

## STUFF: MATERIAL THINGS

Shirley, the woman from my church who is coordinating Saturday morning help for me, is a young widow whose husband Lester died suddenly two years ago. At the time, I was still able to walk and drive, and so I joined the other church members in rallying around Shirley, offering support in her time of need. Many of us were not only amazed, but delighted to see how well she adjusted to her new situation. God's grace was sufficient for her to a degree visible enough to give hope to the rest of us.

A demanding job that involved traveling kept Shirley occupied some weekends, but when she was home, she was in church. Lester had been a very active person in the church, filling several positions as well as volunteering on projects. Shirley felt obliged to complete the commitments that her husband had made and in so doing, became herself an integral part of the church leadership. Publicly she spoke about her relationship with Lester and about his death. The tears she shed in our presence were without embarrassment and only served to endear her to us.

Being in charge of my Saturday schedule was not enough for Shirley. In addition, she put her own name on several dates this fall. Thus it happened that the two of us were talking in my kitchen recently. She mentioned that it is so important to accept change in life. How true! And she has earned the right to say that with her own fine example. Life moves on and we must move with it, she said.

Then Shirley began to talk about disposing of some of Lester's belongings. She did not do this immediately after her husband's death, but was proceeding now with a well-thought-out plan in mind. Good for her! I really believe that there is a right time to do things like this, and doing it too soon may hurt rather than heal the one left behind. The "right time," of course, varies with each of us. Shirley said that something I told her when she was helping me pack last fall for our move to Drum Hill is helping her to do this work: I said of the things I was discarding, "It's all just stuff." I don't remember saying that to her, but can imagine that I did. In any event, I have been thinking all day about stuff (material things) in the Bible and in my life. What follows is the result of my musings.

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Twice while our five children were small – in 1968 and in 1973 – our family drove from New York to Arizona and back on three week vacations. We planned to spend about five days in a house in Tucson, with a couple overnight stops with friends along the way. Unless inclement weather indicated the wisdom of eating in a restaurant and sleeping in a motel, we wanted to camp the rest of the evenings, preparing dinner and having breakfast at the campsites. It was a lot of work getting ready for those trips. Besides packing clothing for all of us, we took all sort of camping gear: several tents; sleeping bags, air mattresses and other bedding; pots and pans, dishes and utensils; lanterns; a stove and fuel; a large food chest filled with staples and a block of ice; water jugs, etc. I filled a large can with snacks for our rest stops and took games, notebooks and other things to keep the children occupied along the way. A box of emergency supplies, maps and a book listing campgrounds across our country added the finishing touches to our packing. It was a lot of stuff, and all of it seemed necessary to me. Leo managed to get it all stowed away in our van, and we were off.

Those camping trips pale when compared to the marathon forty year campout that the Israelites held in the wilderness thousands of years ago – before there were vans! The fascinating story is told in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Israelites had been told by Moses that God was going to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt and take them to a wonderful Promised Land where they would live under God's rule, not Pharaoh's. Nine miraculous plagues had convinced the Israelites and many Egyptians that God was real and powerful; perhaps they'd better start packing! The magnitude of this undertaking is hard to imagine. Scripture tells us that there were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children, and that many other people went up with them (I imagine these were the Egyptians who had come to believe in God). The total number must have been at least two million. That's a lot of people preparing to go camping together! All they needed was Pharaoh's permission to go and so far he had refused to give it.

Major differences stand out between their camping and our family's trips, beside the numbers. First, they were not going to be returning home after a while. Anything they didn't take with them, they were giving up. And they didn't know how long their trip would take – three weeks? three months? I'm sure they weren't thinking in terms of years! Besides that, none of them had ever been to this Promised Land and there were no travel brochures to read. Questions must have swirled in their heads, the answers to which might have made it easier to pack.

Finally the night of the tenth plague arrived: the death of the firstborn in all houses not protected by the blood of a lamb. This was the night their trek would begin, for Pharaoh, in his grief, would be glad to have them go. Time for the last minute packing! The lambs had been roasted and the final instructions given: *This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover.* Imagine the excitement: "We are leaving home sometime tonight." "We're moving to a wonderful new land." "No more slavery." "Thank God!"

