

THEOLOGY OF STEWARDSHIP

“Stewardship is a way of life for all of life”.

W.R. Phillippe, A Stewardship Scrapbook

Genesis 1:1-2:4	Story of God’s creation
Genesis 13:1-18	Abraham and wealth
Exodus 36:2-7	Freewill Offerings
Leviticus 25:1-55	The Year of Jubilee
Numbers 18:20-32	A Tithe of a Tithe
Deuteronomy 8:1-20	Not to Forget God in Prosperity
Deuteronomy 14:22-29	Regulations Concerning Tithes
Deuteronomy 24:17-22	Reap your harvest but leave for Widow, Orphaned and Alien
Ezekiel 34:11-23	God, the true Shepherd
Matthew 20:1-16	Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 25:14-30	The Parable of the Talents
Matthew 25:31-45	The Judgement of the Nations
Luke 12: 13-32	The Parable of the Rich Fool/Do not Worry
Luke 15:1-10	Parables of Lost Sheep and Lost Coin
Luke 14:7-24	Humility and Hospitality/Parable of the Great Feast
Luke 16:19-26	The Rich Man and Lazarus
Luke 16:1-13	The Parable of the Dishonest Manager
Luke 19:11-27	The Parable of the Ten Pounds
Luke 21:1-4	The Widow’s Offering

John 15:7-17 If you Abide in Me....bearing much fruit

Acts 4:32-5:11 Believers Share Their Possessions

I Corinthians 12:1-31 Spiritual Gifts/One Body

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 Encouragement to be Generous

Ephesians 1:3-14 Spiritual Blessings in Christ

I Timothy 6:2b-12 False Teaching and True Riches

I Peter 4:1-11 Good Stewards of God's Grace

James 2:1-13 Warning Against Partiality

And there are many more.....

The Israelites became anxious, in the absence of the authority figure, and went to Moses' brother Aaron and said, "We don't know what happened to that man who brought us up out of Egypt. Make gods for us, to go before us." In the absence of the authority figure, they experienced the absence of God. Aaron had them bring their gold jewelry and earrings, and melted them down into the shape of a bull. It would have been a bull – Apis, the war god of Egypt, represented by having two golden bulls as his footstool. Aaron may have only had enough gold to make one. Scripture itself has the sense of being derogatory or sarcastic here, using the immature diminutive form, so the English is rightly translated "golden calf." Not the bull of Apis the war god, but a little bully-wully, a plaything. He said, "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt," and then attempted to cloak the whole nonsense with true religion.

In the perceived absence of God the human tendency is to find a pale substitute – and that may be a golden calf or a prayer tower or a crystal cathedral, or materialism, or entertainment. We may go back to what we know best. There is some irony that either Aaron or the Israelites chose the bull image, the very image that so long represented their oppressor in Egypt. But that is how imprint works. In the absence of God, we make God in our own image, or some familiar image.

Meanwhile, back at the camp, Aaron's efforts to make this okay were *not* okay, and God's wrath was about to break out in a deadly way against the Israelites. It would be a more frightening passage, if God and Moses didn't sound here like a couple of parents with a bad teenager. She's *my* daughter when she gets good grades, but *yours* when she wrecks the car. God said to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely! Get out of my way so my wrath may burn hot against them." When Moses interceded for the people, he said, "Why burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt? If you kill them out here, what would the neighbors say?"

The Israelites lived, even though Aaron had to explain himself to his brother. His excuse is thin: "I don't know what happened. I threw all those stocks and securities into the fire, and out came this calf." Perhaps that is another thing that happens in the perceived absence of God – dodging responsibility for the results of what we set in motion.

In Matthew Jesus told the story of a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son, and the expected guests spurned the invitation, some going back to work, and others seizing and killing the servants (who represent the prophets of Israel). The king sent other servants into the streets and they gathered all they found, both the good and the bad, so the wedding hall was filled.

It was a great celebration, characterized by the absence of who was expected, those who had more important pursuits to follow. Or so they thought. The temptation to idolatry is *still* the first and greatest temptation we face.

We have thought a good and meaningful life good be insured with free markets, and we've had a reminder of our limitations that is still going on. We have thought right living could be insured with military power, and despite our power we are discovering its limitations. We may have thought entertainment or security or the perfect spouse or psychological self-improvement or religious ecstasy would bring meaning, make life profound, get us into the banquet, or ease the anxiety we feel when God seems absent. Maybe God is not the one who is absent. And we missed dinner.

Can we trust that God? Or will we keep stripping the treasure from our ears and necks and pockets and put it somewhere else? In the perceived absence of God there is a sense that we must somehow fill the empty. Absence is frightening to the soul, the absence of meaning, of truth, the absence of health and physical abilities and control, the absence of the ones we love who we have lost to death. Those absences are hard to fill, and trying to fill that space with something artificial or contrived will not bring the reassurance or comfort of God. God knows this feeling. On the cross, Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and the absent God raised him from death so even our sense of abandonment is redeemed.

The trick (and it's not a trick) is not to fill the absence with a golden calf or some pale substitute for the ultimate God; the trick is not to fill the silence with the noise of our diversions. It is to let absence be absence, silence be silence, longing be longing, and to seek God within it. It is when we hunger, hunger and thirst, for the Living God, that our souls are open in the silence and the absence to receive some sign of God's presence in our world. Because, finally, the old man comes down from the mountain; finally, Christ is no longer forsaken, but raised; and we – finally we are fed with the bread of life, at the heavenly banquet.

Be thankful.