

What Is the Recession For?

by John Piper

The recession is an opportunity for God to expose hidden sin, wake us up to the world's condition, and relocate the roots of our joy in His grace.

Duration: 42:48

Scripture: Job 1:1, Acts 4:34, 2 Corinthians 1:8, 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, Hebrews 13:3

Topics: "Faith In Crisis", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

This sermon delves into the purpose of the recession, emphasizing the need to not waste this challenging time but to seek God's guidance and teaching. It explores how recessions can expose hidden sins, awaken us to global suffering, relocate our joy in God's grace, advance God's mission in spreading the gospel, and encourage the church to care for its members in need.

Transcript

Father our hearts desire now is that we not waste this recession. Forbid that we would let it go by with a preoccupation of anxiety or grumbling or clever financial maneuvering. Oh God grant I pray that our ears would be open to what you are saying to the world, France, Tokyo, New York, Brasilia.

May our eyes be open to what you are saying and doing. Don't let us sleep through the recession. May we learn, may we grow, may we hear, may we know your plan.

Come be our teacher in these days. In Jesus name, Amen. So this is a message about the recession and God's purpose is in it and when I use the term recession I don't have any careful sophisticated definition in mind.

I don't even know what the definition of recession is. You hear it on the radio so I think I know what they're talking about. I mean the financial setbacks like business slowdown, decreasing profits, massive layoffs, joblessness, the bursting of the housing bubble, thousands of foreclosures, personal and business bankruptcies, bank failures, investment company collapses, loss of retirement funds.

Got a letter from the BGC today, my little white sheet, 29.97% lower than the last little white sheet I got from the retirement people down at the BGC. That's the sort of thing I mean by recession. And now more and more all of the social and political upheavals that will accompany it.

Witness France for example and probably more on the way. So God is sovereign which is why you can speak in terms of purposes. God is sovereign over these things.

He foresees them all. He causes or permits them all. And when He foresees and He causes or permits is always by design.

So whatever comes to pass comes to pass by God's design. However it comes to pass. The lot is cast in the lap.

Every decision is from the Lord in Las Vegas. Many are the plans of the mind of a man, but the purpose of the Lord will stand on Wall Street. The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing.

He frustrates the plans of the peoples in Switzerland. The Lord declares the end from the beginning saying, my counsel shall stand. I will accomplish all my purpose everywhere.

So this is the foundation of understanding that we have when we ask, so what are you up to today? What are the purposes of God in the recession? And we're not left without an answer. There are many answers, but not all of them. God is up to billions and billions of things that you don't know about, I don't know about, we won't know about till we get to heaven.

We trust Him for those, but He's up to five or six or a hundred things that we do know about because they're in the Bible. So those are the ones I want to talk about because those are the ones we have some authority to talk about and they're not unclear. I have time perhaps to do five.

Here they are. I'll state them and then we'll unpack them. Number one, He intends in this recession to expose hidden sin and to bring us to repentance and cleansing.

Number two, He intends to wake us up, I'm thinking us in the West in particularly, to the constant and desperate condition of the developing world where they always have mega recession and nothing else. Number three, He intends to relocate the roots of our joy in His grace and not in our goods, in His mercy and not in our money, in His worth and not in our wealth. Number four, He intends to advance His saving mission in the world and spread the gospel like wildfire and grow His church precisely at a time when they have least resources to do it.

And number five, He intends for the church to care for its hurting members and to grow in the gift of love so that no one is in need in the church of Jesus Christ, period. Number one, He intends for this recession to expose hidden sin and so bring us to repentance and cleansing. Biblical example, Job, the first verse of the book of Job says, there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.

That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. So, he was a good man. In the last chapter, verse 6, chapter 42, verse 6, it says, Job says, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

So, what does that mean? He was a blameless man. Check him out, Satan. Job, I'm a wicked man, covering myself with dust and ashes and repenting before the living God.

What does that mean? It means this, the most pure, blameless, holy saint on the planet has a sediment of sin lying quietly at the bottom of his beaker while we look at this clean, clear water called holiness. But you bump him, you just bump him, and it gets cloudy. And Job got bumped big-time, and out of his mouth

came some things he never should have said, because they were there, and they're in you.