And what stuff did the Israelites take with them? A lot, which makes me speculate on one thing: I think they must have had carts to help haul the stuff (and maybe the very young, the very old or infirm people). Here is a list of some of the things we know they took:

- Valuables from the Egyptians. *The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.*

- Large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.

- Food and clothing. *The people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing.* I'm sure they brought other utensils, cooking ware, dishes and clothing as well.

- Musical instruments. We know for certain that there were tambourines, at least, because after the crossing of the Red Sea, Scripture records that Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron and Moses, took a tambourine in her hand and sang a song of victory. All the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.

- Tents. A few weeks into the trip, the Israelites were complaining about food when God said he would rain down bread from heaven for them. Each morning they were to gather the manna, as it was called, with this instruction: *Take one measure for each person in your tent.* Later on there were assigned places where the tents were to be pitched, according to their ancestral tribes.

- Weapons. There were a number of battles during the long camping trip. Before one battle Moses said to the people, *"Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites."* Twelve thousand men comprised the army that was gathered, presumably all with weapons. A large amount of plunder was gathered from the Midianites after their defeat. More stuff!

- Craft supplies and equipment. This was the time when yarn, cloth, clothing, household articles, furniture and just about everything else was homemade. Making things requires equipment: spinning devices, looms, tools, molds, and more, as well as raw materials to work with. There were many skilled craftsmen and women among the travelers. As one who spent many years involved with crafts, I empathize with those who had to decide what stuff to bring and what to leave behind.

- Joseph's bones. Joseph died in Egypt several hundred years before the exodus. He was sure that God would keep his promise to bring the descendants of his father Israel into the Promised Land. He made his brothers swear that when the time came they would have his bones carried out of Egypt and buried in that Land. The story was passed on through the generations and somehow, in all the haste of the actual leaving, someone remembered, and the bones were packed. At the end of the book of Joshua, after the Land was settled, we read: *And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up*

*from Egypt, were buried at Shechem.* What a tribute to Joseph's faith!

– Miscellaneous. We cannot possibly know everything the people took when they left Egypt, but I think a firm picture of a couple million people with millions of animals and lots and lots of stuff helps us to understand and appreciate the story of the forty year trip from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Our all-wise God knew that the shortest route to their destination would not be the best one for the Israelites to take. If they did, they would soon be involved in war, become discouraged and return to Egypt. And so, after the Red Sea crossing, God led the people southward to begin a two year period of preparation before they would be ready to enter the Promised Land. How much they needed to learn in order to function as a nation under God rather than as captives in a foreign land! God planned to give them a constitution with many bylaws as well as a whole new way of worshiping him. This was all accomplished while the Israelites camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for more than a year.

One of the reasons we keep so much stuff is that we feel we may need it some day. Such an occasion happened at Mt. Sinai. There God revealed his plan for worship, involving construction of a large portable tent structure called the Tabernacle. It was a huge undertaking, requiring many varied supplies and much equipment, plus the services of all sorts of skilled craftsmen and women. I'm sure many people were glad they had brought with them their craft supplies and the valuables that the Egyptians had given them. Indeed they did come in handy!

The story of gathering the materials and starting the work of construction is fascinating reading. Here is a passage from Exodus 35, where Moses is requesting donations of materials and time: *Moses said to the whole Israelite community, "Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece. All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded."*

Continuing in Exodus 35 we see the wonderful response: *All who were willing and whose hearts moved them came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry 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 or bronze brought it as an offering to the Lord, and everyone 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 breastpiece. They also brought spices and olive oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense.*

While the skilled, willing workers were plying their crafts, the people continued to bring their freewill offerings morning after morning. *So all the skilled workers who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left what they were doing and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done." Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work (Exodus 36:4-7).* What a testimony to the generosity of the people!

