

THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s

had a profound effect upon the children growing up during that time. Poverty and grief combined left deep scars on American’s psyches. Emotional and physical resources were stretched to the limit as young and old competed for a severely diminished number of jobs. The effects of living on so little led to stealing and hoarding. Many were too tired, hungry, angry, or hopeless to see the clamoring for emotional sustenance from their children. Just as growling stomachs drive men to personal survival, famished emotional natures can become engrossed in seeking fulfillment.

John was an incredible schoolteacher. He spent extra time with his students, tutoring them and going the extra mile to make sure they understood the concepts he was teaching. His wife knew however, that he did it all to try to get emotional fulfillment out of his students and it wasn’t working. His wife would try to compensate at home by telling him what a good job he was doing, patting him on the back, but it was never enough. He was still trying to find what he had failed to receive from home as a child. He admitted to the vacancy in his life and realized his insatiable hunger for words of approbation. As hard as he tried, he never quite felt emotionally tanked up for any significant length of time. Most of the time he was somewhere close to empty.

Children who do not get the love they need grow up with a sense of longing for something that they inherently know should be theirs. Depending on circumstances, a child’s experiences can put him or her in fight or flight mode, where the sympathetic nervous system is chronically stimulated. Like a leaky faucet, stress hormones drip steadily into the system. Children can become programmed to operate based on a stress response. Thought patterns are shaped. For example, children who experience a lack of approval and respect for their feelings when young tend to learn how to suppress them. At first it is a conscious decision to stuff feelings, then it becomes subconscious. Years later, though, the gap is still there.

The vast majority of us have those quiet moments when we allow ourselves to feel the vacancy within. It can be unnerving, uncomfortable at best. In the case of the schoolteacher, a counselor gave some wise advice:

Give what you yearn for. When you feel the need for acclamations such as, ‘you are such a wonderful person, you did such a good job . . .’ give that to your students. Pat them on the back. Recognize their need for words of approbation and encouragement that you desire. You may always have that hole, but like a wound that shrivels into a scar, it will get smaller as you focus on giving to others.



GIVE WHAT YOU YEARN FOR

Running on empty is a dangerous thing. Like a car, you may not necessarily feel that you are running on empty, at least not all the time. We can become numb to it. A starving person eventually no longer feels hunger pains. Yet we find ourselves drawn to substances, activities, and people who seem to be able to offer us the feeling we want. Leaches on life, we try to suck out what we need from anything and everything: work, others, hobbies, food, entertainment. Our choices may be sophisticatedly cloaked, but they are still desperate attempts to tank up.

The following story takes place during a time of great famine. Rain had not fallen for a couple of years. Food was scarce. Being a man of faith and prayer, Elijah had warned the nation’s leaders of the coming calamity, but to no avail. It became a time of survival and God sent the hungry Elijah to a widow in the city of Zarephath to provide for him.

Upon his arrival, the hungry, thirsty Elijah found the woman gathering sticks. He called to her and asked her for water and then for bread. “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die” (1 Kings 17:12, NIV). She had almost nothing herself. Surely God must have made a mistake in directing Elijah to this poverty stricken widow! He could have asked, “Why would you send me to a woman who has only enough food for one more scanty meal, God?” But no, Elijah trusted God’s word and said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth’” (1 Kings 17:13-14, NASB).

The promise was that when the containers of flour and oil were poured out for someone else, they would not be exhausted or empty. Impossible! They themselves were in need. This process of being filled seemed so contradictory and hopeless. What a supreme test this had to have been for the woman. Elijah

was a complete stranger to her. And yet in her dire extremity, regardless of the suffering that might result, she did as Elijah requested and her unselfish liberality was rewarded. She and her son were fed from the constant replenishing of those two vessels until the famine was over. “The barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord” (1 Kings 17:16). In return for her giving, her life and the life of her son were preserved.

The Bible records yet another impoverished widow who experienced abundance as a result of pouring out what she had. The only thing her husband had left her was unmanageable debt and their two sons. The creditors had come and because she had no money her sons were to be taken as slaves. With an intense plea for help she approached Elijah’s successor, the prophet Elisha. “Elisha replied to her, ‘How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?’ ‘Your servant has nothing there at all,’ she said, ‘except a little oil.’ Elisha said, ‘Go around and ask all your neighbors for *empty jars*. Don’t ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side” (2 Kings 4:1-4, NIV). [Emphasis added.] She only had a little bit of oil. The counsel to her was to get more containers, empty containers. When we have little, when we are running on empty, our natural tendency is to conserve what is left. Save for self. Like a shrunken stomach that hasn’t gotten a lot of food, we shut down the capacity, making the tank smaller in the hope that we won’t feel so empty. A smaller vacuum results in the illusion that we are fuller. But the Word of the Lord is the same to us as it was to the widow. Increase your capacity to receive. Enlarge the emptiness. Borrow not a few. Don’t be scanty. Then pour what you have into all those empty vessels. Give what you yearn for.

