

Self Denial Appeal
**A Gift From
The Heart**



Devotional
By Lt-Colonel Christine Rees



Since you excel
in so many ways...
I want you to excel
also in this gracious
act of giving.

2 Corinthians 8:7 (NLT)

EPENEZERI GEN. STORE



A Gift From The Heart

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.

2 Corinthians 8:1-14 (NRSV)

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave

themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but

even to desire to do something—¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

Reflection

'A gift from the heart' is a phrase that resonates in our personal experience on more than one level. We may have received such a gift which immediately comes to mind—perhaps from the hands of a child who has lovingly and joyfully made something special—'This is for you!'. Perhaps the gift was from a loved one, friend or colleague—a thoughtfully chosen gift to delight, acknowledge, or demonstrate love and the value of a relationship. We may also remember giving a special gift from the heart. The greatest value of the gift, we know, is often in what it means, and what will be held in the heart.

'A gift from the heart' is the theme for Self Denial 2023. The idea centres in the Scripture we have read, where Paul uses his knowledge of and love for the Corinthian believers, and all of his considerable persuasive powers, in a heartfelt appeal. He wants them to demonstrate their love in the ministry of giving, fulfilling a commitment made with enthusiasm some time before, to willingly and generously respond from their hearts. Encouraged by Titus' good report of the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 7:13b), Paul feels confident that the time is right for some urging and tactful advice.

The 'ministry to the saints' (8:4) was a matter close to Paul's heart because of his commitment to 'remember the poor,' as we read in Galatians 2:8–10 (NRSV). He assures the Corinthians that every willingly offered gift was acceptable and worthy in the Lord's eyes (8:12).

This Scripture points us to the spirit of Christian giving, and the blessing lives and communities experience when giving and sharing is genuinely others-focussed. When we are stirred by the needs we see at home or abroad, and respond compassionately and practically,

that giving has value beyond the size or amount of the gift itself. Our experience of God's grace stirs us to share the blessing of our means, to contribute meaningfully and prayerfully. In this way, our giving is a natural, considered, joyful expression of love for God.

As Jesus first loved us, so we love him in return—and his people, and the work of his kingdom.

In the coming weeks of the Self Denial Appeal video series, we learn of Salvation Army territories where mission needs are great and resources scarce; but where personnel are gifted, invested and empowered by the gracious Spirit of God. Let us ask God to guide us as we learn, so that, reflecting the purpose of the theme, we can 'excel also in this generous undertaking' (8:7).

After re-reading the Scripture passage, take a little time to consider and respond to the questions below.

- **Revelation:** What do these Scriptures teach?
- **Conviction:** How is my heart stirred and my understanding enlarged? How is God leading my thoughts and renewing my mind?

- **Action:** What steps will I take to respond to his word?

Prayer

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire to work and speak and think for thee; still let me guard the holy fire, and still stir up thy gift in me (Charles Wesley, *O Thou Who Camest from Above*, The Salvation Army Songbook, No. 288, verse 3).

Generous Grace

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (NLT)

¹Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. ²They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. ³For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. ⁴They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. ⁵They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do.

⁶So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. ⁷Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. ⁸I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches. ⁹You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

2 Corinthians 9:1-15 (NLT)

Thank God for this gift too wonderful for words!

Reflection

Grace is a steadily woven theme through Paul's letters, used in these

Corinthian passages with intent to sharpen focus and draw from his readers a wholehearted response.

'I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia' (8:1). Yes, the Corinthian believers knew the saving grace of God and the gifts of his grace, but Paul wants them to specifically understand the Macedonian situation, that, though 'tested by many troubles, and they are very poor ... they are also filled with abundant joy which has overflowed in rich generosity' (8:2).

More inspiring than the Macedonians' extraordinarily generous gift was their step 'to give themselves to the Lord, and to us' (8:5). They recognised God's goodness and grace first, then opened their hearts to generosity. For the Corinthians, time had passed and other priorities, it seems, had diluted their enthusiasm for the offering they had been so keen to participate in earlier (8:10).