Ever since the Israelites left Egypt, God had been directing them by appearing as a pillar of cloud that spread out over the camp during the day and a pillar of fire at night. After the Tabernacle was built, the pillar centered on this place of worship. The people were being trained in this way to keep their focus on God, which was also the first directive in their new constitution. Every time the cloud lifted and began to move, they had to pack up everything and go where the cloud went. In addition the Levite tribe now had the Tabernacle to dismantle, pack and carry to wherever the cloud settled next. The parade in the wilderness became more organized and interesting as time went on!

Finally, after two years, God had led the people to the point where they could easily enter the Promised Land. The Lord asked Moses to send a delegation of twelve men to go spy out the land before the whole assembly moved in. The twelve spent forty days surveying the land and came back with a glowing report. Ten of them added a fear: "The people who live there are large; we even saw giants there! And the large cities are well fortified. We can't attack people who are stronger than we." Joshua and Caleb, the other two, were appalled! They said, "Do not be afraid of the people of the land. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us." Despite their pleas, and those of Moses and his brother Aaron, the Israelites believed the ten and talked of returning to Egypt. God had the final word: because of their unbelief, the group would end up spending forty years wandering in the desert before getting to their destination, one year for each of the days the spies were in the land.

And so for forty years the Israelites lived a nomadic lifestyle, described succinctly in Numbers 9:17-23: *Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the Lord's order and did not set out. Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the Lord's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted they set out. Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the Lord's command they encamped, and at the Lord's command they set out. They obeyed the Lord's order, in accordance with his command through Moses.*

Later in the book of Numbers we find that Moses, at God's command, had kept a diary of the moves. Part of the record follows: *Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. At the Lord's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey. This is their journey by stages: The Israelites set out from Rameses on the fifteenth day of the first month, the day after the Passover. They marched out boldly in full view of all the Egyptians, who were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had struck down among them; for the Lord had brought judgment on their gods. The Israelites left Rameses and camped at Succoth. They left Succoth and camped at Etham, on the edge of the desert... (Numbers 33:1-6).* In all, 41 moves are mentioned in the journal, from leaving Egypt to arriving at the Jordan River across from Jericho! Think of all the packing and unpacking that entailed!

How would you like to set up camp not knowing whether you were going to stay overnight, or for a week, a month or a year? Some of God's servants, like Corrie Ten Boom, lived out of suitcases for years, not knowing where the Lord would send them next. All of us should be willing to let God guide us, trusting that the Lord always has a purpose for what he does. I learned Proverbs 3:5,6 from my Aunt Sarah when I was about twelve years old:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.*

I can truly say: that's a good way to live!

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The story of the battle of Jericho, in Joshua 6, gives an interesting perspective on material things. This was the first battle in the Promised Land. The Israelites had just spent forty years wandering and camping in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to this wonderful land that the Lord had promised them. God had given them their battle instructions and now, as the time approached when the walls of the city would fall and the Israelites would prevail, additional instructions came from Joshua, their leader: *The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the Lord.... Keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them.... All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.* God must come before possessions: that is a principle taught here. God is to be first!

The thought of a portion of anything we have belonging to God is also behind the teachings of tithing, firstfruits and the dedication of the firstborn. Better still would be to develop the mindset that everything belongs to God and is loaned to us for our use. Paul says: *Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?* (1 Corinthians 4:7).

At the end of King David's life, he was allowed by God to gather materials for the construction of a permanent temple for God, a project that his son Solomon would then undertake and complete. After David had amassed a great quantity of materials to which he had access, he then donated his personal wealth for the building of the temple. After that he issued an invitation for others to donate as well, and oh, how they gave! 1 Chronicles records: *The leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of the King's work gave willingly. After a listing of what they brought, the narrative continues: The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and whole-heartedly to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly.*

David then prayed a wonderful public prayer of thanksgiving that is recorded in 1 Chronicles 29:10-18: *Praise be to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O 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, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. 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. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. 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 ancestors. 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 Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people for ever, and keep their hearts loyal to you.*

David, a man whose heart beat for God, prayed for the condition of our hearts, that we might be willing, generous givers, loyal to God. What a thought! There is so much worth pondering – and worth living by – in that prayer, isn't there? When we consider the magnificent majesty of God, it is humbling to think that from his hand, in one way or another, comes everything we have. When we give as the people did for the building of the tabernacle and the temple we are reflecting the character of God our Father: a worthy aim!

