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STUFF

Exodus 36:7: “For the stuff they had was sufficient for all the work to make it, and too much.”

What a Scripture! What a realization of eternal truth! Just weeks out of 400 years of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites, led by Moses, were able to erect the tabernacle in the wilderness. One commentary places the value of the structures at \$13.5 million. Enabled by the Lord, the Israelites had not only sufficient resources, but even more than enough.

Many church members (and church leaders) poormouth themselves and the Lord. They moan, “We can’t do this — we can’t do that,” especially in the areas of evangelism and missions. Many times when they build necessary buildings, they go into unnecessary debt. Are you aware that the resources available in the average congregation just stagger the imagination? I had lunch recently with a pastor who claimed his church was about on its last legs, that they had no money, no resources. I asked him what time he thought God had toppled dead off His throne. He snapped, “How can you ask such a foolish question?” I replied, “Well, I was just responding to your implication that God lied when He promised to provide all our needs.”

I cannot tell you how many times I have seen the Lord provide the absolutely unexpected “unprovidable”! God commanded Moses and the Israelites to build the tabernacle. When they implicitly obeyed their Lord’s directive, His limitless resources were at their beckon. When we obey the Lord’s direction in both our private lives and the corporate life of the church, the resources are there. If the resources are *not* there, check your premises. Something is amiss. If we are in God’s plan, the “stuff” we have is enough. In fact, it is more than enough!

PRAYER:

O God, open my eyes of faith to behold the wonders of Your provision that my natural eyes cannot comprehend. May I always do according to Your will and purpose and so see Your hand at work in all the dealings of life.

Amen.



There used to be a church house right here

Acts 26:19: Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.

I enjoy taking big band pop songs and re-writing the lyrics so I can sing them in church rallies. This devotional is about one of those songs.

Recently I got to thinking about my joyous childhood, which was centered around three institutions: my home, my school, and my church. Of the three, only the house still stands. I loved my church beyond words to tell you. It was perhaps at that time the strongest evangelical church within a three-state area. Recently I drove by it. A chain-link, locked fence surrounds the structure. The grounds are covered by weeds. The site frankly broke my heart, and — thinking about it — I wrote these lyrics for a song prompted in my thinking by Joseph Rapozo's song, "There Used to Be a Ballpark Right Here."

And there used to be a church
house / in my childhood and
my teens / where the people

sang and worshiped with a
joy I've seldom seen / and the
place was filled with wonder /
from the platform to the rear /
yes, there used to be a church
house right here.

And there used to be a vision
of those things God wanted
done / now there's no one still
attending of those saints, not
even one / and the sky has got
so cloudy when it used to be
so clear / and the glory left so
quickly one year.

Now the children try to find
it / and they can't believe
their eyes / for the old folks
don't remember, so no one
really tries / but I'll never stop
recalling / those days still seem
so near / that there used to be
a church house right here."

It's a sad song. I pray it never happens
to your home church.

Prayer: O God, please help me do my part to keep the vision
burning brightly in the church I attend. In generations to come, may
it continue to be a tribute to the power, mercy, and glory of Your
name. *Amen.*

When Religion becomes Counter-productive

Byline #3

1 Corinthians 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.
But the greatest of these is love (NIV).

Recently a 40-year-old Pakistani man decided that his 25-year-old stepdaughter had committed an immoral act. She hadn't, but he thought otherwise and killed her in

cold blood. Then he killed his three young daughters.

According to the Independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, male relatives murder hundreds of girls and women each year in this conservative Islamic nation. Speaking to the Associated Press in the back of a police truck, the man showed no contrition, only dismay that he didn't murder the stepdaughter's alleged lover as well. He added, "I thought my younger daughters would do what the older girl did, so they should be eliminated."¹

Authorities report the murdered woman actually did nothing, except flee her brutal husband who had forced her to work in a brick-making factory. To get even with her for running away, the husband accused her falsely of adultery. A human rights worker said, "Women are treated here as property." Here we find another major difference between Islam and Christianity. Throughout history, Christianity has elevated the status of women — and rightly so! Followers of Christ in general honor human rights, and the dignity of the individual is upheld. Jesus called upon His followers to "follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). That is often not the case in religions where there is blind hatred, often fomented by so-called clerics who

PRAYER

O God, help me to ever remember that the uniform of a Christ-follower is love. May I always react to those around me, drawing from the very love of Jesus who dwells within me. May I never give reason for reproach upon the lovely name of my Lord Jesus. Amen.

call for their congregations to kill and destroy. The equipment of the follower of Christ is love. Unfortunately, equipment for some other faiths is often a sword.

