

Responding to Grace

by Scott Grant

'You can't outdo God'

I heard a woman interviewed who had five children of her own and had adopted 11 others, including one with spina bifida. Why did she adopt all those kids? Her response: You can't outdo God for generosity." It was her understanding of God's generosity to her that motivated her. God's grace stirs us to follow him: to serve, to give and to obey.

Exodus 32 through 34 is largely a story of the grace of the Lord. The people rebel against him, but the Lord leads Moses to intercede for, and lead, the people (Chapter 33), and he renews his covenant with the people (Chapter 34). Despite the golden calf, the Lord still loves.

Chapters 35 through 40 concern the construction of the tabernacle. The people's response is overwhelming.

Overwhelming response (35:1-40:33)

The words "all" and "every" appear in connection with people, as in "all people" or "every person," 18 times in 35:1-36:8. Moses addresses "all the congregation of the sons of Israel" (35:1, 4, 20). Every skillful craftsman is put to work in the building of the tabernacle (35:10; 36:1, 2, 4). And every person whose heart moves him or her makes a contribution to the building of the tabernacle (35:20-29). The response of the people to the Lord is overwhelming in terms of the number of people; everyone is involved.

The response of the people is overwhelming also in the way in which they respond. They are exuberant. The people respond to the Lord in three ways: They give, they serve and they obey. The people give of their resources for the construction of the tabernacle (35:4-9, 29-29; 36:1-7), the skilled craftsmen build the tabernacle (35:10-19; 35:30-39:43) and the people obey the Lord's prescriptions regarding the tabernacle (38:21-40:33).

Everyone in Israel has the privilege of giving from the material resources with which he or she has been blessed. The Israelites give brooches, earrings, signet rings, bracelets, articles of gold, linen, goats' hair, rams' skins, seal skins, silver, bronze, acacia wood, stones, spices and oil -- all for the building of the tabernacle. The people give so much that the workmen were deluged with material and had to tell Moses to ask the people to stop giving. (When was the last time you heard some church or ministry beg you to *stop* giving?) The response is overwhelming.

Unlike the Israelites, we have no tabernacle to contribute to, *per se*. But God is still building a tabernacle of sorts, and he wants our participation. He's building his household, the church, the body of Christ (Ephesians 2:19-22; 4:12, 16). He's adding people to it, and he's equipping those who are already in it. All this takes resources -- resources that God has blessed us with in the first place, resources that we can give back to God for his work in building his household and caring for his people.

Everyone not only has the privilege of giving; everyone has the privilege of serving. In 35:10, the Lord says, "Let every skillful man among you come and make all that the Lord has commanded." This represents an expansion upon the first prescription for the tabernacle. Then, the Lord referred to only two craftsmen, Bezalel and Oholiab (31:1-11). Those two are involved this time around as well, but they are joined by a host of others. Everyone who is skilled is allowed the privilege of building the tabernacle. Bezalel, at least, is filled with the Spirit of God and therefore wise, or skillful, and inventive so as to carry out his work in building the

tabernacle. The other craftsmen are also "skillful" (36:2), which is evidently also a work of the Spirit.

The task of building today's tabernacle, the church, involves everyone. Paul says that "each one of us" has been gifted by God for service (Ephesians 4:7) and that the growth of the body of Christ is dependent on "each individual part" (Ephesians 4:16). He makes a strong case for the importance of each individual in 1 Corinthians 12. In verse 12 through 19, he says that each individual person should consider himself important, no matter how insignificant his role seems. Then in verses 20 through 26, he says that those who have the seemingly more significant roles should honor those who are "unseemly." He makes two points: You are important, and so is everyone else.

All of us, then, have important, though different, parts to play in the building of the household of God. And like the Israelites of old, we have been gifted uniquely by his Spirit and are therefore able to do that which God calls us to do for the building up of the body (Ephesians 4:16), for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7) and for the glory of God (1 Peter 4:11). And like Bezalel, we too can be "inventive" in the ways we serve, not always doing things the way they've always been done but developing creative ways to serve that are particular to our gifts, our time and our culture.

