THE REALITIES OF Money & Missions

GLOBAL CHALLENGES & CASE STUDIES



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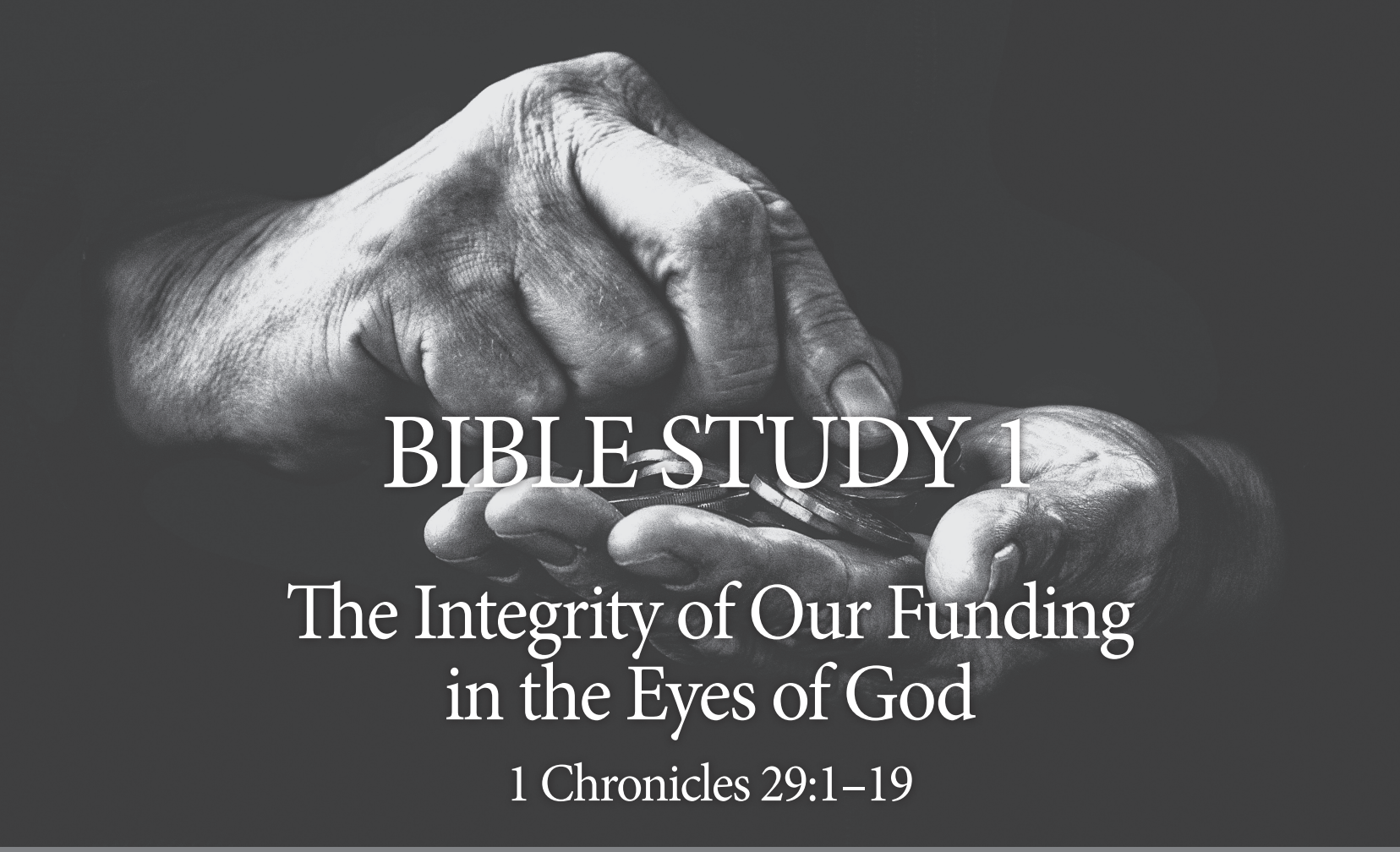
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BIBLE STUDY 1

The Integrity of Our Funding in the Eyes of God

1 Chronicles 29:1–19

by Christopher J. H. Wright

Big projects need big funding, as any church or Christian mission organization knows. And big projects for the Lord God need God's people to respond from the heart, out of gratitude for God's redemption in the past and commitment to God's mission in the future. That is what happens in the story we read in this chapter.

This is, in fact, the second great fundraising moment in the Bible. And they both have the same purpose—to build a structure that would be the focal point of God dwelling in the midst of his people. The first was Moses's appeal to the people to provide all the materials needed for the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod. 35), and this is David's appeal for all that was needed for the temple in Jerusalem, which replaced the old portable tent.