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Ecclesiastes 3:6 says: *(There is) a time to keep and a time to throw away.* My own amplification of this verse reads as follows: There is a time to acquire, to accumulate, to keep, to use and a time to give away, to donate, to sell, to throw away. It is interesting for me to think back on how Leo and I acquired the huge amount of stuff that passed through our hands over the years. When we got married we had very little besides our personal items and our wedding gifts, including very little money. We rented a furnished apartment in Huntsville and soon began to accumulate. I remember it was there that our books first overflowed the bookcase and began to pile up on the floor by the desk, a foretaste of what was to come. Then our first baby was born and we needed all the equipment used by babies. Before our second child was born in 1959 we moved into an unfurnished house across the street from our apartment. Then we really had needs! Leo and I had fun doing what we could to furnish a house and often thanked God for the way things worked out.

Other than appliances, there were very few pieces of furniture that we bought new, not only when we were starting out, but all through our housekeeping years. We preferred shopping in used furniture and thrift stores. We also answered ads in the newspaper and bought from people who were moving or

having yard sales. We traded in our plaid stamps for furniture and occasionally brought things home from the curbside junk pickup days that our town conducted several times a year. But the most amazing thing to me was the number of people who simply gave us furniture, clothing and household items, and on the top of that list was Leo's family. When I first met my future in-laws, generosity was the quality that I found outstanding. Never had I been around such giving people! Besides his parents, Leo's sister Frances and husband Tom and his brother Joe and wife Eileen supplied us with good items that they no longer needed to furnish our house in Huntsville, including baby furniture, equipment and clothing. I decided then that I wanted to be a generous person too, when it was my time to give.

When we moved to New York in 1960 we brought every bit of our stuff with us, either in the moving van or in our station wagon, including house plants and the contents of a workshop that our landlord said we may have. In New York we found ourselves in a still larger house that swallowed up all our stuff and left room for more. A lot of things had been left in the basement and garages of that house, and again we were told we may have anything we wanted from that supply. We found several items there that became ours. Moreover, in New York we worshiped with a whole church full of generous people, and we – fairly newlywed and with young children – were often the recipients of their generosity. Here are some examples:

- One woman cleared an area in her living room and covered that portion of the floor with items that she no longer needed or wanted, such as dishes and other tableware, vases, knickknacks – all sorts of pretty and useful things. Then she invited Leo and me to her house and told us we could have anything we wanted. I'm sure others came after us to shop at this flea market with no price stickers. "Come and buy ... without money." What a wonderful idea!

- A family with five children, getting ready to move across the country, had many large toys that the children had outgrown, especially metal trucks and a car that children could sit in and pedal. The father asked Leo and me if we wanted the toys for our children and we said yes. Then he did something that amazed me: as a work project, he had his children clean, repair and PAINT the toys before presenting them to our family! What a wise father!

- A family homestead was being sold and the remaining family members were moving away to much smaller quarters. They emptied the pieces of furniture they would not be taking and asked us to take what we wanted. I remember taking a kitchen cabinet, at least two large bookcases (plus some books) and a custom-made buffet from their house. Our roomy station wagon came in handy in those days!

The human digestive system is a good analogy for many things in life. For it to work well, there must be regular intake of food, then processing. Some of the food is retained to nourish our bodies and the rest is eliminated. If any one of these four steps becomes defective or is neglected, our bodies suffer; they may even die. So it is with the stuff (the material things) we take into our lives. Along with taking in, we have to process, to think about our possessions. Do all these things we have serve as nourishment for our families or should some of it be eliminated? Houses, rooms, garages, storage spaces, and drawers, as well as bodies, can become constipated, a serious condition. We know how to handle physical constipation. The glut of stuff, the constant acquisition without elimination, saps a person's energy and leads to an inertia that seems like death. Such a person needs help and will accept it, if wise. It's not easy to let others sort through your things and eliminate the excess, but sometimes that is the only way out of the emergency.

