



entering the movement
of **divine generosity**

God So Loved,

He Gave

Kelly M. Kopic

with Justin Berger

God So Loved, He Gave is a work of rare theological and spiritual perceptiveness. As it conducts its readers through the movement of God's ways with the world, it invites them to contemplate the divine works and to be formed in godliness by them. This is practical Christian divinity at its best: intellectually astute, humane, and animated by the gospel's generosity.

—*John Webster, professor at King's College, University of Aberdeen, Scotland*

Kelly Kopic has given us a forceful presentation of our universe ruled by a magnificently giving God. It is a scholarly and deeply thoughtful presentation that is, at the same time, vividly inspiring. It will help you to think magnificently of God and of what your life can be in his universe. Stepping into a life of giving love is the only reasonable response since that is how God is and how he has made us.

—*Dallas Willard, professor of philosophy at University of Southern California, author of The Divine Conspiracy and Renovation of the Heart.*

The Heidelberg Catechism tells us that "it is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness." Kelly Kopic's book shows why. It shows biblically and theologically that anyone who grasps the nature of God and of his gospel will live a life poured out in acts of generosity, especially to the poorest and most needy. I'm glad to recommend it.

—*Tim Keller, pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City*

God So Loved, He Gave is an amazing book. In it Kelly Kopic deftly moves from our being recipients of all God's generous gifts through Christ to our being stewards of God's gifts as we share them with others. This book is both encouraging and challenging. It should be read attentively and prayerfully.

—*Jerry Bridges, author of The Pursuit of Holiness*

God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity is a must read. Jesus himself said it is more blessed to give than to receive. Entering the movement of divine generosity is what we all ought to be concerned about. This is a great book; it is beautifully written, practical, helpful, and biblically sound. I encourage all Christians, particularly those seeking to experience the blessings that come out of generosity, to read this book. The blessings we receive from generosity are not limited to strictly financial blessings, but often are the blessings of love and encouragement that we get from sharing our lives with others. These blessings are more precious than silver and gold.

—*Dr. John M. Perkins, founder and president emeritus of the Christian Community Development Association of the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation*

God So Loved, He Gave is an eye-opening exploration of the boundless dimensions of God's heart for the world. Simultaneously it raises the bar for how God's image-bearers join him in big-hearted, open-handed, selfless generosity of our resources and of ourselves to the world he loves. Kelly Kopic has gifted us with a thought-provoking, deeply needed vision of our calling to gospel living.

—*Carolyn Custis James, author of Half the Church*

Here is a rich portrayal of redemption! In *God So Loved, He Gave* we are challenged to don the familiar story of salvation as a vestment more precious than the king's crown jewels. As we robe ourselves, we take delight in the story's often surprising and baffling, but always precious, truths. Sparkling quotes enliven each chapter.

—Bruce K. Waltke, *author of An Old Testament Theology and professor emeritus of Old Testament, Regent College, Vancouver, BC*

This fine book is an elegant portrayal of a marvelously generous God, who calls his people to show forth his generosity in a world that he sent his Son to redeem.

—Richard J. Mouw, *president of Fuller Seminary and professor of Christian philosophy*

Our cultural environment seems to assume a world as a given rather than a gift, as debt rather than exchange, as limited resources rather than “enough to go around.” How refreshing it is to step into the world of the triune God, who not only gives it all but creates a new society that anticipates his everlasting shalom. Kapic leads us into the breathtaking vistas of this new creation, with beauty and wisdom. This book itself is a welcome gift to Christ's body.

—Michael Horton, *J. G. Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary, California*

In this book Kelly Kapic uses his considerable wisdom and skill to unpack the story of God's generosity and what it means to belong to and follow a generous God. At stake is nothing less than what it means to follow Christ faithfully in today's world. Kapic is a clear communicator who cherishes Christ, cares for the church, and conducts all the right conversations across the fields of biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, and practical theology. The result is a rare combination—a robust, warm-hearted, accessible book that glorifies our generous triune God and instructs and inspires readers throughout the church.

—Justin Taylor, *managing editor, ESV Study Bible*

Many books today address the practical questions of stewardship and generosity. But few do this while making the crucial connection between the gospel and giving. I highly recommend *God So Loved, He Gave* for every recipient of God's grace who desires to become a participant in divine generosity.

