsible money manager is getting ready for that rainy day.

You say, it's a little late for that—calamity has already struck!
How can I get ready for rain, when it's already pouring outside?
Let me leave you with a couple suggestions.

FIRST, MAKE SAVINGS A HABIT—no matter what! Put it in the budget. Set it up to happen automatically; you won't even miss it. Don't do it on the fly. Don't say "I'll do it if I have some left over." You have to be more intentional than that.

There's Biblical precedent for this way back in Genesis. Remember JOSEPH—how God got him to Egypt through the connivery of his 11 brothers (who sold him into slavery, thinking he would be murdered)?

There's a story told in **Genesis 41**—about how Joseph's skill in interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams got him promoted to (let's call it) Secretary of Agriculture. In the hierarchy, he was second-in-command (even though he was an outsider, a foreigner, a "Hebrew"). Based on two dreams—one with "seven cows, fat and sleek" followed by "seven other cows, scrawny and ugly and lean" ~AND~ a dream with "seven heads of grain, full and good" followed by "seven other heads, withered and thin and scorched"—he projected 7 good years of abundance + 7 lean years of famine.

Then Joseph gave the king a survival plan for the next 14 years. It was basically *a savings' plan*. He recommended appointing commissioners to make sure a fifth of each year's harvest was stored up and held in reserve for the 7 years of famine that were coming. Through careful planning, Joseph was able to prevent the starvation of many and save the nation. We too must take responsibility to come up with a savings' plan and then translate that plan into practical actions. To do that, sometimes we need "outside" help.....

SECOND, SEEK GODLY COUNSEL AND GUIDANCE. Most of us aren't smart enough to know all the in's and out's of responsible money management. That's why we're offering the **Financial Peace University** series to our church & community again this year (starting Feb. 8th). This is one of the greatest and most useful resources I've personally ever run across. You will learn such practical strategies as starting with an emergency fund (if you don't have one) of \$1000. That's pretty doable. It won't cover everything, but it'll get you started. Then later on, you'll set a goal of having three month's worth of living expenses stashed away.

THIRD, START SAVING FOR RETIREMENT—EARLY. Teens, do you hear me? Let me run a little math on you. If at the age of 20 you put \$2000 in a plan that earns 10% a year, and leave it there until you're 65, you will walk away with \$180K. It will multiply over and over. If you do it 10 years, you'll end up with nearly \$2 million. That's the power of compound interest. But you've got to be disciplined.

CONCLUSION

So what is the SPIRITUAL VALUE of all this? Here's the value: When you practice *the discipline of saving* and do it with *an attitude of trust in God*, you are living not just for today, but for tomorrow as well. You are living not just for yourself and your own personal pleasure (or the pleasures of the moment), but you are investing in the personal well-being of others (e.g.: your kids, your spouse, and those who depend on you). Values very near to the heart of God!!!

Saving is really an attitude. *Saving + being ready for financial set-backs* says I will do what I can do with what God has given me, and He will take care of the rest. Saving for tomorrow actually allows you to enjoy God's peace today!

Financial crisis can so easily undermine that peace. But a realistic savings plan + a faith attitude is your best hedge against always living in crisis mode. It gets your mind off obsessing about money and gets you through the emergencies (that are naturally going to happen). And it gives you the freedom to see even bigger things God wants to do *in, for, and through* you. That freedom and that peace are God's incredible gifts that He wants you to enjoy right now—even in the midst of all the economic calamity around us.