

**'I will not offer ... to the Lord ... that which costs me nothing', 2 Sam. 24. 24.  
Bethesda Coffee Morning. 9 February 2011.**

At the end of last week, I received an email from a friend in America which included a riddle. The riddle ran ...

'What is greater than God and more evil than the devil? The poor have it, and the rich need it. And if you eat it, you'll die?' Well, you of all people shouldn't have any problem in solving that, because, as you well know, we are currently in the middle of a short series which focuses on the very word which supplies the answer to my friend's riddle. Yes, the answer is 'nothing'. For indeed 'nothing' is greater than God ... 'nothing' is more evil than the devil ... the poor have 'nothing' ... the rich need 'nothing' ... and if you eat 'nothing', you'll die.

Well, this morning our Bible text comes from the last chapter of the Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament. 'I will not offer ... to the Lord ... that which costs me nothing'.

In brief, King David and the people of Israel had sinned against God, and, as a result, God had visited the nation with a severe pestilence or plague. But, in His mercy, God had suspended the final wave of His judgement and told David to build an altar in the threshing-floor of a man whose name was Araunah, and there to offer certain animal sacrifices to appease His (God's) wrath. And animal sacrifices there had to be, for, as God Himself had made clear long before, 'without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness'. How thankful we should be that, according to the New Testament, in the Lord Jesus, we who believe 'have our redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins'.

Let me read you what the Bible says happened next to David.

*So David went ... as the Lord commanded. And when Araunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming ... And Araunah said, 'Why has my lord the king come to his servant?' And David said, 'To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be restrained from the people'. Then Araunah said to David, 'Let my lord the king take and offer up that which seems good to him. See, here are the oxen for the burnt offering and the threshing sledges and the yokes of the oxen for the wood. All these ... Araunah gives to the king' ... But the king said to Araunah, 'No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price. I will not offer to the Lord my God that which costs me nothing'.*

*So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built an altar there to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord was entreated for the land, and the plague was restrained from Israel.*

David, you note then, rejected Araunah's generous offer and insisted on paying the full price – insisted on offering to God from his own possessions and not from those which belonged to another – albeit to one of his own subjects.

And in reality, that which costs nothing is worth nothing. And as many Christians have found, in the service of God, the expenditure of thought, time and strength is required along with that of money and possessions.

In times of persecution their faith in God and faithfulness to God have cost many their property, their liberty and/or their lives. And they have borne this cost bravely and gladly. Shame on me that so often I grudge even the smallest sacrifice for the Lord Jesus – that so often I am tempted to see how little I can get away with giving, rather than how much I can give.

As most, if not all, of you know, I spent most of last month in India – arriving home late last Friday evening. Most of my time in India was spent in remote villages around the town of Ongole in the state of Andhra Pradesh, although I did manage to fit in a short visit to a place called Kollegal in the state of Karnataka. There – in Kollegal – I stayed on a Christian compound which houses a home for about 50 girls from a Hindu background, whose families are either too poor to feed them, or who have cast them out just because they are girls. This compound also houses two schools – one primary and one secondary – for very poor children – both boys and girls.

Both at Kollegal and in the area around Ongole I met many Christians who, unlike me, really do know what it is to make sacrifices in their service for the Lord.

At Kollegal, because of the abject poverty around, the charge made for each child to attend school is just one rupee a day ... there are 74 rupees in a single pound of our money! As a result, the Board of Trustees can afford to pay their teachers – each of whom is highly qualified – less than one quarter of what these men and ladies would be paid for teaching at a Government school. So why do these qualified Christian teachers devote their lives to working in the Christian schools at Kollegal? Ask King David! These fine men and women – including the two headmistresses – do not offer to God what costs them nothing. They do it for the good of others and because they love the Lord Jesus.

And I can tell you too that I felt increasingly small as I met many men in the Ongole area who have given up everything to work for the Lord as full-time evangelists or elders – and I mean everything.

This relatively young man and his family live in a village called Markapur. Raj Kumar is an evangelist. He and his wife went to Markapur in 2001, along with 6 other believers, to commence an assembly of Christians there. There are now over 90 members in that church. And Raj has also established three other churches in villages about 25 kilometres away – to which he travels regularly on an old bike.

All the messages I gave in the Ongole area were translated into Telugu, the local Indian language. I asked the man who was translating for me (Isaac) how Raj had gone about his work. Isaac told me that, at first, Raj and his wife had simply lived in their new community, getting to know people. Raj visited every home in their village, offering to do anything he could to help the poor people who lived there. If anybody had a problem of any kind, they knew where to come! Isaac told me that, quite early on, Raj gave away the only decent clothes he had to those who were poorer than himself and who had no proper clothing to speak of!

He and his young wife worked in the fields around to provide for their needs and yet regularly invited those around to join them for their simple meals. After a time Raj began to tell his neighbours about the love and the cross of Jesus. He arranged for another evangelist to come and speak in his home. And, as a result no doubt of what they had seen lived out by this young couple, several became Christians – and things spread from there.

This is a picture of several evangelists I spent some time with in a place called Konanki. The man on our right in the front row is a very well educated man with a family. He speaks English quite well. A few years ago, this man gave up his job ... as the Principal of large college ... to serve the Lord full-time. The only support I could discover which he receives is 100 rupees a month, which my translator together with a few employed Christians pass on to him and to 61 other full-time Christian workers. That is about £1.30 a month!

And the same kind of story was multiplied in each of the areas I was privileged to visit. I had gone, on invitation, to teach such men – and many other believers – from God's word. But I tell you, the men I met taught me ... they taught me what true Christian service and sacrifice is all about. For here were men who most certainly were not, in the words of our Bible text for this morning, offering to God that which cost them nothing. In one afternoon session I spent with a group of such men, I was asked what impression I had formed of them and their work. With tears in my eyes ... and from my heart ... I answered, 'That you men are rich, and I am poor'. I had learned from them what King David meant when he said, 'I will not offer ... to the Lord ... that which costs me nothing'.