

Generosity

Study Notes

Introduction

If you are a Christian, you probably know the value of being a generous person. But what does generosity really look like? Why is it so important to God? This is what our theme video on generosity is all about. These notes go a level deeper than we can cover in a five-minute video. In the following pages, you'll be introduced to key concepts and passages that will enable you to gain a better understanding of the theme of generosity throughout the Bible.

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Jesus' Upside-Down View of the World

Jesus grew up in a world under military occupation, with people losing their land and families to debt and poverty. Knowing his firsthand experience of poverty, ponder one of his teachings.

And he said to his disciples, "For this reason I tell you, don't be anxious about your life, what you will eat; and don't be anxious about your body, what clothes you put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Ponder the ravens, for they don't sow seed or reap a harvest; they have no storerooms or barns, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add an hour to his life's span? And if you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters? Ponder the lilies, how they grow: they don't toil or spin clothes; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how

*much more will he clothe you? You who trust God so little! And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and don't foster your anxiety. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek His kingdom, and these things will be **granted** to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to **give** you the kingdom.*

Sell your possessions and give to the poor; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Luke 12:22-34

**Most Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) with changes and emphasis added for understanding.*

Jesus looks at birds and flowers and grass and sees signs of God's generosity and overabundant love. These words may sound somewhat irresponsible to a Type A, hard-working person. What kind of tradition forms a person to speak like this? (You can't just say, "Well, he's Jesus!") Jesus is articulating a way of seeing the world that is rooted in Hebrew Scripture and its depiction of God's generosity. Look at how this psalmist reflects the same worldview.

*He sends forth springs in the valleys;
They flow between the mountains;
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They lift up their voices among the branches.
He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of his works.*

*He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
And wine which makes man's heart glad,
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man's heart.
The trees of the Lord drink their fill,
The cedars of Lebanon which he planted,
Where the birds build their nests,
And the stork, whose home is the fir trees.*

*O Lord, how many are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
The earth is full of your possessions.
There is the sea, great and broad,
In which are swarms without number,
Animals both small and great.
There the ships move along,
And Leviathan, which you have formed to sport in it.
They all wait for you
To give them their food in due season.
You give to them, they gather it up;
You open your hand, they are satisfied with good.*

Psalm 104:10-17, 24-28

Freedom from anxiety is rooted in a conception of the universe found in the first pages of Genesis. This truth shaped the way Hebrew poets like the one behind Psalm 104 viewed the world. Creation is presented as a safe place where humanity is welcomed by a generous host. The overabundance seen in nature comes from a Creator who shows that same generosity toward us, and this mindset frees us from the fear of releasing resources to others. This is the upside-down way Jesus looked at the world. Let's take a closer look at these first chapters of the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus and the psalmist knew so well.

The Genesis Narratives: Meeting the Generous Host of Creation

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 present two complementary creation accounts that confirm the same truth. Creation is an expression of the generous, creative love of God. First, God brings order out of chaos and blesses humanity (Genesis 1). In the following account, God creates a garden out of a wasteland and gives it as a gift to humanity (Genesis 2).

And God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, subdue the land, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the living things upon the land."

Genesis 1:28

And Yahweh God took the human and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and to care for it.

Genesis 2:15

Later biblical poets reflect on this creation event as an expression of divine love.

*Your covenant love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mountains of God (lit. "El");
Your justice is a great deep.
O Lord, you deliver (lit. "save") human and beast.
How precious is your covenant love, O God!
And the sons of humanity take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They drink their fill of the abundance of your house;
And you give them to drink of the river of your delights (lit. "Edens").
For with you is the fountain of life;
In your light we see light.*

Psalms 36:5-9

Creation as a gift to humanity contrasts with the alternative conceptions of creation in the ancient Near East. Let's take a look at one prominent story called the Atrahasis Epic (Akkadian for "extremely wise"). This story was discovered on Akkadian tablets that date back to the 17th century B.C.

The Story of Atrahasis

The Atrahasis Epic presents multiple tiers to the divine order. Enlil, the chief deity of the land, along with Anu (sky-ruler) and Enki (god of fresh water) are at the top of the hierarchy. The Annunaki, upper class deities, are one level down. Lastly, the Igigi are the lower-class deities, who serve the Annunaki in menial labor. The Igigi become tired of serving the upper tiers, and they stage a massive walkout, grumbling over their labor in the river deltas. They go to Enlil and protest. The Annunaki send out negotiators who arrange for another creature be made to serve the Annunaki: humanity!