—Howard Dayton, *cofounder of Crown Financial Ministries; founder of Compass-Finances God's Way*

To belong to one who truly loves me is bondage sweet, for true love frees its object to delight in its greatest joy—which is to please one's lover. Such a paradox for the mind is readily deciphered by the heart and is explored with charming writing, winsome freshness, and gospel zeal by the well-read Kapic. A once-common hymn declared that those who know the old, old story best long to hear it like the rest. Kapic's book demonstrates that one who knows the gospel well can tell Jesus' story very, very well—so well that we will delight to be owned by the One who gave himself for us.

—Bryan Chapell, *president, Covenant Theological Seminary*

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To Tabitha

During the writing of this book you walked
through cancer with courage and grace,
and through it all you gave the rest of us an authentic glimpse of
him who is the Giver of life.

You are the most stunningly beautiful gift I know.

Kelly

To my grandparents

William and Helen Cross

who embodied the words of Jesus,

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Justin

Contents

Preface 9

From Belonging to Bondage

Prologue: The Ewe Lamb 13

1. All Things Belong to God 14

2. Everything Appears Lost 30

3. The Coming of the King 46

Epilogue: What Went Wrong? 60

God Reclaims All by Giving All: Son, Spirit, and Kingdom

Prologue: The Vineyard Owner 63

4. The Gift of the Son 64

5. Believing the Gift. 80

6. The Gift of the Spirit 94

7. Experiencing the Gift. 106

8. The Gift of the Kingdom. 120

9. Living in the Gift. 130

Epilogue: How Will God Get Back What Was Lost? . . 141

Living in the Gifts:
Cross, Resurrection, Church

Prologue: A Kernel of Wheat 145

10. Following a Crucified Lord 146

11. Resurrection Faith and Work 164

12. Resurrection Life in Action 176

13. Receiving Life Together 188

14. Giving Life Together 200

Epilogue: God So Loved, He Gave 211

Acknowledgments 213

Discussion Questions for Each Chapter 216

Notes 227

Scripture Index 263

Subject Index 275

Preface

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY. . .

While it may be a familiar story, how well do we know it? Many people believe that this story is the most important story in the world. The characters and main events of the narrative are commonly known, but do we really understand it?

This is the story about God. This is the story about everything that exists. This is the story about humanity. It is this grand narrative that I want to tell you about, even if you have heard it a thousand times. For what we discover in this story inevitably surprises, baffles, and sometimes even offends both those who are near and those who are far away.

But I believe that if this story is understood, and if we have the courage to believe it, everything looks different. God looks different. You and I look different. Everything about this world looks different. And yet, the point of the story is not merely to change our thinking, but to liberate our lives.

Here is how it starts . . .

From all eternity God not only has existed, but he has lived in perfect fullness, joy, and delight. At some point the eternal God then did the unfathomable—he created everything out of *nothing*, out of no-thing. For he alone existed until he spoke with creative force and brought that which was not into being. Whether one thinks of sand or stars, trees or people, God created all that is not God. All that has come into existence owes its ultimate reality to him.

As Creator, God is the King and owner of all things. God himself is the artist of this diverse, beautiful, and dynamic world, so this world should reflect the brilliance and contentment of its Creator.

However, unlike lifeless statues made by a sculptor, living and free people were created by God. Out of God's own freedom he made creatures in his image; he created us to walk with him, to commune with him as we enjoy his presence and blessing. But we have rejected his love and his lordship, which has resulted in death and disaster. We have turned from the One to whom we belong. As a result of our sin and rebellion the great song of creation turned into a deafening moan. This rejection of God's kingship caused a rupture in the entire cosmos, for, if you could hear it, even the rocks and the trees began to cry out against this fissure between the Creator and his creation.

What could be done? God could have decided simply to crush his creation as a frustrated potter crushes a newly formed jar that is disappointing, deciding to start over from scratch. But God took another way.

In the pages that follow you will read the story of divine generosity. When captured by the depth of God's gifts in the gospel, we discover that he frees us to participate in his work of grace, hope, righteousness, and love. This is the generous life; this is what *belonging* to God is all about.

We have written this book in the hope that as we learn to dwell in the good news of belonging to God, we will grow in the freedom to give ourselves to God and others in ways that are impossible for those who treasure their lives as their own. We hope people will discover in this book how, in God's strange economy, to live with God as the Master is not suffocating, but is the very thing that will finally allow us to breathe deeply and live courageously. We invite you to "take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:19 NIV).

