

“The Problem of Scarcity”

Proverbs 3:1-12; John 14:1-4

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In a book called, “The Life You Can Save,” Yale ethicist Peter Singer puts the problem of perceived scarcity in startling terms. He envisions a hypothetical scenario in which a train steams towards a human being. If action isn’t taken, the lumbering locomotive is sure to level this person, killing them. Thankfully, you look down and right beside you in a rail switch. Pull the lever and the train takes a track away from the person standing on the tracks.

You’d pull the lever, right?

But, Singer suggests, what if your most prized possession lay on this track, waiting to be destroyed if you save the man. Well, you’d pull the lever still, wouldn’t you?

But, Singer wonders, what if it weren’t just a prized possession? What if the cost of pulling the lever would be the loss of your job or some measure of security like a portion of your retirement funds or even a year of your life? What about then? Would it be so easy to pull that lever if what you thought was absolutely necessary for your life or comfort here on earth were in jeopardy?

Well, Peter Singer knows, sadly. We’d let the person die if the stakes are perceived as high enough and the person unknown to us. Now, not if it was someone we know, but like a random stranger who were never going to know or be affected by their loved one’s grief.

Scarcity is something we all fear, isn’t it? That is that there won’t be enough of something when push comes to shove. I know I fall prey to this sometimes, to be sure. In the early days of the pandemic, there was a real concern about toilet paper. Well, I didn’t want any part of lacking that, so online I went, scouring through the webpages of online vendors, looking to add to it. I found some and ordered as much as I could. Natalie can tell you we’ve got enough toilet paper in our house to last until the Kingdom comes. And it was all because I had fallen into the scarcity trap.

I call it the scarcity trap because, once you fall into it, it’s dreadfully hard to get out. That is to say that one can remain stuck there for most of the days of their life. Worse thing is, when you’re afflicted with the scarcity syndrome, you don’t realize you have it. You think you’re being practical. After all, who wants to end up without toilet paper, right? So not only are you trapped, you don’t realize your predicament.

But why do I call it that? Practicality as a predicament? It is restrictive in a subtle way that’s not readily apparent. You see, when you’re frightened, scared that is of anything, your mind has a tendency to reduce all the options available to you to just three – flight, fight or freeze. Now, here’s the thing. NO matter what, there are typically other options than just those three but, when your mind perceives danger, this is a protective device to help us survive. So, like if a bear is running toward us (which might happen, by the way, one our neighbors got some doorbell camera footage of a black bear strolling by their front door), fight flight or freeze is great.

If, however, we’re fearful of not having enough toilet paper, fighting to make sure you have 1000 rolls stockpiled in your house makes a whole heck of a lot of sense. Of course, the problem becomes that when certain people sense the need to have a thousand rolls of toilet paper, some people are likely going to have to go without.

A scarcity mindset deeply affects how we treat other people. If we don’t think there’s enough of anything to go around, then we can become jerks rather quickly. I mean, take for example every year at Christmastime. There’s always one insanely hot toy that every kid wants. Parents have been known to do some pretty stupid stuff trying to get those, don’t they? Ever seen some of the footage from Wal-Mart’s Black Friday Sales? Savages. And I should know, right? Takes one to know one.

But it isn’t just toys or toilet paper or even things that the scarcity syndrome affects once it takes root. We can become convinced that there just isn’t enough time, not enough power for everyone to thrive and, as such, we treat others with reckless indifference. When we think there isn’t enough time, we can do dangerous things like drive really, really fast or take chances with our health. If we’re convinced, we won’t get sufficient love, we can actually end up abusing the very people who do love us.

And it’s all because we think there just isn’t enough of any good thing to go around.

Problem is, nothing could be further from the truth, not Biblically speaking, it isn't. Because the God we worship, you see, He doesn't lack anything. And, because we're His children, chosen by Him before the very foundations of the earth, we can lay claim to His overwhelming abundance because the Word teaches us that He will not withhold from us any good thing.

Of course, one particular passage touches upon this lavish abundance of God as it relates to what we've been talking about. As Jesus takes the turn to Jerusalem in the Gospel of John, He takes the time to issue lengthy directives mixed among some very significant teaching on Jesus' relationship to God the Father. Quelling His followers concerns about lacking anything, Jesus says this in the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John, verses one through six, *"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."*

Here, Jesus dispels His follower's concerns about Jesus being taken from them, He uses words designed to comfort. At their root, they talk about the abundance of space in the coming Kingdom. I chose to use the King James Version of this reading because I think that language captures the abundance of God's provision. It isn't the case that there's merely sufficient room, it's that there are mansions, giant homes, enough space for everyone.

This one passage points us to a much more fulsome awareness of God's abundance which is a recurrent theme in the Bible. That makes sense because in this world where our perception is plagued with the sin that resides in us, we tend to think that there isn't enough of anything to go around – not cats, not toilet paper, not time, not space. But each of these conclusions that we draw is horribly flawed because they all fail to account for God's active and ongoing participation in our lives.

As Moses prepares to send the Jewish people into Canaan under the direction of their new leader, Joshua, he shares with them an extended teaching. In Deuteronomy 31:6, Moses says, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."*

In the New Testament, we hear an echo of this, just as we're being instructed against avarice, Hebrews 13:5 reads, *"Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"*

And because Jesus is with us, we can know, with confidence, that anything we truly need will NEVER be withheld from us. Our God is sufficient. In fact, our God is overflowing with an abundance of anything and everything we could every possibly need.

To begin with, we look to this particular passage from the Gospel of John to dispel one of the greatest fears we all have – running out of time.

To say that we've become obsessed with time, let me cite just this one fact: The internet has gotten us so attached to how fast things can get done, that the recent surveys suggest that we become impatient when a web page fails to load in, get this, less than 2 seconds. How quickly we've forgotten dial-up, right?

