

# Living Generously

*A big-hearted people with  
a big-hearted God*

**Steve Thomas**



Salt & Light Ministries

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# Introduction

A few years ago, I was listening to a man with a real ministry of speaking on ‘faith for finance’. He was convinced that God wanted to release an ‘end-time abundance’ into churches in these days so we could see an ‘end-time harvest’. Well, I want to see an ‘end-time harvest’, for sure, and I pray for revival and times of outpouring, for the only hope for our world is if we see a massive turning to Christ. But what was this preacher’s key? If only we would pay our full tithes and bring our generous gifts to God, *“he would open the windows of heaven, and pour out such a blessing that we could not contain it”* (Malachi 3:11).

I sat through his three seminars in this vein, emotionally drawn to his teaching, but nevertheless detecting a flaw. Afterwards, as we talked together, I told him how much I had appreciated his teaching, its faith element, and the desire to honour God and encourage generosity. “But,” I said, “isn’t your teaching always true? Wouldn’t it always be right to tithe and honour God, and to live generously, and to bless others? Wasn’t that right in Old Testament times, and in New Testament times, in mediaeval times, in Reformation times, and in the end-times? Isn’t that just the way God wants us to live?” And a lively discussion followed!

I believe that giving, and living generously, is *not a means of extracting blessing from God*; it is *a way of living*

*under the blessing of God.* These two things are not the same. We do not give in order to engineer circumstances in which God will bless us. We simply want to live in a way that pleases God. Generosity makes God happy. And he shows favour to the generous. It's simply a cycle of blessing that is a joy to live in.

We are facing big challenges currently after the recent economic crisis and the ensuing massive downturn. Many governments have been forced to face fresh questions about economic growth and the previous trajectory we were on, which assumed that prosperity could simply climb and climb.

But I hear conversations in the church, and amongst leaders, that trouble me. Some leaders are counselling wisdom in the current climate. Some people are holding back from giving quite so generously as a few years ago. Some suggest we perhaps need to be a bit more 'careful'. But is all of this simply fear masquerading as prudence? Of course we have to be realistic about resources. We have to budget carefully. We have to calculate and be enterprising. But will we ever be so poor that we can't be generous? Or is it our lack of generosity that makes us poor?

And is there a right way to live, in any time or season, that doesn't depend on circumstances, economic blessing or prosperity, or our wanting to engineer some blessing from God? That's what I want us to consider in this little booklet: a review of the attitudes of our hearts, as we allow God to transform our thinking from the inside out. Perhaps, almost without noticing, through general economic pressure or even through weariness of giving over years, we have become that bit more defensive and

self-centred in how we spend our money or invest our resources. And perhaps churches need to review together what they prioritise in terms of generosity to the poor, or to mission.

And is there a constant faith challenge that God wants to bring to us again? *“Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it”* (Malachi 3:11). I, for one, would love the outpoured blessing of God on all I am engaged in. What about you?



# Chapter 1

## God is a Very, Very Generous God!

*“For God so loved the world that he **gave...**”* So starts probably the most famous gospel verse in the whole of the Bible (John 3:16).

*“For God so loved the world that he gave **his one and only Son...**”* Not only did God show his incredible love for us in giving, he gave the thing that was most precious to him, his one and only Son.

He gave the best. He gave when it really cost him to give.

It goes without saying that giving is a sign of loving another, wanting to please another. We give presents to show our affection and care. We give time because we enjoy being with people, and because it shows how much we value them. We give money in order to help others. We give service to others because it actually forges relationship to give. It's only human – but it's also godly!

The Bible is full of stories about God's goodness, totally undeserved by human beings who are often rascals and definitely not worth the bother. The very first story of the Bible depicts God as creator and artisan, working to make something beautiful out of a formless chaos. Light and darkness, earth and sky, sea and land,

plants and trees, sun and moon and stars, fish and animals, all are made and declared by God to be good. And to cap it all, he puts man in this beautiful setting to enjoy it, care for it, and rule it. God himself was very satisfied with the fruit of his creative work, and when we take time to appreciate all the gifts he has given us in creation, so are we.

What a gift to live in God's wonderful world! I say that to myself regularly. In the UK, we enjoy an incredibly rich variety of creation. From the Highlands of Scotland, through the splendour of the Lake District, to the rugged Welsh mountains, and the peaceful Cotswolds, or the rural holiday counties of Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, we are surrounded with delights in our country. Those with eyes to see are overwhelmed with such richness and beauty.

And when you move out of the UK, you find richness, variety, and splendour of a wholly different dimension. Fly in to Vancouver in Canada and you are overwhelmed with the grandeur of the mountains and the vastness of rivers and lakes. Go to Africa, and there is a sense of space and openness, with people who are warm, welcoming and energetic; and, of course, there is a richness of animal life, elephants, giraffes, wild cats, zebra, wildebeest, rhinos and hippos. In Europe, there is an incredible sense of centuries of history and culture, seen in almost any town or city. In India or China there is a rich tapestry of life, industry, colour, and variety. Documentaries on the wonders of the animal world – the speed of the jaguar or the leopard, the sleek beauty of the whale or the dolphin, or the flight of eagle or owl –

help us see profound aspects of God's incredible creation. And much of this only scratches the surface.

How wonderful of God to put us in this excellent world. What a gift!

And, of course, when you consider just how wonderfully everything works together – the planets, solar systems, and the universe, as each turns in slightly different orbits without collisions; or the miracle of the human body with all its intricacy of function; or the wonders of sun and moon, daytime and night-time, and their impact on tides or human energy – these things stretch our minds and imagination. No wonder our exploration is never satisfied, and our wonder constantly aroused.

And then there is the gift of family and human relationships. The joys of love and marriage, and children being brought up to love, be loved, give, please others, be affirmed, validated, and grow up secure – that's all pretty amazing. The fun of social interaction, conversation, friendships, and company – there's mystery, frustration and satisfaction in all of that. Even when relationships sadly break down, we go on seeking friendship and bonding again, we go on looking for better, because something within us is made for society and community. How wonderful is that?

Oh, the goodness of God to give us all these things! What a generous God he is! He chose Abraham to have a huge family so he could bless all nations through his offspring. How generous is that? He formed a nation that would bless many nations and bring them knowledge of God's love, his grace, and his ways. How generous is that?

When his people, Israel, found themselves in slavery in Egypt, he heard their cry for help, and freed them from their captors. He gave them good leadership, spoke to them through the prophets. And he did more. He made a covenant with them that he would be their God and they would be his people. They would have a special relationship with him and would live as the objects of God's love for ever.

Even when they tired of their relationship with God and started to look for the thrills and excitement of worshipping other gods, with all their sexual worship rituals and seductively hedonistic practices, God remained faithful to them, and promised them a second chance. How generous is that?

In fact, the Bible is littered with proclamations of God's generosity. The testimony of generation after generation is of his goodness and his blessing – which is his goodness made known to each one of us. Let me repeat: when God blesses us, he is making his goodness personally known to each one of us. He is good and generous anyway. That's his character, and he can't be anything else. He's always good and always generous. And he has a habit of demonstrating it to us in abundance.

Jacob blessed his son Joseph with these words:

*Joseph is a fruitful vine,  
A fruitful vine near a spring,  
Whose branches climb over a wall.  
With bitterness archers attacked him;  
They shot at him with hostility.*

*But his bow remained steady,  
His strong arms stayed supple,  
Because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
Because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
Because of your father's God who helps you  
Because of the Almighty, who blesses you  
With blessings of the heaven above,  
Blessings of the deep that lies below,  
Blessings of the breast and the womb.  
Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of  
the ancient mountains,  
Than the bounty of the age-old hills.  
Let all these rest on the head of Joseph,  
On the brow of the prince among his brothers.  
(Genesis 49:22-26)*

These are powerful prayers and prophecies over Joseph's life, coming from Jacob's knowledge of God's generous character.

Moses' first encounter with God was to do with God's holiness, as he was confronted at the burning bush. God showed him that he was a redeemer, and had heard the cry of his people. *"So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."* (Exodus 3:8). That sounds like a generous deal from a generous God!

In a further encounter, where Moses is passionately pleading for the Presence of Yahweh to keep moving with his people, we read:

*Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion...”*

*(Exodus 33:18-19)*

*Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

*(Exodus 34:5-7)*

The weight of God’s glory is seen by Moses in his goodness, compassion, grace, abounding love and generosity. God’s glory is his generous character. When we pray for God’s glory to fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, as the prophets promised would happen, that must have something to do with the nations seeing and understanding God’s gracious and generous character – maybe through the testimony of a people who have the same generous character of God.