1. Khalid Tanveer, The Associated Press, January 1, 2006.

SAINt S IN CAESAR'S ho u SEhol d

Philippians 4:21–22; NIV

Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus.
... All the saints send you greetings,
especially those who belong to Caesar's
household.

When our Lord was born, Augustus was the caesar of Rome. He was followed by Tiberias (about whom it was said that he liked not one single human being and that not one single human being liked him). Tiberius was followed by the depraved Gaius Caesar, better known as Caligula — Little Boots. He ruled for four years and was a monster of cruelty and vice. He was finally assassinated in the year A.D. 41. The Praetorian Guard, fearful of a return to a republic, forcibly made Claudius (officially Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus) the emperor. And for the next 13 years, this strange man of handicapped body and slow speech was the monarch of the Roman world. Claudius was followed, in turn, by Nero, who ruled for 14 years until his suicide

in A.D. 68. All these decades were plotched with immorality, depravity, and insanity such as the world has rarely witnessed.

But think of it! In those years between A.D. 40 and 60, there were men and women who were followers of Jesus Christ who managed to thrive while working in the very palace of Caligula, Claudius, and Nero! Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome, testified of this reality in the letter he sent to the church at Philippi, "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22; NIV).

Today, we sometimes find professing saints who complain about the pressures of serving God in the free world. How do they think they would have fared in ancient Rome where their witness for Christ could have made them fodder for the lions? But on the other hand, some of the most courageous saints ever are serving God this very day. Are you one of them?

PRAYER

O God, let me by Thy Spirit serve Thee well this day! May there be no pressure or circumstance that would cause me to grieve Thee. Let my thoughts, words, and actions please Thee! Amen.



Byline
#4

GOD'S LOVE TAKES AWAY ALL FEAR FROM OUR LIVES

LEVITICUS 20:24; NIV: "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey."

Israel has been my "home away from home" since 1971. The first trip there was still two years away from the infamous Munich Olympics massacre, offering entry to the shadowy and bloody world of terrorism. I am often asked if I worry about safety in the Holy Land. Frankly, no. We are all well cognizant of the dangers that face the world today; however, I refuse to cower in the corner when there is so much living to do.

Some of my life's greatest adventures have come in Israel. I think of climbing into the ancient guard tower in the Jericho ruins, believed to be the oldest man made structure on earth, even predating the pyramids by thousands of years. I remember that tiny, open sided helicopter that whisked me from one end of Israel to the other, our feet hanging out as we swept over Nazareth, Haifa, the Sea of Galilee, and Jerusalem. I often reminisce about the prayer meeting with the Greek Orthodox priests early one morning in the cave of the nativity in Bethlehem. I can still hear the laughter ringing from my friends on Yehuda's wooden boat as we filmed a documentary in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. And I positively drool when I remember a tiny hole in the wall restaurant in Jerusalem where my friend David Assael took me late one night, where the bread is "to die for." I think often of the late night dinners with Palestinian friends overlooking the Herodian and the tiny village of Tekoa.

Life is so fulfilling and rich! But not if one shrinks into the shadows of presumed safety. Yes, life can offer danger in many cloaks. But somehow it's realized more often by the fearful. God's love casts out all fear, my friend! So enjoy living.

Prayer: O God, by the word of Thy mouth, strike all fear from my life. May I walk in joy and the security of knowing You. You promised life abundant! And You have delivered it to those of us willing to reach for it. Thank You. Amen.





Forget post-modern and remember Pentecost

Acts 1:8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

According to a recent poll, the church in America is growing rapidly, and thoughts of a “post-Christian” America are just not true. People who never went to church or went only occasionally are now signing up as official members in growing numbers across the nation. Well over half of Americans are connected to the church in one way or another. My friend, that’s a clear majority!

In my own part of the world, southwest Florida, churches that fervently declare the old-fashioned gospel of the Bible are the ones that are flourishing. Those congregations that entangle themselves in politics or even social issues alone (good though they may be) are declining. Jesus promised us His power to fulfill His divine redemptive mission on this earth; therefore, the mission is possible by His Spirit.

