

FAITH & ECONOMICS (1 CHRONICLES 29:11-12)

Genesis 1 taught us that man is made uniquely in the image of God, which distinguishes him from every other living creature. The Bible makes clear that all human life is a sovereign gift of God. From the creation of the first man we are told, “*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*” (Gen. 2:7) When we talk about God being sovereign what we mean is that He alone possesses supreme power and authority so that He is in complete control and can accomplish whatever He pleases, independent of and unlimited by anyone else, “*The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all.*” (Psa. 103:19; cf. Psa. 115:3; 135-5-6) Every one of the atoms and sub-atomic particles of this universe is keeping its position and moving through space by God’s appointment.

But God not only sovereignly gives us the gift of life, He also sovereignly sustains it. At any moment for any reason, God can simply remove it. In Daniel 5 the old prophet confronted the proud blasphemous King Belshazzar. He warned him that his life was hanging by a thread, “*the God in whose hand thy breath is.*” The hand that wrote the riddle on the wall in Belshazzar’s palace is the hand that holds the very breath of Belshazzar. This is equally true of every human on this planet. We are all an involuntary heartbeat away from eternity. The date of our birth and the date of our death is under the sovereign control of God. What foolishness it is for puny man to exalt himself against the God in whose hand his very breath is, “*For in Him we live, and move, and have our being*” (Acts 17:28).

Man lives in fear of this truth, as “*Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust*” (Psa. 104:29). When God removes it, no man can bring it back. Man cannot sustain his life no matter how educated, wealthy or powerful he is. That is why irrespective of what chemicals are used by the greatest of medical minds to try to revive a “material” corpse they cannot create life. Bodily decomposition sets in immediately life leaves the body, as we return to the dust we came from. But the life of the soul has departed to another place. The Bible constantly warns us not to boast of the future, as the life is not in our hands.

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (Eccl. 12:6-7)

God can withdraw the life at any moment and the body will just return to the dust it came from. That is a truth we must all live in constant remembrance concerning. Sadly, it seems to be that the more wealth God gives us the harder it is for us to acknowledge and walk with God. Jesus Christ even testifies of the hardening effects of prosperity, “*Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 19:23). John Flavel once observed, “*To see a man humble under prosperity is one of the greatest rarities in the world.*” Typical of that spirit of pride is the poet, William Ernest Henley who penned the infamous lines in the poem *Invictus*,

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

We may surmise that a wealthy and powerful person is outside the reach of saving grace. It is true *“not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called”* (1 Corinthians 1:26), but it doesn't say that not *any* mighty or noble are called! The Bible contains some stories of remarkable conversions of rich and powerful men and women, like Nebuchadnezzar, Naaman, Queen of Sheba etc. to encourage us to pray continuously for souls we are burdened for, as we contemplate the great lengths our longsuffering and merciful Lord went to reach this man. *“Is any thing too hard for the LORD?”*(Genesis 18:4) is still true.

GOD & GOVERNMENT

We tend to be very impressed with the greatness of man's talents and personality, man's kingdoms, man's business empires. But God is never impressed, *“All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.”* (Isaiah 40:17) God's sovereignty is not just over individuals, God is also sovereign over nations of individuals. Daniel famously declared to the great Nebuchadnezzar that it is God alone who removes kings and establishes kings, *“Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are His: And He changeth the times and the seasons: He removeth kings, and setteth up kings”* (Daniel 2:20-21) Many rulers appear impressive but this appearance never lasts!



Isaiah also warned

That bringeth the princes to nothing; He maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and He shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. (Isaiah 40:23-24)

We tend to forget that amidst the fast-paced society we live in that exalts man. It is God alone who can raise up and put down any man or nation. Often God judges a nation for its sin, *“The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God”* (Psalm 9:17). History is a long tale or the rise and fall of rulers and kingdoms.