Unsurprisingly, the worship of the Old Testament is littered with the whole sense of God’s generosity. At Solomon’s dedication of the temple, one of the greatest celebrations of God’s people in the Old Testament, when fire came down from heaven to consume the sacrifices on the altar and the priests could not even enter the temple

because of the glory of God's presence filling it, all the Israelites sang the most simple but profound song:

*He is good;  
His love endures for ever.  
(2 Chronicles 5:13)*

Many of the psalms take up this simple but profound theme. For example:

*The LORD is gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger and rich in love.  
The Lord is good to all;  
He has compassion on all he has made.  
All you have made will praise you, O Lord;  
Your saints will extol you.  
They will tell of the glory of your kingdom  
And speak of your might,  
So that all men will know of your mighty acts  
And the glorious splendour of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
And your dominion endures through all generations.  
The LORD is faithful to his promises  
And loving to all he has made.  
The LORD upholds all those who fall  
And lifts up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
And you give them their food at the proper time.  
You open your hand  
And satisfy the desires of every living thing.  
(Psalm 145:8-16)*

This is just one among many similar songs of worship that celebrate how good God is. But I sometimes wonder

whether we really appreciate what this really means. The consequence of this is theologically profound and practically precious.

### **An Incredible Sense of Being Blessed**

All of this leads us, surely, to an incredible sense of being blessed. If God is a good God, and responsible for all the gifts of creation and the joys of family life, we can't help but feel blessed. Former generations often sang a hymn: "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." God's generosity pours out to us day by day, if we will but stop, look and reflect.

### **An Incredible Security in Present Challenges**

If we understand that a good God is with us, even when we walk through challenging circumstances, then we recognise his goodness is everywhere, right here in difficulty. God is omnipresent, that means he is everywhere. And if a good God is everywhere, that means his goodness is available everywhere.

I remember when my first wife died and I was left with three young children, not knowing quite what was going on in my life or how I would cope, God spoke to me from a very simple verse from the end of Psalm 62:

*One thing God has spoken,  
Two things have I heard:  
That you, O God, are strong,  
And that you, O LORD, are loving.  
(Psalm 62:11)*

It was as though God the Holy Spirit whispered to me in my tenderness as I read that verse, “You see, I am strong enough, as a rock, to see you through this; and somewhere around here, you will find my loving purposes.” And so it was, in all sorts of different ways too numerous to list here.

### **An Incredible Confidence in the Future**

If God is a good and generous God by nature, this means that he cannot do bad and mean things. A good God, by nature, does not do bad things, and a generous God does not do mean things. This is why God came in Christ to redeem the world: because he cannot do bad things, nor could he, in his goodness, leave the world to rot in its own sin. That means that, in the future, if we seek his help, he will do good to me, my family, and all those who put him first.

This gives me incredible confidence for the future! I have quoted often when speaking the time I was sitting in a meeting of the International Team of the Salt & Light family, and our brother J B Masinde taught us a simple Swahili song:

*Mambo, sawa sawa;  
Mambo, sawa sawa;  
Jesu, akiwa enzhini  
Mambo sawa sawa*

*Things are getting better;  
Things are getting better;  
When the Lord is on the throne  
Things are getting better!*

I listened to what JB was saying and the thought struck me: “That’s some of the best and simplest theology I’ve heard for a long time! If a good God is on the throne, things have got to get better!”

## **And Things Get Lots Better in the New Testament**

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the experience of countless people in the New Testament was also of the undeserved generosity and goodness of God. Mary is told that she has “*found favour*” with God. Elizabeth is delighted, and takes it as a mark of God’s favour on her, that she can even greet Mary and her son still in the womb. Mary’s song of praise is all about God’s generosity and goodness to the humble and the hungry. The angels also proclaim God’s favour is on mankind through this gift of Jesus. “*For God so loved the world that he gave...*”

Well, the generous gift and goodness of God in giving us Jesus is repeated over and over in the New Testament; but here’s one of my favourites, just to finish this chapter:

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*  
(1 John 3:1)

This is a cry almost of astonishment. Astonishment at what this means for us, but also astonishment at the love of the Father that he should have ever thought to make us his children. What generosity!

## **Questions**

1. Have I become blasé about the blessings of God? Do I take them for granted? What can I list right now, without trying too hard, that sums up his blessings on my life? Take time to pour out thanks to God now!
2. Do I understand what it means to know a good God? Are there secret fears or insecurities that I live with, which should not be part of my life? If so, pray about them now, and stand against them.



## Chapter 2

# God Wants a Very, Very Generous People!

I have had the privilege of visiting many nations, and when I get home, of being quizzed by my family about what it's like where I have just been. "What's it like in India, dad?" – or whatever country I've just returned from. One of my great delights is to tell my family stories of my travels that describe that nation. I have recounted stories of Indian trains, African buses, European art, Polish food (well, food from everywhere, actually!). We tell stories to help people understand what life is like in another country or culture.

And that's why Jesus told lots of stories. Most of his stories were to explain what God's kingdom looks like. Why did he need to tell these stories? Because where God lives and rules looks very different from life on earth. The trouble is, we grow up thinking that how we think and do things is normal. British people grow up thinking that queuing for a bus (or for anything!) is normal, polite behaviour. But for the French (or for Indians getting on trains) nothing could be further from the truth! Why would we queue? Why not just surge when the bus comes?

I remember a Ugandan friend coming to the UK where he spent quite a few months. One day, he said to me, “I don’t understand why you run your buses the way you do. You run them on time, but half empty. It’s obvious your bus operators won’t make a profit. Why don’t you do what we do in Uganda, and wait until they are filled up, and then run them full?” I remember thinking this was impeccable logic! The bus might be several hours late arriving, while it was waiting to fill up, but at least the bus companies could pay to operate the bus. Which is right?

Jesus told a story of absolutely mammoth proportions to try to show what his Father’s kingdom is like. One of his key disciples, Peter, came to him with a question concerning forgiveness. Thinking he’d understood a fair bit about God’s kingdom, and that God is a good and forgiving God, Peter put his question like this: “*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*” (Matthew 18:21). I think Peter imagined he was being very magnanimous when he offered to forgive seven times. But Jesus’ story illustrated that God’s generosity is of totally incredible proportions, and Peter was nowhere near understanding it. Jesus said, “*Not seven times, but seventy times seven!*” – in other words, until you lose count! Here’s the story:

*The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt...*

The beginning of the story sets the context. The king is trying to sort out his finances. A provincial governor is hauled before him owing billions of pounds of debt – literally, that’s the scale of the proportions here. (He can only be a provincial governor; the debt is so massive, it’s certainly not personal debt.) The only right and natural solution follows: the governor and his family are heading for the debtors’ prison, or even slavery.

*The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’  
The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go...*

What begins as a very understandable story has now gone totally crazy! As soon as Jesus talks about the servant asking for mercy *because he will repay everything*, everyone listening to Jesus knows this is totally impossible. No one can repay this amount of debt. It’s impossible, an outrageous proposal. People start looking at one another, raising their eyes and eyebrows in mockery, maybe even tittering at the notion. It can’t be done! No one can repay that much debt!

The next sentence goes from crazy to totally and outlandishly stupid. Without thinking about it, almost without pausing for reflection, the master “*took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go*”! I think that Jesus’ hearers now knew they were in another reality, another world, or another universe. No one, but no one, forgives that much debt – it’s billions and billions, like the debt of one of the developing nations. And one of the reasons no one forgives that much debt is that someone has to pay!

But the King of the Kingdom just forgives it, releases the man and his family, and lets them go. Sorted! What sort of a crazy kingdom is this kingdom of God? Can Peter grasp the scale of the forgiving spirit of God, with his paltry offer to forgive his brother seven times? Peter, the kingdom of God is a totally other world! Expand your thinking, Peter! We have to change our paradigms totally.

### **Forgiving like God**

But it's the continuation of this story that challenges us even more. It's how un-kingdom our behaviour often is.

*But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'*

*But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all the debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?' In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

*'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'*

It is unbelievable how someone who had received such mercy could be so small-minded! This servant who had been forgiven billions was owed a few pence, which could easily be raised, and could definitely be repaid. But the servant could not find it in himself to deal with another as he himself had been dealt with. Jesus wanted us to recognise the generosity of God, and our own ungenerous spirit in being unforgiving and petty with our fellows. So, Peter, you have been forgiven masses. Don't forgive just a little; forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive, over and over again, until you've lost count! That's the generosity of the Kingdom.

### **Giving like God**

The idea of forgiveness and generosity are clearly put together by Jesus in Luke 6:37-38.

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*

God's measure is a generous measure, and he wants us to use the same measure to others. Indeed, as we read the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament, it seems that God rewards generosity with his own generosity. I am sure that he does not really want us to give in order to receive; but he definitely promises that we will receive if we give to him and to others who need our help!

*Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*  
(Matthew 7:9-11)

When Jesus sends out the twelve disciples on their first mission, he encourages them to go with a giving and generous spirit:

*As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his keep.*  
(Matthew 10:7-10)

## **Caring for the Poor Like God**

In another story that Jesus tells about the kingdom, not long before his death, he wants to show again how different the values of his kingdom are. This story is about the future (Matthew 25:31) when he himself is enthroned in glory and he starts the process of separating sheep from goats. So far so good! Everyone listening knows very well that there is going to be a separation between the righteous and the wicked, and all are nodding sagely their agreement. Suddenly there comes a surprise, as the announcement is made for the basis of why the righteous are welcome to his presence:

*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*  
(Matthew 25:35-36)

The righteous in the story seem as shocked as anyone else to be recognised as righteous. When they ask why they are being accepted, the King says: “*I tell you the truth, whatever you did for these brothers of mine, you did for me*” (verse 40). Equally, the wicked are rejected because of their lack of generosity to others whom God has made.

