



Surviving Prosperity

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

The headlines of Friday's *San Jose Mercury News* were simply, "HOW BAD CAN IT GET?" It's a good question. What's interesting is that it wasn't all that long ago that we were experiencing a season of incredible prosperity, especially here in the Bay Area with the dot com boom. Then the question was, "How good can it get?" So in the past few years we've seen abundant prosperity and now we seem to be embarking on a time of tremendous adversity and scarcity.

But sometimes I wonder, which is harder to handle? Spiritually speaking, is it better to have a little or a lot? We talk about testings and trials and we normally associate that with adversity, but I wonder if prosperity and affluence can be a test as well. Thomas Carlisle believed that. He said "adversity is hard on a person but for every one person who can handle prosperity I'll find you a hundred who can handle adversity." What does he mean? He means a lot more people fail the test of prosperity than adversity.

This is something Moses was concerned about as he addressed the people of Israel on the border of the Promised Land. They'd just completed a 40 year experience in wilderness survival. Talk about adversity! But now they're about to move into the Promised Land where they'll have an abundance. This is "the land flowing with milk and honey." But Moses is concerned about this. He sees danger ahead. He wants to prepare them for this new season and so he talks to them about surviving prosperity.

I don't know, but I have to at least wonder if these are lessons we failed to learn ourselves in our own seasons of prosperity. I wonder if we had understood these things as a nation whether or not we wouldn't be in this situation. So let's take a look at what Moses says. Moses says three things are essential to surviving prosperity...

I. Remember lessons learned in adversity.

The key word in the first thing is to remember. Moses says we'll survive prosperity if we remember lessons learned in adversity. Look at vv.1-6.

"All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to give to your forefathers. You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live

by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him."

Moses reminds Israel that the years in the desert had been hard years but they weren't wasted years. Even though disobedience had kept that whole generation out of the Promised Land, God was with them just the same. They may have grieved him but he still didn't forsake them. Look at the words Moses uses to describe what God was doing through their adversity in the desert. He was humbling them. He was testing them. He was teaching them. And he was disciplining them as a father does his own son. All of these things are good. All of these things tell me that God doesn't waste our pain.

Think about this as it relates to what's happening in our own economy and to our own bank accounts. We may have gotten in this situation for all the wrong reasons. But God is using this in our lives. He's humbling us, testing us, teaching us and disciplining us. His purpose is good; not evil. This applies not just to the economy but to anything we have to go through that's hard; anything where we feel our needs are not being met. We experience wilderness in many different areas of life. We cry out "Why Lord?" and we wonder "How long?" but God is using this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and eventually killed for resisting the Nazis. Writing from his prison cell he said, "Much as I long to be out of here, I don't believe a single day has been wasted...something is bound to come out of it..." One of the things that comes out of it is we learn something. Here's the lesson we learn in the wilderness: I can't survive without God. That's the lesson. Everything you normally depend on is stripped away and you're driven to complete dependence upon God. And he meets your needs. God himself becomes the source of life.

Look how God taught Israel this lesson. In vv.2-3 Moses says that God was testing them to see what was in their heart. Would they obey him or not? How did he test them? He let them go through hunger. They had to experience unmet need. Did you know God lets you go through these times? But then they cried out to God and he gave them manna. They had manna for breakfast, manna for lunch and manna for dinner. The very day Moses preached this sermon to them they had manna. By the way, do you know what manna means? It means "what is it?" So every day they ate something called "what is it?"

The manna would sustain them physically. They would learn to depend on him for physical sustenance. But God was also concerned for their spiritual lives. To live spiritually, they needed more than just bread. They needed God's word. So the manna was tied to obedience to God's word. God said to collect only enough for today or else it would rot. To enjoy the manna they had to obey God's word. Ultimately, God's word sustained them and they learned the lesson, **"Man does not live by bread alone but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord."**

The bottom line is that we don't learn those lessons in prosperity; we learn them in adversity. When God strips us of things; when God pries our fingers off of the things we hold so tightly; when life fails to deliver what we've wanted and expected, then we really learn how desperately we need God and how God himself can meet our deepest needs. Think back on your life. When have you grown the most? In times of adversity or prosperity? When have you deepened the most in prayer? In times of adversity or prosperity? When have you thirsted for his word and found it to be a refreshment for your soul? In times of adversity or prosperity?