The Macedonians, in contrast, simply wanted to have the privilege of giving (8:4), even insisting upon it when, as J.B. Phillips puts it, 'they were down to their last penny!'



What a model for the Corinthians and for us! How easily our lives, our comfort and culture can dampen our sensitivity to others' needs, or perhaps overwhelm us with a sense of our inadequacy to meet the need of the moment.

We have become acutely aware in recent times of the scope of life's challenges for many in our communities, our congregations, and all around the world. We have seen outpourings of tremendous generosity, as people respond to the plight of others. Still, as time passes, we hear of more discomfiting news and can become desensitised or overloaded by the exposure to sad and confronting circumstances.

For us, then, how important it is to keep our focus on Jesus and his example! We are called to share God's kindness, hope and healing with the world, remembering the 'least of these' (Matthew 25:40). As the words of The Salvation Army Songbook, number 935 say, 'There are people hurting in the world out there. They need you, they need me, they need Christ'. It's timely, then, to consider the Macedonians' example, so that what we give of ourselves, and in Self Denial, is stimulated by a renewed sense of privilege and blessing.

Paul draws his Corinthian friends' attention to the Lord Jesus, and the cross. He prompts their memory of Jesus' poverty for their sakes, and the wealth of salvation and all its blessings freely lavished upon them. It's a powerful appeal, the reference to God's gift to the world—the "gift too wonderful for words!" (9:15).

Lent and Easter give us occasion to reflect on the Cross and the saving grace of Jesus. Can we also follow the Macedonian example to renew our dedication, and be ready to give joyfully and generously?

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Prayer

Lord, move my heart as I reflect upon your grace, and stir in me the desire to be, to do and to give, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Abundant Joy

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Give us this day our daily bread.

2 Corinthians 8:1-2 (NRSV)

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia;² for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

John 15:7-11 (NRSV)

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my

love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Reflection

'Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart ... because the King is in residence there.' They're the words of a chorus some of us will know. It creates a mental image, and illustrates the obvious nature of the joy of Jesus in our hearts (John 15:11), distinguishable from the joys of human life and experience. As a fruit of the Spirit, joy is for sharing. J.I. Packer has said: 'Joy is like jam, you know; it sticks to you as you try to spread it!' As the chorus also says: 'Let the whole world know!'

In the Scripture from 2 Corinthians, we are alerted to something quite wonderful. Three elements contribute to the expression of the Macedonians' generosity. Two are painful matters—'a severe ordeal



of affliction', and 'their extreme poverty' (8:2). Between these two dark experiences there is the shining gem of 'their abundant joy!' God's grace had supplied their need, keeping them faithful in their sufferings, and fulfilling Jesus' promise of his joy to be complete in them—to the point of abundant overflow. Have you ever thought of joy as a generator of generosity?

Troubles and joy within them are realities described in Scripture, well known to Paul and often mentioned in his letters (for example, 2 Corinthians 6:10, 7:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:6). He knew, as Jesus had taught, that the life of faith would never be free from trials and sorrows. We reflect here that grace with joy in suffering, far from being a sign of God's absence, is instead a sure sign of his presence and power. We see this principle at work in mission fields where circumstances are hard, and where resources are in short supply, but where miracles of faith and provision bring joy and transformation.

Some time ago, while exploring the Port Arthur penal settlement in Tasmania, Australia, I went into the

small church in the precinct, still being used for worship. On a wall I noticed a memorial plaque to a man who had been the caretaker and attendant for services and activities for many years. The plaque said of him: 'Duty was a pleasure faithfully performed.' I have never forgotten the simplicity of the statement and its testimony to the spirit of a man whose willing service, it was implied, was a gift infused with joy, a pleasure that was the notable hallmark of his life.

A gift from a joy-filled heart can only be a pleasure and privilege to offer to God. In our Salvation Army Songbook we find these words, 'Graces that the Lord has given; O that they may shine in me' (*Who the Child of God Shall Sever*, No. 694, verse 3).

After re-reading the Scripture passage, take a little time to consider and respond to the questions below.

