

“After the Fire—Hope and Sustainable Lifestyles in the New Normal”

What our economy has gone through in the last two years has been like a forest fire. Economically we’ve watched a firestorm sweep across our country, and most of the rest of the world. The stock market went from a high of 14,000 in 2007 to a low in March of 2009 of 6,690. Americans lost around 14\$ trillion in wealth during that drop. Thankfully that’s been reversing.

In 2008 foreclosures rose 80% and the last quarter of 2010 saw a decrease in the number of properties entering foreclosure, but an increase in home repossessions in a majority of metro areas in the U.S. During these last two years home values nation-wide have dropped 20-30%, even more in some areas. Unemployment went from 4.8% in April 2008 to 10.2% in 2009. It’s now hovering around 9.5% nationally and around 8.4% in Joplin.

In the last two years in corporate America we’ve seen some of the largest, oldest companies in America experience the unthinkable. Some of them bankrupt, some ceasing to exist.

Officially the recession ended in June of 2009, but for a lot of people it doesn’t feel like it. Most economists say that we really are in a recovery mode, but this recession will be different because recovery will be slow. That it won’t be until 2012 or 2013 that we see employment at 2007 levels. It’s been an economic firestorm that most of us have never seen and hopefully will never see again. The good news is that there are significant signs of recovery, but it doesn’t feel that way when unemployment is so high, and fear rules the media. But listen, there’s hope in the future.

So as we come through this firestorm we ask the question, “What does our faith have to say us about what we’ve been through and what we’re going through and where do we go from here?”

Christians have an important role in this time of recovery after the firestorm. We encourage one another, support one another, take care of one another. I’ve heard of two families who have taken in people who’ve lost jobs, or homes, or both. Given them a temporary place to stay for a few months until they get back on their feet. I don’t know where those people would have ended up if there weren’t fellow Christians who said, “We’ve got the room and we can do this.” And we can do this, we can help one another. And a couple of years from now, things will be, not exactly normal, if normal means what it looked like in 2006 or 2007. But it will be the new normal that we keep hearing about.

Today I want to talk about hope and I want to talk about sustainable lifestyles in the new normal. Because what we had in the past was broken and it was NOT sustainable. And when you listen to secular people talk about what it looks like to live sustainable lives, it looks a lot like what the Bible teaches us about how to live, it looks like what Christians have been talking about for a very, very long time.

But I think it’s very important for us to talk about hope in the midst of the fire. It may not feel like we’re out of the fire, but there’s a point when a forest fire is contained. The flames are still there but it’s just a matter of time before the fire is brought under control and put out.

And as we talk about hope in the midst of the firestorm, we also have to talk about how fire is sometimes a good thing. When we think about it we know this. Fire is used to refine metals. Like gold. It’s not pure until it’s gone through the fire and the impurities are burnt off. In some ways what we’ve been through economically has been a time to burn off some impurities in lots of us. It’s been hard and challenging. Because going through the fire is not fun. But good things can come of it. The apostle James wrote these uncomfortable words. **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).**

Let’s be real here. Considering it pure joy when we face trials sounds crazy! We might say that James could write that because he didn’t watch his IRA’s drop 40% in value, and his home drop 30% in value, he didn’t face unemployment for a year. No he didn’t. He didn’t face any of those things. He just faced ruthless persecution. He just faced being hunted down for his faith. He was just killed for his faith! He was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin in 62AD. Yet he was able to write, “consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds because the testing of your faith produces something beautiful in you.”

When we face firestorms, whether that’s an economic firestorm, or a personal firestorm, or even the death of a loved one, you can allow that to overwhelm you with bitterness, and disappointment, and believe that your best

days are behind you. Or you can look at it and say, "I believe God can do something with this that is good. And I believe that my best days are still ahead of me, and God isn't finished with me yet."

We decide which path to take when the fire comes, and when we decide to take the tragedies, the difficulties we face, and do something good with it, it becomes a source of joy. Not bubbly, happy-joy-joy. But a joy that trusts that God can make something good come out of something terrible. In God's hands, no suffering, no trial, no tragedy is ever wasted. That's how James can say, "Consider it joy when you face trials of many kinds." He knows what we can know too. That out of what looks like tragedy comes triumph.

In fact, when we look at the economic crisis and try to see the good that can come out of it, it really doesn't take long to see the good. Lots of you have told me about the good that's come. You've told me about a deeper awareness of the blessings in your life and how you intended to not take them for granted—whether that's the food on your plate, the roof over your head, your job that before all this you didn't really like, now, for some reason, you love it! You've talked about how you've chosen to simplify your life so that you can enjoy simple things that don't cost anything but are actually more fun than expensive experiences and things.