But we shouldn't think—Oh, these were just fundraisings for a building project. For who were these people, and why did God want to dwell in their midst? Answer—the people of Israel, whom God had created and called for the sake of his mission among all nations on earth, as he promised Abraham. And, as Moses pointed out to God himself, the only thing that distinguished Israel from other nations was the presence of the one true, living God in their midst (Exod. 33:16). That was what the tabernacle and the temple provided for—in a visible, tangible way. So, these were moments of providing funds in order to "enable God," as it were, to inhabit his people for the sake of their mission and God's mission in the world.

That makes it relevant to any fundraising we do for the same purpose. Why do we raise funds for our work? Not because we think God can't do anything without us. But rather because we know that God chooses to act in his world *in and through us*. We build "structures"—yes (whether physical or organizational), but not just for our own convenience, comfort, or efficiency. We do so for God to inhabit

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them, so that by *God dwelling in our midst* God's purposes are accomplished in the world.

So in this chapter, in vv. 1–9 we see David's heart for God as he holds a great national Gift Day, and in vv. 10–19 we hear David's great hymn of praise and humble prayer.

I. David's Heart for God (vv. 1-9)

Here's how David introduces the whole project in the previous chapter:

> King David rose to his feet and said: "Listen to me, my fellow Israelites, my people.
>
> I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it" (1 Chron. 28:2).

Then he goes on to say that God told him he was not the one to build it, but Solomon would. David, however, made the plans and set about raising the funds. His heart was in it—and as we'll see later, he knew very well also that God knew what was in his heart. Two things stand out in the way the event is described in the first nine verses:

The Leaders Took the Lead!

Clearly there needed to be some real generosity if the plans for a glorious temple were to be realized. But notice where that generosity started. It started with those who owned the most and controlled the most. They led by example, not just by appeal. So David sets it all in motion himself, by giving out of his own wealth. We may wonder when and how he came to be so rich (especially in view of the warnings that Deuteronomy 17:17 gives to kings!), but the point here is simply that, without boasting about it, he claims, "With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God …" (v. 2). Only then does he appeal for others to join him: "Now, who is willing to *consecrate themselves to the LORD* today?" (v.5)—implying of course that such consecration to God would include giving to God's dwelling place among them (rather as Paul says that the Macedonian believers had first given themselves to the Lord before giving to Paul [2 Cor. 8:5]).

And then, I love verse six! The leaders of the whole community joined in—including family heads, tribal officials, and military officers. And after they did a massive accounting of all that the leadership had given, we read that "the people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders" (v. 9), and presumably were inspired and motivated to emulate them. How often in our churches and agencies it's the other way round—the *leaders* rejoice to see how much the *people* are giving! But no, here the people rejoice to see how much the leaders had already given. Isn't that a worthwhile principle to follow? At my own home church of All Souls, Langham Place, London, when the church council decided on a major building project, the first thing they did was to ask for gifts and pledges from themselves—that is, all the council members—and only then, when that was known, did they go to the congregation. Lead by example. It's not rocket science, really, just motivational good sense and good practice. Are you able to state, with evidence, that every member of your church's leadership, or every member of your mission or ministry's board, is a committed donor to the work—that they have a personal "stake," as it were, in the vision and mission?

The Giving Was "Willingly" and "From the Heart"

You may have noticed how often the words "freely" and "willingly" crop up in this chapter (in English). It's actually the same word in Hebrew, and it occurs six times, in verses 5, 6, 9 (twice), 14, and 17. And to reinforce that, the Hebrew word for "heart" occurs five times, in verses 9, 17 (twice), 18, and 19. That's a total of eleven times that the narrator wants us to get the point: this was not a grudging or compulsory giving, out of pressure, or guilt, or duty. This was a communal outpouring of the heart—a free and willing response. Notice also that it was a response not just to David's appeal, but was a gift rooted in consecration to the Lord (as he himself put it, vv. 5, 9). David certainly set a good example. But in his appeal, he did not focus on himself ("Who is going to join *me?* Anybody up for a matching gift …?"). No, he immediately switches the focus to how the people should respond to the Lord. David's words and actions appear to have sparked a spiritual response among the whole people, such that they combined fresh commitment to God with generous giving to his dwelling place among them. That is surely something to pray for in our own fundraising efforts.

I just wonder if Paul had this very Scripture in mind as he described the way the Macedonian believers had given so generously in response to the grace of God:

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> And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. [2] In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. [3] For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, [4] they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. [5] And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

Much in the same way, then, this great occasion of grateful fundraising among the people of Israel was led by the example of their leaders and fed by the willingness of their own hearts. So, with that brief look at the nature of the event, let's turn to David's prayer in verses 10-19.