- **Revelation:** What do these Scriptures teach?
- **Conviction:** How is my heart stirred and my understanding enlarged? How is God leading my thoughts and renewing my mind?

- **Action:** What steps will I take to respond to his word?

Prayer

I thank you, dear Lord. 'You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy' (Psalm 16:11). May my life and my faith be recharged with your joy, and my giving an expression of my thanksgiving and wonder at your gift of grace to me. Amen.

Gifts To Share

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

2 Corinthians 8:7-9 (NLT)

⁷Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. ⁸I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches. ⁹You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

Romans 12:6-16 (NLT)

⁶In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you

the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. ⁷If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

⁹Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other. ¹¹Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. ¹²Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. ¹³When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who

weep.¹⁶Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

Reflection

In Paul's letters to the early churches, he lists gifts of the Holy Spirit, explaining their source and purpose. We find them in Romans 12:4–8, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4:7–16. The Apostle Peter also says, 'God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well so that God's generosity can flow through you...' (1 Peter 4:10–11, NLT).

As we share Christian life and fellowship with others, how thankful to God we are for the variety of spiritual gifts we see in action around us. It's encouraging to partner with others where we know a range of God's gifts enable ministries of compassion, grace and excellence. We praise God equally for natural abilities and well-developed skills, professional expertise, creative energy, innovative and intuitive responsiveness—so much generously offered to God in ministry and mission at home and far afield.

In the passage from Romans 12, Paul gives a class in 'what to do with



your gift, and how to do it! There is spirited exhortation here, conveying a message as relevant to us as in any time, about the importance of working together in a fellowship marked by harmony, respect for one another's gifts, patience, enthusiasm and love. 'Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other,' he says in verse 10. Love, the greatest gift, is at the heart of all the 'doing' and 'being' God calls us to.

Paul elsewhere uses the image of the body working together as an integrated whole, highlighting the importance of every part, every gift at work in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:3-16). 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it,' we read in 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV). Every part is valuable to the whole; every gift is good!

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10 (NIV), 'For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' God's creative purpose for all of us, and each of us, is an awesome truth we affirm. His is the power at work within his people to do 'immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3:20, NIV).

As we hear about what God is doing in overseas territories, and how necessary is our support of their mission and ministries, we may sense the Holy Spirit moving us to become involved in something new or different. It may be a 'stirring up' of his gift within us in a fresh and vital way. It may well be time to say 'Yes!' to his prompting, so that the Self Denial gift we bring will truly be from the heart.

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- **Action:** What steps will I take to respond to his word?

Prayer

Lord God, I thank you for the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of your people around me, and in the worldwide Army. As I pray for them now, I pray that you help me as I prepare my heart and my gift. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Warm Hearts & Willing Hands

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

2 Corinthians 8:16-24 (NLT)

¹⁶But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming of the good news, ¹⁹and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering

this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. ²⁰We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, ²¹for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others. ²²And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴Therefore, openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.



Reflection

There are people who come into our lives who are a gift from God to us in helping and encouraging us, complementing our gifts and skills, and being part of the joys and struggles of life, work and ministry. Such a person was Titus to Paul in his ministry to the Gentiles. In this instance, in the matter of getting the collection in Corinth finished and on its way to Jerusalem as promised.

Titus, with the two trusted godly men Paul commended for their partnership in the endeavour, was keen to be involved in this kind of ministry—happy to share faith, preach the gospel, and facilitate the practical matters in a right and proper way. We read how grace flowed through the warm hearts and the willing hands of these coworkers. Their willingness and spiritual strength were helpful to Paul in his ministry, and to the believers in Corinth who responded positively to their visit and the reason for it.

In God's plan to spark the Corinthians' desire to excel in giving, Titus was the man for the task. Eagerness to be involved and willingness to share from the heart was the crux of the

matter in the church at Corinth. Titus' buoyant spirit and gracious leadership ensured the outcome Paul anticipated. God calls, and equips with his gifts, people just like Titus —perceptive, encouraging, strong, godly servant—leaders who see the best in others and harness it for fruitful ministry.