All Things Belong to God

We Belong to the Lord

I remember asking my son, who was five at the time, about his day. Jonathan didn't think very long before he smiled and piped up, "I learned something. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You can't serve two masters."

That made me smile. Clearly that morning his class must have looked at Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

I was impressed with what he learned, and I thought our conversation would move on, but Jonathan asked: "Do you know what a master is?" Intrigued, I wondered what he might say. "Owner" was his simple reply. Satisfied that he had taught me enough for one evening, he returned to his dinner in hopes of getting dessert. But even as he moved on, I found myself taken aback by his simple but deeply insightful answer—okay, he was probably just repeating what he learned in class, but coming from the mouth of a child it felt profound. Was Jonathan right?

In 1563 some ministers produced a catechism in Heidelberg, Germany, to teach the essential truths of the Christian faith. The first question in the catechism moves us to the heart of the matter:

Question 1: What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

Answer: That I *belong*—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. . . . (emphasis mine)⁵

But Don't We Own Ourselves?

Our passion to possess, however, jeopardizes this joy of belonging to God. Especially in the affluent West, our sense of self can become so wrapped up with the idea of self-ownership that the thought of belonging to somebody else—including God—looks like a threat and not a hope. Fearing to give, we grasp ever more tightly. We constantly clamor for our “rights” and cling to the impression that we own our bodies, our money, our ideas, our time, our property, and everything else we can manage to slap our name tag on. But more than anything else, we feel sure that we own *ourselves*.

John Locke (1632–1704), the English philosopher and political thinker, helped shape this modern mentality, arguing that self-ownership is an incontestable human right:

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself.⁶

The loss of self-ownership, whether to states or to other people, led to all kinds of abuse in Locke's world. Fears of such abuse are woven into the fabric of many contemporary political and social ideals.

In fact, today it seems offensive, maybe even anti-American to be told that there may be a problem with the idea that we own ourselves. After all, how can we ever downplay the great wickedness of slavery in America's past? Without question, this historical evil that darkens our history makes it almost impossible for us to conceive of the idea of being “owned” or having a “master” as a good thing. But is it possible that lives lived under the impression of self-ownership might actually harm both ourselves and others?

There still remains an underlying problem that can be hard for us to recognize, much less admit. We live under the burden and illusion of *self-ownership*. Think of commercials that tell women that at forty-five years old they should still look twenty-eight, and if not, it is their fault for not buying the product. Parents are promised their children's future success if they will only purchase the newest educational video and attend every extracurricular sporting activity. From the clothes we wear to the food we eat, the reality is that convention, society, and a complex of other com-

peting forces own us. We are owned by our possessions; owned by those around us; owned by people we have never met but who exert incredible power over our lives in some of the most subtle and sinister ways.

So we enter into the myth of self-ownership, and we cannot hear the good news. I will never forget when we lived overseas and I spoke with a British friend about his recent visit to New York City. Discussing his time in the States he said, “Americans are funny, because most of them pride themselves on being free, with everyone living just as they want. Yet, the truth is,” he continued, “everywhere in New York I went I saw people wearing uniforms. A child of six years old and a man in his fifties looked the same, each wearing baggy Levi’s, a t-shirt, and a ball cap.” His point was that their freedom was illusory.

The concept of freedom can be deceptive, and in truth pure self-ownership is impossible and a lie, because we are always owned. The question is not *if* you will be owned, but *to whom* will you belong? We are called to choose this day whom we will serve (Josh. 24:14–15). Will you belong to the true Owner or to competing powers? Deep down we sense we are owned and we rage against this, but in the process we end up serving degrading masters rather than the Lord of love.

Embracing God’s Ownership as Good News

The great tragedy of this possessive way of thinking about ourselves is that it causes so many to reject the gospel itself, the good news that we are not our own but have been “called to *belong* to Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6, italics added).⁷ The gospel tells us that we have been “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19–20) and that God has “set his seal of ownership on us” by his Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22 NIV). “The God of Christians,” Blaise Pascal once said, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob . . . is a God of love and of consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses.”⁸ But when we think of ourselves as our own personal property, it becomes difficult to embrace God’s ownership as good news. After all, how can the gospel be “good news” when it calls us to deny the very thing we see as our ultimate possession? If we are ever going to appreciate this liberating truth of belonging to God, we must first be reminded of God’s original relation to creation.