God wants us to care for people *just like he does*. He wants us to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, visit the sick and those in prison, and look after them. This requires a generosity of heart, not the mean-spiritedness that can often prevail in our societies, or a self-centredness that simply looks out for our own interests.

## **The Early Church was Generous**

Actually, this is exactly what the early church did. In the Acts of the Apostles, there was a daily distribution of food for widows in the church (Acts 6). This was an important ministry, and eventually a dispute arose over who was getting more (Palestinian Jews or Grecian Jews) that led to deacons being appointed to ensure the distribution was done fairly and properly. Equally, when Agabus stood up in the church in Antioch and prophesied that there was going to be a huge famine over the known Roman world, the Christians in Antioch did not wait for

the famine to arrive, they responded to the prophetic word, took a collection, and sent the offering to their brothers in Judaea, knowing they would probably have the greater hardship (Acts 11:27-30).

In the New Testament we read of other collections being taken. For example, the Macedonian churches gave to alleviate the hardship of the church in Jerusalem, and Paul urged the church in Corinth to participate generously, sending Titus to take the collection. Again, he urged them strongly to be generous (2 Corinthians 9:6-15). I want to look at this passage in greater depth in a later chapter, because Paul outlines several principles of generous living that it is easy for us to miss, but for now let us simply note that the teaching of generosity flows out of a way of life that the first century church lived.

### **An Apostolic Principle**

The apostles did not always agree about everything, for sure. If we were slightly naïve, we might hope that Christians would always see things the same way and that everything would be peace, light and joy. But a visit to any church or family of churches – or even a look at any Christian magazine – will quickly demonstrate that the church and the Christian life is not always like that. Paul had a sharp dispute with Barnabas about whether to take John Mark with them after he had once before abandoned the missionary team. Acts 15:39 tells us that their dispute was so sharp that Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, while Paul took Silas with him and went to Syria and Cilicia to strengthen the churches they had already planted.

There was a much more profound disagreement later between Paul and Peter, described in Galatians 2, about the nature of the gospel and its implications. This led to an outright confrontation between the two of them, because Paul felt Peter's lifestyle choices (going back to Jewish practices) was a denial of their freedom in Christ. Confrontations such as this are not bad, but good, because they become the crucible for change in all of our lives. Indeed, lots of us often do not change unless we are confronted with the need for change.

So while there might have been differences between the apostles on some things, it is interesting to note where they were totally of one mind. Three years after Paul's radical conversion, he went to Jerusalem to meet the apostles. He got to know Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. They were glad to hear his testimony and rejoiced with his conversion, though it is clear he wasn't properly or fully accepted by the rest of the apostles or church. Actually he didn't even meet them. Eleven years later, he returned to Jerusalem for what was obviously a very important meeting. It was to be a discussion of the preaching of the gospel in various settings. It is clear that the Jerusalem apostles accepted Paul had a call to preach the gospel to non-Jews, while Peter was really an apostle to the Jews. The story finishes like this:

*James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to **remember the poor**, the very thing I was eager to do.*  
(Galatians 2:9-10)

There were disagreements and discussions about preaching the gospel, but there was no discussion about one central theme: that each in their fields of work should **‘remember the poor’**.

Apostles everywhere want to live generously, not only holding out the word of life in the gospel, but ministering to the poor, just like Jesus had done. Generosity is God’s own heart and nature, and the apostles, the leading envoys of the church, were to manifest God’s nature in his world. They were absolutely agreed that generous living and ministering to the poor was an apostolic obligation and necessity. This properly portrays God’s heart to his world. ***“For God so loved the world that he gave...”***

## **Questions**

1. Are there people and situations that I hold on to in a mean-spirited way? Are there any to whom I should issue generous forgiveness?
2. As I look back over the past year, how generous have I been in my giving? What needs to change?
3. Do I 'remember the poor'? If so, how? If not, what could I do to come into line with this apostolic injunction?



# Chapter 3

## Hospitality – a Principle with a Blessing

Some childhood memories stay etched on the human brain. Some are the deeply embarrassing or shocking events that have happened, which we still remember with horror or other emotion. I can still remember the day my grandma died suddenly, and the communication that came in the middle of the night, and some of the difficult family interaction that unfolded at that time of our lives.

Equally, there are highlights that were thoroughly good, that you remember with huge joy, affection and appreciation. From time to time, my mother would be invited to preach in various churches. She was an extremely good communicator, and we three children would all be dragged along with her. My father was not a Christian at the time, so she would take us with her, with various degrees of threats and incentives to encourage our co-operation.

But no threats or incentives were ever needed when we went to Rawtenstall in Lancashire. My mother would always preach at both the morning and the evening services in this Mission Hall, but between the two services were the most important events of all – a

Lancashire lunch and tea. This was offered by very lovely, down-to-earth people who were obviously delighted to welcome us, and lots of other people who were also invited, or maybe uninvited, but who turned up anyway. This was hospitality on a scale I had never seen. The lunch was always copious and steaming (and probably quite unhealthy by today's standards), but it was good English country cooking, for sure. The meat course was excellent, and the puddings were out of this world. These people also knew how to entertain children; it was not a boring, adult environment. So the afternoons were full of activity and creativity. A very short time after lunch, or so it appeared to me, the table was laden again with goodies – bread and scones, jams and home-made lemon curd, cakes and trifles, jellies and cream, and – I remember it as clearly as yesterday – ginger beer served from earthenware jars.

### **A Gift of Hospitality**

These people knew how to offer hospitality. Our question, whenever we knew that mum was going somewhere to preach, was, “Can we go to Rawtenstall again?” Since then, I have been privileged to receive hospitality in many different countries in the world, as well as in many homes locally. Some fare has been meagre, but nevertheless given generously, and has been a huge blessing; some has been adequate, but given grudgingly or out of duty, and has been embarrassing.

Being a generous God himself, God always encourages his people to receive others and offer hospitality with generosity. That's why Peter said,

*The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. **Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.** Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do so as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.*

*(1 Peter 4:7-11)*

## **Love in the Family**

The first focus for hospitality is within the family of God. The “one another” phrase appears in the writings of the New Testament in abundance. It’s like a new catchphrase for the early church: “love one another,” “accept one another”, “forgive one another”, “greet one another with a holy kiss”, and so on. And here’s another: “*offer hospitality to one another without grumbling*”.

It’s such an understandable encouragement. It’s quite a lot of work to have people for a meal, or to have people to stay. Once in a while, it’s quite a treat, or even an adventure. But if you do it a lot, it’s just hard work! So we can easily get into a wrong spirit over it. ‘Why do we have to have these people? I don’t see others breaking their necks to have people like we do! How come we don’t seem to be invited elsewhere, like we invite people here?’ and so on. It’s very easy for us to get into the Martha mentality (Luke 10:38-42). First we get into the

grumbling stage, and then we probably give up all together! So here's another encouragement:

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need.*

**Practise hospitality.**

*(Romans 12:9-13)*

Here we encounter a note of both reality and passion injected into this area of life. It is all too easy to lose our zeal or fervour, and especially to throttle back when life gets busy. But Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to a wholehearted relational lifestyle together. Love is practical. The Christian life is both attitude and action. Spiritual passion is about being keen in serving the Lord and serving one another. In the light of what we said in the last chapter, this is to do with caring for the poor and needy within the church fellowship, and practising hospitality towards others.

The Greek word translated 'practise' in the phrase '*practise hospitality*' is the word for pursue, or chase after. In other words, the Christians in Rome are told to pursue hospitality – to make it an eager goal of theirs to receive and welcome others into their homes. It's not an optional extra, but a pursuit. Christians should love receiving others into their homes.

My observation is that this is all too easily something we slacken up on. It's all very understandable, and perhaps logical, that, when we get busy, we cut out

non-essentials. But that's just the point, isn't it? The Scripture seems to say that this is *not* a non-essential; it's *an essential part of being part of the Body of Christ*, and joined into his family, that we welcome others into our home, and really do live a relational life. And if we cut out hospitality as a 'non-essential', what we end up busying ourselves with is – ourselves! We end up living a very selfish life, orientated around ourselves and our needs, with an odd meeting thrown in. That's not the church as God designed it, for sure. Church is being part of a new community 24/7.

## **Hospitable Leaders**

Interestingly enough, in the lists of qualifications for eldership in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, being hospitable is one of Paul's criteria.

*Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, **hospitable**, able to teach...*

*(1 Timothy 3:2-3)*

*...(the overseer) must be **hospitable**, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*

*(Titus 1:8)*

In other words, leaders are to set an example to others in giving hospitality, entertaining people for meals and sharing our home and relationships with others. All of this is a demonstration of life in God's family. It blesses other people, and it enlarges us to receive others, get to

know them, hear their experiences of life and share their story.