And you know what brings them out? Recession. That's what brings them out. Me too.

That's the way it works. That's the way recessions work. That's what they're for.

And it works individually, and it works socially. Individually. Let's try that one first.

2 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 8. This is the text that was read. Paul says, we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. So some of you may feel that way, getting to that point.

We despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

This is amazing. God brought His own precious, authorized, chosen apostle to the brink of death in order that he might go deeper with God in trust. Why did he need that? Because at the bottom of every apostle's life, every pastor's life, every person's life, who is a Christian is a sediment of self-reliance, including Paul.

And what you have to have happen to you to discover it, feel it, to know it, to hate it, to renounce it, to flee it, is some recession in your life. And it works socially as well. That's why the Ponzi schemes have been discovered.

In your greed, and in your lying, and in your deceit, and in your covetousness, you promise returns like 17 percent and 22 percent if people will invest in nothing. And then you pay them their return with others who are investing in nothing. And then you just skim off the top millions and millions of dollars and build a home in Florida, and build a home in South Dakota, and build a home in you know where, each of them costing four, five, eight million dollars.

And then the recession comes, and they want their money back. And it's over. God, thank you that it's over.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you that it's over. How many of you are still there? What are you doing? What have you hidden that has not yet been revealed by this recession? Get it over quick. Get it behind you quick.

You won't have to sit in Hennepin County Jail so long. God is good. God is very good to us to expose our motives.

Oh, how many sins are yet to be exposed. Recessions are good at exposing the sin of waste. Wasting other people's money and wasting your own.

Whether you're in a church or anywhere else. Recessions are good at exposing the sin of selfishness and the sin of greed in the mortgage business. Recessions are good at exposing the sin of fear when everything starts coming down.

You thought you had great confidence in God. Now, whoa, I don't have as much as I thought I had. What a gift to you.

You were so blind to your unbelief. Now you know it. What a gift.

The sin of grumbling. Philippians 2 says don't grumble. The sin of impatience.

You thought your marriage was strong. Now the relationship is stressed to the max because money was the glue, not God. And on and on and on the recession mercifully, graciously exposing our sin and calling us to forgiveness.

Calling us to the cross that we've been singing about. Where we can find relief and peace and rest that, like Kenny said, really does go beyond reason. That's number one.

Number two, God intends to wake us up to the constant and desperate condition of the developing world where is only recession all the time of the worst kind. We think recessions come and go. They don't come and go.

They just come. For two-thirds of the world, they just come. That's all they do is come.

They don't ever go. There isn't anything, and we're not in one as far as they're concerned. This building has got electricity and heat.

It's astonishing, is it not, how blind prosperity makes us to the miseries of the world or the neighborhood. God has some remedies for this. Let me read you a text and relate it to the recession.

This is Hebrews 13 chapter 3. It goes like this. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are in the body. You have a body.

What's going on there? How's that verse reasoning? How's it work? He says there are people in prison, and there are people mistreated, and we tend to forget them. He says, remember them. We must be tending to forget them.

He says, remember. They're in prison. Remember.

Don't forget. We do. Well, we forget.

We forget that people are mistreated. We forget that people are hungry. We forget that people are thirsty.

We forget that they don't have any education. We forget that billions and billions need Christ. We just forget, and so the Bible constantly has to say, remember, and then it gives us some strange incentives and helps.

It says, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you have a body. You're also in the body. You have a body.

How's that work? It works like this. If I get sick in my body, this really happens to me as a pastor. If I have this long period of health, don't have an ache in my body, my empathy quotient for you is lower.

But if I get one of those things that's going around, I pray for you better. I feel better for you. I'm more patient with you.

It wasn't your fault. We're just so prone to forget. We need a recession.

We need a recession so bad in order to wake up to the world in which we live. What a world we live in. So God's aim is to wake us up to facts like a billion people don't have safe drinking water.

16,000 children die every day from hunger-related diseases. Hunger-related diseases. 18 million children are orphaned in Sub-Saharan Africa.

We, as a family, read every morning the Global Prayer Digest. You can get it online or you can subscribe to it like we do. So we have paper in our hand when we're doing devotions.

And that's praying each day for a different unreached people group. And so on Thursday, this is what Talitha and Noel and I read. It's 3 a.m. We were praying for the Afar people of Ethiopia.