It comes in two parts—a hymn of praise (vv. 10-13) and a humble prayer (vv. 14-19).

II. David's Hymn of Praise (vv. 10-13)

In this first part of his prayer, David celebrates *what belongs to God* (though he is willing to share it with us), while in the second part (vv. 14-19) he reflects on *what does not belong to us* (though we can give it to God).

Verses 10–13 are in poetic form, and the structure helps to show the core message. It is in a concentric shape. The outer "circle" (vv. 10 and 13) is the framework of praise and thanksgiving. Then there is an inner "circle" (vv. 11a and 12b), where the key words are *power*, along with *greatness* and *strength*. And finally, there is the center of the prayer (vv. 11b and 12a), focusing on God's reign as king and ruler:

[10]"**Praise** be to you, LORD,
the God of our father Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.

[11] Yours, LORD, is the *greatness and the power*
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, LORD, is the **kingdom**;
you are exalted as head over all.

[12] Wealth and honor come from you;
you are the **ruler** of all things.

In your hands are *strength and power*
to exalt and give strength to all.

[13] Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and **praise** your glorious name.

So, the central point that David is celebrating is the affirmation of the Kingdom of God. Yahweh, God of Israel, is king and rules over all (vv. 11b-12a).

Now let's remember that David himself was speaking as a king. And his son Solomon was just about to be anointed as king (vv. 22-25). But all human kingdoms, power, and glory must bow to the LORD, the true king. Or as we say in the Lord's prayer, which is clearly based on these words of David, "Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory." David is acknowledging a kingship above and beyond his own—as some of the Psalms also do.

This is the proper context for all our giving and our fundraising. If God reigns over all people and all things in heaven and earth, then any giving that we do has to be seen in the light of that great cosmic truth. It is not as if God is waiting for us to give him some spare cash so he can get something done in his world. No indeed. All our giving is in one sense derivative. We give in order to participate in something that is already under God's ownership and governance. All our projects and ministry funding—all of it—flows from the Kingdom of God and is for the Kingdom of God.

And that moves us on to see, in the inner circle, two things about this God who is king—what he owns and what he gives:

What God Owns (v. 11a)—Everything!

"Everything in heaven and earth is yours." The king is the ultimate owner of his domain, namely the whole created order. We easily pass over this affirmation of Yahweh's universal ownership of the cosmos without pausing to see how staggering it is. It is made in many places. For example, "To the LORD belongs the earth and the fullness of it, the world and the dwellers on it" (Ps. 24:1, my translation), and "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, the heaven of heavens, the earth and all that is on it" (Deut. 10:14, my translation).

There are vast consequences of this, which we can't go into now. But they include at least:

i) Ecology—the earth belongs to God, not to us. So, we are accountable to God for how we treat what belongs to him. It is surely impossible to claim to love God and yet trash his property, yet many Christians don't care about the environment or actively oppose environmental action in relation to the climate crisis.

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The earth is created, sustained and redeemed by Christ.[1] We cannot claim to love God while abusing what belongs to Christ by right of creation, redemption and inheritance. We care for the earth and responsibly use its abundant resources, not according to the rationale of the secular world, but for the Lord's sake. If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says "Jesus is Lord" is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is a thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.[2]

ii) Mission—the earth belongs to Yahweh God, not to any other gods. Or in New Testament terms, Jesus of Nazareth is Lord of all the earth. These verses form the background also to the great affirmation and claim that Jesus makes at opening of the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me" (Matt. 28:18). There is not an inch of planet that does not belong to him. Therefore, wherever we go on mission in his name we are walking on his property. We go with confidence in the name of the owner, with no fear, affirming Christ's rightful lordship as owner of all.

So David begins with what God owns as king, namely, everything in heaven and earth. But then he also celebrates:

What God Gives (v. 12b)—Power and Strength

In the Kingdom of God, there is much that God intends to accomplish through his people. For Solomon, that meant building the temple. So God would provide the strength to do it, while the people would provide the resources (from what already belonged to God anyway). The lesson is that whatever the task, challenge, ministry, or mission, God provides the strength and resources to do it—in all of life—not just for "Christian" things. The God who owns all there is, freely gives to all who need.

The Apostle Paul makes the same point about God's ultimate gift—his own Son: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

So as we put these two points together:

Q. What belongs to God?

A. Everything there is, which includes everything we have.

Q. What does God give?

A. Everything we need.

God owns everything we have, and God gives everything we need.

No wonder then that David begins and ends with praise and thanksgiving. For all our giving and fundraising must be done out of gratitude to God and in the service of his Kingdom. That's why it is so appropriate that before David says anything else, before he even thanks his donors (as we might put it), he gives praise and worship and thanks to God.