Church growth is not rocket science. Decades ago I heard Dr. Robert Schuller teach three principles I have never forgotten. He claimed that every pastor and church leader needs to be able to answer these questions: (1) What in the world am I trying to do here? (A recent poll indicated that 90 percent of church leaders cannot clearly articulate the vision of their church.) (2) How in the world do I plan to do it? (3) Why in the world do I do the work? Decades ago, in our church, we clearly concluded and stated what our church goals were. Then we prayerfully and painstakingly laid out the plan of how we believed Jesus wanted it done. Through very hard work, fervent prayer, and vision, we have seen miracles of every kind. Post-modern, indeed! This is the day of the Holy Ghost!

Prayer: O God, may our church faithfully reflect Thy majesty, compassion, and wisdom. Empower us by Thy precious Holy Spirit to do Your work on earth, occupying until You return. ***Amen.***

SPRING IN YOUR HEART

Proverbs 23:7: For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.

A friend up north just called me to report brutal weather, including ice and snow. I live in the tropics, so I just patiently smiled and said somewhat sardonically, "Oh, really. . . ." He snapped back, "Yeah, well, you have to deal with humidity!" I retorted, "Yes, but in 21 years of living here, I've never had to scrape humidity off my windshield." He hung up on me.

But, you know, our daily attitude is not dependent upon weather. Honestly, it's not! We can have spring in our hearts 12 months each year. The other day I was in the airport in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was about six a.m. I was preparing to go through security. I approached the lady at the entry point and said, "Good morning, ma'am. Are you having a good day?" She looked me straight in the eyes, grinned, and responded, "Sir, this is going to be the best day of my entire life!" I thought to myself, *Hey, it probably will be*. She had already pre-determined that in her mind.

The Bible itself teaches us that as a person thinks, so is he. "She," too. God's promises are generic, you know. You cannot always control your circumstances, but by an act of your will, you can usually determine how you are going to react to them. If you woke up this morning determined to somehow grouse your way through the day, it's probably not going to be too scintillating for you or those around you. If, on the other hand, you woke up knowing this is the day the Lord made and you're going to rejoice and be glad in it, you're probably going to have a wonderful day. Look at the opportunities for real living extant all around you, thank the Lord, breathe in deeply, and say, "Yes, Lord, it's gonna be a great day!"

PRAYER:

O God, this day let every thought that goes through my brain and every word that comes from my mouth be worthy of You and pleasing in Your sight and hearing! You truly did make this day, so let me make the very best of it, by Your grace.

Amen.

THE BLESSINGS OF A GENEROUS SPIRIT

Luke 6:38

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

The Bible teaches that it's more blessed to give than to receive. That would be a great verse for a prizefighter, wouldn't it? But seriously, the way to gain is to give. However, here's the hitch: we don't give just to get. In all my years of pastoring, I can make an air-tight case for the joy of giving, both scripturally and in actual life occurrences. Giving churches are invariably receiving churches. Giving individuals are invariably those who receive bountifully. Jesus taught it. Look at the Scripture above. Our Lord promised, "Give, and it shall be given unto you!"

I often tell young pastors and church leaders,
"If you want

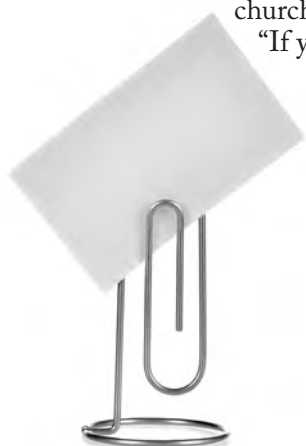
your church to be blessed, you must be a blessing yourself." I love Proverbs 11:24 that promises, "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty" (NIV). The wealth spoken of here is not necessarily money (although God certainly blesses in that area as well). The receiving is primarily the bounty of God's provision in your life in basically every area of existence. Church leader, if you want more people in your church, be willing to give or send some of the people you do have to work in other vineyards. If you want financial strength, undergird missions around the world. Scripture emphasizes: "Give! Don't hoard!"

It truly is more blessed to give than to receive. Try it! Yes, this goes against the teachings and understandings of the world system, but we're not in that system anyway.

Be a giver today! And every day!