Luke, in his second picture of the Spirit-filled Jerusalem church (Acts 4:32–37), describes how 'all the believers' were united in spirit, sharing their possessions readily so that there wasn't a needy person among them. No names are given except Barnabas', but Luke's picture reveals a close-knit, well-organised group, living harmoniously, boldly giving testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, and 'great grace was upon them all' (4:33). By the powerful working of God's grace in them, 'all the believers' were able to stand together in the new community of faith, supporting one another in the new life of grace which they had all just begun.

The story of Titus and his friends, with the first church example of generous community life, stirs and confirms in us the desire to give our best, in every way we can. Many of God's gifts are generously given

in some measure to all Christians, and in special measure to some. That means that every one of us can share in the joy of giving our full measure —all kinds, sizes and shapes of gifts contributing to the flow of grace and blessing far and wide.

As we take our part in serving and giving, let it be a blessing to our spirits that we are partners and coworkers with all of God's people in the ministry of the gospel.

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- **Action:** What steps will I take to respond to his word?

Prayer

Lord, I thank you for the inspiration and example of people serving with grace and sacrifice in their Salvation Army ministries today, all around the world. May their work and witness prosper, and may great grace be upon them. Amen.

A Plentiful Harvest

Pause and pray

Coming into God's presence, I quieten my body and mind. I open my heart to God, and pray: Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen!

Psalm 67 (NRSV)

¹May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, ²that your way may be known upon Earth, your saving power among all nations. ³Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. ⁴Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon Earth. ⁵Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. ⁶The Earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. ⁷May God

continue to bless us; let all the ends of the Earth revere him.

Reflection

Our monetary gifts from the heart are presented on this 2023 Self Denial Altar Service Sunday with thanksgiving and a prayer for God's blessing to be upon them as they are gathered in—in something like a harvest—then thoughtfully and wisely distributed in the global mission of Salvation Army service. The 'harvest' will be the means of meeting many and varied needs through the resources it makes available.

Our thoughts reach out to God in prayer and praise as we share in this act of worship, the ministry of giving: 'That your way may be known upon Earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the

peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you ... The Earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us' (Psalm 67:2, 3, 6). Here is the 'harvest' note again, which we may see as a metaphor for the long-distance view of the whole world being blessed by the Gospel, all people receiving the Good News, giving worship and glory to God.

Scriptures we have reflected on in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, assure us that just like the Macedonian believers whose giving was a fruit of their effervescent joy, we too, sharing the same privilege in the same Spirit, will be enriched by the abundant flow of provision reaching other places, other people and other fruitful mission fields.

Jesus said: 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matthew 9:37-38, NIV). Wrapped around our gifts from the heart is the faith that God will powerfully multiply the blessing of them, that his love may be known on the Earth, and his saving power among the peoples of all nations.

Our knowledge of the world and its sorrows, struggles and



catastrophes in recent times is enough for us to appreciate the need for our heartfelt response. We may be among those who have encountered difficulties in our own circumstances, with changes having to be made and adjusted to. Paul's practical spiritual insight encourages us all in this: that the Lord who knows our hearts, accepts and blesses all that we give willingly and thankfully, joyfully and generously.

In our Self Denial giving we are united with many Salvationists and friends around the world.

Together we express our confidence in the power of the Gospel to bring salvation to the world, and our belief that everyone should have the opportunity to receive it.

Together we acknowledge that grace-filled Christian community is central to God's purpose of bringing the light and life of Jesus to the world.

Together we affirm our belief that every person bears God's image, and we demonstrate our commitment to caring for the needy and the disadvantaged through the worldwide mission of The Salvation Army.

May the Lord's abundant joy and great grace be the inspiration and blessing of this day!

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Prayer

'All that I am, all I can be, all that I have, all that is me accept and use, Lord, as you would choose, Lord, right now—today. Take every passion, every skill, take all my dreams and bend them to your will. My all I give, Lord, for you I'll live, Lord, come what may.'

(All That I Am, William Himes, The Salvation Army Songbook, No. 568)

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