God’s Gift of Creation

From the nebulae in outer space to our personal savings accounts—God owns *everything*. As the Dutch statesmen Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920)

famously put it, “there is not a single inch on the whole terrain of our human existence over which Christ . . . does not exclaim, ‘Mine!’”⁹ As we will see, this expansive view of God’s ownership is found not merely in a few obscure passages of Scripture, but it is an ever-present assumption throughout the whole Bible.¹⁰ Fundamental to the reality of God’s ownership of all things is the truth that he alone is the Creator of everything that exists.

God Created out of Freedom, Not out of Need

We cannot rightly conceive of the gift of creation until we first recognize that God’s creative actions are *free*. By definition, gifts are unnecessary. God did not have to create. If we are ever to understand the joy and power of human liberty, we must first gain a better appreciation of God’s glorious freedom. It is out of divine freedom that God creates—nothing forced his hand.

Creation was not made in order to perfect something lacking in God.¹¹ As A. W. Tozer reminds us, “To admit the existence of a need in God is to admit incompleteness in the divine Being. *Need* is a creature-word and cannot be spoken of the Creator. God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made.”¹² Acts 17:24–25 confesses this truth:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth . . . he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (NIV)

This does not mean that God is distant or unconcerned, but the exact opposite inference is more fitting. The God who did not need to create, who is eternally complete in himself, is the God who *does* create, who continues to uphold what he created, and who takes a personal interest in each life and molecule of creation.

God Created out of His Triune Love

God’s generosity flows out of his love, and thus we must ask a few key questions about his love. Did God need to create in order to experience love? Does God only *become* loving after he creates, when there is something to love? Actually, no.

Scripture affirms that “God *is* love” (1 John 4:9, 16). Love is a perfection of God’s being, which means it is not something temporary or acci-

dental to him. All of his being is of love. To speak of God apart from his love is to speak of someone other than God.

How, then, is it possible that God loves before there is a creation? Simply put, the God who creates is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God existing in perfect unity and love in a triune manner. Pope Benedict XVI, reflecting on John's comment that "God is love," says it well:

Here we find ourselves before the most dazzling revelation of the source of love, the mystery of the Trinity: in God, one and triune, there is an everlasting exchange of love between the persons of the Father and the Son, and this love is not an energy or a sentiment, but it is a person; it is the Holy Spirit.¹³

Here Pope Benedict reflects a long Christian tradition, which sometimes spoke of the Father as the Lover, the Son as the Beloved, and the Spirit as the Love between them.¹⁴

Although analogies between God's love and our love have significant problems, one thing in Scripture is clear: the eternal God is love. Divine and eternal love is then unfolded and directed toward creation from the Father through the Son in the Spirit.¹⁵ God does not need to create in order to experience love, because the triune God exists in love within himself. He creates as an outworking of that eternal love. C. S. Lewis summarizes the point well: "God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them."¹⁶ God creates out of the overflow of his eternal triune love, and we were made to enjoy and respond to this very love.

God Created for the Purpose of Celebration

Centuries ago theologians claimed that the end or goal of creation was the glory or celebration of God (*gloria* or *celebratio Dei*).¹⁷ Creation's existence is meant both to bring God glory and enable all his creation to enjoy him. All things were made to reflect and express the Creator's beauty and majesty. Consequently, while creation's primary end is God's glory, the secondary end is humanity's good. "Yahweh's good intention," says Walter Brueggemann, "is a place of fruitfulness, abundance, productivity, extravagance—all terms summed up in the word *blessing*."¹⁸

People were made to love the Creator, partly by taking pleasure in the rest of creation and by faithfully participating in it. Not surprisingly, then, God's first command to the man and woman he creates begins with a call to "be fruitful . . ." (Gen 1:28). Humanity was to reproduce, to enjoy and

share the gifts of God in creation, and to live in joyful response to these blessings. The goal of creation was quite simply *celebratio*—celebration; this word was also used in the history of the church to describe a feast or sacred function that people participated in.

