

Many supply chains are truly quite extraordinary. Worldwide...routinely...literally billions of transactions connect two transactional parties to their mutual satisfaction. And then that happens over and over again! Now, take a step back and hear that again: *worldwide...routinely...literally billions of transactions connect two transactional parties to their mutual satisfaction! And then that happens over and over again!*

That enormous amount of activity is one of the astonishing fruits of highly developed economies, where, say, Americans go to their local grocery store in any city in the U.S. to find dozens of varieties of reasonably-priced pickles waiting there for just the right pickle to be selected as “the winner”—yes, in this case, perhaps Vlasic Kosher whole dill pickles, maybe a large 80-ounce jar for the holiday party this Friday.

Now, for sure, the typical American couldn't possibly conjure up that particular pickle offering *from scratch*, say, during the next year...even they were offered a million dollars to do just that! *What, you say, I could do that for a million dollars!* OK, let's run through just some of what you would need to do...

You would need to learn how to make a glass jar from scratch. So, you first need to source and acquire the sand, soda ash, and limestone to create the glass for that jar. You would need to personally build the right heating apparatus, a type of furnace, to then forge that glass jar. Accordingly, you would need to discern what metals and fasteners are needed to build the furnace itself and start buying the mining rights where metals for the furnace might be found and excavated.

And, of course, for the metal lid, you would need to do similar processes from scratch. Also, you would need to learn how to make a label from scratch to affix to the jar, creating the right paper and adhesive as well as the dye for the writing. And, of course, you would rent the proper type of land to grow the cucumbers that make the best dill pickles. And you must craft a recipe and grow the dill and garlic cloves.

That's so ridiculous, you say! I don't have to do any of that! That's right, you don't, *here in the U.S. in the 21st century!* But what about a thousand years ago? You see, extraordinary supply chains have constantly been put in place and improved and integrated all the way to your pickles being right there on the shelf!

Yeah, the fertilizer company...the cucumber farmer...the harvest-machinery manufacturer...the glass manufacturer...the lid maker...the spices vendor...the truck-delivery company...all those supply chains and more smoothly integrated by Vlasic and folded into an alliance with a Safeway or a Walmart—all the way down to each local store with managers, stockers, and greeters. Frankly, in a vibrant, free-trade capitalist society—well beyond pickles—all of that is true for many thousands of items in just one store right now!

Truth be told, all of this is very much what we can call out as a gargantuan amount of advanced mash-ups of countless man-made “miracles.” And those miracles are comprised of relentless combinations of action that require ever-advancing human ingenuity and constant effort and dedicated stewardship by the many parties that're involved. *Oh...you still have doubts?* Then think back just a moment to making your own one lonely jar of dill pickles *all from scratch*...and then multiply that scenario for all those things we all enjoy and tend to take for granted, like BandAids and bicycles and decongestants and printer ink.

Now further consider purely-digital supply chains! How about a search on Google—a nearly instant return of multiple options of massive amounts of information! How about streaming movies on multiple appliances that we can take anywhere? And where will AI capabilities surely take us all?

But here's the deal: there's failure constantly lurking in the promises made and expectations embedded in each and every supply chain. Yeah, here's an example of when such a failure happens: your spouse calls you and asks about your shopping trip to Walmart, and you say, “It's stupid, they were actually out of Vlasic dill pickles! Well, they did have a smaller jar of 'em and some other brands of pickles we need, but you know we need that huge jar of Vlasics for the party. I'm upset about it...I don't have time for this!” Well, then, welcome to the world of keeping all those miracles going *to the complete satisfaction of every spoiled American customer every day!* Yes, those miracles are taken for granted...until broken by one

simple out-of-stock item. Yes, you're upset 'cause the holiday party is ruined! ...But just what *are* some possible causes of brokenness in this scenario? Well, that's a key point in and of itself—*it could be several.*