PRAYER

O God, You loved me so much that You gave. You freely gave Jesus to us so that we could have eternal life. You have taught us that loving leads to giving. May we, as Your servants, learn that lesson well and having learned it, practice it in everyday life. Amen.



THE SINGIN' COWBOY

2 Corinthians 5:17: Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Probably no convert to Christ ever caught so much attention of the church crowd as did Stuart Hamblen. He committed his life to Christ in 1949. The young preacher who so influenced him by God's Spirit was Billy Graham.

Hamblen began his career in radio in 1926 on station KAYO in Abilene, Texas. He may well have been that media's first "singing cowboy." Hamblen soon went to Hollywood and was known to the radio audience as "Cowboy Joe." For 21 years thereafter, Hamblen stayed in front of the West Coast public with his radio show, "King Cowboy and His Woolly West Review." He also made a number of western films with such stars as Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. He wrote quite a few hit songs. In 1945, Stuart became the first man to "fly a horse" when he flew his race horse Lobo by plane, of course, to a distant racetrack. He became as well known for his racehorses as for his music. But when he met Christ, Hamblen turned away from radio and films in order to devote his life to Christ. He was married to his wife Suzy for 55 years prior to his death in 1989.

I met Hamblen several times, one of them the night I gave my life to Christ as a 13 year old. He sang in that very service. It was Stuart Hamblen who gave us the classic song, "It Is No Secret What God Can Do," recorded by Elvis, the Andrews Sisters, Jo Stafford, and Bill Kenny and the Ink Spots (my own personal favorite rendition of that song).

The last time I met Hamblen (in an elevator of all places!), I shook his hand and thanked him for his role in bringing me to Christ. You know, old Stuart was right: "It's no secret what God can do!"

Prayer: O God, I thank Thee that I'm not what I used to be. And, I'm not yet what I'm going to be. I am a "becomer," one who is "becoming" a child of God. Thank You for new life in Your Son Jesus. Amen.





When you're up to your ears in . . . iguanas!

Job 4:8 Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.

This whole wild scenario in our county got started when a few folks grew weary of their pet iguanas. They took the critters out in the countryside and just let 'em go. No, that certainly was not cruelty to a reptile, not here in warm, tropical southwest Florida! The iguanas would do just fine. Boy . . . would they ever do fine!

Just north of my house rolls the mighty Peace River, one of the hot spots for tarpon angling on the planet. And iguanas. Lots and lots of iguanas! In fact, in one little town alone, authorities estimate there are at least 10,000 iguanas. Residents are not happy. They say they often find the creatures inside their homes, nesting in crawl spaces, shredding attic insulation, scratching holes in pool screens, and eating prized gardens. These iguanas are a far cry from the kazillion chameleons we have everywhere that are three or four inches long. No, these big

guys get four feet long or longer. They can reproduce in their second year of life, with the females laying an average of 35 eggs per nest. So you can see that we are about to be inundated with lizards. Here's what we've learned: it's easier to not release the original iguanas than it is to stop them once they start mass-producing themselves.

The Scripture that opens this devotional warns of that which we incubate within us. If we sow iniquity and wickedness, that's what we reap. In life, you and I need to be very careful what we release in our minds and hearts. It's easy to get started but often impossible to stop. Don't even think about looking at porn on your computer or TV screens. Don't even think about taking that first drink. Tell the drug pusher to go away and leave you alone. If you don't, you may soon be wading through life's iguanas. And, brother, sister, that's not fun!

Prayer: O God, I pray the cry of the Psalmist today: "Let the words that I say and the thoughts that I think be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and redeemer." Help me to guard carefully those things I allow in through the eye and ear gates of my soul. I look to Thee today, O King of my heart! Spare me from hell's iguanas. *Amen.*

The sTa R WhOse l Igh T WeNT OUT

Byline #11

James 4:15

For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

A few decades ago, I spent a somewhat dreadful year traveling with a gospel-singing group. I wouldn't say we were bad, but I didn't even buy our

records! One night we sang in Detroit. Our tenor singer was a good friend of one of the best-known pop singers of that day who had four huge hits, two of them hitting number one on the pop charts. Our tenor heard that the star was singing in a nightclub in Windsor, just across the river in Canada, and called him. The star, who happened to be a real gentleman, invited us to his show that night and to sing some gospel songs with him. So we did.