III. David's Humble Prayer (vv. 14–19)

We turn now to second half of David's prayer. After his hymn of praise comes this prayer of humility and petition. The focus now shifts to the people's act of giving to God—the joyful outcome of this fundraising appeal. David says four remarkable things about it: it's a privilege; it's a paradox; it's pleasing to God; and it needs to be purposeful.

It's a Privilege! (v. 14a)

David's first response, as he thinks about what is happening on this great fundraising occasion, is one of surprise. "Who am I? Who are we?" he asks. This is the same response that we heard on David's lips when God made his covenant with him and promised him an everlasting kingdom—"Who am I, Lord God, and what is my family … ?" (1 Chron. 17:16). On that occasion, he was surprised and amazed that God would *choose* him and make such a promise. This time he is surprised and amazed that God would *accept* his gifts.

Being able to give to God and God's work is a *privilege* that ought to fill us with some wonderment. It's not a chore or a duty, not something imposed or compelled, but an incredible privilege. After all, who are we that God should include us among his donors and benefactors?! It's not a matter of kudos or credit—that we should expect recognition, getting our names on donor lists, plaques or tributes, or buildings.

1 Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:2–3.

2 "The Cape Town Commitment," Part 1.7A, Lausanne Movement, 2021, https://lausanne.org/content/ctcommitment#capetown.

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In fact, our ability and willingness to give is in itself a gift of God's grace, such that we should respond with gratitude that we are even permitted to participate in doing so. That's how the Macedonian believers thought. Paul says that "they urgently pleaded with us for *the privilege of sharing in this service* to the Lord's people" (2 Cor. 8:4).

There is a point here for the way we "message" our fundraising. It is easy to slip into a mode of congratulating people when they give—especially if they make large gifts. Don't misunderstand me—*of course* we must thank and appreciate people who take our ministry and vision to heart and give generously to the Lord's work. But somehow, we need to remind people of the enormous privilege and blessing it is to be able to do so at all, and how surprising it is that God—the God who owns and rules all things—invites us to "donate" to him!

Never lose the sense of privilege, surprise, gratitude, amazement … at being able to serve God in any way! It is all a response to God's amazing grace and generosity toward us.

It's a Paradox (vv. 14b–16)

In my country (the UK), there is a saying you might hear around Christmas time or birthdays: "What can you give to the man (or woman) who's got everything?" It doesn't necessarily mean that the person is ultrawealthy. It just means that they seem to have comfortably all they need and it's hard to know what gift would be really welcomed and appreciated. Well, this is even harder! What can you give to the God who owns everything?

In verses 14b–16 David ponders the paradox of what he has just said about God in verse 11. It was a great day, of course. People were giving lots of stuff very generously.

But, when you think about it, what were they actually giving? Only what God already owns! "We have given you only what comes from your hand … all this abundance that we have provided … all of it belongs to you" (vv. 14, 16). Well, quite.

Verse 15 may seem odd, with its reference to "foreigners and strangers." It doesn't mean, "You don't know who we are." It is taken from Leviticus 25:23 and describes Israel's relation to the land God had given them to possess. It was God's land: "The land is mine," God said—just as the whole earth belongs to God. Israel lived in the land like God's tenants. That is, they lived in it, but they did not own it. They were in the same position before God as those in their society who were "resident foreigners," that is, resident—but not owners. So, the Israelites were like tenants in a land that belonged ultimately to God.

So, says David, how can God's tenants give something to their divine landlord except what already belongs to him? It's as if you are living as a tenant in a fully furnished house or apartment that belongs to a landlord. And on your landlord's birthday, you take one of the paintings on the wall that he has provided to decorate the house for you, and give it to him as a present. What kind of gift is that? You are only giving to him what already belongs to him!

And yet, that is what God receives from us. We give to God what God already owns and has entrusted to us. That's the paradox of Christian giving. All our generosity is not only a response to God's generosity to us, it also *uses* what God has given to us in the first place.

Something of this dynamic is also present in the warning of Moses not to imagine that we generate all our own wealth for our own exclusive benefit. Don't forget the God who enabled you to do so! "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth …" (Deut. 8:17–18). So, our giving should never be a matter of pride, but a reflex of grace—the grace of living in God's earth, as tenants of the one who already owns everything we possess.

So, giving is a privilege and a paradox, and thirdly:

It's Pleasing to God (v. 17)

… when it is done with integrity. This verse, 1 Chronicles 29:17, was one of John Stott's favorites. I have heard him quote it often in his preaching and teaching: "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity."

God is pleased with honesty and integrity, that is, when our giving reflects the truth of our hearts and our motives—not the size of our bank account. And this applies as much also to the ethics of our fundraising as to its outcomes.

Contrast Ananias and Sapphira who did give, but there was a lack of integrity between the appearance

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