God has also put into the hearts of Bezalel and Oholiab a desire to teach other craftsmen. As we serve, it's important that we involve others, that we take others along with us, that they can not only participate but observe and learn.

The people give; the people serve. They also obey. As the construction of the tabernacle nears its completion an interesting little phrase begins to appear in the text: "... just as the Lord had commanded Moses" (39:5). The people built the tabernacle "just as the Lord had commanded Moses." This exact phrase occurs 13 times in the narrative, and other phrases close to it appear several more times. The people are exact in their obedience to the commands of the Lord, and their obedience contributes to the construction of the tabernacle.

Our giving to the cause of the Lord, our service, our obedience also contributes to the building of his household as we become eager to follow the Lord, and even extravagant in following him.

A First Century woman, most likely a prostitute, whose name we do not know, was an extravagant follower. In appreciation of Jesus, she fell at Jesus' feet, wetting them with her tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing them with her lips and anointing them with expensive perfume (Luke 7:36-50). This was an extremely expressive, humble and expensive display of the customary habits of hospitality. What caused this extravagant response? Jesus says to Simon the Pharisee in Luke 11:27: "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many have been forgiven, for she loved much ..." Her love for Jesus didn't earn her forgiveness; rather, her love followed from her forgiveness. She was extravagant because she understood that Jesus forgave her -- even her, a prostitute, the lowest of the low. It was God's grace that motivated her overwhelming response to the Lord, just as it is God's grace that motivates the Israelites' overwhelming response to the Lord.

Overwhelming grace (35:2-3, 21)

Before speaking to the people about the tabernacle, the Lord first refers to the sabbath, reminding them that it is a day of rest. What are three verses concerning the sabbath doing at the beginning of six chapters devoted exclusively to the tabernacle? For one thing, it's where the narrator left off before the people's rebellion interrupted the flow. When the Lord concluded giving his prescription for the tabernacle in chapters 25 through 31, he issued instructions regarding the sabbath (31:12-17). If the people had not rebelled against the Lord, they would have begun immediately to build the tabernacle. The narrative may have been interrupted by the people's sin, but not the Lord's desire to continue with his people. In again invoking the sabbath, a sign of the covenant between the Lord and his people, the Lord is affirming, once again, that the deal is still on. He's picking up with the people where he left off. This is grace.

The whole concept of the sabbath points to grace. The Lord ordained the sabbath so that the people could rest and recognize his work, particularly in creation and redemption (Exodus 20:10-11, Deuteronomy 5:15), so that they could "know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Exodus 31:13). Before the Lord commands work, he commands rest. The purpose of the rest is to recognize *his* work -- his work of grace. The people's work,

then, begins with God's grace and is, in fact, motivated by it.

Unlike, the Israelites, we are not bound to a specific time of rest (Colosians 2:16-17), but spirit of the sabbath is still with us. Work begins from a place of rest. We rest to recognize God's work, his amazing grace. Our response to the Lord is just that -- a response. We therefore need to take note of what he's done, and to take note, we need to rest.

The people respond to the need to build the tabernacle in an effusive way. They obviously consider it a privilege to give, serve and obey, so much so that they go overboard. How are we to understand this response? Their hearts were stirred and their spirits were moved (35:21). The words translated "heart" and "spirit" both refer to the inner person. The verbs translated "stirred" and "moved," then, refer to some kind of movement inside the people. Something has happened inside these people.

This is not something they did; this is something that happened to them. Something happened in their hearts, in their spirits. This internal movement caused their response. What caused it? The command of the Lord, as relayed by Moses, moved them, certainly (35:4). But the words of the Lord don't always move a heart. A heart has to be made ready to be moved. What made the people's hearts ready for movement? Can it be anything else but the grace of the Lord? The people sinned against the Lord by worshiping the golden calf, yet the Lord forgave the people and took them back. The grace of the Lord has worked its way into their hearts and softened them for movement. The grace of God prepared them to respond to the call to give, serve and obey.

