

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Giving Our Church to God

Exodus 35:30-36:7

Grab a hard hat and come visit the construction site in today's Scripture passage, and you'll soon feel like you're standing in the middle of a dream. After all, the people of God have more than enough to do what God has told them to do. There's no shortage of money. You won't see Moses passing the plate one more time, hoping to gather just a little more financing for the sanctuary project. There's no shortage of building materials. You won't see God's people poking around in their garages, scraping together a few more supplies to contribute to the enterprise. There's no shortage of skilled labor. You won't see workers assigned to tasks that are completely beyond their abilities and experience. No, in this case, everything, and everyone, needed to see this undertaking through to completion is there, and more. This surplus of resources is every church member's, and particularly every pastor's, dream.

Actually, the word "surplus" isn't one that we get to use a lot in the life of the church. It seems like we're regularly dealing with some sort of lack. A lack of volunteers. A lack of money. A lack of time. A lack of commitment. A lack of experience. A lack of leadership. And on the list could go. It's as if we get accustomed to living in a state of lack. Scarcity meets us at every turn, and we end up spending lots of our time and energy figuring out how to manage our shortfalls, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. Think about it. When was the last time you heard a worship leader announce the cancellation of today's collection, because the church already has enough money in the bank? When was the last time a member of the Nominating Committee turned you away because all available places of service are already filled? When was the last time an usher had you wait in the vestibule for a moment while he located a seat for you in the packed sanctuary?

No wonder "empty" is a bad word in the life of the church. We don't, and shouldn't, like empty. Empty pews. Empty parking spaces. Empty offering plates. Empty baptistery. Empty spots on the calendar. Empty classrooms. Empty lines on committee lists. Wherever there's emptiness, we seek to fill it. Especially over the last two years, during the ongoing pandemic, we've struggled with the challenges of space that has been sitting idle, empty, waiting to be reactivated and utilized for kingdom purposes.

Now clearly, emptiness wasn't a problem in this morning's text from Exodus. Instead of having too little, they actually had too much. Too much money. Too many building materials. Too many skilled workers. Resources were flooding in to support the completion of the tabernacle. Recall that the tabernacle, also called the tent of meeting, was essentially a portable sanctuary. It was a movable house of worship that the Israelites used during their journey in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. But during the construction phase, Moses would have been lost without Bezalel, whom we meet in our Scripture passage. Bezalel was the chief architect of the tabernacle project. He designed and oversaw its construction, giving meticulous attention to every detail. Bezalel's chief assistant was Oholiab, a craftsman known for his skills in design and embroidery. Together, Bezalel and Oholiab made an impressive team. They not only knew their stuff, but also

knew how to communicate it to others, whom they trained and supervised as the project unfolded.

But Bezalel, Oholiab, and those who worked under them could only work with what they were given. And in this situation, they were given a lot. The people of God were the primary source of supplies. Some gave their money. Some gave their jewelry. Some gave other precious metals and stones. Some gave much-needed wood. Some gave colorful fabrics and fine linens. Some gave oil and incense. Some gave the skill of their hands. As the verse just before today's text says, "All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the Lord freewill offerings for all the work the Lord through Moses had commanded them to do" (35:29). So God laid out the project, and God's people stepped up, big time.

Christian leader Gordon MacDonald tells a story about an experience that reshaped his understanding of giving. He says:

The process began when my wife, Gail, and I made a missions trip to West Africa. On the first Sunday of our visit, we joined a large crowd of desperately poor Christians for worship. As we neared the church, I noticed that almost every person was carrying something. Some hoisted cages of noisy chickens, others carried baskets of yams, and still others toted bags of eggs or bowls of cassava paste.

"Why are they bringing all that stuff?" I asked one of our hosts. "Watch!" she said. Almost every person in that African congregation brought something: a chicken, a basket of yams, a bowl of cassava paste. I saw that giving, whether yams or dollars, is not optional for Christ followers.

Soon after the worship began, the moment came when everyone stood and poured into the aisles, singing, clapping, even shouting. The people began moving forward, each in turn bringing whatever he had brought to a space in the front. Then I got it. This was West African offering time. The chickens would help others get a tiny farm business started. The yams and the eggs given could be sold in the marketplace to help the needy. The cassava paste would guarantee that someone who was hungry could eat.