A-F-A-R. Never heard of them? Neither had I. That's why we read it. It's 3 a.m. and the Afar father is still awake.

The desert night is cold. He snuggles up to his wife and newborn baby to keep them warm. Their stomachs rumble with hunger.

Should he slaughter his scrawny goat to feed his wife, hoping she will produce enough milk for their baby? Or should he beseech the clan elders to move again in search of weeds for the goat or maybe even some fresh water? They are fortunate. Both his wife and their baby survived the birth. The Afar people have the highest maternal fatality rate in the world.

Women give birth without benefit of sterile conditions and even clean water. Of the babies born alive, one-third die before the age of five. Afar people roam throughout one of the most desolate places on earth, the Ethiopian desert.

Drought and malnutrition make them vulnerable to diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, conjunctivitis, and other waterborne illnesses. Of 13 million Afar, 3 million are infected with HIV and AIDS. Did you know that? I didn't.

Now I know. And we prayed. A small thing.

A teeny small thing. God have mercy on the Afar people. Send somebody! Lord of the harvest, you told us to ask.

Send somebody. Send somebody who cares about all their suffering, especially their eternal suffering. That's the way we pray every morning for a different group.

Let you feel it more if you're sick or for recession. Helps you wake up to what the world is really like for most of the people in the world. It's good to know these things.

And it helps me think about this church. It's not easy to be the Church of Jesus Christ in America. Sometimes I wonder if we are the Church of Christ in America.

It helps me dream of cultivating a radical culture at Bethlehem in which hundreds of people dream of ways of spending their lives creatively, long term, for the relief of suffering. I just want hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people to think that way about growing up and getting old and dying. Instead of the whole mindset being a school, job, car, house, health care, retirement, dead.

What is that? When this is happening, surely the mindset should be life counting. Life counting. Whatever your profession is.

Counting for the relief of suffering, especially eternal suffering, which is the most serious kind. That's what I mean by a radical culture at a church where that's just the way you grow up here and get old here. We have a vision at Bethlehem called treasuring Christ together.

It's our fumbling effort to try to figure out how to do church in the Twin Cities with a lot of lost people. It has these three parts, multiplying campuses instead of enlarging this downtown thing, and church planting, and the global diaconate, which is an effort to constantly keep before us the poorest of the poor. So that over the last, since 2005, last four years, we have given seven million dollars to treasuring Christ together.

To multiply campuses, plant churches, and global diaconate. Ten percent goes to church planting, ten percent goes to the global diaconate, which means, and this gives me great encouragement, which means \$700,000 over and above the \$9.2 million budget for doing church steady state has gone to the poorest of the poor, and \$593,000 of that is out. It's gone.

That makes me glad. When the Lord sees that, He says something like, I think, that's good, and don't relent, and don't be satisfied. That's number two, awakening us to the world through our own little recession.

Number three, He intends to relocate the roots of our joy in His grace, not our goods, in His mercy, not our money, in His worth, not our wealth. God sends recessions to yank up the roots of our joy from the pleasures of the world, and plant them in the glory of His grace. Now, there's one text in the New Testament that is the clearest recession text in the Bible, and I'm going to take you there now.

It's 2 Corinthians 8. We went there a few months ago. This will be familiar to Bethlehem folks. We should go here every week.

Almost everything I have ever wanted to teach is here in these two verses. Now, that's an overstatement. I just like them a lot, so I overstate things when I like something.

Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 8, we want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that was given among the churches of Macedonia. So, He's writing to Corinth about something that happened up in Macedonia, up around Philippi. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Now, that's my dream for Bethlehem. I don't think we'll ever reach the poverty part, but wouldn't hurt, perhaps. Verse 2 says, these folks have a wealth of generosity.

That's what I want for us. I mean every kind of generosity. I mean, after this service, somebody wants to talk to you, you're generous with your time.

Somebody needs some money, you're generous with your money. Every kind. In other words, we're just the kind of people that's there.

We're just ready to be spent for others. That's what I mean by generous. I want that for our people.

So, my question here is, where did that come from? Where did that come from in this text? And it's so clear. Sometimes I'm embarrassed to preach on this text to insult your intelligence. But, prepare to be insulted.