Chief Deities: Enlil, Anu, Enki
Upper Class Deities: Annunaki
Lower Class Deities: Igigi
Humanity

The new creatures need to be closer to the gods than animals, so a junior deity (Geshtu) is sacrificially killed, and his blood is mixed with clay to produce the humans. Humans will now serve the Annunaki in place of the Igigi. But there was a catch in their master plan.

The gods are immediately annoyed by the noise, mess, and overpopulation of humanity. Therefore, they send a flood to annihilate them. But Enki goes to warn one of the humans, Atrahasis, who builds a great boat for his family and animals. Author Joshua Berman reflects on the contrast between this story and the biblical account.

The tale is a virtual celebration of social hierarchy. From the beginning of time, the gods have already been divided along social lines. The rebellion of the lower gods simply serves as an occasion to bring humans onto the scene to occupy the lowest rung on the ladder. The purpose of humankind is to serve as a toiling servant of the gods, carrying out the most menial, backbreaking tasks on their behalf.

Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, 21

Humanity as God's Chief Stewards

As you can see, the Atrahasis Epic stands in complete contrast to the biblical portrait. In Genesis 1-2, creation is put forth as a gift for the animals and for humanity. Far from slaves, humans are created to rule in partnership with God.

*God created humanity in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Then God said, "Behold, **I have given you** every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the land, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and **I have given** to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, every green plant for food"; and it was so.*

Genesis 1:27-30

Then Yahweh God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and to keep it.

Genesis 2:15

God designed humanity to be the chief stewards of creation. However, God is the Creator and uncontested owner of all creation. Biblical authors throughout Scripture reflect this truth.

The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,
*The world, and those who dwell in it.
For He has founded it upon the seas
And established it upon the rivers.*

Psalms 24:1-2

The God who made the world and all things in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

Acts 17:24-25

The skies are yours; the land also is yours;
*the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.
The north and the south, you have created them;*

Psalms 89:11-12

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

Romans 11:36

*Know that Yahweh, he is God!
It is he who made us, and **we belong to him.***

Psalms 100:3

This is the beautiful picture of the world that we find in the Bible. Creation is an expression of God's generous love. He is the host, and humans are his guests in a world of opportunity and abundance. We are called to keep the party going and to spread his goodness.

But that's not the way most people experience the world. Rather, we find a world marked by scarcity and struggle, not abundance. What went wrong?

The Root of a Scarcity Mindset

The biblical portrait of evil begins with an act of desiring and taking what is not rightfully ours to take. You can find the full story in Genesis chapter 3, but let's take a look at a few verses that demonstrate this point.

- "You shall not eat **from any tree** of the garden" (Gen. 3:1). The scene opens with a serpent subtly undermining God's generosity.
- "You will not die. For God knows that in the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like elohim, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). The serpent portrays God as holding out on humanity, withholding knowledge and good things.
- "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was **desirable** for making wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she **gave** also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6). The word for "**desirable**" (Hebrew: *nekhmad*) refers to an object of covetous desire.

God's Short-Term Response

God's short-term response to covetousness is to give people over to their corrupted desires. The opening pages of Genesis sit within the larger literary unit of Genesis chapters 1-11. The following chapters provide a series of vignettes to demonstrate the effects of evil worked out through covetous desire in the world.

- **Genesis 4:** Cain's jealous anger at his brother compels him to **take** life instead of **give**. This is why murder is such a heinous crime in the Old Testament. To "take" a life is to act as if it is mine to take, rather than recognizing my role as a human is to "give" life and participate in its flourishing. An additional irony occurs in this passage. Cain is called a "worker of the ground" (Gen. 4:2) but denies his role as a "keeper of your brother" (Gen. 4:9). This is a direct rebellion against the call of humanity in Genesis 2:15 to "work and keep" the garden.
- **Genesis 6:** The sons of elohim, "**saw** that the daughters of men were **beautiful** (*lit. good*); and they **took** wives for themselves, whomever they chose" (Genesis 6:2).
- **Genesis 11:** The people of Babylon declare, "Let us build **for ourselves** a city and a tower, and its head will be in the skies, **and we will make a name for ourselves**" (Gen. 11:4).

God's Long-Term Response

At the end of this rather depressing literary unit, the author reveals God's long-term response to what was lost in Genesis 3. God's plan is to offer a new gift—the new human Jesus who opens the way to a new creation. God wants humans to experience his generosity, so he starts with one family—the family of Abraham—and promises to give them the abundance he wants for everyone else. The most tangible part of this gift is the promised Land.