You've talked about learning to save for things you want rather than buy things on impulse or put it on a credit card. You've told me about learning to save in general and prepare for the unexpected. You've talked about finding ways to help out neighbors, and friends, and family that are hitting hard times. You've talked about putting your faith in Christ at the center of your life instead somewhere out at the periphery because you've realized that that faith foundation is what makes everything else make sense. Not stuff, not money, not your job, not your retirement plans—Jesus Christ and his guidance for your life.

A single mom wrote this, "About a year ago I was laid off as an accounting manager and after three months of searching accepted a new job with a 40% pay decrease. As a single mom it was a devastating blow to the standard of living I was able to provide my seven year old daughter. Last month I finally had to accept the fact that I could no longer afford the house we were living in and moved into a townhouse. And yet we're happier and more blessed than we've ever been. My daughter loves that I'm not stressed out trying to keep up with the cleaning and yard work of the big house anymore. And now we read together, play games, eat dinner at home every night and spend time cuddling on the couch."

I used to spend my free time rewarding myself for working so hard with massages, pedicures, nights out and lots and lots of shopping with little volunteer work. Now I have close relationships with friends instead of superficial ones, we go for walks, [help at the school], spend time caring for each other, I'm now co-leading a small group, singing in choir, I volunteer for the PTA and am contemplating starting a not-for-profit to mentor teenage parents."

Every day I thank God for giving me the opportunity to learn that life isn't about the stuff you acquire, it's about the people whose lives you touch. I never dreamed that losing income could exponentially boost our standard of living."

I don't want to make this out like you go through the firestorm, the refiner's fire, and it's easy, and happy-happy-joy-joy. It's not like that. No matter what the fire is you go through, it hurts, it's painful—sometimes it's disfiguring to go through the fire. But put into God's hands, God can use it to refine us, to develop in us character, and help us remember who we are and what really matters in our lives. And ultimately to develop trust, and patience, and hope.

I believe that James in the Bible knew what he was talking about, and he's talking to us. We can consider the trials with joy because we have faith in what God will do. Faith that God will guide us through and life will be better than it was before. Faith that the fire is not the last word, the trial, the tragedy, is not the last word!

God will bring us through this fire and life will be better on the other side, but we still have to be careful about affluenza. That's a term I heard Tony Campolo use to describe the disease we get when we can't resist getting the newest, latest gadget, car, clothes, lips, hair, whatever. Even when we have stuff that works just fine and clothes that are in perfect condition, when we're infected with affluenza, we become convinced that what we have just isn't good enough.

Somebody said that what we've struggled with is not just affluenza, but a particular strain of affluenza called the H1N1 strain. It's the "Have 1, Need 1" strain. I have one already, but I need a better one. I have one already but I need a faster one. I have one already but I need a bigger one. That's the infection that we can get so easily if

we don't already have it. And if the recession cured us of it, we have to be careful not to catch it again when things get better.

Because in the last 25 years we as a society went on a consuming binge. The amount of things we consumed per person increased drastically, the size of our homes, our TV's, our appetites for everything, our waistlines, all increased in this consumption binge. In 1982 the average American family saved 11% of their income. In 2007 it had dropped to 1.7%. The lowest savings rate ever recorded in our country. From 1982 to 2007 we doubled the amount of household debt. This is when we got in the cycle of the only way our economy grew was by consumer spending which went from 62% of our economy to 70% of our economy.

Corporate America, and our own government, encouraged us to spend more in order to show growth in the economy year over year. That led to lower credit standards, easy access to credit, easy access to home loans and then easy access to home equity loans. As a nation we started living today on tomorrow's income. Eventually the house of cards has to fall, and it fell. We found out how long a cycle like that could last, living today on tomorrow's dime. It can about 25 years. And that ended about 2 years ago.

That's the old normal. And we can't go back to that. In the next 5 to 10 years we won't be able to go back to that because the credit mechanisms won't be there. But we pray that we won't ever go back to it. So what we have to figure out is the new normal.

And that leads to two Greek words from the Bible that are very important when it comes to money and possessions. The first one is **Metanoia = a change in thinking**. In the Bible that word gets translated as to "repent", but it literally means to have a change of mind, a change in thinking afterward. To be thinking in one way, and then begin thinking in a new way, a better way of thinking. And that new way of thinking has an impact on what you do. When it comes to money and possessions it means to think differently about the assumptions we may have had. And when we challenge the assumptions we've had, we have the challenge to live differently. I say, as Christians, let's lead the way in a new way of thinking in the new normal.