## **The Blessing of Welcoming Others**

Our own experience is that this is not a burden, but a delight. Even when we have felt that our resources would not really stretch to it in a particular week, the hospitality may not have been sumptuous, but it has been fun, and a blessing. This should not surprise us, because it is also a promise of God. Actually, there are lots of encouragements to give in the Bible that come with promises attached. Not that we give in order to manipulate blessing from God, but because we understand that when we give, we are entering into a cycle of God's blessing. So, for example:

*One man gives freely, yet gains even more;  
Another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.  
A generous man will prosper;  
He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.  
(Proverbs 11:24-25)*

One weekend, we lent our house to some friends while we were away. They were in need of a break, and our house was empty, so it was no sacrifice for us really. We simply had to prepare the house so it was ready to receive them. When we returned home, we noticed that an old wooden breadboard that was cracked had been replaced by a new, round wooden breadboard. Inscribed around the edge were the words: "*He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*" We were touched by their thoughtfulness and creativity; but every time we welcomed people, even if it was only for a simple lunch

of soup and bread, we were reminded: “*He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*” Wonderful!

Sometimes, our thoughts are affected and informed more by our circumstances than the Word of God. We’re under pressure, so we don’t invite anyone, or just live for ourselves. Our budgets are tight, so we won’t bless anyone else at our table this month. I love the times when our children have said to us, “Who’s coming to lunch on Sunday?” We’ve maybe had to reply – either because we haven’t thought ahead, or we’re in a selfish phase (!) – “No-one this week-end”. And they have exclaimed, “Oh no, how boring!”

We need to let the Bible inform our thinking in every area of life: “*A generous man will prosper!*” If that’s true, it behoves us to be generous! If a generous person is blessed, but a mean, tight-fisted person ends up in poverty (even if it were only in a poverty of spirit!), we’d better not be mean. And if we are ourselves refreshed when we refresh others, we’d better refresh others.

We have been so blessed by people we have welcomed into our home. I think of Nicolas Wafula from Uganda, for example, with whom we have been friends for years. It so happened that Nicolas came to stay with us for a few days shortly after our son Benjamin was born. I brought him home after one of our conferences, and as I was walking with him from the car to our front door, I mentioned that he was the first person we had had to stay since Ben was born. He was covered with confusion because he had no present, for in his culture, the first person to stay in a home after the birth of a baby must bring a present; and from then on, he has a special relationship with the newborn. He took out his wallet,

and gave us the only money he had and handed it to us as a gift for Ben. We were mortified to take his last cash, but Nicolas, according to his culture, absolutely had to give it to us. Since then, Nicolas and I have met at least once a year, and sometimes more, and every time we meet his first question is, “And how are you and Lorraine?” and his second question “And how is my friend Benjamin?”

A couple of years ago, we had Nicolas to speak in a celebration of Oxfordshire Community Churches, and it was a delight to introduce Nicolas to our Benjamin, then a strapping sixteen-year-old. Nicolas has prayed for Ben regularly all these years, and we are grateful for the blessing of faithful friends like that.

## **A Culture of Hospitality**

We understand that some aspects of hospitality are cultural. But the point about it is: it’s a good culture! It is commended by God and his Word. Hotels and restaurants, where we stay away and eat out, are part of our rather more individualistic culture; but we have to ask whether it really is reproducing the care, relationship, and blessing that comes from the joy of receiving people into our homes, or staying in other people’s homes and blessing others.

Last autumn, I accompanied my friend Jean Pillonel on a trip to North Africa, along with Mark Gallagher, who works in that region. There we stayed in the pastor’s humble home: one sitting room downstairs, and a kitchen and bedroom upstairs, and a toilet cubicle in the yard outside, and a shower-bucket in the rather public yard. Jean and I had the two single beds, and Mark and various young men slept on cushions on the floor. I don’t

think we were ever less than five staying over in the six nights we stayed there. And upstairs were sleeping most of the ladies in the group!

It was a wonderful blessing! We got to know the pastor and his wife and their daughter really well, but also built close relationships with many of the young men who were staying. At the end of the week, the pastor mentioned how much of a blessing it had been that we had stayed in their home, and honoured and blessed them, when he knew we could have been more comfortable in a hotel. He spoke of the pain of other ‘men of God’ coming to see them, but choosing to stay in a hotel, and thus never giving themselves into the family context, just adopting a more professional ministry posture. How grateful I was that we had stayed there and blessed them in this way. And Jean, Mark and I were blessed too, richly and profoundly.

## **Being Thoughtful**

There is a wonderful little story in 2 Kings 4:8-10.

*One day, Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged them to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, “I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let’s make him a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.*

When you stay somewhere, you don’t need much; but it is nice to know that people have thought of what you might need. A bed to sleep on, a table and chair to sit,

and a lamp to read by – that’s thoughtful! I’ve stayed in a few places where a lamp would have been a blessing. Our hospitality doesn’t need to be grand, but it can be thoughtful. A little soap here, a towel there, a welcome card, or a bowl with some sweets or maybe a piece of fruit or two; not huge demands, but a little token of thoughtfulness and a desire to bless.

### **Flexibility for the Surprise Guest**

One of the big challenges is when our plans are taken by surprise. When someone turns up unannounced, can we cope? I know that this can happen more in other cultures, but it can occasionally happen in our European culture too. When it does, how do we deal with it?

Job said, *“No stranger had to spend the night in the street, for my door was always open to the traveller”* (Job 31:32), and Hebrews 13:2 underlines this readiness to receive no matter who: *“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

### **It’s for everyone!**

Is this matter of hospitality and generous living restricted to the better-off or to leaders within the church? By no means! When Paul is giving instructions to his apostolic delegate, Timothy, on how to look after different groups of people within the church at Ephesus, he encourages him to have a list of widows who need to be properly cared for within the life of the church. Here is Paul’s advice to Timothy:

*No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.*

*(1 Timothy 5:9-10)*

It is assumed that, just like doing good to all, showing hospitality is part of normal life for God's people. It's living generously, like our God is generous to all. It's the way of the Kingdom!

### **Questions:**

1. Is giving hospitality to others a regular feature of my life? What specifically have I/we done over the past six months to express this? Have I previously been more hospitable than now? If so, why has this changed?
2. How do I respond when people call by unannounced and upset my plans for the day?
3. Is there a fresh spirit of hospitality that my small group or church needs to find? If so, what practically might we do to express that?



# Chapter 4

## Tithing – a Principle with a Blessing

William Colgate, the founder of the famous toothpaste company, was embarking on his business life with energy. His father's instructions he carried with him, and practised, all of his business life: "Tithe ten per cent of everything you make, my son, and God will surely bless you!"

Tithing is a principle that is spoken of at various points throughout the Scriptures. In this chapter we will focus on what is said about it in the Old Testament, and in the next chapter we will look at the New Testament. It is vital, in both testaments, to understand that tithing is *a principle*, not *a law*. I have recently re-read many articles and booklets on tithing. Some emphasise that the secret of blessing in the Christian life is to tithe ten per cent of all of one's income – it's a 'must do' which guarantees the favour of God. Meanwhile, others want to free us from what they see as the legalistic bondage of tithing, proclaiming that tithing is simply based on the Jewish Law and that we are now completely free from that Law's demands.

Well, I would certainly want to set anyone free from legalistic bondage, of duty-filled, guilt-driven,

obligation-based faith. Tithing is not a ‘must do’ in the sense that we have to obey the rules to live in the Kingdom. I want people to live out of a sense of the goodness and grace of God, to know they are loved unconditionally by God whatever they do, and that there is no way we can earn more favour from God than he has already shown us. But at the same time, we need to ask how we respond to the grace of God. Are there still principles of giving and honouring God for his goodness – simply because we want to honour God, recognise his goodness, and give generously as he has given to us? And might tithing be a ‘must do’ in the sense that we want to go on honouring God, acknowledging his goodness, and living under his blessing? In other words, we would be stupid not to live like this, wouldn’t we? It’s a no-brainer, I think, because there is a promise of blessing for us when we honour God with our worldly wealth. But it is so vital to distinguish between this being some sort of a ‘law of the Kingdom’ that puts us under obligation, and us really wanting to live like true Christians, generous like God is generous, and honouring God for his goodness.

## **Old Testament Practice**

Let us try to outline the practice of tithing in Old Testament times. First of all, we need to note that tithing is mentioned *before* the Law of Moses was ever given. Both Abraham and Jacob, who lived long before the Law, are said to have tithed. Abraham brought his tithe to Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem, and Melchizedek ministered bread and wine to Abraham and blessed him (Genesis 14:17-20). This event has always been seen as a ‘type’ or pre-figurement of Christ’s blessing of us and our

response to him (for example, see Hebrews 7), a prophetic event pointing forward to future fulfilment and a greater reality than the actual event itself. Clearly, Abraham saw Melchizedek as worshipping and representing the same God as him, and wanted to honour him. It is worth asking *why* Abraham decided to tithe to Melchizedek. Where did he get this idea from? Well there is some indication that this may have been a common practice in those days. For example, when, many years later, the Israelites demanded a king, the prophet Samuel tried to warn the people against this, by saying that a king would “*take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage*” to give it to his own servants, and “*a tenth of your own flocks*” (1 Samuel 8:15-17). It seems that it was assumed that the tithe was simply an appropriate offering to make to a king. A tenth belongs to the king! What an interesting concept! So if you see Yahweh as your king, you give him your tithe!

