

## The Pitfalls of Prosperity Deuteronomy 8

Happy Days are Here Again – that’s the song we’ve been singing in Port Gibson this week. A proposal for a new liquefied natural gas plant has been unveiled, which will bring thousands of jobs to the area. They’re even talking about starting up some related operations at LeTourneau, so the prosperity will extend all the way into south Warren County.

But of course by worldwide standards, we Americans have been fabulously wealthy for quite some time. Our fertile farmland produces all the food and fiber we need and much more to send overseas. Our spirit of free enterprise and free inquiry has led to technological innovations that have revolutionized transportation, communication and computation. And our stable system of representative government has protected and encouraged all kinds of entrepreneurship. Yes, just as the Ancient Israelites were to find when they entered the land God promised to give them, we have everything we need.

So, why the note of warning in this passage? Because, to put it simply, prosperity can be dangerous. In verses 12-14, Moses warned the people that once they had eaten their fill, once they had nice homes to live in, once their material possessions multiplied it would be easy for them to become proud. It would be easy for them to become complacent. In fact, verse 17 says they would be tempted to give themselves the credit for the peace and prosperity they enjoyed. And it’s all too easy for us modern Americans to do the same thing – to assume the permanence of our wealth and thus to presume upon God’s grace.

So, how can we avoid this trap? How can we enjoy the good times in the proper way? Well, the first thing we need to do is to remember the tough times and why we went through them. Moses wanted his people to remember the years of their wilderness wanderings. He wanted them to remember being hungry and tired. Moreover, in verse 5 he reminded them that they had spent forty years in the desert as a form of discipline, because the previous generation had not trusted God to lead them into the Promised Land when they had first arrived at its borders.

We’ve been through some tough times too, haven’t we? In Port Gibson, the cotton-seed oil mill and the hardwood flooring factory closed in 2002. LeTourneau ceased operations in 2011 and Chamberlain-Hunt was closed in 2014. The loss of these and other good paying jobs has brought hard times to lots of other local businesses, many of whom had to close. Lots of folks have had to move out of the area just to find work, and others have just given up hope.

And we can’t deny that at least part of the reason we’ve been through hard times in Southwest Mississippi is because of the sins of our ancestors, because of the way black folks and white folks have treated each other for so long. For let’s face it – the prosperity we had before 1863 was based on African slavery, and that was just wrong. The prosperity we had around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and again in the 1950’s wasn’t shared by everyone – lots of people were excluded from educational opportunities and good jobs because of their ancestry. But after the Civil Rights movement, things haven’t gotten much better. For let’s face it – voting for people because of their ancestry is just as wrong as keeping people from voting for the same reason. So, it’s no wonder that businesses are hesitant to locate where they can’t depend on honest jurors and honest government officials to protect their property and fairly administer the laws. No, any careful student of history would acknowledge that

neither greed nor envy is a good foundation on which to build a healthy society, but that's what we've tried to do around here for a long time.

So, the question for us is the same one Moses posed to the people of his time: have we allowed our tough times to humble us? Are we still trying to make it on our own, to prosper in the self-centered way that all too often makes sense to us? Or have we at last come to the understanding that we need to do things God's way? Are we willing to admit that we need God to lead us and to provide for us?

For that's the second way we can avoid the dangers of prosperity – not just by accepting the discipline of God, but also remembering how God is the One Who has given us whatever prosperity we have already experienced. That was certainly true in Moses' day. Even though the people of Israel had to stay in the desert because of their lack of faith in God, God never gave up on them. He continued to give them bread from Heaven to eat. He even kept their clothes and shoes from wearing out.

And can't we give the same sort of testimony as individual people? During these tough economic times, how many of us have gotten jobs or kept jobs? And how many other prayers has God answered – prayers for healing for ourselves or our loved ones, prayers for release from addictions and besetting sins? No, we may not have had bread literally rain down from Heaven on us as it did on those people in the desert, but we've all experienced God's blessings in one way or another.

And remembering how God has provided for us in the tough times can keep us humble in the good times. Remembering that God is the One Who gives us the power to make wealth, as verse 18 says, can keep us from selfish pride, envy and greed when new opportunities come our way.

But in order to avoid the dangers of prosperity, we need to do more than just remember the tough times, and how God has protected and provided for us. As a response to God's grace, and as a result of God's discipline, we need to devote ourselves to the service of God. Over and over through this passage, God reminds His people to do what He commands, to keep His ordinances and statutes, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

Now, as we saw last week, this fear of God is not abject terror. Instead, it is the sort of grateful, loving confidence that little children place in their parents. For, given how God has provided for us, and given how God has disciplined us, He deserves the same sort of awe and wonder and respect that we give to our earthly fathers and mothers.

And what is it that God has told those of us who fear Him to do? To put Him first, turning away from money or careers or success or anything else to which we might look for meaning and purpose and direction in life. What has God told us to do? To turn away from selfish greed or envy, treating other people the same way that we would like to be treated. Can we doubt that ignoring God's law of love has led in one way or another to so much of our poverty? And should we be surprised that virtuous people, people who seek to order their lives according to God's Word, tend to be prosperous?

So, yes, we may very well see a lot of prosperity in the coming days. But in order for that prosperity to be a blessing to us and to others, in order for us to avoid all the pitfalls of selfishness and pride that can go along with it, we need to pay careful attention to verse 3. For the most important kind of wealth is not material, but spiritual. The most important food is not what will be on our lunch tables after worship, but right here.

No, this bite of bread and this sip of juice won't satisfy our physical hunger – but that's part of the point of this sacrament. For this meal tells us that only the Christ to which these things point can satisfy our spiritual hunger. Only Christ, through His perfect sacrifice, can wash us of our greed and envy and pride, can wash us of our hatred of others, can wash us of all the sins which have plagued our area for so long. Only Christ, as He fills us with Himself, can heal us of our disappointment, our discouragement, our hopelessness – all the things that have held us back for so long. And only as all who trust in Him truly become the Body of Christ can we live His life of self-sacrificial service and unconditional love for one another. It is only as Christ is within us that we can truly use all our worldly opportunities and blessings to build a healthy society.

So, if you think a new job or more worldly success will make you happy, if you're still focused on bread alone, there's nothing on this table for you. But if you long to live according to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, if you trust in Christ alone as your Savior and bow the knee to Him as your Lord, then come to the table – come and be filled with nothing less than Christ Himself.