Seriously though, if we look out and survey matters, chances are we won't find a place where the problem of scarcity bears a greater mark on our lives. Make no mistake, we've made commodity out of time. We have people deliver our groceries, clean our homes, fix our food, all because we don't want to waste our precious time doing things like chores when we could, I don't know, be binge watching Game of Thrones.

We make bucket lists, carefully recording all the things we'd like to do before we die. Now look, at some level, these are innocent things if we allow them to be aspirational goals. If, however, we become obsessed with them, believe that our lives will somehow be insufficient if we don't get to Paris or hike Kilimanjaro then misery awaits, either for ourselves or others. We might not get to do whatever it is on that list, thusly perceiving our lives as deficient or perhaps the cost of accomplishing our list causes us to be callous with others.

But the Bible teaches us clearly about our God and His time. To begin with, God is eternal. That is HE has no worries about time whatsoever. God isn't up in heaven thinking, "Man if Jason Bryant doesn't get to the movie on time, the world's going to end."

You see, the reason that there is sufficient time is that time, like all other things, remains a creation of God's. That is to say that the God who created heaven and earth ALSO created the phenomena of time. And because He created and control it, He can add more of it!

And we know He has. Jesus promises His believers eternal life. Later, in the same 14th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus says this in **John 14:9** – *"Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."*

1 John 5:11 records it this way, *"And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."*

Romans 6:23 – *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

If you're fearful today that you're running out of time, be of good cheer, fellow Christian. Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten Son of our Father God, lives even after He died and we shall as well. One of the great promises of the Scriptures is that we Christians look forward to an embodied existence in the Kingdom. That is to say that we'll have real, perfect bodies. Bodies untarnished by and untarnishable by sin, we can look forward to the abundance of life in the Kingdom.

As our bodies break down, we can look forward to that eternal life that lays just ahead in the undiscovered country beyond our graves.

We can look forward to eternity because the God we worship isn't a puny, weak, human god. No, our God is so great and so mighty that all power and authority is eternally vested in Him.

The Scriptures talk abundantly about God's power but I think one book captures and conveys that power so perfectly – the Book of Job. **Job 26:7-14** – *"God stretches the northern sky over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing. He wraps the rain in his thick clouds, and the clouds don't burst with the weight. He covers the face of the moon, shrouding it with his clouds. He created the horizon when he separated the waters: he set the boundary between day and night. The foundations of heaven tremble; they shudder at his rebuke. By his power the sea grew calm. By his skill he crushed the great sea monster. His Spirit made the heavens beautiful, and his power pierced the gliding serpent. These are just the beginning of all that he does, merely a whisper of his power. Who, then, can comprehend the thunder of his power?"*

I love that, "the thunder of his power."

Or what about this, from **Ephesians 1:16-19** – *"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his incomparably great might."*

Timothy Keller, pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, notes that this term "great might" in the Biblical Greek means something larger than we might conjure. This phrase means "the megaton dynamite of God."

One time, many years ago, I was fortunate to be in Charlotte as one of the old buildings was torn down. We lined up on some unremembered uptown street. There wasn't a warning, per se, aside from a loud clap followed by the building tumbling down. It was a great sight...until a giant wave of dust and debris came barreling toward us. Soon, all of us that had gathered to watch were literally running in the opposite direction. And that was just some dynamite and a building.

Now consider God's power. And while it can be a destructive force, God primary uses His awesome power as a means to provide for us.

For, in the beginning, God created all that we're ever going to encounter. Yes, God can raze but God also can raise up – Mountains, oceans, life from death. There is NO power that God lacks.

We see this most clearly in and through Jesus Christ. Because God raised Him from the dead. Death, our mighty and seemingly unvanquishable enemy has been destroyed. God's power is abundance.

Because his Grace is abundant.

Jesus Christ came to atone for all our sin. The lamb of God who takes away the SIN of the world. There is forgiveness aplenty.

Anybody that gets to know me is going to learn a few things about me pretty quickly. One of those clear items about me is this – I love cats. Take a look at any of my social media accounts and what you’ll quickly see is that I devote all my social media space to my kids and cats.

That love for cats came early and it arrived under the most difficult circumstances for a feline-lover. You see, I was a pretty sick kid. I had really bad asthma related to my allergies. One of the things I was clearly allergic to was, you guessed it, cat dander. So, we weren’t allowed to have actual cats. But what I did have was “Gently.”

I wish I had gotten a picture or something because Gently still exists. She can be found in a box at my parent’s house. Oh, she’s a ragged old thing. Not surprising seeing as how she’s almost as old as I am. I loved Gently. Especially considering that the doctor’s concluded I shouldn’t have stuffed animals (I was allergic to the fibers they were using at the time.”

To my young mind, Gently was it. The only cat, real or otherwise, that I was ever going to have in my life.

And how I protected her. I would make sure that she was near me all the time. Near enough that she got things spilled on her. Near enough that she got torn when I would run and fall with her in my hands. Gently, my dearly beloved stuffed cat got so run-down, I had to put her in a box as she was so beat up. But, as I did so, I probably thought that was as close to as owning a cat as I’d ever get.

Fast forward a few decades. Today, thanks to my wife, I am the happy and proud owner of 4 cats. They provide so much joy that I can’t hardly tell you. IN fact, if you look at my camera roll right now, chances are there are as many pictures of cats as there are of my deeply loved children.

And how did that happen?

By God’s grace, at some point, I quick worrying about the insufficiency of cats in my life and, because I must need them, God who is always with us, provided richly. A veterinarian wife, kids that love cats and help with their care.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Amen.