Therefore, they didn't respond out of guilt or duty; they responded out of love -- love for the Lord, who had loved them so. They respond freely and eagerly. The New Testament also speaks of people who were touched by the grace of God and gave extravagantly (Matthew 26:7, Philippians 4:14-19).

Moses doesn't manipulate the people into giving, serving and obeying. He simply says what the Lord says. Without any arm twisting, the people respond to such an extent that they have to be told to stop giving. It's up to God to move a heart, and if that heart has been touched by the grace of God, it will move. Sometimes, it will move in extraordinary ways.

Like the Israelites, we too are loved by God. We, too, have been forgiven. God gave up his Son for us. This is grace. This grace causes movement. It moves more than mountains; it moves human hearts. Usually, it catches us by surprise. We wander through life, perhaps routinely, perhaps destructively. In the middle of the routine or at the end of our ropes, God's grace breaks through. And we see it as we never have before. We see him. We see Jesus. And we know that without him, we are lost. And we know that the only reason we are not lost is because God found us. Our hearts and spirits, our inner selves, are then ready for the call of our Lord.

Sonia, the harlot in Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," was touched by the grace of God. This is poignantly observable when she reads aloud the story of the raising of Lazarus to Raskalnikov, a murderer whom she had befriended:

Sonia opened the book and found the place. Her hands trembled and her voice would not come out. Twice she began and could not get past the first syllable. "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany," she said at last, with effort, yet all of a sudden. After the third word, her voice tightened. Her breath went, and her chest constricted. ...

"Martha therefore said to Jesus, 'Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.'" Here she paused again, shamefacedly, anticipating that her voice would tremble and break. ...

She was coming to the tale of that greatest immense miracle, and a feeling of triumph possessed her. Her voice rang metal-clear; triumph and joy sounded in it and strengthened it. Her eyes misted over and the lines blurred, but she knew what she was reading by heart. At the last verse -- "'Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him who was blind ...'" she lowered her voice. ...

"And when he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' *He who had died came forth," she read loudly and ecstatically, trembling and shivering, as though she were seeing it before her very eyes, "bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'* Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what he had done, *believed in him."*

Past this she did not and could not read. Closing the book, she rose quickly from her chair. "That is all about the resurrection of Lazarus," she whispered sternly and abruptly without moving, her eyes askance, not daring, somehow ashamed, to meet his. She went on trembling. The candle end had long been flickering out in its crooked holder, dimly illuminating in this beggarly room the murderer and the harlot, who had so strangely come together here to read the Eternal Book. Five minutes passed, or more.

The word of God told Sonia of the grace of God. In the story of Lazarus, she knew that she, a lowly prostitute, had been raised from the dead by God's grace. Her heart was stirred and her spirit was moved. And she was ready to respond to God's call on her life.

Does God's grace stir our hearts and move our spirits? If so, we have the great and awesome privilege of responding to that grace by giving to God's cause with our material resources, serving him with our spiritual gifts and obeying him with our whole being. God's grace not only activates us; it liberates us from a kind of responsiveness to God that isn't responsive at all. So often our giving, our serving and our obedience do not represent a response to God but an effort to get God to respond to us. We do things in order to get things -- whether they be material or immaterial. This approach, which was the Pharisees' specialty, turns God into a cosmic Santa Clause, who bids his people to do good for the purpose of getting good things but withholds those things if they've turned in a bad year, or a bad day. In this case, then, our giving, service and obedience are not eager and joyful but resentful and fearful. We resent all this stuff we have to do, and we fear that if we don't do it, we won't get what we want and we'll instead get hammered. This approach is what Paul calls serving "in the oldness of the letter," that is, the law (Romans 7:6). Much better to be moved by God's grace and serve "in newness of the Spirit," full of eagerness and joy.