God humbled the proud Nebuchadnezzar to the point that the humbled monarch declared that man can never be compared to God, *“And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay*

His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?” (Daniel 4:35) The supposedly “Great” Nebuchadnezzar is now cognisant that God is God and he is not! Nebuchadnezzar attests to the omnipotence of Almighty God, *“He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?”* Solomon, the greatest of all earthly rulers, confessed that God governs every ruler, *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”* (Prov. 21:1) Even the seemingly random events are under the superintendence of God, *“The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.”* (Prov. 16:33) No matter what diplomatic skills he may have and what economic plans the leader may engage in, the Lord will have the final say, *“The LORD bringeth the counsel of the beathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect. The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.”* (Psa. 33:10-11)

One of the clear areas of God’s sovereignty in nations is that He permits some to economically rise and some to fall. It is God who still raises up nations, governments, kings, and even multi-national corporations. Thousands of years ago in the oldest book of the Bible, it was observed that God has a habit of allowing nations and Empires to rise and fall, *“He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them: He enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again.”* (Job 12:23)



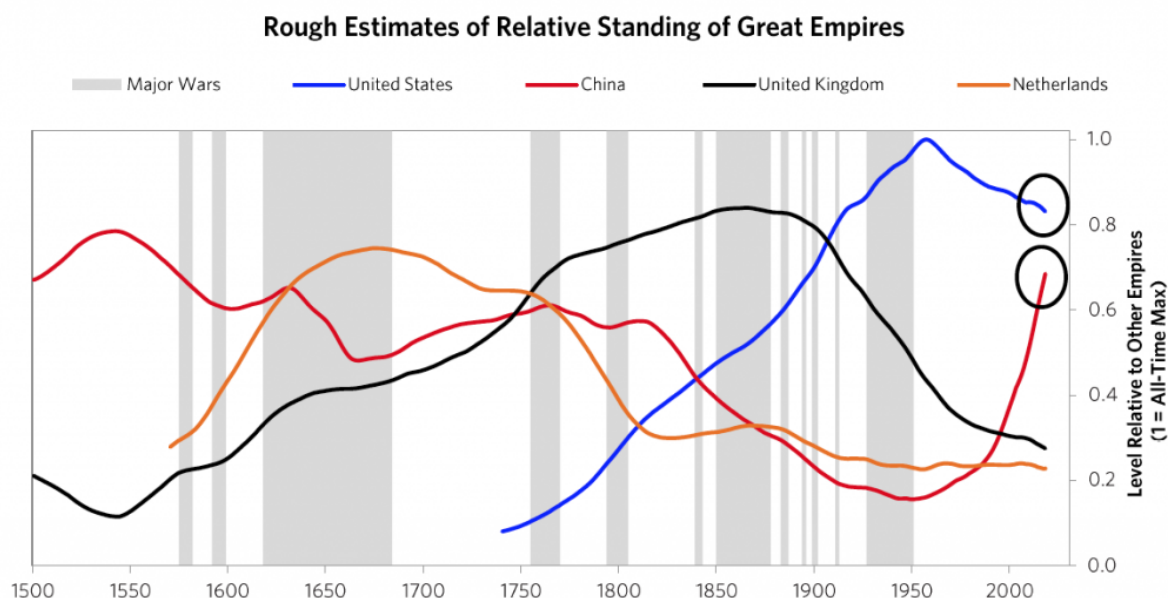
King David rose from great obscurity to become one of the most powerful, respected and wealthy men on the earth. At the end of his life, David declared before the whole nation that all of his supposed success and achievements came from the Lord,

Thine, O LORD is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. (1 Chron. 29:11-12)

Power and position are God-given privileges. Leadership in a business, a church, a home or a nation is both God-given and a manifestation of His greatness - not ours. King David even recognised that the offerings we return to the Lord are simply a recognition that all came from Him, *“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.”* (1 Chron. 29:14)

There is a fundamental arrogance in man that believes that he is superior to all those around him. At one point in history the British ruled the largest empire in the history of mankind. On the 22 June 1897, about 400 million people around the world (around a quarter of the total population) got the day off to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's ascension to the British throne. The English Historian, Arnold Toynbee wrote of his feelings that day in London, "Well, here we are on top of the world, and we have arrived at this peak to stay there forever. There is, of course, a thing called history, but history is something unpleasant that happens to other people. We are comfortably outside all of that I am sure."

