

Stewardship and Mission

Devotional Reading: Zechariah 8:18–23

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:17–18; Acts 26:12–20;
2 Corinthians 8:1–15; 9:1–15

Today's Scripture: Acts 1:6–8; 2 Corinthians 8:3–9

I. Jesus and the Apostles

Acts 1:6–8

6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

7 And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

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

6. The book of Acts begins with a dialog between Jesus and His apostles at the Mount of Olives before He ascends to heaven. Within the 40-day time period of His appearance to His disciples, Jesus directs them to remain in Jerusalem and “wait for the promise of the Father,” the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). But as the conversation continues, the disciples reveal a misunderstanding they hold and a desire for something they should not have.

The disciples *come together* to ask Him the question we see here. Their question reflects the expectations of many first-century Jews regarding the timing and nature of the Messiah's task.

Several Old Testament texts likely are the primary drivers of these expectations: Genesis 49:10; Numbers 24:17–19; and Isaiah 11:1–6. These texts can be interpreted in one sense to lead the reader to conclude that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman occupiers as He ascended to the throne of David. Thus God is expected to *restore again the kingdom to Israel*.

7. Jesus responds, but not in the way the disciples hope. He does not address their concern for Israel's restoration. Instead, Jesus tells them that they are not to be concerned with knowledge of *the times* and *the seasons* of such things. This privileged knowledge is for God *the Father* only.

8a. Jesus redirects the disciples' focus and highlights their unique task as they wait for His return. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus' command that the disciples remain in Jerusalem until they receive “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The verse before us moves from the abstract to the specific: the source of that *power* is to be *the Holy Ghost*.

8b. The Holy Spirit's empowerment becomes the starting point for the church. The noun *witness* can be interpreted in at least two ways, depending on context. In one sense, the word *witness* refers to someone who has observed something—a spectator, observer, or eyewitness. In a second sense, the noun *witness* can refer

to someone who testifies to something, as in a deposition. Jesus' disciples are already witnesses in the first sense, having seen firsthand His ministry, crucifixion, and Him personally after His resurrection. But now they are to be witnesses in the second sense as they take the gospel to *Jerusalem, . . . Judaea, . . . Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

The phrase *uttermost part of the earth* emphasizes that Jesus wants His disciples to take His message of salvation to all people and all the world. To do so would be a significant undertaking. Further, Jesus gave them no specifics regarding how they would work to complete this task. For the disciples and witnesses to follow through on this task, they must show each other care, hospitality, and financial generosity (examples: Acts 8:26; 10:9–20; 16:6–10; 18:9).

II. Paul and the Church 2 Corinthians 8:3–9

3 For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves;

4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

5 And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.

6 Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also.

7 Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.

8 I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.

9 For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

3. The next segment of Scripture to study takes us into the middle of a relief project being managed by the apostle Paul. The collection of this gift provides the backdrop for Paul's teachings on stewardship found in 2 Corinthians 8. The timeline indicates that the relief project was a plan spread over several years, given that Paul did not arrive back in Jerusalem until AD 58.

To make his case to the church at Corinth that they should complete the gift, Paul presents the example of the churches of Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:1, which is the antecedent of the words *their* and *they* in the verse before us.

Paul does not give the specific financial amount offered by the Macedonian churches. Instead, he classifies their giving into two categories. First, their giving was *to their power*, an amount to be expected. The second category, however, goes above and beyond the first: their giving was *beyond their power*. This giving level reveals that God was at work in and through their sacrificial generosity.

Further, the fact that they *were willing of themselves* indicates that they gave without coercion from Paul. Their generosity was a free response to having received God's gift of grace.

4. Not only do the Macedonian churches give freely, but they also plead with Paul and his companions to *receive* the churches' generous financial *gift*. As used here, the word *praying* refers to requests not to God but to other people—in this case, to Paul and his traveling companions (*us*). For believers in one area to provide aid to believers in other provinces is not without precedent.