Jacob also vowed to give a tithe of all that God blessed him with after his encounter at Bethel. When he woke up from the dream, in which he had seen a stairway going up from earth to heaven and angels coming down and going back up the stairway, indicating God’s desire to bless Jacob and be his God, Jacob was overwhelmed with the sense of God’s presence in the place. He set up a stone and made an offering to God, and then made this vow:

*If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give a tenth.*

*(Genesis 28:20-22)*

It is important to note what is and isn't said here. Jacob is *not* saying that if God will bless him, then he will honour God and pay his tithe. This is not a conditional, "If God does this for me, then I will do that for him" type of pledge. No. God has *already spoken* to him through his dream, and has already promised to bless him and be his God. So Jacob is simply saying, "Well, if these promises are the case, then I will definitely be true to God and follow him, set up this shrine, and give ten per cent of all God gives me back to him."

I cite these two stories because they probably exemplify a *heart response* to God, expressed in tithing. At the end of the day, how else do you show gratitude, apart from giving? You want to do something – you have to do something! – to show how grateful you are.

Eventually, this principle became enshrined in the Law of the Old Testament. Actually, lots of things close to God's heart became enshrined in the Old Testament Law. The Ten Commandments are simply an expression of God's heart enshrined in Law: his desire that he alone be God, honoured in nature and name; his desire that the rest day and the life of the family be safeguarded; that life be preserved; that adultery, theft, dishonesty and

covetousness be avoided. What is *implicit* in God's heart becomes *explicit* in the Ten Commandments.

The same is true of the *principle* of generosity and tithing. It is a pre-Law principle that becomes explicitly stated in the Law of the Old Testament. It is a way of living that God commends to all his people. So what was the clear Old Testament teaching about the tithe?

### **The Tithe Belongs to the LORD**

The clearest statement of this comes in Leviticus 27:30-32.

*A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD ... The entire tithe of the herd and flock - every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod - will be holy to the LORD*

This is quite unequivocal. The first 10% of everything produced *belongs* to the LORD. We don't have the option of consuming what we need, and then hoping that there's enough to be able to make some offering to God. No, the tithe *belongs* to the LORD.

When I was at theological college, I had a friend who was studying theology and training for the Baptist ministry overseas. He had a wife who worked part-time to support him and their daughter of 18 months. They suddenly discovered that they were expecting twins. We got to talking about money, and the principle of tithing, which we both accepted and practised. I said to him, "You will soon find that a big challenge, won't you?" But he replied, "It's always been a challenge. But it depends which end you start from. I've always found that if you

give the first 10% to God, the other 90% always goes round, and God always blesses. But if you start from the other end and use the 90% first, you never seem to be able to find the 10% afterwards.” And then he added, “I think we’ll keep doing it that way as the twins come too!” I was full of respect for them, and still remember the conversation 36 years later!

## **Tithes Support Ministers of God**

Numbers 18:21 outlines this principle:

*I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting.*

Every other tribe in Israel was given land so they could be fruitful and productive, grow crops, and have grazing land for their animals. But the tribe of Levi was given a different sort of inheritance. They received some land, but did not have to work it. Instead, they were set apart to serve God in the ministry of the Tabernacle and subsequently the Temple. The tithes of the other tribes provided for the Levites as a recompense for this service.

About 1000 years after these laws were laid down in the time of Moses, Nehemiah and all the leaders of the people of Israel reaffirmed their commitment to honour the Lord in a variety of ways, including paying the tithe (Nehemiah 10:35-37). Everyone agreed to bring their tithe, including the Levites, and the tithe supported the ministry of the Levites in the temple. Nehemiah chapter 12 indicates that there was a great spirit of

giving in the restored city of Jerusalem and in the temple worship.

Nehemiah had to leave Jerusalem for a year when King Artaxerxes recalled him to his service back in Persia, but was able to return again. When he returned, he was appalled to find that tithes were not being given to support the Levites, and so, unsurprisingly, the Levites had gone back to their own fields to grow their food. He called the people to repent and start giving their tithes again, which they did.

This story of Nehemiah is illustrative of what happens in the church all too often. God's people stop giving to support the ministry for one reason or another, and this leads to a contraction of the ministry. It is blindingly obvious when you think about it. Tithes support the ministry, and if tithes are diminished – either by people not giving them, or by church leaders applying them to things other than the ministry (for example, buildings) – then there is going to be less money available to support the ministry, and the ministry of particular churches will have to be cut back.

This leads us to another Old Testament principle.

### **Offerings for Buildings do not Come from Tithes**

This is a slight insertion into what I am seeking to establish about the tithe at this point, but it does illuminate Old Testament thinking and mindsets. Tithes were for the support of the ministry of priests and Levites. But when special projects were envisaged, these

came from extra freewill offerings – in other words, providing opportunity for even more generosity.

Exodus 35 outlines Moses' project to establish the Tabernacle as a place for worship. He invites people to give gifts of all different types, and also to bring their skills in a voluntary capacity to accomplish the task. The great thing is that Moses invites people to give voluntarily and with generosity, as they are willing.

*...and everyone **who was willing and whose heart moved him** came and brought an offering to the LORD for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for its sacred garments. **All who were willing**, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewellery of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the Lord. Everyone who had blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen, or goat hair, ram skins dyed red, or hides of sea-cows brought them. Those presenting an offering of silver and bronze brought it as an offering to the Lord, and anyone who had acacia wood for any part of the work brought it. Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun – blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen. And **all the women who were willing** and had the skill spun the goat hair. The leaders brought onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and the breastpiece. They also brought spices and olive oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense. **All the Israelite men and women were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings** for all the work the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do.  
(Exodus 35:21-29)*

Equally, when David planned to build the temple in Jerusalem, subsequently executed by his son Solomon, he himself dedicated huge gifts from his personal resources for the project. But so do many of his leaders and people. At the end of 1 Chronicles we have the record of a huge celebration where gifts were brought in. The worship honoured God as full of greatness and power, splendour and majesty, and the source of all that is. It then continued:

*But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. We are aliens and strangers in your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope. O LORD our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you. I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. O Lord, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you.*

*(1 Chronicles 29:14-18)*

The spirit of this prayer is superb. King David emphasised his own desire to give, and also the willing hearts of his people. Since God gave it all in the first place, it was a joyful response to his goodness. But the underlying theme of these two stories is clear: tithes pay for ministry, while offerings pay for buildings.

## **Tithing and a lifestyle of generous giving**

Two passages in Deuteronomy underline that the Israelites saw a whole range of giving to God, and not just tithing. Tithing is meant to kickstart a lifestyle of generous giving!

Twice in Deuteronomy chapter 12, Moses instructs people to bring to the temple all their burnt offerings and sacrifices, tithes and special gifts, pledged gifts and freewill offerings, and “*eat and rejoice in the presence of God*” (verses 7 and 18).

Chapter 14 gives a fascinating encouragement to bring tithes “*so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always*” (verse 23). It sounds as though the bringing of the tithe inculcates in the heart and mind of the giver a proper attitude of honouring the LORD. That sounds reasonable enough. I think it does the same for me.

But if we put these Deuteronomy passages side by side with the Numbers passage that we looked at earlier, we see the following pattern:

- Each year, a tenth of all produce was to go to the storehouse of the central place of worship to be distributed to the Levites.
- While worshipping there, Israelites ate part of the tithe themselves, but the rest, undoubtedly the larger part of the tithe, went to the Levites.
- Every third year, the tithe was stored up and distributed not only to the Levites, but also to the aliens, the fatherless and the widows.
- The Levites also gave a tithe of the tithes they received back to God.

## **The Full Tithe**

Just as Nehemiah challenged the people of his generation for withholding the tithe, so the prophet Malachi did the same, around the same time as Nehemiah. Actually, he charged the Israelites with the crime of “robbing God”, and was clear that they were putting themselves under a curse precisely because they were not bringing “the full tithe” into God’s storehouse. For Malachi, this was a faith issue. Their short-changing God by giving partial tithes was short-sighted.

He challenged them to an act of faith in bringing in the whole tithe, thereby seeing blessing from God poured down upon them.

*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it.*

*(Malachi 3:10)*

A few years ago, our group of churches had a ministry weekend with the man I referred to in my foreword, who taught on the economics of God’s Kingdom. He challenged us that God was not a legalist, but could count accurately, and encouraged us that the promises of this Scripture still work now. My wife, Lorraine, and I realised that we had had a number of gifts and blessings – albeit small ones – that we had not accurately tithed, that we just hadn’t really bothered to think about. It was also true that we regularly had months when the ends didn’t seem to meet. From then on, we agreed with the Lord

that whatever he gave to us, however he gave it, we would tithe accurately. (We had always given offerings over and above, but had just been a bit careless with the full tithe.) All I can say is that, from that time on, our experience was different. We still have to be careful with how we manage our finances, but we have never found the ends failing to meet like before.

