

STEWARDSHIP

We know that stewardship is very ancient. The first use of the word 'steward' in our English AV is Genesis 15.2 where mention is made of Abraham's steward Eliezer around 4000 years ago. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word is 'son of possession'. Abraham was childless and the practices of his day meant his house manager would inherit his substance if he had no son (verse 3). We learn from Genesis 43.19 that the house manager was also a practice in Egypt in the days of Joseph at least two centuries later. Joseph's brethren approached 'the steward of Joseph's house'. Our word 'steward' here translates three Hebrew words meaning 'a man who (was) over'. David, 1000 years later had his stewards (Hebrew: 'head persons') 'over all the substance and possession of the king'. In Daniel 1.11, we read of Melzar, literally, 'the steward', whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel and his friends. Thus in Mesopotamia, around 1400 years after Abraham left the area, the practice of stewardship remained, even at the highest levels. In Luke 8.3, we read of 'Chuza Herod's steward' or household manager in the time of our Lord.

I. The first steward

In order to properly understand stewardship we must go back to the beginning. We read in Genesis 2.15, 'And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it'. In Paradise stewardship involved the following.

A. Resources

The Garden of Eden was a wonderful biological and zoological resource. It is not accidental that economists classified natural resources under the category 'Land'. God's earth is our means of survival and source of wealth. It yields water, food, clothing, minerals, and power, through harvests, pastoral farming, mining, and other applications of human ingenuity. We have no knowledge of anywhere like planet earth in millions of galaxies despite vast sums spent in searching for extra-terrestrial life at the expense of those living here. It is as though the Maker of it all never said, 'Be

fruitful, and multiply, and replenish *the earth*, and subdue it' (Genesis 1.28). The Psalmist had things weighed up 3000 years before our modern age, 'Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. *Then* shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us' (Psalm 67.5-6).

B. Entrustedness

What we read of in Genesis 2.15 is the highest level of entrustedness possible for man. 'The Lord God took 'Adam and 'put him' in the garden to 'dress it and to keep it'. The man was to look after Paradise on the behalf of his Maker. This profound entrustedness is so simple that even a child can understand it. If I say to my grandson, 'Look after my garden for me while I am away on business' he has no problem with the concept of stewardship. A *precious resource* is being *committed* to his care *to look after* for *me*. The problem with the vineyard tenants who killed the King's Son was that they wanted the precious possession for themselves to selfishly enjoy. This is still man's problem. He wants to cut the owner out of the picture.

C. Control

Scripture teaches divine sovereignty, predestination and election. God *is* in control but along side of this the Bible also teaches personal responsibility. It is a mystery but Adam was not a robot but a man with mind, emotion and will capable of thoughtful purpose and satisfaction in accomplishing worthy purposes. We get excited these days about artificial intelligence, robots, driver-less cars and space probes. Put them all together, multiply by a billion and you have, not even, one billionth of one baby! It is true. Nebuchadnezzar was once a baby, likewise Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. They became rulers of immense empires. Their accomplishments were astonishing but not so great as those of Saul of Tarsus and Peter the fisherman who also began lives as babes in arms. You see, God created man for great accomplishments by oversight and management under his rule.

D. Development

We are not to think of Adam's task or ours as some static caretaking. When the caretaker finishes his shift and everything is the same as when he started it is a job well done. He keeps things clean and tidy and ensures nothing is stolen. We are not to think of man's stewardship to God in such a way. God created man with vision and imagination to invent, develop and enhance. The kitchen is not drudgery where there is imagination and experimentation. The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 seeks resources and works willingly. She is like merchants' ships bringing good things. She can well nourish a crowd. She has an eye for productive soil and profitable investment. She is industrious. She has good taste for what is pleasing and beautiful. She is competent at cottage crafts to keep the merchants supplied. Her words are wise and kind. What eulogy is reserved for marital and maternal competence in industry, innovation and accumulation! 'Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates' (Proverbs 31.29-31).

E. Faithfulness

Genesis 2 records the time of perfection before the Fall. There had been no disobedience in the human race. Man's natural response to his stewardship would be one of perfect faithfulness. His will was perfect but not so fixed as that sin was impossible. His duty, however, was faithfulness. Man, as created by God, would not be putting his hand in the till to steal his employer's money. He would not be excusing theft on the grounds that the overtime rate is paltry.

F. Accountability

Moses' inspired record immediately passes from verse 15 to verses 16 and 17. Implicit in stewardship vocation is accountability. Obedient fulfilment was clearly presented in God's command, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die'. God's terrain must

be used in God's way and that applies over the full range of resources at our disposal, be they natural resources (the economist's *Land*), human resources (the economist's *Labour*) or assets (the economist's *Capital*). Man is accountable to his Maker in his use of each unit of each, whether a Bible believing Christian or not. Accountability goes both ways. The servant who buried his pound and did nothing with it had even it taken from him. The servant who gained ten pounds from his one pound was given authority over ten cities (Luke 19.11-28). God's intention in eternity is to enhance stewardship beyond all that we know here.

II. The perfect steward

A. Christ's perfection

We are not to imagine that rewards hereafter are anything but gracious. They are not earned in the meritorious sense of rewards for duty done to the standards required. 'All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). Paul rejected his former confidence in meritorious deeds. Justification is by faith, not work. Since Adam fell, there has been only one perfect man, namely, Jesus Christ. He alone was perfectly holy, harmless and undefiled.

B. Christ's stewardship as the Servant of the Lord

So splendid was the stewardship of Jesus Christ that God himself commends him to us, not as an ethical example to follow but as Saviour and Lord. See Isaiah 42.1-4, where we read, 'Behold my servant, whom I uphold; *mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth*; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.'

C. Christ's faithfulness unto death

Christ's words to the Christians at Smyrna 'be thou faithful unto

death, and I will give thee a crown of life' could bring no comfort to sinners had not the Saviour died. He had to be the suffering servant of the Lord because of the task committed to him. Isaiah 53 begins with those telling words concerning widespread disbelief that a crucified carpenter could accomplish our redemption. 'Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.' Sinners should not be offended at substitutionary atonement but, by faith, rejoice in it. The prophet continues (verses 4-6), 'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.' Grace, atonement, rebirth, faith, repentance, pardon and justification are the beginning of all faithful stewardship to God.

3. The Christian steward

A. Church officers

It is to be expected that Scriptural teaching concerning pastors and preaching will contain significant lessons concerning stewardship and so it does. Consider two key passages.

Titus 1.7-9 addresses the necessary *character*: 'For a bishop must be blameless, *as the steward of God*; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.'

1 Corinthians 4.1-4 addresses the preacher's necessary faithfulness and accountability to the Lord: 'Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.'

B. Every Christian

Every Christian, however, is a steward. In 1 Peter 4.10 we read, 'As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God'. Whatsoever it is that God has given us, we are to diligently use it in serving one another. We are not to be distracted from spiritual stewardship by worldly gain. The parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16.1-12 teaches us to be wise in handling 'the mammon of unrighteousness'. This man was unfaithful to his master in false accounting contrary to his interest and, therefore, 'unjust'. He was, however, wise in his own interest concerning material goods. Christ does not encourage us to follow his fraud but his wisdom regarding material possessions. The spiritual man must also be wise concerning possessions but in a different way. They are not to clog our stewardship by their attraction but to facilitate it by generosity.

Conclusion

Do all things as unto the Lord, through him and for him who gave himself for us. Heed the Saviour's counsel concerning faithful stewardship, 'Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath' (Luke 12.42-44).