There were certain things that I allowed to pass through my life rather than remain. Less than a year after Paul, our fifth child, was born, I had a hysterectomy. Knowing I would never be pregnant again, I gave away my maternity clothes to friends immediately. Then as Paul outgrew baby clothing and equipment, I gave that away too. All I kept were a few things that guests might need and that grandchildren eventually used: a booster seat and some special toys, books, and games, for example.

During their teenage years, as we continued to acquire, we also kept and stored some things that we thought our children might be able to use in their own homes some day. None of them lived with us after the age of twenty; two got married at that age and the others got their own apartments. We were glad when we had furniture or other items to give them for their homes.

When I was about to get married, I went through the attic spaces of my parents' house where I had stored my childhood stuff and processed my belongings, disposing of most of them. I didn't think it fair to take up room in their house when I wouldn't be living there anymore. Later on I realized the emotional value of what I did; it was a way of putting childish ways behind me as I became mature. I expected the same of our children. Within a few years of their leaving, our sons and daughters had removed their possessions from our house. Did that unclutter our home? Somewhat, but truthfully, it was still very "constipated."

Early in the 1990's I began to attack the accumulated clutter. First I got some large sturdy plastic trash bags and went into every room, filling them with useable things that I felt we could do without. I donated about ten bags of stuff to our local thrift store. What a good feeling! From time to time I would take similar bags, go into the most densely packed areas of our house and see what could be thrown away or recycled. How I loved taking dozens of bags and armloads of other things out of the house for disposal! The trash pickup days that the Town of Yorktown scheduled for us several times a year provided a tremendous incentive for cleaning out the house. I made it a project to have something at the curb every time; the bigger the pile, the better I felt. How happy I was when people came along and took items from our curbside piles! That is a good kind of recycling.

Our moving from our house in Yorktown Heights to an apartment in Drum Hill, Peekskill prompted the biggest disposal of goods that we had ever experienced. Fortunately we were able to furnish the apartment before the house was sold. Everything else, then, became disposable. At the same time I had to confront my declining abilities. Never again would I be using my huge store of craft supplies, for example; all of it was sent to a missionary in Ukraine. We gave our children what they wanted, sold some items, gave things to others, and put a lot at the curbside where much of it was taken. George and Janet also stored boxes of stuff for us to process later.

I said that I believe there is a time for everything, including a time to keep. There were two things I was not ready to give up in the move: my electronic piano and my store of posters, maps and illustrations that I had used in teaching Bible seminars and classes. All went to Drum Hill with me. Janet put the teaching materials in a large cloth bag which we stored between my files and the table that held my printer. Perhaps six months later I was ready to give up the piano; my keyboard was sufficient for me. At the same time MaryBeth's family had just reached the stage where the piano would really be welcomed. Her seven year old son John had his first piano lesson the week the instrument arrived in Hamilton, MA! Now that I am in Sky View, George has my keyboard – and I am glad. All in its time ...

In the summer of 2004 MaryBeth went under my printer table to get supplies and found that the carpet was wet and the walls were moldy. The cloth bag was in the same condition, and inside all my teaching materials were ruined. Obviously the right time had come again. I told MaryBeth to throw it all away. In the end, it was just stuff! The maintenance men repaired the leak in the air conditioning unit in the apartment above us, the source of the problem, restored our walls to a mold-free condition, and my life went on, less encumbered than it had been before.