Just as in the previous chapter we talked about giving hospitality as a principle with a promise from God attached, I believe that tithing – giving the first-fruits of God’s blessing of us – is a principle in God’s heart with a promise attached. It is a lifestyle with a promise of blessing. I believe that as we tithe fully, we are blessed by God, and where communities of God’s people will tithe fully (because this Malachi passage was addressed to the people of God corporately), then those communities will be blessed with God’s outpoured provision.

It all comes down to a question of priorities. Where do we invest, as a first priority, what God gives to us? Clearly, Nehemiah and Malachi were saying that God was getting the leftovers, but definitely not the first-fruits. Haggai makes similar comments:

*Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.*

*(Haggai 1:5-6)*

The reason for this, says Haggai, is that they have prioritised their own houses and their own wealth, while the house of the LORD lay in ruins. Their priorities were

wrong, they were investing in the wrong things, and they still were facing hardship and financial difficulty. It's surely the same sound we hear in Malachi. As Jesus articulated later to his disciples: *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33).

## **Questions**

1. Granted that tithing is not ‘a law’, have I personally thought enough about the principle of tithing? Is there something I need to face here?
2. Do I like to divide up my tithe and give it to lots of different places? Should I instead consider investing my full tithe in my local church’s ministry?



# Chapter 5

## Freely you Have Received, Freely Give!

This classic sentence that is our chapter heading is, of course, part of Jesus' instructions to his disciples as he sent them out on their first adventure as ambassadors of the Kingdom. The spirit in which they went out was to be the same spirit of generosity that God had employed in blessing them through Jesus. They had received so much from him, they were now to go and give it away.

Of course, they were to give away what they had encountered in Jesus: healing, deliverance, forgiveness – and God's generosity of grace. We have already spoken about God's generosity in an earlier chapter. But what generosity does God expect from us in return for his amazing grace and generosity towards us?

It is important to note that the principle of tithing is never revoked in the New Testament. I have tried to explain that it was more than simply a Law of the Old Testament; it is a principle in the heart of God, expressed long before the Law was given. Even when Jesus challenged the Pharisees for their many failures, he still affirmed the importance of tithing, even in little things. The Pharisees' problem was that they forgot some of the big things!

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former.*

*(Matthew 23:23; parallel in Luke 11:42)*

Perhaps even more explicitly, Paul tells the Christians in Corinth how to give, and says this is just what he told the Galatians to do as well:

*On the first day of every week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come, no collections will have to be made.*

*(1 Corinthians 16:2)*

The phrase “in keeping with his income”, or more literally, ‘in proportion with how each one has been prospered’, brings to mind the stipulations concerning the tithe in Deuteronomy 16:10 – “...by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you,” and again in Deuteronomy 16:17: “Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.”

## **Much More than Tithing!**

So tithing is not revoked; indeed it seems to remain a practice encouraged by Jesus and the apostles. Having said that, we have not fully described the lifestyle of generosity that the early church practised. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is said of the early church that there was

*“no needy person amongst them”* (Acts 4:34). People sold land and houses to share with others, and the believers had *“everything in common”* (Acts 2:44). In other words, they were radical in their sharing with one another and giving to one another. The early Christians were told to *“share with God’s people who are in need”* (Romans 12:13), to *“do good and share with others”* (Hebrews 13:16), and to support financially those who taught them the Word of God (Galatians 6:6).

By far the most pre-eminent passage of Scripture concerning generosity comes in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The matter came up for the Apostle Paul in the context of an offering for distressed people in Jerusalem that had been envisaged and enthusiastically embraced at first by the Christians in Corinth; but it was clear that the initial enthusiasm had somewhat waned by the time Paul wrote this second letter – a sound familiar to those of us who keep trying to envision people for offerings for ongoing projects!

To get the best out of these chapters, it is vital to read them slowly, thoroughly, and thoughtfully. I will draw ten key points out of the chapters, but I encourage the reader to go to the source directly and look for more.

*1. Grace to give is something that comes from God (8:1-3)*

Paul holds up the Macedonian churches as a fine example of giving. They were extremely poor, but had such huge joy because of their faith in Christ that they overflowed with huge generosity. In fact, they were so desperate to give that they demanded the opportunity to do so. I have watched Indian Christians bring rice, chickens, fruit, and all sorts of produce to the Lord with huge generosity and

joy. They had real grace to give, and Paul says that this came from God! We see people receiving the grace of God in all sorts of ways: grace in hardship, grace to forgive, grace to be faithful in difficult relationships, and grace in serving. But there is also a grace to give that God wants to pour down on all of us.

*2. Giving starts by giving ourselves to Christ (8:5)*

These Macedonian Christians first of all “gave themselves to the Lord.” It is impossible to give generously and uncomplainingly unless we are totally abandoned to Christ himself. Jesus himself commended a widow who, in giving two pennies, gave everything she had. This showed where her heart was. I remember, as I grew up in Liverpool, widows who were as ‘poor as barn mice’ still bringing their gifts generously to God. What an example of those who had given themselves to Christ first of all.

*3. The example of giving is Christ himself (8:9)*

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.  
(2 Corinthians 8:9)*

God does not ask of us what he does not do himself. God knows about giving! He knows about being poor. He deliberately became poor in order to bestow huge riches on us. He is the best example of generosity that we could ever have.

4. *We give out of what we have, not out of what we don't have (8:12)*

*For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. (2 Corinthians 8:12)*

There can be a tremendous guilt thing about giving. If our hearts are touched or moved to compassion by people and their situations, we naturally want to give. We can sometimes feel moved to guilt at what we have when others have so little. There are so many emotional tugs. But Paul says, *so long as we are willing to give*, we don't have to bankrupt ourselves or be stupid about our giving.

5. *Giving means sharing and equality (8:13-14)*

Paul is clear that he doesn't want these Corinthian Christians to be bankrupted by giving, but he does want to see some equality. In a world where there is huge disparity both of incomes and living standards, we can become very blasé about the hardships others experience, or the inequalities in our society. Paul sees Christian living as me giving now to help others in their distress, so that others can give to me later if I am in need. For most western Christians, we are caught in a system of individuals storing up wealth for themselves, and we naturally think that's appropriate. But Paul maintains it is not! The best of socialism and care for others in society comes from Christian principles.

6. *We can give generously when there is good stewardship in evidence (8:16-9:5)*

Paul takes quite a large portion of his teaching on giving here to highlight that he and the other apostles have taken great care to steward whatever is given carefully, honestly and transparently, so that there can be no criticism in the administration of these offerings that were being taken around the churches. We may feel this should go without saying; but often people feel they don't want to give precisely because they may not know how the gifts are being spent, or what percentage of the gifts reaches those in need, rather than going on administration. These are important questions, and transparency in the conduct of affairs is very important. We have all heard of horror stories about embezzlement or mismanagement of funds, and transparency helps to restore trust against this background.

7. *Sow generously, reap generously!*

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. (2 Corinthians 9.6)*

Now we come in Paul's thinking to some spiritual laws that undergird his thinking. What we need is for our perspectives to be transformed so that we really understand these laws. It is absolutely plain to see in the physical realms of farming or business that if you sow a little seed, you will reap a little crop or return from such sowing. If you want a really good crop, you have to sow lots of seed first.

Henry Ford once said: “We know that 50% of advertising works; we just don’t know which 50%!” In other words, you have to advertise more than you imagine, because you don’t quite know where your return will come from; but keep advertising! That’s probably true of sharing the gospel as well. You never quite know where interest will come from, and it often doesn’t come from where you think it might. So keep sharing.

But the apostle Paul is saying more than this: he is saying that there is a spiritual principle in place, that *God sees and rewards those who are generous*. Because he goes on to say that God loves the cheerful giver, and will himself provide incredible resources and opportunity for the Corinthians to be generous, if they know how to be generous.

In other words, *God blesses the generous*. This makes huge sense. Why would God bless the person who simply stores up resources for his own selfish use? What a waste of those resources. No, Paul says, God gives to the generous so that his blessing can be recycled again and again. There is a cycle in God’s economy. He gives to us, then we give to others or back to him for our gifts to be used for his ministry, so God blesses and gives back to us, so that we can give again... and so on. If we really believe that God knows everything about us as individuals, he definitely knows whether we know how to give, and blesses us when we do.

## 8. *God loves cheerful givers*

*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6)*

I suppose few of us like things that are done for us or given to us grudgingly. If we feel we are being dealt with like that, we are just as likely to respond, “Well, don’t worry, then, I’ll do it myself.” We love willing servers and willing givers, not grudging ones. And so does God. He loves to see our generosity flowing out of our love for him and for others. Actually the word used for ‘cheerful’ is even stronger in Greek than our English translation indicates. Literally, the verse says, “God loves *hilarious* givers”. What a great thing it would be if we could bring our offerings to God for his work with a spirit of hilarity!

