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NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

IS IT TRUE THAT “GOD’S WORK, DONE GOD’S WAY, WILL NEVER LACK GOD’S SUPPLY?” THE TEST CASE OF MARY AND JOSEPH

JOEL S. WOODRUFF, ED.D.

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children and I listen to a local radio station that has a game called “Bible or Not.” The host reads a quotation and the contestant guesses whether it is from the Bible or not from the Bible. Now let me play the game with you. Here is the quotation, “God’s work, done

God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.” Is this from the Bible or not from the Bible?

If you guessed “not from the Bible,” you’re correct. The quote is used often in churches and ministry circles and is attributed to Hudson Taylor, the founder of China Inland Mission. This leads to the follow-up question, “Is this quote true or false?”

Taylor’s quotation is typically understood to mean, “If you are faithful to God and to the ministry to which you have been called, you will always have the cash on hand to cover the bills.” But is this what Hudson Taylor meant?

Since it is the season of Advent, let’s use the ministry of Jesus’s parents, Joseph and Mary, as a test case.

Mary and Joseph are examples of godly obedience and character to us. They did God’s work in God’s way. First, we see this in Joseph’s life as described by Matthew: “When Joseph woke from sleep [after an angelic dream], he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus” (Matt, 1:24–25 ESV).

Rather than being born into opulence, Jesus started His life among the common people and was visited by shepherds on the outskirts of town.





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Mary also responds obediently to the call of God on her life as a young virgin to be supernaturally impregnated and give birth to the Son of God. She exclaims: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant” (Luke 1:46–47 ESV).

Mary and Joseph exemplify the idea of doing God’s work, God’s way, and it is clearly a biblical idea. It reflects the second part of the Great Commission, which states that we are to teach others to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:18–20). In other words, we’re to do things God’s way. It would be difficult to make disciples of Jesus Christ if we ourselves were not trying to obey Jesus.

Paul adds to this principle when he writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that we can do all kinds of good deeds, but if we don’t do them in love toward God and neighbor, the deeds are counted as “nothing.” Thus, it’s clear – if we are doing God’s work, it must be done in God’s way, as we are called to reflect the love, holiness, and character of God.

This leads us to the second part of Hudson Taylor’s quotation, which states that if we do God’s work in God’s way we “will never lack God’s supply.” Does this imply that as long as a church or ministry is doing things God’s way it will always have the money needed in advance to cover all of the bills? The key in this case are the words “God’s supply.” What is God’s supply? Now let’s get back to Mary and Joseph as a test case.

What would a pregnant woman’s response be to her husband if he said, “I’ve got it all arranged for the delivery of our baby. I found a cave that’s been turned into a stable that would be the perfect place for you to give birth. You can use a hay bale as a birthing chair, and we can place our newborn baby in a feeding trough after delivery”?

No husband in his right mind would suggest this to his expectant wife. Yet this is how God supplied a place for Mary to give birth to the King of kings. God didn’t provide a clean labor and delivery room with all of the bells and whistles. (Now, one could argue that



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at least Joseph didn’t have to fight with insurance companies to help pay the exorbitant medical bills.)

If we didn’t know how the story was going to turn out, would we have ever expected “God’s supply” for the birth of the Savior of the world to be a smelly, dirty stable as a delivery room?

We can learn from the lives of Mary and Joseph that God’s supply doesn’t always add up to what we might think as adequate provision. And yet God’s supply of a stable for Mary to give birth accomplished God’s purposes. For one, Jesus’s birth fulfilled the prophecy that He would be born in Bethlehem. It also demonstrated that Jesus was to be a king like no other king. Rather than being born into opulence, Jesus started His life among the common people and was visited by shepherds on the outskirts of town. In earthly terms, God’s supply may seem wanting in the case of Jesus’s birth.

After Jesus is born, Matthew (Matthew 2:1-18) tells us that Mary and Joseph receive some unexpected visitors in Bethlehem. A group of wise men from the East have followed a star in the heavens to find the Messiah, the future King of Israel, and end up on their doorstep. What a surprise this must have been to Joseph and Mary! Then to top it off they give Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that amount to a few years’ worth of salary! Joseph and Mary are now prepared for upward mobility. God’s supply is looking pretty good in this story. It’s more than Mary and Joseph could ever have expected.

That night, however, Joseph is warned in a dream to leave Bethlehem immediately and escape to Egypt with Mary and their toddler so that King Herod and his troops will not be able to capture and kill the Messiah. How was a poor carpenter able to afford the expense of a long journey and a life of exile in Egypt with his family? God supplied gold, frankincense, and myrrh from the wise men that would have given Mary and Joseph all they



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needed to live as strangers in a foreign land. In this case, God’s supply was extravagant and unexpected, yet with a purpose – to protect Jesus and His family.

In the early years of Jesus’s life, we see how God honored the obedience of Jesus’s earthly parents as they did God’s work in God’s way. God also supplied Joseph and Mary with all that they needed to accomplish God’s mission for them on earth. In one case, God’s supply might appear wanting and inadequate, a simple stable. And in another case, God’s supply was extravagant – expensive gifts. In each case, however, God accomplished His mission.

Perhaps the apostle Paul, in regard to his ministry, summed it up best when he wrote,

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil. 4:12 NIV).

So the maxim “God’s work, done God’s way, will never lack God’s supply” is true if we understand that God’s supply is not always having all that we think we need; rather, God’s supply is what is needed to accomplish His mission in our lives and in the world.

As we enter the season of Advent and Christmas, let us strive to do God’s work, God’s way and look for God’s supply, even if it might be different from what we would normally expect. ■



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