

**Buzz King**

[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)

<https://BuzzKing.com>

**Acts 20:27–35, ESV**

*<sup>28</sup>“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup>I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup>and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup>Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup>And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup>I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup>You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup>In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”*

**A doll stuffed with rice.**

My father’s mother raised my dad on her own. Her husband, my father’s father, served in the trenches in World War I, I believe for two years. He was a bugler. It was his job to use his bugle to send out command signals during combat. That meant that he had to stand up straight, and he repeatedly put himself in the line of fire. He saw hundreds, perhaps thousands, of his buddies get slaughtered, but over and over and over, he made it back without getting shot or hit by a shell. He was finally hit with mustard gas, and so he was sent home. When he got home,

though, he was in terrible mental shape. My father was two years old. His dad ran off, abandoning his family. He drifted in and out of my father's life, lived on the street in Quebec, and was finally killed on the street when I was a boy. So, my grandmother was a single mom. When she was older and had a pacemaker implanted in her chest, she came to live with my parents. So, I got to know her. She was a soft-spoken woman, very small, and she spoke halting English. She loved talking to me. When I was in grad school, getting a Ph.D. in Computer Science, she didn't understand that I wasn't studying to be a medical doctor. She kept asking me medical questions.

One day, I was in my parent's living room, working on some coursework. My grandmother came into the room, holding something. She sat down next to me and said that she didn't mean to interrupt my work, but could she talk to me for a bit. I said fine, there was no emergency on the assignment. It was something tedious and not very interesting. Then I noticed that she was holding something. It was a very old doll, with hair that was partly missing, and a hole in one of the knees. It was made of tan leather, with a ceramic head and neck. It's arms and legs were floppy, with no joints, and it was stuffed with rice. It was stained and dirty. She told me that it was named Marcia. She said that she had had it since she was a very little girl and that it was the only thing she still had

from her childhood. My grandmother told me about how when she was a girl, she would carry Marcia everywhere, that she ate with it, slept with it, took it to school, talked to it, danced with it, and drank milk with it. Then she handed it to me and asked me if I would please take it, that she wanted me to have it. I said that I didn't want to take the only thing she still had from her childhood. Then she said that I was like her husband before he went crazy, that I reminded her of him, and that I had always been very, very nice to her. She said it would mean everything if I would take Marcia. She apologized for not having anything nicer to give me and that she knew you don't give a man a doll, but could I please take it? Please. It was the only thing she could give me, she said.

Our passage today ends with a line that is extremely famous. It's from the Book of Acts, the narrative written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. It tells the story first of Peter and the Apostles spreading the faith to Jews after Jesus has been crucified, and then tells the story of Paul and others spreading the faith much farther, to Gentile people all the way from Jerusalem to what is now Italy. Our passage is from Chapter 20. This is near the end of the story of Paul's journeys. In Chapter 20, Paul travels from the wealthy port city of Ephesus, in modern Turkey, to Macedonia. Then he travels through Macedonia and Greece, and Asia Minor (again, modern Turkey), and ends up back near Ephesus, in a city

called Miletus. He sends a messenger to get the church leaders of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. These elders were among the very first people that Paul converted in his missionary work, and he has returned to give a sort of farewell speech. He offers his life as an example that these elders should follow. Paul declares his absolute dedication to the task of spreading the faith. Then he relinquishes his role as their leader and as their teacher. He tells them to protect the church from wolves. Here is an edited version of our quote: <sup>28</sup> *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”*

Paul tells these people who will inherit the job of spreading the Gospel that they will have to work hard, that they will have to be alert. They must help the weak. And most of all, they must be generous. They are to give and not receive. They are not to see themselves as important or powerful or better than other

people. That phrase has become one of the most frequently quoted passages of the Bible: *It is more blessed to give than to receive*. That is, of course, what my grandmother was doing. Paul was near the end of his mission trips. My grandmother was near the end of her life. She was very unsophisticated about medical things, but she knew she would not live much longer. She knew that she couldn't take her doll with her, that it was time to hand it off. It was time for her to teach her grandson about generosity.

