The Hebrew Pattern of Family Provision

Written by Wade Myers

As the men in our weekly prayer meeting went around the room in their prayers, nearly every single one of us was expressing prayer for God's leading in the areas of restructuring our work and family life, looking for a new job, considering a move, or improving in our role as a provider. As men family leaders, we are constantly concerned about our ability to provide adequately. The curse of Adam looms large on a daily basis as we deal with the thorns and thistles as providers, but we often have a deeper stress than our forefathers in this matter due to our departure from the Biblical pattern of provision.

As we seek God's wisdom in the area of providing for our families and raising sons to provide for their families, let's start by seeking the wisdom of scripture. We are told in Proverbs 24:27, to "Prepare thy work without, and make it fit for thyself in the field; and afterwards build thine house." In other words, young man, get ready to provide (preparing your fields to yield sufficiently to provide) prior to getting married (building a house was synonymous with getting married and starting a family.) At first glance, that doesn't sound any different than what you would expect, but it is quite unique compared to our typical experience today when you consider the fact that the young Israelite male typically inherited the land—the income-producing asset.

Land was very important to the Lord and to the Israelites. Among the many promises from God regarding the land he was giving them as an inheritance was that it was "flowing with milk and honey" in terms of fruitfulness (and as an extra blessing the Israelites could walk right into a situation where they got vineyards that were already planted and houses that were already built.) In fact, land was so important, that if an Israelite sold any land, he really only sold the number of remaining harvests until the Year of Jubilee and then he got the land back.

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Given the land, a Hebrew man only needed to focus on preparing the fields in order to provide adequately. And when also given some animals, he was in an excellent position to take care of his family. "The lambs are for thy clothing, and the goats are the price of the field. And thou shalt have goats' milk enough for thy food, for the food of thy household, and for the maintenance for thy maidens" (Proverbs 27:26-27). In fact, Proverbs 19:4 likely indicates that he received a home as well: "House and riches are the inheritance of fathers…" What an incredible blessing! No wonder we don't have any scriptural examples of men crying out to God to help them find a better-paying job.

They had inherited the assets they needed to provide, so they just needed to be diligent to work the land. "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds" (Proverbs 27:23).

Significantly, the Israelite pattern of provision by land distribution down family lines is not mentioned in the New Testament, nor taught to gentile converts. However, the principles of work, thrift, generosity, and responsibility to provide for dependent family members continue to be emphasized. Responsible stewardship naturally included passing on the family land or business to capable sons or daughters, if they are properly trained, and capable of ownership. Even as recently as the early 1900's, sons would inherit skills by apprenticing with their fathers, including the associated land, tradesman tools, or shops with which to earn a living. But in our modern, predominately wage-earner lifestyles where the fathers do not necessarily pass along assets that produce income, their sons often follow in their wage earner footsteps. This is a noble way to be a steward. Many are called to be a wage earner rather than owner. Sometimes children are even sent to college to learn higher-level skills in order to serve better as an employee without a plan to gain ownership equity.

Would that our only stress was to till and plant our fields measured by acres! But the "fields" many fathers must till today are the hearts and minds of their sons and daughters, to "fertilize" a life of stewardship in the knowledge-based society of today. Building family stewardship regarding wealth and provision will take diligence, patience and our dependence upon God's providence.

Just like Israelite fathers provided their sons with assets with which to provide, Christian fathers today should equip their children with work place skills whether these skills be ownership and management or employment and doing excellently at menial tasks. What matters most is to labor faithfully in the role to which God calls them. We, like ancient Israelite fathers, must pass on a spiritual legacy that includes the multi-generational vision of faithfulness and fruitfulness, with fathers preparing sons for their role as leader, protector and provider. In the case of business ownership, how wonderful it is when fathers raise up sons to work alongside them in the family business, mentor them, and then pass it along to them.

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Understanding wealth

Wealth is not inherently evil, but we must understand it properly. While the world desires wealth for selfish benefits, Christians may use wealth as a tool to glorify God. We can waste money on our own sinful desires and appetites, or we can use it for building God's kingdom and taking dominion.

Deuteronomy 8:18 tells us wealth's purpose: "But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day."

While we do need to work in order to provide, we are not to work merely to be rich, as Proverbs 23:4-5 warns us: "Labour not to be rich; cease from thine own wisdom. Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven."

The familiar verse in Timothy speaks to our motives about money. "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness" (1 Timothy 6:10-11).

God calls Christians to be fruitful and to seek fruitfulness in our families, businesses, and spiritual life in order to fulfill His dominion mandate and bring Him glory (Genesis 1:26-28; 1 Chronicles 29:11-13; Proverbs 15:6, 13:22, 22:29; John 15:8, 16).

Christian entrepreneurs

Ask most aspiring entrepreneurs why they want to be an entrepreneur and you will hear the same predictable two-part response: money and "being their own boss" (read: independence). Christian entrepreneurs, however, need to fight constantly against a worldview that lacks accountability and lures with easy riches.

Because Christians affirm that the primary purpose of man is to glorify God, we should answer that question quite differently. Yes, we want to be good providers for our families, but we also have other roles, such as leading and protecting our families. We need to remind ourselves frequently that the Christian life is about living our lives according to the principles, precepts, and patterns of Scripture, whether we are employees or employers.

When a Christian chooses the entrepreneurial path, there is not a guarantee of wealth. God may choose instead to discipline us, refine us, or sanctify us according to His providence. There will be opportunities for sanctification through the thorns and thistles that the entrepreneur faces each day. He may have a higher potential for financial reward, but he must weigh his risk with the Lord's leading for him.

Recent research on entrepreneurship performed by Scott Shane, the A. Malachi Mixon Professor of Entrepreneurial Studies at Case Western Reserve University, and published in his book, *The Illusions of Entrepreneurship: The Costly Myths That Entrepreneurs, Investors, and Policy Makers Live By*, clearly shows that while entrepreneurship creates a lot of wealth, it is very unevenly distributed. His research shows that the typical entrepreneur earns less money than he otherwise would have earned working for someone else. This is a sobering thought for aspiring entrepreneurs, but through the extensive career surveys published each year by Howard H. Stevenson, the Sarofim-Rock Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, entrepreneurs—even those with lower earnings—are far happier about their choice to be an entrepreneur due to their level of independence.

The chief end of entrepreneurship

Is it a sin to seek independence? It can be, if the goal of independence is to avoid accountability. The world wishes to do whatever it desires without consequence, but the Christian should be motivated to entrepreneurial independence in order to shepherd his family better.

When launching an independent business which allows the family to work together, men have the opportunity to create a holistic environment involving all aspects of family, work, and discipleship. The entire family is then able to work together to achieve common goals under the daily headship of the father who is there to lead the family and the family company. Rather than striving to be his own boss, a husband and father in this setting can be about the business of reforming Christian family life (Genesis 2:18-24; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Ephesians 5:22-28, 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 3:4; 1 Peter 3:7; Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-9; Psalm 78:3-8; Proverbs 13:20; Isaiah 59:21; Malachi 4:6; Luke 1:17; Ephesians 6:4; Titus 2).

The bottom line for Christian entrepreneurs is to keep our eyes on the goal of laying up treasure in heaven, while seeking to create opportunities to be faithful and independent leaders, providers, and protectors of our families. If God blesses our efforts along the way, our stewardship burden to glorify Him simply increases. As Christians, we need to resist the temptation to measure treasure by the world's standards and instead measure treasure by Kingdom standards.

See Wade Myers' biographical information on page 24 of this book, or read more of his story at www.WadeTMyers.com.