We talk of the age of Western dominance as if that were an inevitable fact. But students of history will know that the West has not always dominated the East. We tend to forget that until the mid-1880s, China, India and Japan together generated a greater total GDP than the USA, UK, France, Germany and Italy combined. Human history is still under His control, "*The LORD hath prepared His throne in the heavens; and His kingdom ruleth over all*" (Psalm 103:19). It is God who stands as the silent director behind the scenes and controls the scenes He is behind! Heaven rules! Nothing has changed about this truth in the 21st century!



GOD & ECONOMICS

The Bible never endorses a particular economic system but it does set out some basic principles that are worth noting.

(1) God gave the resources of the earth to be harvested, worked and for the creation of wealth, "*And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.*" (Gen. 1:28)

(2) God gave each Israelite family a specific piece of land for a private possession. The laws were then made to prevent the family losing that land by the theft of the State or another citizen or even bankruptcy (Exodus 20.15; Deut. 5.19; cf. Matt 20.15; Acts 5.4). Ahab was condemned for unjustly

seizing the possessions of a private citizen when he had Nadab murdered and took his land. Al Mohler notes,

“Some economic systems treat the idea of private property as a problem. But Scripture never considers private property as a problem to be solved (see, for instance, the Ten Commandments). Scripture’s view of private property implies it is the reward of someone’s labor and dominion. The Eighth and Tenth Commandments teach us that we have no right to violate the financial rewards of the diligent.”

(3) Wealth is primarily created through the medium of work as the result of combining natural resources with physical labour and mental creativity. This can be done individually or in concert with others. It was God who ordained that man should engage in productive labour (Genesis 2:15; Proverbs 14:2; 22:29). Indeed, the Bible presents the ideal woman of virtue as one that engages in business, buys at a prudent price, sells for a profit and uses the resultant wealth created to provide for her family and the needy (Proverbs 31.10-31). The materially rich are never condemned in Scripture merely because they are rich. However, all are warned not to avoid unpaid debt, and to promote prudence and thrift.



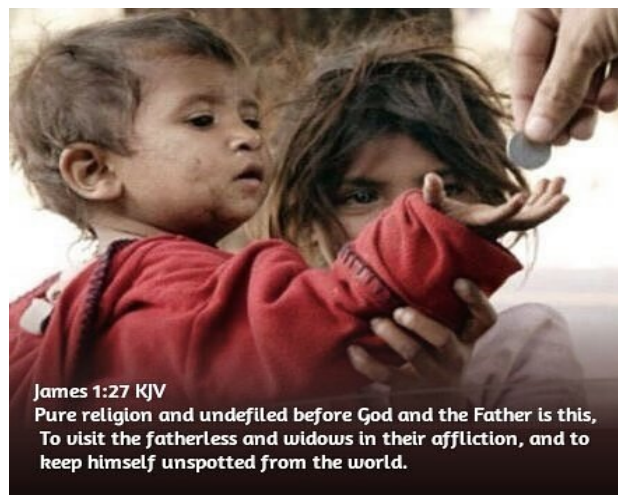
(4) The Bible repeatedly condemns any economic or business model that permits the powerful to exploit the vulnerable such as withholding wages (James 5:4; Leviticus 19:13) or not paying a fair wage commensurate with the work carried out, “*For the scripture saith, thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.*” (1 Timothy 5:18)

(5) God ordered the Israelites to ensure that there was a welfare for work system in their farms to provide opportunities for work for the orphan, the immigrant, the widow, and the poor (cf. Deut. 24:19). In the Book of Ruth, we saw this exemplified by the actions of the rich landowner, Boaz and the poor widow, Ruth. The commentator, Michael Rhodes points out,

“We in the West often embrace an economic discipleship that says “make all you can and then give some away.” We typically use our leftovers to fund soup kitchen-style strategies that meet peoples’ immediate needs, while simultaneously creating communities of “soup havers” and “soup needers.” But while soup kitchens are necessary, the Bible’s economic vision is not a vastly more equitable soup kitchen where everyone gets fed; it’s a potluck feast where everyone brings a plate. A soup kitchen creates a room full of haves and have-nots. At a potluck, everyone gives to and receives from everyone else. The gleaning laws and the story of Ruth remind us that work is one of the primary ways people bring their

best plate to the party. Even more importantly, these laws call God’s people to sacrificially and creatively welcome marginalized workers into the workplace in the way we manage our economic lives.”