Notice that the Bible itself regularly calls people to celebrate God and his work in the world through Sabbaths, festivals, and feasts.¹⁹ In part, these events reminded them of God’s goodness as the one who makes all things and from whom all things come (1 Tim. 4:4). This God could be trusted not merely for the past, but for the present and future (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17). Even to this day, there are churches around the world that still have “Harvest Sundays” and the like, which serve as reminders of God’s faithful lordship over all things.²⁰

Such events serve to bring us back to rightly recognizing the Creator. Many of us have lost that sense of connection between food and the earth. The easy access to grocery stores and restaurants, and our distance from farms and the raising of animals can create the illusion that food and water are guaranteed. We take it as a given that they will be there. In truth, they are “given,” but given by the Creator and Sustainer of everything. They are gifts.

The whole of creation was made to celebrate God, to feast on his graciousness, and to return to him in praise.

All That God Created Was Good

Because all things come from God, creation is inherently good (Gen. 1:31). The story of creation in Genesis 1–2 repeatedly makes the assessment that every step and element of God’s creation is all good. The light, dirt, and seas were wonderfully good; the vegetation, stars, birds, and animals were delightfully good; humanity, the great climax of creation, was likewise unequivocally proclaimed by God to be good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Although people have sometimes treated aspects of the material world as intrinsically bad, Genesis unflinchingly reminds us of the original wholeness and glory of the earth. In the beginning *everything* was made good, including humans, their bodies, and their relations with God, each other, and the world. We were designed to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

Further, creation is not good merely because it is intricately engineered or beautifully put together, but because it comes from a good God. Creation is a *gift* through which we enjoy the Creator himself (cf. Ps. 19:1–2; 1 Tim. 6:17). Thus, to delight in elements of creation should provoke us to celebrate the creator God. Whether you eat or drink, do all things to his

glory, recognizing his lordship over it all (Eccl. 2:24–26; 1 Cor. 10:31). All that is comes from God, and thus it displays God’s generosity. In truth, nothing can be earned nor can demand be made of it—everything points back to the reality of gift. As Walter Brueggemann has explained,

There is a givenness to be relied on, guaranteed by none other than God. That givenness is here before us, stands over us, endures beyond us, and surrounds us behind and before. . . . The most foundational experience is the daily experience of *life’s regularities*, which are experienced as reliable, equitable and generous.²¹

When this fundamental orientation of praise for God’s generosity is forgotten, great tragedy and disillusionment occur.

God’s Ownership Confronts and Comforts Us

On the one hand, it would be a lie to suggest that the idea of God’s absolute ownership is not somewhat offensive to our modern sensibilities. As James Luther Mays says, “The declaration that the Lord is owner is an intentional denial that anyone else is.”²² That is offensive. Note 1 Corinthians 4:7, where Paul asks, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not receive it?” That too is offensive and deeply humbling.

On the other hand, God’s ownership—or our belonging to God—is deeply comforting. Especially in the face of scarcity, hardship, struggles, and darkness. As Regina Spektor, a thoughtful contemporary musician observes in her powerful song “Laughing With,” there is a paradox that happens when we are desperate.²³ Whether we are at a hospital, in the trenches during wartime, or wondering where our next meal is going to come from, in such times we don’t find ourselves laughing at God. We long for his care and provision. Yet when things are going well, when laughter fills the air, then we somehow think the idea of God can be hilarious. Spektor has it just right. When we are faced with our vulnerability, with our lack of power and control, with our great need—in those times our hearts often ache with the longing to belong to One who can be trusted, who is truly sovereign and good even in the midst of our fears.

This is why the covenant relationship God shares with his people, combined with the great covenant summary we find repeated throughout the Bible, hinges on the idea of belonging:

I will take *you* to be my people, and I will be *your* God.²⁴

The essence of the covenant is this relationship of his being ours and our being his. Similarly, the great priestly benediction of the Old Testament begins with this blessing of belonging:

The LORD *bles*s you and *keep* you. . . .²⁵

Thus, when rightly understood, belonging to God brings, not personal privation, but peace and protection to God's people. As Zacharias Ursinus, coauthor of the sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism, has said: "We are his property; therefore, he watches over us as his own, so that not so much as a hair can fall from our heads without the will of our heavenly Father. Our safety does not lie in our own hands, or strength; for if it did, we should lose it a thousand times every moment."²⁶ God's ownership cuts both ways, it confronts us even as it comforts (cf. Job 41:11; Ps. 100:3; Isa. 43:1; Ezek. 37:27).

