

# Economic Shutdown: Three Steps Forward for Every Christian

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After 11 years of steady prosperity, a health pandemic has brought the global economy to a screeching halt. While Scripture has no helpful stories about novel coronaviruses, it does deal with plenty of economic shutdowns: famine. These times of scarce food and economic instability were not wasted by God – He was powerfully at work in and through them. Thankfully, Scripture reveals three steps forward for every believer who is living in a time of economic shutdown that can guide us through this season.

## STEP 1 - ALLOW GOD TO CHANGE YOUR PLANS

In the face of crisis, smart people make plans. Our instinct is to buy up toilet paper, rearrange our finances, evaluate our food supply, and begin checking items off our to-do list. In Genesis 26, Isaac and Rebekah were crisis-planning during a famine when God asked them to set their plans completely aside. His redirection of their lives during a famine launched their family along in their calling and allowed them to play a key role in the salvation history of humanity.

When the famine broke out, Isaac and Rebekah had the economic means to flee and planned to head south toward Egypt, a better location for the difficult times ahead. But God told Isaac to stay in Gerar, the land of the Philistines. Though Isaac's sin of deception almost derailed things, and despite conflicts and struggles along the way, God prospered their family greatly in Gerar. Isaac and Rebekah were heirs of a great promise (Gen. 26:3-5), living as aliens in a land that failed to acknowledge the true God, but remained steadfast and faithful.

After the famine, God appeared to Isaac to affirm His promise, just like He had done for Abraham a generation before. It was only *after the famine* that Isaac was ready to receive this great blessing, and he worshipped God. The time of testing had made him ready to receive God's direct appearance!

As we face this modern famine, we must stand ready for God's total redirection of our life plans. Our willingness to change course could launch us forward to our future calling in Christ. Ask, "Lord, where is my Gerar?" God may want to anchor you in your local church, or to embrace a new season in family relationships, or even to move you to a career field you never expected. Your choice to follow God's leading could catalyze unexpected spiritual and even material blessings and will bring glory to God.



## STEP 2 - PROTECT THE VULNERABLE

In Nehemiah 5, when Nehemiah and his wall-building peers faced a famine, they reversed course on practices that were exploiting the plight of the poor and vulnerable. The economic system of the day involved debt-slavery for poor farmers, with the wealthy and the taxing authorities enjoying their advantaged position. During the famine, farmers often had to mortgage their land to make ends meet, sometimes even placing sons or daughters into debt slavery. The wealthy, meanwhile, exacted harsh interest payments from these lowly farmers, creating a vicious cycle of unsustainable debt.

Nehemiah was infuriated when he realized that Jewish leaders were forcing this plight upon fellow children of God. After a vigorous talking-to, the wealthy of the town agreed to return the property of the poor and stop exacting usurious interest.

We also learn that Nehemiah, facing this crisis as governor, chose not to collect his full benefits package or the taxes he had a legal right to. He paid for meals from his own resources, absorbing some of the famine's shortfall rather than forcing others to pay higher taxes to support his executive lifestyle.

In today's economic shutdown, what lessons can we draw from Nehemiah's righteous actions, preserved in Scripture for our edification?

One parallel involves leaders making payroll decisions in this crisis. Layoffs and performance-driven firings are a normal part of life. In a crisis, they are often unavoidable. That said, if a payroll reduction is necessary in this economic famine, servant leaders ensure that they take the first hit, and hourly workers and entry-level staff take the second hit. If you're a leader, consider reducing your own pay and benefits like Nehemiah did before taking action that affects frontline staff. It's clear from Scripture that leaders who protect or enrich themselves at the expense of the vulnerable stir up the righteous anger of God.

## STEP 3 - TAKE A RISK: GIVE GENEROUSLY

While Step 2 applies only to the wealthy and powerful, Step 3 involves every single believer. Scripture contains multiple examples of radical, faith-filled generosity in the midst of economic shutdowns!

God calls us to generosity in times of crisis because it is then, and only then, that generosity can have its maximum impact upon our spiritual formation. It is relatively easy to give when resources are plentiful. But when your bank account feels threatened and your toilet paper supplies are dwindling – what then? Only faith in an eternal God who issues eternal rewards can justify giving from a position of vulnerability. And God can use such faith-driven giving to shape our hearts, making us look more and more like Jesus Christ in the process.



In 1 Kings 17, we learn of a widow who had enough in her pantry to make one more meal and was resigned to the fact that she and her son would then starve. God sent the prophet Elijah to her and had him ask her for a meal. She refuses. He explains that God will provide miraculously if she will comply. In faith, she does – and God multiplies her flour and oil so that all three parties can eat through the famine. What faith!

Where is God asking you to give in this season? If you face dire circumstances but have an opportunity to give, consider this prayer of Saint Basil the Great and make it your own:

*And if you have only one remaining loaf of bread, and someone comes knocking at your door, bring forth the one loaf from your store, hold it heavenward, and say this prayer, which is not only generous on your part, but also calls for the Lord's pity: "Lord, you see this one loaf, and you know the threat of starvation is imminent, but I place your commandment before my own well-being, and from the little I have I give to this famished brother. Give, then, in return to me your servant, since I am also in danger of starvation. I know your goodness, and am emboldened by your power. You do not delay your grace indefinitely, but distribute your gifts when you will."*

Like the widow of Zarephath, He calls all of us to generosity, even when death knocks at the door and our money and food are running out. We may prefer to wait until things are more stable. But God may call us to give toward the great opportunity now, today, to advance His kingdom purposes.

The prophet Elijah was hungry during the famine, not after it. Who is your Elijah? Where can you sacrificially give?

### PARTING THOUGHT

As you navigate the days ahead, may you faithfully step into these three biblical responses to famine:

- Is God changing your life plans? Allow Him to, and seek His guidance for this new season.
- Have you witnessed exploitation by the powerful for their own advantage? Have you exploited others? Seek justice and correction.
- Have you opened your heart to faith-driven generosity? Pray for open doors to give.

May God surprise you with His mercy and kindness as we walk through this season of suffering together. And may your faithful actions testify to the goodness of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gracious caretaker of our world.



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