So when you're in those times of prosperity, remember the lessons learned in adversity and how God taught you that life is found in him and him alone. Remember how you learned to walk so closely with him and in such great dependence.

II. Bless the Lord for what he's given us.

The first word is to remember. The second word is to bless. We'll survive prosperity by blessing the Lord for what he's given us. Look at vv.7-10.

"For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you."

Moses says when you're in the land and the Lord has given you an abundance you're to bless him for all that he's done. It's very simple. We normally talk about how the Lord blesses us, but here we learn that we're to bless the Lord.

What does this mean? When we bless the Lord we're praising him and thanking him and acknowledging him. It's no surprise we see this over and over in the Psalms because they're filled with God's praise. Psalms 16:7, **"I will bless the LORD who has counseled me; Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night."** Psalms 26:12, **"My foot stands on a level place; In the congregations I shall bless the LORD."** Psalms 34:1, **"I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth."** Psalms 103:1, **"Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name."** In the book of Judges, after Deborah and Barak won a great victory they sang a song and it says they "blessed" the

Lord for all the leaders and volunteers who had fought in the battle (Judges 5:2). And when Zacharias could finally speak after the birth of his son John the first thing he said was **"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people"** (Lk.1:68).

In some ways this sounds so basic. Most of us know that we're supposed to praise and thank and acknowledge God when he blesses us. But how do we really do this? Moses seems to say in v.10 you need to be intentional about it. Obviously, it starts with an inward disposition of the heart. It starts with a recognition that all we have comes from God. We're going to talk more about that in a minute. But this is talking about expressing that in terms of our outward actions. Blessing the Lord is not just something we feel but it's something we do. How do we do it? When do we do it? One of the times we do this is before we eat. It's interesting that the Jews took this so literally that they blessed God not just before the meal but also after it! We also bless the Lord when we gather together here at church for worship. This is perhaps the main reason we meet Sunday after Sunday—to bless the Lord. Once a month we also gather around the Lord's Table for communion. That's another way we bless the Lord. Historically, communion has been called the "eucharist" which means thanksgiving. So when we take communion we're blessing and thanking the Lord for giving his life for us. Every few months we also have a baby dedication. Some people wonder why we do this because the Bible doesn't say that we should dedicate our babies at church. But when you have a child you instinctively know that you should do something to acknowledge your gratitude to God for what he's done. So a baby dedication is really a time to intentionally bless the Lord. We also have holidays when we celebrate certain aspects of our faith. On Easter we celebrate the cross and resurrection. On Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus. I even think it's a wise thing to start every day and to end every day by blessing the Lord.

Here's my point: as much as we should just bless the Lord all the time; as much as it should just be as natural as breathing, we need these "hooks" to keep our heart tethered to God. We need these set days and times and ways to bless the Lord. We don't always feel like it but we do it anyway. C.S. Lewis wrote about both the duty and the delight of doing this. He said, **"The duty exists for the delight. When we carry out our religious duties we're like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready... There are happy moments even now when a trickle creeps along the dry beds, and happy souls to whom this happens often."** To survive prosperity you need to keep digging those channels and bless the Lord.

III. Beware of a proud and independent spirit.

This brings me to the thing to do to survive prosperity. The key word here is beware. When you experience prosperity, beware of a proud and independent spirit. Look at vv.11-18.

"Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding

you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day."

I want you to notice something that isn't apparent on the surface. Moses describes a situation where not only do they have enough, but they have more than enough. He talks about a time when their herds and flocks multiply and silver and gold multiplies and all that they have multiplies. This isn't just having enough, it's having too much.

Let's face it, this describes a lot of us in America, and especially here in the Bay Area. Consider this: America controls nearly 20 percent of the world's wealth, but we only have about 5 percent of the world's population. One billion people in the world don't have access to clean water, while the average American uses four hundred to six hundred liters of water a day. Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14 percent of the food we purchase. Nearly one billion people in the world live on less than one American dollar a day, but the average American teenager spends nearly \$150 a week. Forty percent of people in the world lack basic sanitation, while 49 million diapers are thrown away in America every day. By far, most of the people in the world don't own a car while one third of American families own three cars. We spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half of the world does on all goods.