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Last week (on May 11, 2006) I attended the monthly worship service conducted here at Sky View by the rector of a local Episcopal church. His sermons are always excellent, coming from a heart of faith. Not only did my spirit respond to what he was saying last week, but I also recognized that his thoughts would be a good addition to this essay about stuff (material possessions) on which I was currently working. The result once again was an overwhelming sense that God knows exactly what I am doing and is directing my steps along the way. Certainly God knows how to bring people together for his purposes! Here is Acts 4:23-37, the Scripture the rector read and on which he based his sermon:

*On their release [from interrogation by the Sanhedrin, the ruling council], Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the*

*mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.*

The rector said that believers often look at the second paragraph only, as though it contains an ideal pattern that we should strive to emulate, while skipping over the instruction contained in the first paragraph. Looking at the entire passage, we see Peter and John as representative of the early members of the church. The whole group consisted of people who were full of faith, excited about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and on a mission to spread the word of God to all who would listen. They enjoyed each other's company. Together, they would report on their activities and then pray. They knew the Scriptures and had a lofty view of God. Not requesting protection, they asked that the Lord would work through them and that they would speak their message boldly. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit; unity, love and grace characterized the group. No wonder they shared their material goods with each other! That was the natural outflowing of inward lives solidly connected with God.

I am still meditating on that wonderful message. There is no way to exhaust the word of God!

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My original notes from a year ago listed more Bible stories and other ideas that I thought I might develop for this essay. Now that I see how long this has become, (although, wouldn't you expect an essay with the title "Stuff: Material Things" to be long?) I have decided just to mention them instead. Then you decide if you want to prolong the subject with research or leave it as it is.

– In 1 Samuel 30 there is a story that contains two words I consider to be synonymous with "stuff": plunder and supplies. Before he was king, David and 400 of his followers went on a rescue raid that resulted in much plunder, while 200 others stayed behind guarding the supplies. David said the plunder was to be divided equally among all 600 men. Guarding the stuff was important.

– 2 Chronicles 20 tells one of my favorite thanksgiving stories, actually surrounding a story of war. Three armies were coming to fight Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Following God's instructions, when Judah's army arrived at the battle ground, they found all three attacking armies dead! All Jehoshaphat's soldiers had to do was collect the plunder. What a job that was! There was so much stuff! Verses 24-26 gives the details, including what they gathered: equipment, clothing and articles of value.

– When Jesus fed thousands with small amounts of food on at least two occasions, he asked his disciples to gather the leftovers into baskets and count them. Later he asked if they remembered how many baskets they had filled. He also told a story of a foolish man whose barns were overflowing with stuff. Instead of sharing his excess with others, the man decided to build a new barn. But that night he died! Now what would happen to his things?

– When Jesus sent out seventy-two workers on an extensive preaching tour (Luke 10) he told them to travel lightly ("Do not take a purse or bag or sandals"). This reminds me of Hebrews 12:1:



*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. "Everything that hinders" can be another synonym for stuff. If we could grasp the picture of ourselves as believers engaged in a race planned by God for us, it might help us dispose of our stuff.*

Are you familiar with the Adam Raccoon books written and illustrated by Glen Keane? They are parables in which a lion, King Aren, interacts with Adam in all sorts of interesting ways. I used the books often during my Bible teaching years. In one of them Adam is getting ready to go hiking with King Aren. I have given away my books now, but in my mind I can still see one of the funniest pictures I have ever seen: Adam Raccoon coming out of his house ready for the hike, his arms overloaded with all the stuff he thought he absolutely had to bring with him. Just as King Aren warned, those things caused problems for Adam. Finally they were all lost except a little red ball. Even that was too much, for it got Adam deep into Lost Woods. After his rescue by the lion, Adam realized that as long as he was with King Aren he had everything he needed. And Adam was happy. Reminds me of a line from an old hymn I learned in childhood: "I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today." Amen!

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The final word on the subject of material things for this essay comes from Jesus: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).* There is a time and place for storing up things. The time is now and the place is Heaven. I'd rather have my heart in Heaven than in a secret hiding place, a safe deposit box or a storage locker on earth; wouldn't you?

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This essay was started in April, 2005 at Drum Hill where it served as sermon material for the Friday night worship services. It was completed at Sky View: a transitional essay.

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