Did it come, you can help me, just tell me what the answers are to these questions. Did it come from their prosperity? What's the answer? No, because they don't have any. It says, verse 2, their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of liberality.

So, scratch that answer. It didn't come from prosperity. Do you know what state in the United States is per capita the poorest? Tell me.

Risk it. It'll be an insult, but say it anyway. Mississippi.

It's all right. Do you know what state per capita has the highest level of charitable giving? Now you know the answer. It's Mississippi.

There's a correlation, folks, between poverty and giving, not wealth and giving. Wealthy people don't give much money proportionately. They give a lot of money, it just looks like they're giving a lot of money.

I give a lot of money to this church, but I make a lot of money from this church. So, what's the big deal, right? It's just no big deal, but when somebody has almost nothing and they get a plea and they can't resist the giving, something's going on there really beautiful, and that's what's going on here. These people are poor, in verse 2, and they've got a wealth of generosity.

Second question, where did it come from? Did it come from being surrounded by approving people and culture? The answer to that one is no, because they're being harassed. It says in verse 2, look at it, in a severe test of affliction. So, now you've got poverty and you got people beating up on them.

The reason I'm assuming affliction means that is because of Acts 17, verse 5. That's what happened in Thessalonica, that is up there around the Macedonians. Jason got arrested and beat up. The church, three weeks old, is being hurt, and they're giving like crazy.

I mean, this is recession over the top, and they're lavishly giving. So, question third time, where'd this come from? All right? It says in verse 2 where it came from. Their abundance of joy in that extreme poverty overflowed with the wealth of the brother, generosity.

So, they were happy that the recession was abounding. They were poor, people were beaten up on them, and they were so happy they gave. Last question, where'd that joy come from? Verse 1, we want you to know, brothers, about the, say those next three words.

That's the answer about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia. What does grace of God look like? It looks like abundant joy in the midst of poverty overflowing in a wealth of liberality. That's what grace looks like when it comes down.

The question for the church is, this church, your church, wherever you go to church, the question for the church is, have you experienced grace? Do you know your sediment of self-reliance so well, and you see it so clearly when it gets all murky after you get bumped by your wife, or bumped by your kid, or bumped by your broker, and you're looking at your glass, it's all murky, and you hate it, and you're stunned at the grace of God that He loves you, that He forgives you, that He stays by you, that He keeps holding on to you, that He brings you home to glory, and you can hardly imagine a God so kind that you're going to give, and give, and give to people who are in need. I just want to be like that. I want you to be like that because it's such a beautiful, beautiful thing.

So the way recessions work is that they bump us, and then they reveal the sin, and then they jerk up, and they jerk up the roots of our joy, which were down there in our money, and on our security, and how everything was going, and we suddenly are rootless for a minute, and then He mercifully sinks them into the glory of the grace of God, and they're firm, and they're solid, and they're not shaken anymore. Be thankful in all circumstances. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Amen. So He's relocating our joy. That's number three.

Number four. God intends in this recession, and by this recession, for His mission in the world to advance. I mean the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

The spread of the gospel and the growth of the church out of unbelievers, people being rescued precisely at a time. He intends for this to happen. This spread, this advance of His mission at a time when the resources of the church are the least that they have been in a long time.

That's how He guards His glory. Now, if you would ask me, so where do you get that in the Bible? We've seen kind of texts, all these other ones, and my answer would be everywhere. We could just do it for an hour, but I'll take two minutes.

He promises the heir when Abraham and Sarah are old and barren. He splits the Red Sea when the people are trapped and cornered by Pharaoh. He gives manna in the wilderness when there is no food anywhere to eat.

He stops the Jordan River when it's time to take the land. When a city stands in the way of a people, the walls fall down. When the Midianites are as many as the sand of the sea before the armies of God, He strips the army down from 10,000 to 300, because if it stays at 10,000, the soldiers might get the glory, and if 300 take it, God gets the glory.

He does this with recession over and over and over again. When Goliath defies the armies of the Lord, he sends a boy with a sling lest an army get the glory. When the Son of God comes into the world to save sinners, He calls a virgin to conceive.