I was captivated. I'd never seen a joyful offering before. Obviously, my keep-money-under-the-radar policy would not have worked in that West African church. Those African believers, although they never knew it, had moved me. I began to understand that giving—whether yams or dollars—was not an option for Christ-followers. Rather it was an indication of the direction and the tenor of one's whole life.¹

In many ways, the Christian life is an act of giving, a way of making our lives, individually and together, an offering to God, as a grateful response to his saving mercy in Christ. We present ourselves—all that we are and all that we have—to the Lord who, through Jesus, has liberated us from captivity to sin and death and has made us his people, a dwelling place for his presence.

As Gordon MacDonald points out, our giving, in all its forms, is a key indicator of the course and content of our lives. In other words, you can tell a lot about us by what we give and how we give it. Notice that the Israelites in today's text don't give based on what's prudent or reasonable. Their offerings aren't calculated or cautious. Rather, when God calls, the people pour into the aisles and come to the front with an abundance of gratitude, gladness, and generosity. What better way to respond to this incredibly gracious God who has come to them in forgiveness and wants to begin again with his stiff-necked people.

And so it should be with this construction project called Grace Baptist Church. All kinds of resources are needed for God's building program. There's room for a whole range of offerings, from all of you. This undertaking called the church isn't just a clergy project.

Just as Moses needed Bezalel and Oholiab, and they in turn needed all the supplies and skilled hands of the people, so God calls and commands each of us to step out and step forward with generous gifts in hand. Gifts of time. Gifts of commitment. Gifts of vision. Gifts of experience. Gifts of occupation. Gifts of talent. Gifts of skill. Gifts of money. Gifts of energy. Gifts of devotion. And these gifts can cover a whole range of specialties and skills. Gifts in administration and organization. Gifts in finance. Gifts in hospitality. Gifts in teaching. Gifts in science and technology. Gifts in architecture and facilities. Gifts in art and design. Gifts in music. Gifts in prayer and worship. Gifts in serving and caring.

Our congregation, like every congregation, is a collection of individual offerings, presented to the Lord for use in his project of being in and with the world. The Lord takes these offerings and uses them to build his church, so that we, together with all those who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, become a habitation for God's holiness. As we give ourselves to the Lord, we become the building material that he assembles to erect something beautiful, a community of people where he takes up residence and makes his glory known to the world. As Paul says in Ephesians, "In him [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (vv. 21-22). Now it's true, God isn't confined to his church, but God has chosen to dwell in this world, in a unique way, among his people in Christ.

And as God's people in Christ, we ourselves are constantly under construction. One preacher tells about a time when he was invited to preach at Winchester Cathedral in England. He had actually been there several years before. At that time, the west front of the cathedral was covered in scaffolding. Now, he was scheduled to preach at a service celebrating the completion of the renovation of the west front. When he arrived, he was surprised to find new scaffolding on the south front of the cathedral. So he said to the dean of the cathedral, "I thought you all had finished all this stuff." And the dean replied, "A cathedral's work is never done. We retain permanent scaffolding. We just move from one side to the other."²

A church is always a work in progress. This is true not only of the community of believers who comprise the congregation, but also of the building where they gather to worship, learn, fellowship, and serve. Our life and mission as Grace Baptist Church is deeply connected to this building where we meet. During COVID-19, we've been through an experience that helps give us a renewed perspective on this space, this facility, that God has entrusted to us. In the early stages of the pandemic, when the building was closed and we weren't able to gather in person, we gained a deeper appreciation of how we ourselves are the church. As others put it, the building was closed but the church was open.

And now, almost two years later, as we see positive signs of progress on our way out of the pandemic, we're once again thinking more, and planning more, about the role that our church building plays, and will play, in our life together. A couple of Sundays ago, I spoke about pews that have been repaired and reinforced. Our nursery is getting repaired and refreshed. Classrooms for children's Sunday School and Children's Church have reopened. We're also beginning to think about ways that we can take this place that God has entrusted to us and use it not only to build up ourselves but also to bless our community, for the sake of God's kingdom. So continue to join us, especially our Church Council, in prayerfully seeking God's will and discerning God's way, so that we can take what the Lord has given to us here, and make it an offering to the Lord, for his redeeming purposes.

¹ Gordon MacDonald, "Transforming Scrooge." *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2013). Cited at PreachingToday.com. Accessed July 16, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/june/5061013.html>>.

² Peter J. Gomes, in a sermon at the Washington National Cathedral on May 4, 2008.