(6) God also ordered that there were occasions when it is right to help vulnerable people directly such as the disabled and orphans, *“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”* (James 1:27; cf. 1 John 3:17). This is first to poor members of the Body of Christ, and then only to those outside the Body of Christ (Galatians 6:10). Such giving should be accompanied with spiritual help (2 Corinthians 8, 9). This is voluntary acts of charity. It is not to be coerced by the church or the state under the guise of “social redistribution.”



However, those that were able to work and had opportunity to work but refused to do so were not to be given handouts, *“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.”* (2 Thess. 3:10) In fact, those who could work were ordered to do so in order to provide for themselves and their families, *“For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread.”* (2 Thess. 3:11-12)

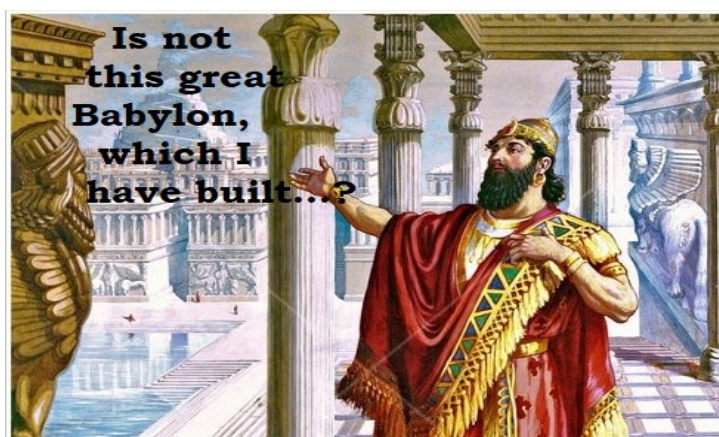
CONCLUSION

The Bible presents a balanced picture of what God desires and commands from the economies of this world. It is one that doesn’t reward the shirker but seeks to strike an equitable balance of rights and responsibilities between all stakeholders in an economy. Ken Boa gives a good summary of what the Bible teaches on economics,

“In summary, the Bible says that mankind has the resources of the earth with which to work and create wealth. As a measure of stored value, money exists for the bartering of goods and services. It appears that the Bible encourages a consistently valued currency. The Bible also encourages savings and investment of the money earned. Finally, government is established by God for the protection of the citizens and, by inference, of the commerce that takes place within its borders. Admittedly, the Bible does not specifically address the complexities of the economic factors that fuel our economy today.

But even though the Bible does not comment on housing starts and bank lending rates, principles of wealth creation can be developed, and investors can reason from these biblical principles and apply them to the current economic events to seek knowledge and wisdom for decision making.”

The fact that the wealth of companies, nations, and individuals is because of the sovereign gift of God should ensure that none of us are ever proud of our wealth. Yet so many are! The great Nebuchadnezzar became puffed up with pride as he surveyed his kingdom and boasted, “*Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?*” (Daniel 4:30) Too many have the “Nebuchadnezzar syndrome.”



We must be humble and thankful for what we have. Hezekiah was chastised by God in 2 Kings 20 for showing off his wealth to the Babylonians. In the end, the same Babylonians took it all!

There is nothing wrong for us to be wealthier or be promoted in a higher station of life as a result of hard work and blessings from God. But when we work in this world, we must do so not to gain glory in our achievements and wealth but to point men to God (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:31). We must prioritise laying up treasures in heaven and not on earth. The Lord gives us the perfect way to live,

Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)