The key theme in this verse and this chapter is the *fellowship* of God's people. This refers to a complete sharing of life with another and the unity God's people experience as they abide in Christ, receive God's gift of grace, and freely respond to that gift for the mission of the church.

5. The phrase *not as we hoped* should be understood to signify a mismatch between what Paul and his traveling companions (*us*) expected and what happened. Knowing of the precarious situation of the Macedonians, Paul's expectations of their ability to give had been in line with that reality. Therefore, he is truly surprised by their overwhelming generosity—one that happened because they *first gave their own selves to the Lord*. This level of commitment comes only *by the will of God*, as modeled by Jesus, who gave Himself on the cross.

6. Having summarized the generosity of the Macedonian church, Paul now challenges his Corinthian readers. The challenge is based on the fact that the Macedonian churches have already finished their giving project, but the Corinthians have not.

A key player in helping the Corinthians do so is *Titus*, a “partner and fellowhelper” of the apostle Paul. He is mentioned by name nine times in this book—more than in all the other New Testament books combined. Collecting funds for the poverty-stricken Jerusalem church seems to be a primary task for Titus.

Paul refers to the anticipated financial gift from the Corinthians as *the same grace*. Their gift is not being coerced (more on this below). Instead, it will be their response of grace for having received the grace of God themselves.

7a. Paul has much to say elsewhere about *faith, utterance, knowledge, diligence, and love*. Regarding just the Corinthians, we can list 1 Corinthians 1:5; 12:8; 13:1–2, 13; 14:6; and 16:1–2 on those topics.

7b. Even though the Corinthians excelled in several qualities, completing the offering was an opportunity for them to still *abound* in one more quality—*grace*. Growing in this regard involves the tangible *grace* of financial giving.

8. Regarding certain situations, the apostle Paul gives commands to the Christians in Corinth, and sometimes he merely advises. The imperative “See that ye abound in this grace also,” just studied in 2 Corinthians 8:7b (above), seems like a command at first. But Paul hastens to ensure his exhortation is not misconstrued: *I speak not by command*. Perhaps the clarification is because previously, he had been much more direct to them regarding their giving. Paul desires that the Corinthian believers be generous to other believers in need, but he wants the Corinthians to give out of cheerful love, not compulsion.

Paul notes the reason for his bringing up the example of the Macedonian churches. The word translated *forwardness* is also translated as “diligence” in 2 Corinthians 8:7, above, and that is the sense here. The Macedonians' *diligence* in showing financial generosity was the *occasion* for him to use as an example to the Corinthians. If the Corinthians are similarly diligent, they will *prove the sincerity of their love*.

9. Paul appeals to the example of the *Lord Jesus Christ*. Before the incarnation, Jesus *was rich* in ways we cannot grasp. As the divine Son, He is equal with God from eternity (John 1:1–2). These eternal riches did not stop the divine Son from becoming a servant, humbling Himself and becoming *poor* for the sake of humanity (Philippians 2:5–8). Through His self-sacrifice, Jesus inaugurated the riches of the Father's salvation by making atonement for sin (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 2:17).

Involvement Learning

Stewardship and Mission

Into the Lesson

Define *generosity*.

How have you experienced generosity from God?

In today's lesson, we will study the chain of generosity—one that begins with God in Christ Jesus and extends to all His followers.

Key Text

Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.
—2 Corinthians 8:9

Into the Word

Read Acts 1:6–8 and imagine yourself as Jesus' first-century disciples. Write down a five-to-six-sentence testimony that recounts your time and experience as a "witness" to Jesus.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–5. List words in these verses that reflect the abundant and exceptional giving from the Macedonians.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:6–9. List the strengths that Paul recognized in the Corinthian church and why these are good qualities.

Why is Jesus' life an example of a generous life?

Into Life

List ways to practice generosity every day throughout the upcoming week.

Thought to Remember

Generosity is our response to God's grace.