What was the result of following this unnatural plan of action? The widow left Elisha and after returning home shut the door behind her and her sons. Of course she shut the door. Onlookers would have thought she was on a fool’s errand. Her sons then “brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, ‘Bring me another one.’ But he replied, ‘There is not a jar left.’ Then the oil stopped flowing. She went and told the man of God, and he said, ‘Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left’” (verses 6-7).

The oil ran freely until there was nothing left to receive it. Providing oil for all the other empty pots did not tend to poverty. It resulted in abundance. The more she poured out, the greater her increase. The capacity for receiving survives only to the extent that we impart.

Jesus said, *“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you”* (Luke 6:38, NKJV). Your ability to receive will be in proportion to how much you give. Liberally giving will result in the filling of your own emptiness.

Selfishness is the human mode of self-preservation, our response to feeling the emptiness. But in God’s economy it is the other way around. Nature speaks to us declaring that nothing lives unto itself except the selfish heart of man. Giving is the law of life for the universe. “The Son of Man came to serve, not be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for the many who are held hostage” (Matthew 20:28, MSG). Jesus was continually giving to others and the Father filled Him up daily so He could give more.

God always operates in the context of this outpouring of unselfish love. Love is the basis of His giving. It is His nature, the divine nature. The Bible says that, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him” (2 Peter 1:3, NIV). Among the things He has given to us are, “exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:4, NKJV). His promises and power make it possible to live as the first widow did. When she chose to give Elijah what she thought was her last meal, basing her actions on the selfless principle of love and on the promise that her food would not run out, she became a partaker of God’s divine nature.

Every day various situations arise eliciting a response. Our reactions stem from our life philosophies, thought processes, priorities, and choices. But when it all gets boiled down, decisions and responses are either based upon what the Bible calls the carnal or sinful mind (nature) or the divine nature. These two foundations or ways of operating are based on two antithetical principles. They are opposites. They are at war with each other. The mind of sinful man is death. It is hostile to God. But the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.

Putting it simply, the divine nature is based on the principle of love—bent on unselfish giving. The carnal tendency is selfish—inclined to self-pleasing and what the Scriptures refer to as lust. The spirit that dwells in us lusts (see James 4:5).

CARNAL NATURE = LUSTS
DIVINE NATURE = GIVES

Lust in this context means “yearning, intensely craving.”¹ This longing is part of our being. In our sinful state, the yearning seeks gratification by self-serving, self-seeking, self-preservation. Attempting to fill up our own tank is its focus. But this self-seeking is ultimately self-defeating. “Fleshly lusts . . . war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11, NKJV). The soul is not some ghostly transcendent part of us that we can’t put our finger on. It is the dynamic core of who we are. And this soul hungers. It hungers for love, intimacy, safety, transparency, emotional fulfillment, meaning, purpose. Only one underlying principle exists that will accomplish its satisfaction.

“There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself” (Proverbs 11:24-25, NKJV). The soul that has learned to genuinely disinterestedly give and love is the soul that will be filled up.

Because it is our human nature to be self-seeking, we may not always recognize it. Motives behind even good actions are tainted with its odor. Close scrutiny and daily warfare will be essential to tap into the oasis of the divine nature. The Bible tells us how this can be done. “Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires [lusts after] what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other” (Galatians 5:16-17, NIV).

Practically speaking this means welcoming the Spirit of God into your life and daily choosing a completely different modus operandi. Living based on giving, countering the force of selfishness by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26, NIV). The Spirit empowers us to do the right thing even when we don’t initially feel like it. The Spirit will quicken, recuperate, and transform. While we cannot see the Holy Spirit, the fruit of His presence in our lives will be apparent.

“He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given” (Proverbs 19:17, NKJV). God pays back what we give away in full. There is no other investment with such a guarantee. Where are you investing? If it is simply in the turbulent, unstable economy of the human nature you will go bankrupt someday. But giving of yourself “to the least of these” will be repaid with interest—“good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom” (Luke 6:38, NLT).

To cast your life into the world’s need, in your own unique capacity, will be filling your own life up. The tenor of Jesus’ life was, “For their sakes” (John 17:19). And the great God of the universe still lives with that same focus. “I am the Lord your God, . . . open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Psalms 81:10, NKJV).

1. Strong’s Concordance #1971.

In Pursuit of Intimacy



Risë Rafferty

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