## 9. *God is able to provide overwhelmingly the resources for us to be generous*

I remember hearing Derek Prince, a famous Cambridge philosophy tutor and Bible teacher, preaching on these verses. I have to say, these verses captured my heart then, and I have used them over and over. I quote them fully, because they are so important:

*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: ‘He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; His righteousness endures for ever.’  
(2 Corinthians 9:8-9)*

These verses follow the encouragement to sow generously and give hilariously. If we do this, God promises a most amazing proliferation and multiplication of blessings to us. This verse has four 'alls', two 'everys', and two 'abounds'. This is no small measure! Surely, we are purely and simply depriving ourselves of the blessing of God and the heaped up resources he promises if we behave in a stingy fashion. God promises abundant supply to the hilarious giver. Why? So that we can abound in every good work, and have all that we need.

I saw the pastor under whose care I grew up in Liverpool demonstrate this time and time again. He was one of the most generous people I have ever known. He came from an impoverished background himself but was miraculously saved under the ministry of Edward Jeffreys, a revivalist preacher of the 1930's who, with his brother George Jeffreys, was one of the founders of the Elim movement of churches. My pastor was a soft touch for any story of suffering he heard and would always help. He was well known in the Dingle area of Liverpool for that. But he always had enough, and God blessed him over and over again.

#### *10. Giving precedes consuming*

Paul's conclusion is simple: "*God gives seed to the sower, and bread to the eater*" (2 Corinthians 9:10). It is no accident that Paul summarises his teaching like this. He thinks that it is important to give first, then consume afterwards.

It is one of the tragedies in some agricultural societies – for example, in some areas of Africa where, under the

immense pressure of famine and hardship, some people eat their seed corn. If only they could take a long-term view and realise that they could have a lot more to eat if they sowed their seed rather than eat it.

In our society, our normal approach to life is to get our salary, pay the mortgage and all the essential bills, and then hope there is enough to give after that. But the apostle Paul commends an alternative: that we receive our salary and ask, “What shall I give *first*?” and then feed ourselves and our families with what is left. He says that God gives “*seed to the sower, and bread to the eater,*” NOT “*bread to the eater, and seed to the sower*”. First we sow, then we consume. We need to beware of falling into the same trap as the consumer society all around us, of consuming to our hearts content first, and then thinking, maybe, of what we can afford to give afterwards.

Paul says, in conclusion, that if we will live according to these principles, “*You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us [i.e. the offering we are taking] your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God*” (2 Corinthians 9:11).

The issue for those of us who live under the grace of God is not really giving our tithe – although that seems to me to be an excellent principle and guideline for starters – but whether we see how we can be hilariously generous members of God’s kingdom. If we understood the blessing that flows down from God on to a generous people, and the promises God gives to provide for us so that we can abound in blessing others, *we would not be asking how little we can give, but how much we can give* – so that, at heart, we are modelling ourselves on God’s own nature.

## **Questions**

1. How “hilarious” or “grudging” a giver am I? What needs to change to help me become more hilarious?
2. In what ways have I become infected by the selfish and consumerist spirit of the world around me?
3. Do I really believe that God can provide all I need on every occasion if I give my resources generously now?



# Chapter 6

## Churches Living Generously

Living generously is not just about money, of course. But we start with money because, as Jesus himself said, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (Matthew 6:21). But we have all sorts of other resources that God wants us to be generous with; for example, our time, our gifts, our skills, and our homes. We can be generous with our friendship, or by being good listeners when people need to talk. We have already pointed to passages where, when furnishing the tabernacle, women with all sorts of skills helped with sewing, weaving, and dyeing. Equally, when Nehemiah led the project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, it is remarkable how perfume-makers, goldsmiths, and merchants all gave themselves to the building project. For a period at least, the building project became their priority.

I have witnessed this over and over again. God’s people give themselves unstintingly to help with projects that have touched their hearts or captured their imagination. Some people cook meals for the homeless, others volunteer as street pastors, others pray for healing for people on the streets. Many give time to volunteer on year teams, or as helpers in Christian schools, or as youth workers. Often we are able to give time and skills where we can’t actually afford to give

money and God judges us according to the resources we have, not what we don't have.

I am constantly impressed and not a little amazed at the goodness and generosity of God's people, and exceedingly aware of how much can be accomplished when God's people give themselves and their resources generously to a project that captures their vision and imagination. We have seen Christian schools established, secular youth ministries released, new churches planted, mercy ministries transforming communities, as well as workers released to different parts of the world. And at the same time, these individuals are discovering and fulfilling their destiny in God. This sounds like a WIN-WIN situation. God's Kingdom advances, and individuals are blessed and fulfilled. The key to all this is vision that catches people's hearts, matched by faith that turns to action.

## **Church Tithing**

I believe it is absolutely right, and Biblical, for individuals to tithe to God, and appropriate for them to bring that tithe where they receive care, input, and the ministry of the word that feeds them. I want to be part of a community that is blessed because we honour the Lord with the full tithe, and that sees God open the floodgates of heaven and pour down his blessing.

But if tithing is important at an individual level, it seems a good principle that churches should tithe their income too, say to mission. Many individuals give to a mission that they have particular interest in, of course, and this is good. But how much more effective could our giving and praying be if we all decided to give together to

support a handful of missions that we could really get behind fully. There would be shared interest, prayer, and even fund-raising, and the possibility of teams going to visit particular mission works and groups. This focusing of corporate vision is surely desirable and effective.

### **Churches Sharing their Ministries**

It seems equally important to me that churches which are blessed with good leaders and ministries that God has given them should be willing to live generously with those ministries and share them with others. Perhaps at least 10% of leaders' time and ministry could be given to others beyond the local church to foster concern to bless others and do others good. This stops churches being selfish and self-centred with ministries that God has given them, and sows to care for others and demonstrate interest in others beyond themselves.

I don't think I had really seen the importance of this when I first began in ministry. I had only ever seen patterns of local churches having their leaders and pastors. Then I found various ways of being involved with different nations, and the churches I was leading were glad to share me (and others) to bless other churches and other nations. There are some amazing blessings to all this. First of all, it makes space for others to rise up and take opportunities for ministry in the local church, clearing any sense of a bottleneck. Second, it sows into the leader a vision for something much wider. When you visit other churches or other nations, God expands your heart with vision for things much bigger. When God changes and expands leaders, then churches are also blessed through receiving a bigger vision and

heart. And third, my experience is that whenever I go and see what God is doing elsewhere, I come back with fresh vision and hope for the local situation to be blessed, and fresh revelation of the Kingdom of God. God speaks to me elsewhere, and I come back with greater faith for 'back home'. The church, therefore, is a beneficiary from its own generosity.

Sometimes local churches can get into a manner of thinking, 'Are we paying our leaders to go off to minister into other situations? Do we have enough of their time and ministry here?' I'm sure this is always a balance. Clearly, Paul and Barnabas invested into Antioch before they went off elsewhere. At the same time, as we have been blessed by the ministries raised amongst us in the local church, we should want others to be blessed. So it is a positive thing regularly to send out our ministries to bless and equip others. And we often support those ministries financially as they go and minister. In fact, as I write this, I am in Rwanda, with a team sent by our local churches in Oxfordshire. There is such overwhelming appreciation here for the ministries that have come – and for the churches who have given! – to bless people who have extremely limited resources. What a privilege to be part of such a generous gift!

### **Churches Receiving and Honouring Other Ministries**

One of the great blessings for any local church is to receive ministries from outside it who enlarge, expand, and equip it in a variety of ways. I confess that I am sometimes surprised how little thought can be given to

honouring these ministries. A man or woman of God who has given time to prepare themselves and their message, and then often travelled some way to deliver it, probably at cost to their family, surely deserves to be honoured properly for that prayer, preparation, and commitment of time and effort? Equally, if a group of leaders receive apostolic help or prophetic input, should not that ministry be honoured in a generous and thoughtful way?

The Apostle Paul encourages the Christians in Corinth to think like that. *“If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much for us to reap a material harvest from you?”* (1 Corinthians 9:11). He goes on to state that he never demanded this as a right, but he thinks he could. And then he says even more strongly: *“...the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel”* (1 Corinthians 9:14). In other words, we release that ministry by honouring and blessing it. We release those ministries from financial pressure and worry, and gladly encourage them by our generosity to keep ministering.

In the group of churches I have been leading for some years, we have developed guidelines for gifts for speakers. Regularly, after receiving some ministry from elsewhere, we discuss the ministry gift. The administrators know that I will regularly encourage a larger gift than what is on our ‘scale’. We must be generous, if we want to live in the blessing of God.

I am talking here about receiving all types of ministry, not just Sunday preaching ministry, but also apostolic, prophetic, pastoral, evangelistic and other ministries.

Regular apostolic ministry is a blessing to any local church. To receive apostolic vision into a group of

leaders is a blessing and expansion of heart. In the light of all the ministries we receive as a gift from Jesus, the Lord of the church, we need to consider how we invest back into such ministry. Of course this has to be included in any church budget. Church budgets have quite a lot of strategy to them; and what we value, we will invest in. In New Testament times, much of this support for apostolic ministries was relational and personal. Out of relationship with those who had fathered them, churches gave to support their ministries, to help them on their way to minister in other places, especially the ‘regions beyond’, or to support projects that their spiritual fathers encouraged them in (like the Jerusalem offering). I encourage us to reflect on how we do this in our local churches.