So it's safe to say that what Moses describes here is US! Even with what is happening in the economy, most of us will adjust our life style very little in terms of experiencing real hardship. The question is, how do we handle our wealth? Moses says, "Watch out!" Verse 14, **"Then your heart will become proud..."** Verse 17, **"...you will say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made this wealth...'"** Now most of us here are smart enough and spiritual enough that we would never say this out loud. Maybe that's why Moses describes this as something we say in our heart. So it's possible to say all the right things with our mouth ("God has been so good to me. Praise the Lord. I never could have done this without him") but still harbor pride in our hearts. Deep down we believe that it was MY hard work and MY discipline and MY wise choices that got

me to where we are. It comes out in our attitudes towards others who are struggling. It comes out in our stinginess. It comes out in how loudly we protest when it's taken away from us. Remember Job? Job was one of the few guys who seemed to understand that it all came from God in the first place, so why complain when it's taken away. He said, **"Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I shall return there. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."**

We have to realize, as Moses says here, it's **"the Lord who is giving you the power to make wealth."** You say, "Well, I worked my tail off for everything I have. I got an education. I worked my way up the ranks. I paid my dues." Someone has said that most of us are self-made men who glorify our creator. Don't get me wrong. Hard work is important. Getting a good education is important. All the things you've done to get where you are may very well be good things. But here's the question: who gave you the strength and power to do those things in the first place? Do you know how quickly even your ability to work or think could be removed?

Do you know what I think the Lord does for us? I think even in our times of prosperity he allows things to take place in our lives that humble us. In a sense, he reminds us that life in this world is a wilderness. He shows us that even the best things the world has to offer can't satisfy us at the deepest level. So even when the stock market makes you rich, you have a child who is going off the deep end, or a marriage that is deeply disappointing, or a health issue that won't go away. It's interesting, despite the fact that we're so wealthy as a nation, according to a recent study by Harvard Medical School, we may very well be the saddest nation in the world. Almost 10 percent of Americans suffer from depression or bipolar disorder—the highest among 14 major nations polled. Those nations that scored better than the U.S. suffer from ongoing wars, vast unemployment, and profound poverty. The research shows that the citizens of the world's happier nations find a steady source of joy in their families, their faith, and their traditions. Seneca once wrote, "The good things which belong to prosperity are to be wished, but the good things which belong to adversity are to be admired." So maybe we'll be happier in the next few years.

CONCLUSION

It seems to me this passage gives us a perspective on both times of adversity and times of prosperity. God seems to ordain both of these in our lives and both of them are a test.

Lee Strobel tells the story of a family who seemed to understand this. While working as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune he was assigned to report on the struggles of a poor, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. A devout atheist at the time, Strobel was surprised by the family's attitude in spite of their circumstances: 60-year-old Perfecta Delgado and her granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny, had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny, two-room apartment on the West Side. As he walked in, he couldn't believe how empty it was. There was no furniture,

no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. They were virtually devoid of possessions. In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the way and then hand it to her shivering sister for the rest of the way. But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. Strobel never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; just hope and peace.

Strobel finished his article, then moved on to other assignments. But when Christmas Eve arrived, he found his thoughts drifting back to the Delgados. He said, "I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment." In the middle of a slow news day, he decided to visit the Delgados. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations. Once inside, he saw new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a big Christmas tree and lots of presents; bags of food and warm winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked him. It was their response to those gifts. He said, "As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth." When he asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: "Our neighbors are still in need. We can't have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do."

That blew him away! He then asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed him: "This is wonderful; this is very good. We did nothing to deserve this—it's a gift from God. But it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus."

Strobel writes, "To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything—more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, I saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters. They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material, and something made me long for what they had. Or, more accurately, for the One they knew."

I have a feeling that family survived prosperity because they remembered lessons learned in adversity, and they were intentional about blessing the Lord, and they didn't fall into the trap of a proud and independent spirit. That's how we survive prosperity. Maybe next time the stock market shoots up, we'll remember that!