Creation Was a Gift Calling for a Response

God creates and thus owns, not as a tyrannical agent seeking to seize power, but as a benevolent Lord who makes in order to give. In other words, God freely creates out of his delight to share his own goodness with others. God is full and he makes full. Thus, as he creates, he invites us to enjoy the feast and to extend his gracious hospitality and care to others; in this way we are images of our Creator.

Ancient monarchs would often send out images or statues of themselves to the various regions over which they ruled.²⁷ These images represented the king. When someone saw the image, they were to remember that the land was actually under that monarch's authority. Furthermore, it was the monarch alone who was thought to be made in the god's image—he *alone* represented the god(s). In this respect Scripture highlights a radical, even revolutionary, break from its ancient Near Eastern context. For the Bible makes it clear that not merely the monarch, but every person on the earth exists in God's image: male and female, young and old, rich and poor, Pharaoh and slave.

Thus, all humanity points back to the true King, Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. Yahweh, the creator God, had authority over the entire world and not merely a particular region. Humanity—in its entirety—is to reflect this good God's presence in his world and constantly affirm his ownership of it. Looking into the mirror reminds us to whom we—and the entire world—belong.

Let us not miss an obvious but remarkable implication: from the beginning God entrusts his work into the hands of people. While humanity was

part of the creation itself, God draws near to them and singles them out for the care and nurturing of his world. Humanity was made good and whole, and they were called to respond to their God's gracious invitation to steward his world. Mark Allan Powell captures the surprising nature of this arrangement:

We own nothing; but manage everything. God trusts us in a way that we are reluctant to trust each other (or ourselves) and places confidence in us beyond anything that our record thus far would seem to warrant.²⁸

So man and woman were made in God's image, and our role in the world included nurturing, developing, and protecting the rest of creation. From the beginning God calls his people to participate in his purposes of caring for his world. He invites us to share in his generosity and thus in his work.

God Owns by Giving

God can invite us into this activity because he made this world. He is the potter and we are the clay (Isa. 64:8; Jer. 18:6; Rom. 9:21). We will discuss in chapter 2 how God's lordship—and thus his ownership—has been denied, how sin has shattered the pottery, and how his creation has been pillaged. Nevertheless, there is but one God who made all things, and so all things ultimately point back to his rightful ownership.

What God Creates He Owns

We confess God's work in creation when we say, "God owns everything." The Psalms also repeat this connection:

- Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his (Ps. 100:3).
- The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and all who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters (Ps. 24:1–2).
- The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them. The north and the south, you have created them (Ps. 89:11–12).

When Old Testament writers spoke about creation, they did not merely refer to the origin of the universe. They knew about this origin in the distant past because they knew this God in their present, and therefore they

passionately called God's people to live before this loving Lord as his faithful stewards. Nothing, however insignificant, could be credited to God's creatures without also seeing it as the work of the giving God.²⁹

Of course, most of us have an easier time believing that God created the universe in the past than that he has provided us with everything we have in the present. This is especially true when we think of personal paychecks and college diplomas, which God tends to give us after periods of hard work and personal exertion. The Bible teaches that it is never easier to forget about God than after he has richly blessed us. Affluence can produce a spiritual amnesia.³⁰ While our society teaches us to keep careful catalogues of all our accomplishments, the Bible reminds us that everything on our personal résumé belongs to God, for the power of productivity itself comes from him:

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; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7 NIV)

All of creation points back to the one true Lord and Giver of life.

The Dynamic Nature of God's Ownership

The Scriptures present the movement of divine giving and receiving as a cycle: everything comes from God, is sustained through him, and will be given back to him. Few passages in Scripture provide a more breathtaking introduction to the subject of God's ownership than Romans 11:36:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

These simple words of praise give an all-encompassing view of the world and its purpose. *All things* come *from* God, are sustained *through* him, and will eventually flow *back to* him as the ultimate Owner of everything. Nothing is excluded.

And yet, the way in which God owns everything is somewhat surprising. Romans 11:36 indicates God's ownership is much more *dynamic* than we might expect. While we often associate the idea of "ownership" with locks and keys, safe deposit boxes, bank accounts, and home security systems, God's ownership is fundamentally different. Unlike us, God does not own by keeping, but by giving.³¹ His lordship and ownership is expressed in a life-giving cycle that moves from him, through him, and to him in

a beautiful threefold movement that warrants closer attention.³² This dynamic nature of divine ownership illuminates the relationship between “giving” and “getting.”