If we are not giving, serving and obeying, it may be that we fear loss if we do so. We may fear the loss of our precious time, resources or reputation, so we hold on tightly to what we have. It is only the grace of God, as we understand it, that loosens our grip. It is when we understand how much God has given us -- and will continue to give us -- that we are free to give, serve and obey, knowing that we are losing nothing.

As together we respond to God's grace and build his church, we know that he is with us.

Overwhelming purpose (39:43, 40:34-38)

After Moses examines the work on the tabernacle, he blesses the people. The word translated "examined" is the same word that is translated "saw" in Genesis 1:10, 18, 21, 31. In Genesis 1, the Lord "saw" his creation, that it was good, and he "blessed" both the animals and humanity (Genesis 1:22, 28). In recording Moses' actions and words here, the narrator is communicating that a new creation is in view. The first creation is fallen because of man's sin and therefore not fit for the Lord to inhabit. But the Lord, in inspiring the narrator to apply creation language to the tabernacle, is saying, "Well, yes, there is one place on this earth I can live. I'll live in this little tent." The Lord chooses to dwell in this little tent because he wants to be with his people. The first creation is no longer fit for his habitation, but he makes the new creation, the tabernacle, fit because he desperately wants to be with his people. After the tabernacle is erected, the glory of the Lord fills it. God dwells with his people.

From this point on, whenever the glory cloud lifted from the tabernacle, the Israelites would break camp and follow it. Thus, from this house, the Lord leads his people. He will do so "throughout all their journeys." He dwells with them, in relationship, and he leads them all their days.

He dwells with us as well. Together, we are the tabernacle of the Lord, God's new creation. We are "the living stones" that are "being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). This tabernacle is "being fitted together" and is "growing into a holy temple in the Lord." So it's still being built. This new tabernacle, this new creation, is what God is using to redeem the first creation. Just as he used his Son, Jesus Christ, for the purpose of redemption, he uses us, the body of Christ, for the purpose of redemption. One day, the work of redemption will be complete, and all creation will perfectly fulfill its purpose: to glorify God (Revelation 21:1-22:5). And like the Israelites of old, we each have a part. Our purpose is to build God's tabernacle, his household, the body of Christ -- the church. This involves both encouraging those in the body and adding to our numbers by reaching out. How do we do it? By giving, serving and obeying out of love for our Lord, who showered his grace on us.

We are the community of God, giving, serving and obeying our Lord together. It's a family affair. These are the "sons of Israel" (35:4) and the "house of Israel" (40:38). The whole family is involved, everyone in the house. Like the "sons of Israel," the "house of Israel," we are a family -- the family of God. And the purpose of our family is to build today's tabernacle, today's church, and to do it together, with a view toward the God's even bigger purpose: the redemption of all creation. And as we do so, we can trust that the Lord will lead us, for he led the Israelites "throughout all their journeys."

This is what we all hunger for, isn't it? We all hunger for community, for relationships, for belonging. But this isn't simply community; this is community with a purpose. There is nothing more attractive than community with a purpose. We're not just a bunch of people hanging out together, as attractive as even that can be; we're the family of God commissioned by our Lord to build each other up and invite others to join us as part of God's plan to redeem all of creation. Wow. So, get involved! Give. Serve. Obey.

Journey's end

Our journey through Exodus is at an end. We have lived with Moses and the Israelites as the Lord rescued them from Egypt, carried them on eagle's wings through the wilderness, brought them to himself at Mount Sinai, gave them his word and pitched his tent among them.

Yet our journey with the Lord is far from over. He is dwelling with us. And he will lead us. He will lead us safely into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey: the new heaven and the new earth. At the end of Exodus, the narrator tells us twice that after the Lord pitched his tent among the people, he led them "throughout all their journeys." Thus he will lead us. He will lead us throughout all our journeys.

-- S. Grant, 12-13-96