### **Churches Giving their Best Ministries**

I would go even further. Very early on in my ministry as a local pastor at Cote Baptist Church, we decided to have a church weekend to deepen fellowship, have fun, and expand vision. I invited a local Baptist minister to come and speak, and he was exceedingly inspiring. I remember him speaking to us on some principles of leadership from Acts 13. Things were sailing along quite well in his message, until he said this: “I wonder if we understand how important this is, that any church blessed with good ministries must be prepared to give away its best to others.”

I felt the Holy Spirit challenge me deep inside. I was enjoying a church that was growing, but was I prepared to give the best away? A short time afterwards, God started speaking to us, along with the church in Witney,

about church-planting across the county of Oxfordshire. In particular, we felt he was speaking at that time about Wantage and Chipping Norton. We had three elders at Cote. So here was the question: could I give them away? In the end, David and Rosie Freeman went to lead the church-plant in Wantage, while Len and Jenny Garnham went to lead the church-plant in Chipping Norton. They were two of our best leaders, and we gave them away. That simply made space to train up others to take their full place in God's kingdom.

Since then, this has been repeated time and time again. I know no other way of living like Kingdom people than giving and giving. But it hurts! You see friends you have worked with closely for years move on elsewhere and get on with 'their own' ministry. You see spiritual sons and daughters who you nurtured, prayed for, and watched develop their potential, and whom you love, develop their own visions and ministries, and leave home. You want them to go and be everything God is calling them to be, and you delight in it; but it hurts.

Sometimes it can be easier to move on yourself. Giving away your best, and staying where God has planted you to raise up more leaders and spiritual sons and daughters isn't straightforward. You have to start all over again in some ways. There is a feeling of loss. You are giving, like the church in Antioch gave away Paul and Barnabas who had been so foundational in their own development. Relationship continues, of course. Paul and Barnabas returned and reported back, and there was obviously deep affection between them and the church that sent them out on mission. So yes, there is loss; but there is also huge gain. I now have family all over the world, in

different nations. It's the multiplied blessing of God when you've given away your best.

## **Churches Investing in Young People to Go Elsewhere**

I have been surprised over the years to see church leaders trying to hold on to their young people. Sometimes our Bible College students are sponsored by their home churches for training, but while they are at college, God speaks to them about a different vision, or calls them to ministry elsewhere. Leaders have been disappointed that their people are not coming back to take up ministry at home base. Why else would they have trained them or invested in them? Why indeed? Well, for a bigger vision than the local church, for sure; that is, for God's kingdom.

When we planted the church in Oxford, God spoke to us very clearly about having a BIG vision. (B-I-G = Building family, Infecting students with the Kingdom, Going to people, wherever they are). The 'I' part of this vision was especially important, because we recognised that we would be a high turnover church, with students coming to the two universities in Oxford. God spoke to us before we even started that he wanted us to infect students with a vision for God's kingdom and spoil them for life so that, wherever they went in God's world, they would carry the kingdom with them.

We train people in our churches and especially our young people, for a future in the Kingdom of God. It is God's prerogative if he speaks to them about going and doing something else for the Kingdom. They are God's

people not ours. We train them up and we give them away. I have a feeling that God uses these situations to test our hearts about whether we are trying as leaders to build our own kingdom or to build the Kingdom of God. The story of Babel shows that God does not approve when we build a kingdom to ourselves; but when we are seeking his Kingdom, the blessing of God abounds.

### **Churches Sowing into City Vision**

There are many villages, towns, and cities that are witnessing a great partnership of churches working together to benefit local communities. Projects like 'The Message Trust' in Manchester with its Eden projects, now multiplying round the country, the 'Faithworks' movement sponsored initially by Oasis Trust, and 'Hope for Justice' are all examples of hugely inspiring local initiatives supported by churches of many different types. Hope 08 has sponsored Hope 09 and Hope 10 initiatives, which have brought huge life into many communities needing a touch of colour and hope. There are now many projects that encourage a concern for social justice in God's world, and God's people are right at the centre of this heart for justice.

Isaiah 58 has now become a life message for many churches. I believe there is blessing from God bestowed on churches that are concerned not just for their own projects, which will advance the ministry of their own churches, but who will seek together with others the advancement of God's Kingdom. I acknowledge that we still have to find our way through issues of the differences of God-given visions between them, but I

believe God blesses the enterprise, precisely because it fosters the generous nature of God.

## **Churches Loving Other Nations**

Right from the time of the patriarchs, it is evident that God's heart is for all the nations. He promised to make Abraham the father of a nation, through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. The people of Israel were called to be "a light to the nations", and Jesus sent his disciples out "to make disciples of all nations". When the apostles were thrust out from Antioch by the Holy Spirit, the blessing of God was manifestly with them. There was trouble, but there was also hugely positive response to the message of the gospel. The apostles "*spoke boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders*" (Acts 14:3).

Many of us have experienced the incredible favour that seems to accompany ministry in different nations. It is a constant surprise to me how God honours praying for the sick in ministry outside the local church, and especially in different nations. It is as though God loves to demonstrate to people afresh that he really is alive! Those of us who engage in this ministry know that it has very little to do with us. We are equally as weak and uncertain of ourselves as at home. But God shows his favour over and over again.

Many people in our churches have the opportunity to travel into all sorts of different nations with their work. We should encourage them to be ambassadors of the Kingdom wherever they go. In fact, it is often much easier for them to have a platform for sharing their faith

than for classic ministries who are more 'church-based'. We have also challenged small groups to get a vision for different nations, and go and have an adventure in praying around cities and nations across Europe or elsewhere. After one such challenge, one of our small groups in Oxford decided to go to Uganda together, and in the end a number of families went. Altogether there were twenty-four people of different ages. Another small group decided to go to Poland, to a city we were totally unconnected with, where they prayer-walked around the city, and found some small churches and blessed them.

What a privilege it was to welcome Brother Andrew to our European Leaders' Conference in 2010. Here was a man of 83 years of age, as passionate as ever to take the good news of Jesus to whichever nations he could. And the more difficult the nation, and the greater challenge it is to get in there, the more he wants to go. That is why he called his mission 'Open Doors', because he believes there is no such thing as a closed door in any nation.

I think God wants to give us a fresh heart for the nations. And when we go in obedience to bless others and show them the love of God, he himself shows his favour to us. It's time for churches to live generously!

## **An Issue of Faith?**

I wonder if there is a very central issue here that we need to recover. For as I share all these different arenas where God is calling us to be generous, I recognise weariness can easily come over us, as we ask, 'But how can we do all of this?' The answer is, of course, that we can't. But God can! And if we will dream big dreams, and listen to God's promises over our lives, we definitely can do "more than

we can ask or even imagine”. If we are to live generously, we need a change of mindset. British people – and all Europeans for that matter – definitely need a change of mindset.

I remember listening to a BBC Radio 4 interview a few years ago of a British businessman who had worked one spell of four years in the UK, then four years in the USA, then four years in the UK, then four years in the USA again. When asked what were the main differences between working in UK and USA, he said, “Oh, that’s simple. In the USA they have a ‘can do’ mentality; in the UK, we have a ‘can’t do’ mentality.”

I do not necessarily want us to feel that we have to espouse all of what is often called ‘the prosperity gospel’ for us to realise that we need a good dose of faith in the UK and European churches. I recall one British church leader being asked in an interview some time ago, “Tell us, do you believe in the faith and prosperity gospel that comes to us from the USA?” To which he replied, “Well, I definitely don’t believe in an unbelief and poverty one!” That is one of those answers I wish I could have thought of!

Frankly, I think this is one of our biggest challenges when we reflect on what it means to live generously. Can we start thinking a bit more like God, who is generous from beginning to end?

Perhaps I can finish by quoting a Scripture that has become very precious to me. God challenged me with this several years ago, and said to me that my thinking was far too small, and I needed to “Think BIG”! Since that first time he spoke to me, he has spoken the same word time and time again in different ways.

*‘Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child;  
Burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in  
labour;  
Because more are the children of the desolate woman  
Than of her who has a husband,’ says the LORD.  
‘Enlarge the place of your tent,  
Stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back:  
Lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread out to the right and to the left;  
Your descendants will dispossess nations  
And settle in their desolate cities;’  
(Isaiah 54:1-3)*

I believe that God wants to bless us as his people. I have received these verses as a promise for the churches I lead in Oxfordshire, and for the churches in the Salt & Light family. But I believe they are for his whole family in the earth. If we will live generously as his people, and believe him for expansion and growth at the same time, he will give us much new birth, and allow us to bless cities and nations. He is still able to **“open the floodgates of heaven, and pour down so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it”** (Malachi 3:10).

## **Questions**

1. Are there changes that the church I am part of needs to make in its generosity towards others? What could I do to try to encourage greater generosity and a spirit of giving?
2. Do we have a mentality that gives our best away, or that seeks to keep the best for ourselves?
3. What faith do I have for God to bless our church? What does this faith depend on? Am I thinking big, or thinking maintenance?

## **Small Group Resources**

Small group resources to help unpack this and other **2020vision**> **Books** can be found on our website:

[www.saltlight.org/2020vision](http://www.saltlight.org/2020vision)