Because the message we're bombarded with through every media source is that what we have isn't new enough, good enough, stylish enough, big enough. Metanoia means we challenge that way of thinking. And, yes, sometimes we do need newer, or better, but do you need it, or just want it? Here's where we practice metanoia, we challenge the assumption and live differently realizing that we don't need the newest, latest, biggest. It takes a change in thinking—metanoia.

The other Greek word of the day is **Pleonektes = an intense desire for more**. It literally means to desire more, but usually gets translated into English as covetousness or greed. It's an intense desire for more, not just, "I sure would like some more mashed potatoes." It's like, "I want three or four more helpings, now, I gotta have it!"

We see this word in Luke 12:15. Jesus says, "**Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed [pleonektes] ; one's life does not consist in an abundance of possessions**" (Luke 12:15). Jesus is telling us to be on guard, watch out because it will sneak up on you, it will take you down, it will threaten your existence. Be on guard against the perpetual desire for more and the belief that goes with it that if you have just a little bit more, you'll be happy. Because, listen, your life does not consist of the abundance of your possessions. Joy, and happiness, meaning and satisfaction will not be found in having more, and more, and more.

Paul puts the sin of pleonektes in the same category as adultery, and stealing, saying that all these things lead to the destruction of your soul. In 1 Corinthians he says that pleonektes is idolatry. And idolatry is making something other than God, the god of our lives.

Whatever it is that shapes your lives, and guides how you make decisions, whatever it is that consumes your thoughts, that becomes your idol. And for lots of us Americans, that's money, and the stuff that money can buy. This is why Jesus says this, "**Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**" (Matthew 6:19-21).

The word "treasure" in there is not just something you like, or you value a little. It's what you value most in life. What is it you value most in life? What is your greatest treasure? What is it you are willing to work for, what is it that you think about most, what guides your decisions because it's the most important thing in your life?

We practice metanoia, that change in how we think, so that pleonektes, greed, covetousness, the uncontrolled desire for more, doesn't get a foothold in our lives.

Life in the new normal has more people than ever asking, "How do I find financial peace in uncertain times?" That's a great question to ask, but as followers of Jesus, we also realize that it's not about just us. It's also about how our financial decisions affect others. We have to ask, "Am I honoring God in how I handle my money?" We have to ask, "Does how I handled my money give financial margin in my life to help others in need?" I think these are crucial questions for followers of Jesus.

It makes me think of one of our own staff members, Tammy Jones. Earlier this year she was trying to sell her house which of course means that when the realtor calls with a potential buyer you have to get out of your house pretty quickly so they can show it. Tammy got a call like that one morning, probably on a Saturday, and didn't have a whole lot of time to get her and her kids out. They all got busy, picked up the house, and headed out. They weren't real concerned about what they were wearing or how they looked they just got out. She said they were probably looking pretty raggedy.

She decided to take the kids to IHOP for breakfast. They got there, got a table, ate a nice meal and when it came time to pay the bill, their server said, "It's been taken care of." Tammy wanted to know who took care of it. The server said, "Every week at about this time, there's a man who comes in and picks a family that looks like they could use a boost and pays for their whole meal." When Tammy told the staff about this, we were all really moved, and we told her that should probably go out without her makeup on more often and see what happens!

I don't know what that man's story is, but it could be that he made financial margin in his life in order to do some very kind things for other people. It could be that he chose to do without the newest, the latest, the biggest, in order to have financial room to help others.

I've seen that same principle in action around Josh Jackson's death. He was our youth director and was killed three weeks ago in a motorcycle accident. He didn't have any life insurance. And you, as a church, have stepped up to help out his wife and kids. You've already given around \$25,000, plus one family from our church is paying for their mortgage for 6 months, and another family is paying for their utilities for 6 months. I am so proud of you.

Hundreds of you have given and I don't know the stories behind your generosity, but I know for many of you, making good stewardship decisions, building financial margin in your life by being frugal, by not spending everything you make, by choosing to bring God his tithe, and save for the future, and have margin to give to others in need, it makes a difference in the lives of real people. I'm sure you have found a lot of deep joy in that.

Yes, our nation, much of the world, has been through a fire. But as followers of Jesus, we come through the fires and know that God can make good things come out of tragedy. The new normal, for the next 5 or 10 years is going to be much different than the old normal. It will look more like our parents and grandparents normal. But this is a good thing! I say that we, as followers of Jesus, lead the way in a new way of thinking, in choosing to live simpler lives. I say we lead the way in the new normal with new ways of thinking that are based more on what we give rather than what we get. I say we choose to lead the way to a healthier nation, a healthier, more generous world. Let's lead the way in showing the world that our treasure is not in the stuff we have, but in the God we serve. And for today, that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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