And when the mighty devil himself is to be defeated, a lamb goes to the slaughter. It's everywhere. This is God's moment.

That's what it's for. The glory of the Almighty God is at work, moving to make a name for Himself in His church. That's what the recession is about.

Second Corinthians 8, 1 to 2 makes it pretty plain that that's the way the poor saints down in Jerusalem are going to be fed. The money is going to come from poor people, recession-stricken people. Now, let me take two or three minutes before I give you the last point and explain this thing that's in your folder.

Did you get it out? It was in your worship folder. I want this to be in a context. I told Kenny, let me do this.

Don't say it at the welcome. Let me put it here in the message so it has a feel to it, has a theological, biblical context. If you're a visitor, you can just tune out right now if you want to, or you can kind of listen to how we do this sort of thing.

But if you're a regular attender or member, tune in. We voted as a church that when a million dollars was in the Treasuring Christ Together Campusing Fund, we'd pull the trigger and finish the North Campus. It'll

cost about 1.6 million.

We put that trigger there because we thought we could raise the rest of it while it's being built, no debt on that part of the building. That's what I want to happen. That trigger point to be reached requires this, \$235,000 in the next four weeks.

We don't want to put this off to the fall. I really don't want to put this off to the fall because we waste money and we disrupt all the ministries up there. We can do this.

God will grant grace for a church of 4,500 regular folks in worship to give \$235,000 in the next four weeks. And I say that with this recessionary reality in my mind. That's on top of \$9.2 million budget this year that we just voted on.

It's also the hardest financial times we've faced in decades. It's also going to be given by thousands of people who never put their foot on the North Campus. Amazing grace how sweet the sound when people feel like that.

So I think the simplest way to say it is we created a website called finishthemillion.org. I went there Friday. I got so excited about this absolutely simple little website because you can give online and I give \$100. I thought, oh cool, let me try it.

So first fruits from the Piper family and there's this little diagram right there. This is for kids and young people. I gave her allowance today.

I was way behind so I gave her a whole stack of dollar bills because I have these dollar bills I put in my drawer so I can give her allowance every Saturday night so she has some give when she comes to church on Sunday from that and I'd forgotten and she's reminded me over and over again. So I gave it to her. I said now you can give to TCT.

So I'm sure she will. I won't tell her what to give but there she can get an idea from that little column right there. Folks, we can do this I believe and God wants us to.

But now I've said that vastly more important than whether we make the million by March. That's four weeks from now. Whether we make the million by March.

Vastly more important is that these roots of our joy not be in things. Not even in north campus things. Closing fifth reason why the recession has been so graciously given to us.

God intends for the church to care for its hurting members and thereby to grow in the gift of love. Buildings exist for people. Not the other way around.

I pray that no effort to build will ever keep us from caring for our people. Listen to this simple word from Acts 4:34. Should reverberate through all the churches in recessionary times.

There was not a needy person among them. That doesn't mean they were all rich. In fact Paul is raising money because there's so much poverty in Jerusalem.

It means when one was struck everybody pitched in. Folks, that's not a 2,000 year old idea. That's real or I'm out of here.

You don't have Christians in need while other Christians have plenty. You don't. That's what church is.

That's what it's for. We will be there for each other. And folks, what are you going to do when there's nothing at Rainbow? And mobs rule the streets.

We're going to be there for each other. That's what. Then you'll find out who church is.

So every member will have his needs met at Bethlehem if I have anything to do with it. God is going to test us. Are you a church or are you a club? May the Lord grant us Macedonian grace.

Second Corinthians 8.1. Grace. Both to finish the million, \$235,000 in four weeks, and to make sure nobody in this church is uncared for. Father in heaven, there's a mission to the world that you mean to fulfill in these days.

Yes, you do. And you mean to fulfill it out of a church where every member feels, I got a family and I'm home. I can take all kinds of risks in this world because I got a home.

I got a place. I got a people. I got friends.

So God, don't let us waste the recession. Grow us. Deepen us.

Reveal our sins. There's yet work to be done in my heart. My sediments not yet in the beaker.

Oh God, with every jostle I get, I see another little crumb of crud. Grant, oh God, holiness to rise in our church. Start here in the pulpit.

Multiply the effectiveness of this moment for your glory, I pray in Christ.

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