One mistaken idea is that God simply “gives” out of a calculated desire to “get.” In other words, God creates everything merely because he has needs that he wants fulfilled. As we have already shown, this does not reflect the biblical vision of the triune God.

A second mistake argues that God gives without any apparent purpose or goal, with no thought of the gift’s reception, use, or concern for return. This comes perhaps from an underlying fear that if God has any expectation of return from his gifts, then their graciousness is lost and his giving seems to merely be a divine economic exchange. While such fears have some legitimacy, the Bible does describe and even expects some sort of genuine response to God’s gifts. “We are *not*,” as Yale scholar Miroslav Volf has said, “the final destinations in the flow of God’s gifts. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow from us.”³³ In the end all things return “to God.” As the early church father Irenaeus (c. 130–202) perceived in the second century, for God to give all things necessarily requires that he be the ultimate Owner of everything:

For how could there be any *pleroma* [fullness] or principle, or power, or any other God, since it behooves God, as the fullness of all things, to contain and envelop all things, and to be contained and limited by none. For if there is anything beyond Him He is not the fullness of all things, nor does He contain all things.³⁴

Ultimately, the comprehensive fullness of God’s giving and receiving, as presented in the Scriptures, overcomes all of our fears. Since God did not create to satisfy any inadequacy or need of his own, but out of the fullness of his delight and love, this delight and love flow to the creatures as generosity and back to God as thanksgiving and praise. Creation reflects and therefore shares in—or “beholds”—God’s great glory.³⁵ Our good has by his hand become a means of God’s ultimate glory, intrinsically connected (cf. Ezek. 36:22–27).

The nature of this connection is a key to a healthy view of God and ourselves. As God’s giving does not impoverish but enriches him, so we, as we offer back to God the gifts he has given and sanctified in us, are enriched in his glory and are satisfied in and through him.³⁶ Below we will unpack the cycle of “from him, through him, and to him” in more detail to show the relationship between God’s giving and his owning.

From Him

We have already explored God's act of creation as the ultimate source of all our good, so here we simply mention a few more texts proclaiming that all things are *from* God.

- Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it (Deut. 10:14).
- You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you (Neh. 9:6).
- Who has first given to me [God], that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine (Job 41:11).
- The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them (Ps. 89:11)

Clearly the idea of God as Originator and Owner was understood from the earliest times in the Hebrew Scriptures and that idea is not lost with the formation of the New Testament. Only now the connection is directly linked to the Lord Jesus, the Christ: “yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). The triune God shows himself as the One from whom everything comes and through whom everything is sustained.

Through Him

To say that all things are *through* God affirms that God is constantly orchestrating and upholding every infinitesimal detail that swirls around us. From planetary orbits to electrons encircling the nucleus of an atom, he not only sustains but also guides, directs, and rules the entire created world. This shows how different God's ownership is from ours. We easily forget or neglect our possessions; God never does (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17). Botanists, for example, suspect that the oldest living redwoods in California are somewhere between two and three thousand years old—God has been sustaining them ever since they were saplings, since the age of the Parthenon.³⁷

Previous generations called this “providence.” God did not make the world “very good” to abandon it. He never abandons his creation, as if God wound creation up like a clock and then walked away never to interfere again. Although Bette Midler's lyrics proclaiming “God is watching us . . . from a distance” may move us, this distance does not provide much

comfort and hope.³⁸ The God who creates is also the God who sustains. A merely sympathetic God who is distant, not acting, helping, or promising a future, is not a God worthy of our worship and trust. And that is not the Sustainer God proclaimed in Scripture who says to the waves, “Thus far shall you come, and no farther” (Job 38:11). If God’s caretaking activity ever ceased, even for a moment, the universe would instantly collapse. But Yahweh’s presence is evidenced by his continued care of creation, often represented in agricultural images:

You [God] care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.

The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.