I had never been around that sort of thing before and was intrigued by the acclaim the fellow got from his audience. He told us that he had a brilliant career mapped out and there was no telling how far he could go. Well, his plans never materialized. Several months later, the singer was accosted by somebody and beaten almost to death. He recovered, thankfully, but never again reached such a pinnacle of success.

It made me think of James's writing in the New Testament. He warned us through the Holy Spirit never to say, "I will do this or that" or "We intend to do this or that." Why? Because we don't know what the next breath will hold. And so we ought to preface our predictions by saying, "If God wills, I will do this or that." This devotional is most certainly not a condemnation of the star singer. He was a truly nice man, a delight to join in song. These words are merely a

PRAYER

O God, I know my entire being this day is in Your hands. Your plans for me are good. I will trust You with every action, word, and thought so that You may be glorified and my life enriched. Amen.

reminder that none of us should ever discount God and His plans for our lives. With Him we move and have our being. Without Him? Well, let's not even contemplate such a thing.



No! I don't want to!

Exodus 36:2 And Moses called . . . every wise hearted man . . . whose heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it.

My friend Michael and I were stranded in a patented Russian blizzard. We had been filming in Volgograd (that's the famed Stalingrad of World War II days). If you think airline service can be confusing in America, you should get isolated sometime in a Russian airport. We actually didn't mind the first couple of days because we were able to visit the famed Stalingrad War Memorial honoring the million or so men and women who died in that awful, freezing maelstrom of human suffering in the war.

But on this day, Michael and I ventured back to the airport and approached the "Information" (or lack thereof) center. Mike speaks fluent Russian. He approached the dour lady sitting behind the desk and politely asked, "Can you help me?" She never broke her intimidating countenance and snapped, "No!" Several times she and Mike went over that dialogue. Finally Mike asked her, "Well, do you have the information

about outgoing flights that I am requesting?" "Yes," she grunted. Mike pushed on: "Well, ma'am, if you have that needed information, would you give it to me please?" "No," she repeated, even more loudly. Totally frustrated, Mike asked, "Why won't you tell me?" Her answer put me on the floor in laughter. She stared right at him and said, "Because I don't want to."

Oh, we've all met lots of folks like that in Christian churches. They could be great assets to Christ's kingdom on earth. They just don't want to. "Would you be an usher, one of God's gatekeepers in His house?" "No." "Why?" "I don't want to." "Are you a tither?" "No." "Why not?" "I don't want to." "Do you witness to people about Jesus?" "Uh — no." "Any reason why not?" "Don't want to." Now the lady in Volgograd made me laugh. But folks who could be an asset to God but refuse to are not funny. In fact, they're rather frightening when you start thinking of eternity.

Prayer: O God, may my heart be willing today, joyfully so, to accomplish by Your Spirit all You have planned for me. I don't want to be a foot-dragger but a front-runner for Your glory. *Amen.*

THE JOY OF GIVING

Exodus 36:5: And they spake unto Moses, saying, The people bring much more than enough for the service of the work, which the LORD commanded to make.

Based on well over 50 years of marriage, Darlene and I can testify to the blessings of giving. We do not “give to get”; however, there truly is a law of sowing and reaping. Are you aware that the average Christian gives away less than 3 percent of his or her income? What about tithing, God’s 10 percent that should come right off the top of all income? Only 4 percent of all Christians are known to actually tithe. It has been observed by those who should know that the average *Christian* in our churches today gives less than the average *American* (saved or unsaved) gave in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. Of course, Christ’s church suffers for this spiritual Scrooge mentality; but the one who suffers the most is the non-giving Christian.

A half-century of marriage has taught my wife and me that we live far, far better on the 90 percent of our income that remains after tithe than we ever could have spending God’s 10 percent on ourselves. Most followers of Christ I know will give the same report. Proverbs 11:24–26 gives us the reason: “There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself. He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him: but blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it.”

The blessings of giving come from (1) honoring God with our income, (2) seeing God’s work thrive because of our faithfulness, and (3) having our own lives enriched with our Father’s supernatural blessings. If you’re not giving to God on an ongoing, regular basis, don’t just “try it for a while,” but make generosity to God and your fellow man a lifestyle. Yes, you’ll be blessed!

PRAYER:

O God, give me faith to believe Your Word, all of it, yes, even those parts that admonish me to be a giver. As John prayed, prosper me even as my soul prospers and I will always honor You with my checkbook.

Amen.