I was very reluctant to take the doll. I told her that it was amazing how it was made, and I reminded her that I was an engineering student. I told her that modern dolls were mass produced, molded out of plastic in Asia. But this doll's leather body had thousands of hand-stitches, and after all these decades, the leather was still in very good shape. The face was delicately hand-painted, with dozens of eye lashes. It was stuff with rice. It was a durable work of art that was beautiful. She smiled and said that the day she got it she was the happiest little girl on the planet. I asked her who gave it to her. She laughed and said that she didn't even remember, maybe it was her mother, maybe her grandmother, maybe some other relative. She didn't know if it was a birthday gift, a Christmas gift, or if it was just something that some person decided to give her. She told me she wasn't even sure that it was new when it was given to her. But giving it to

me, she said, would make her very happy. Then she told me that she didn't want to die and not know who was going to be taking care of Marcia. It was then that I relented and took it. My grandmother beamed. I told her that I would keep it always, that I would protect Marcia, and that one day, I would give it to one of my kids, if I had any. She thanked me.

I usually have multiple Bible quotes that I build a sermon out of. But today, I want to keep things simple. In many ways, my grandmother, who was less than five feet tall and could not possibly have weighed more than ninety pounds, was very much like Paul. Her life was a long, very tough journey. She spent much of her life in poverty. She took almost nothing from the world. She gave and she did not take. She passed things forward: a love for God, a love for God's people, and of course, Marcia. Her name was Mabel Medeiros, and Marcia now sits on a shelf in my office at home. It's all I have of my grandmother. But it is by far the most beautiful thing I could possibly have to remember her by.

Not long after she gave me Marcia, my grandmother went on to be with God. I visited her again, weeks before she died. I asked her something that I had been nervous about asking her, but I felt that it was going to be my last chance to do so. I asked her if she understood that her husband had been mentally ill. She nodded. She said that it was very tough for my father, growing up without his

father around, and hearing stories of his father wandering from city to city, committing violent crimes, living on the street. But, she said, she knew that her husband was just trying to do her and his son a favor. My grandmother said that he knew that he was sick, that he had nothing to give. She said that her husband didn't want to live just taking and never being able to give to his family. She said that he believed that it was better for his son to grow up without him, rather than to live with a man who had already given it all away. So, he disappeared. The problem, of course, she said, was that stories about him made their way back to his son, my father, and that my grandfather didn't actually succeed in getting away, getting out of the lives of his wife and son. But he was doing the only thing he could do, trying to not be someone who had nothing to give.

Remember that the most important thing we can give anyone has nothing to do with anything material. But it does call for emotional stamina, and that is what my grandfather didn't have. We can give others love, emotional protection, spiritual support, a listening ear, and true empathy when they are suffering. It can be hard to do this. We go through things in life that make it extremely difficult to reach down inside and find something genuine to give. But if we can do it, if we can give, then, as it turns out, we discover that it lifts us up, too. God made us to want to give, to not want to take. When we ignore the calls of this

world to take rather than to give, if we decide we will not be greedy and selfish, and instead that we will give to others, then we find ourselves soaring above the clouds. That's what my grandmother did just before she died. She gave and she was happy. She handed over her love to me and she handed over the most important possession that she owned. And she soared. Please pray with me.

*God, when we are under stress, when we are scared, worried, sick, worn out, dejected, broken, alone, when our spirits feel empty, it is so, so hard to give. God, give us the strength to give. Light something inside of us. Lift us up enough so that we can reach out and grab the joy that comes with being someone who refuses to take. Let us pass on the most important things we have – not our possessions, not the physical things that we collect in life. God, an old, worn, stained leather doll stuffed with rice isn't a doll at all. It's not a worldly piece of personal property. It is someone's heart. It is their soul. It is everything beautiful inside someone. When that doll stuffed with rice is handed over to a grandchild, it is the love of someone who has taken very little from the world. It is given by someone who thought that she had found herself with not much at all to give, but who discovered that in actuality, she had so, so much to give. Finally, God, let those words of the great evangelist Paul stay with us always: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*