Perhaps the retail store delegates restocking levels to its supply-chain partners—and Vlasic had a supply-chain hiccup last week. But maybe the pickle jar *was* in the store, and the local store management hadn't kept tabs on the local shelves to properly re-stock the empty shelf from the back room. Or perhaps another shopper grabbed the only 80-ounce jar available...but changed his mind and placed it back on a different shelf. Perhaps the inventory software projections weren't programmed for stocking to the level of expected higher demand on a holiday weekend. Or maybe the store is very committed to its own "lean inventory practices" to avoid costly high levels of inventory—and so the store is constantly out-of-stock for lots of stuff. Or maybe 80-ounce jars of Vlasic dill pickles are not routinely carried by the store because shelf-space is limited for such a large, slow-moving inventory item. *No matter: you still expected the dills!*

Look, a Walmart supercenter reportedly offers over 140,000 items nowadays. That means only a 1% out-of-stock rate is 1,400 retail items! And with each inventory label clearly pasted right there on the empty shelf, a retailer is inviting you to be upset by being out of stock: *how dare they waste your time!* All this is really challenging for a store, especially if it doesn't acquire the IT system and skill to analyze data. Truth is, even when you do have extensive data, your results can only be as good as your interpretation of data!

But it can be that the programming *itself* is faulty. Software is only as good as the coding of its programmer. Are all doctors in the top 1%? Of course not, and some are even bad. Same with coders. So, just because software is involved doesn't mean it's awesome...or even sufficient!

Many a supply-chain expert will tell you that the weakest link to think about is *humans!* Did the restaurant you visited for your wedding anniversary have high-end recipes, a world-class kitchen, and an exquisite setting for patrons...but the waitstaff service was lacking? Yes, that last link in a supply chain can torpedo the overall customer experience! Yeah, it can be a salesperson who's not fully trained...or a service or support person who just doesn't care...and, poof, valued customers are lost, maybe for good!

Hey, you know the person with the most experience with supply chain issues...in fact, the most extraordinary supply chain of all time? *Yeah, it's God!* Of course, He created a *nearly flawless* supply chain. With His Son's perfect sacrifice on the Cross, He supplied the opportunity for salvation, the redemption of sins, and eternal life for every person who's walked the earth for a couple thousand years. In fact, He reveals that multiple times! But I did say *nearly flawless*? So, what's the hiccup? Well, people, of course, folks who say they follow God...but don't obey Jesus's commandment to go forth and make disciples!

Jesus taught His disciples about this very "gap" in His supply chain of witness and discipling: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..." But then His very next words were these: "...therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Matthew 9:37-38.

Yes, God's supply-chain protocol is to partner with imperfect believers, giving them the opportunity and privilege of loving and witnessing and discipling as to Christ and Him crucified. But when some churchgoers reject acting on that very privilege, God will indeed send a faithful, loving, witnessing, discipling remnant!

'Course, in all this, God didn't need humanity's digital-ingenuity—His supernatural power working through Christ far exceeds humanity's feeble mimicking of His power in their own independent priorities...then or now! And God's supply chain can be considered flawed only in the short run...that is, until He replaces the apathetic and disobedient and the unloving with that faithful remnant of believers who will go to help fulfill 1 Timothy 2:4—"God our Savior's desire that all people are saved."

Yes, even *seemingly* miraculous human supply chains will always ultimately fail...yes, be broken. But the fruits emanating from the sacrificial miracle of the Cross will simply not be broken by any particular appointed deliverers' disobedience and apathy. Whenever the inquiring person truly asks, seeks, knocks—the door will be opened! (Matthew 7:7) Praise God for His love and trustworthiness!

A&A: Application & Action

1. On a scale from 1 to 100 regarding experiencing amazing supply chain conveniences, with 1 being not spoiled at all and 100 being extremely spoiled, where would you put your number? Discuss.
2. Does your business or nonprofit truly minimize supply chain hiccups for its customers or clients? Or does it have difficulties in this area? Discuss.
3. Does your church truly minimize its supply chain hiccups in God's supply chain of Gospel witness and love? Discuss.