You drench its furrows
and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers
and bless its crops. (Ps. 65:9–10 NIV)

Why is it that rather than embracing God as the owner and caretaker of this world, we pit science against theology? We become confused, believing that once we understand the way things tend to work, we can do away with what is then deemed “mythology.” Yet is not the God who is the Creator also the Sustainer of this world, ensuring the very repeatability and structure of the universe that scientific observation is completely dependent upon? Science is a beautiful thing, and ethical scientific endeavors actually display God’s glorious governance rather than diminish it.³⁹

God’s providential care also calls for our care of his creation: “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate” (Ps. 104:14 NIV). John Chrysostom, the famed fourth-century preacher, captured the universal nature of God’s provision:

God generously gives all things that are much more necessary than money, such as air, water, fire, the sun—all such things. It is surely not true to say that the rich person enjoys the sun’s rays more than the poor person does. It is not correct to say that the rich person takes in a more abundant supply of air than the poor person does. No, all [these] things lie at the equal and common disposition of all.⁴⁰

Sadly, as we will discover in a later chapter, human actions have affected how the poor and rich enjoy the air.⁴¹ However, the aim of creation was

that our activity would reflect and be a means of God's governing. God gives us all our gifts that we might freely give. As Paul told the congregation at Corinth, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Cor. 9:11 NIV).

Behind the call for human effort, however, is always God's lordship and ownership over it all. This is the Lord's land, his animals, his earth. So even when the droughts come, we look to the Creator for renewal. Because the loving Lord of the universe has promised to maintain the ebb and flow of all things through himself, we may trust him in the midst of uncertainty (Hab. 3:17–19).

The life-giving nature of God's ownership should dispel any fear or suspicion we may have about belonging to God. But it doesn't. Why? God's ownership is inseparable from his sustaining providence. To be owned by God does not mean that we are imprisoned and forgotten about; rather, it means we are loved, that we live and move and have our being through him (Acts 17:28).

To Him

Zechariah was one of many prophets who, like Paul, spoke of God's ownership not only in terms of the *beginning*, but also in terms of the *end*. He spoke of a day when all the world's wealth would come rushing back to God as the absolute Owner of everything (Zech. 14:1–21; cf. Rev. 21:24–26). "On that day," wrote Zechariah, "HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells on horses, and the cooking pots in LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty" (Zech. 14:20–21 NIV). In the end, just as in the beginning, every element of creation will reflect God's ownership.

Much earlier in Israel's history the same words, "HOLY TO THE LORD," were engraved on the gold plate that the high priest wore as a sign of being exclusively dedicated to God (Ex. 28:36). By saying that the same sacred words would be inscribed on ordinary objects like pots and pans, Zechariah revealed just how far the redemptive reach of God's ownership will ultimately stretch: to every nook and cranny of creation.

But the greatest significance of the words "all things . . . to him" in Romans 11:36 lies in the fact that Paul wrote them as an outburst of praise. He had just spent over ten chapters outlining the good news of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought justification and hope. Paul was this excited because he saw the glory of redemption, which we will explore in later chapters. The beginning of the biblical narrative stresses God's owner-

ship of all things. The end of the story also highlights the role of the Master to whom all things are returned. But how this occurs is surprising. By saying that all things are “to him,” Paul reminds us that God’s ownership is not “a thing of the past,” but of the future as well.

Conclusion

When we speak of God’s ownership, some people may think that this is just putting a religious spin on the need to donate money. The recognition of God’s ownership and Christian stewardship has fallen on hard times. As Randy Alcorn puts it, “To many it is no longer relevant to the day in which we live. To some it’s just a religious cliché used to make fund-raising sound spiritual. It conjures up images of large red thermometers on church platforms, measuring how far we are from paying off the mortgage.”⁴² But the gospel itself shouts to us of God’s lordship over all that we are and have. Why does it do that?

This is not about raising money to build a bigger sanctuary, a hospital, or art gallery; it is about knowing and obeying the God we worship. It is about understanding who He is and who we are. Only by affirming that Yahweh is the God of creation, with everything flowing from him, through him, and to him, can we rightly relate to this God.

Of course, the strikingly beautiful idea that all things flow back to God leads us to ask about the fallenness of the world we live in. Does He even want any of this back and are we the ones to give it? Our blessed state of belonging has become a cursed condition of bondage. To answer these questions we must now turn from the fullness and glory of creation to the utter brokenness caused by our sin.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

John 8:34

[Sin] is not the beginning, but it is a turning-away from the beginning, the abandonment of the origin, the break with that which God had given and established.

Emil Brunner¹

Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single living human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about himself, so that, just as the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.

Søren Kierkegaard²

"I Me Mine"

George Harrison, of The Beatles³

O greedy men, what will satisfy you, if God Himself will not?

Augustine⁴

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