*Now the Lord said to Abram,
"Go forth from your country,
And from your family
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;*

*And you shall be a blessing;
And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who treats you as cursed, I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."
"To your seed **I will give this land.**" So he built an
altar there to Yahweh who appeared to him.*

Genesis 12:1-3, 7

As the story of Abraham continues, we see something has shifted in his perspective because of God's generosity. Lot—Abraham's nephew—takes the good Eden-land for himself. In contrast, Abraham allows God to "give" him the land.

*So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left." Lot **lifted up his eyes and saw** all the valley of the Jordan, **that it was well watered everywhere like the garden of Yahweh**, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar (this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah). So **Lot chose for himself** all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot **journeyed eastward**. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. (Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against Yahweh.)*

*Yahweh said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, **I will give it to you** and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for **I will give it to you.**"*

Genesis 13:8-17

So what's the point of these early Genesis narratives? They show us several key truths that drive the rest of the biblical narrative.

- God is the generous Creator who consistently gives what people don't deserve.
- Creation is fundamentally corrupted when people desire what isn't theirs and take it, instead of imitating the Creator's generous sharing strategy.
- God's response is to continue giving until humans begin to give like God.

The Story of Israel: God's Generosity in Light of a Scarcity Mindset

Several hundred years later, the family of Abraham became the nation of Israel. Unfortunately, they became enslaved in another land—Egypt. Yet God had not forgotten his promise to gift these people their own land. He brought them up out of Egypt and communicated several ideas surrounding this gift.

Israel's test in the land is to attribute all life and existence to God's generous gift. In the following passage, they are warned not to forget the gift of the land.

*You all shall therefore keep every commandment which I am commanding you today, so that you may be strong and go in and possess the land ... so that you may prolong your days on the land which the Lord swore to your fathers **to give to them** and to their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. For the land, into which you are entering to possess it, is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you used to sow your seed and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden. But the land into which you are about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rain of heaven, a land for*

which the Lord your God cares; the eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning even to the end of the year.

*It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul, that **he will give** the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil.*

Deuteronomy 11:8-14

The gift of the land places an obligation upon Israel. The gift is **unconditioned** (unmerited), but not **unconditional** (non-reciprocal). It is not given to Israel based on an evaluation of their worthiness, but it is given with a clear expectation of obligated response.

*Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to fear him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything ... When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which **he has given you**.*

The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with me.

Leviticus 25:23

*Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes which I am commanding you today; otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ... Otherwise, you may say in your heart, "My power and the strength of my hand produced for me this wealth." But you shall remember the Lord your God, for **it is He who is giving you power to make wealth**, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.*

Deuteronomy 8:6-16

Although Israel was going to be a political entity, their economy was not going to look like the surrounding nations. They were to have an “Exodus-style” economic system.

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. For the Lord your God will bless you as he has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

*If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall **freely open your hand to him**, and shall **generously lend** him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Beware that there is no wicked thought in your heart, saying, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near;” and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you **give him nothing**; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall **generously give to him**, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.*

Deuteronomy 15:1-10

A key theological claim at work in these laws is that of God's identity as the liberator of slaves. He forms a people out of those who were deemed to be people of no standing at all by the political and economic leaders who oppressed them. The egalitarian streak within pentateuchal law codes accords with the portrayal of the Exodus as the prime experience of Israel's self-understanding. Indeed, no Israelite can lay claim to any greater status than another, because all emanate from the Exodus—a common seminal, liberating, and equalizing event ... This notion of God's sovereignty as creator and liberator animated the biblical laws aimed at preventing Israelites from descending into the cycle of poverty and debt.

Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought*, 88.

*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the immigrant, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the immigrant, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. **Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.***

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

The whole point of Israel and the land was to demonstrate the abundance God desired for the whole world. God would provide what they needed. In response, they would need to trust and mirror God's generosity. How did this go?

The Forgotten Gift

The story of Israel continues into a downward spiral. Israel takes God's gifts and attributes them to idol-gods. As a result, God sends them out of the land and back to the wilderness. The prophets reflect on this tragic event yet still hold on to hope in God's long-term plan. Note the echoes of Genesis 1 and the Sinai covenant promise of the land in the following passages.

*For [Israel's] mother has played the harlot;
She who conceived them has acted shamefully.
For she said, "I will go after my lovers,
**Who give me my bread and my water,
My wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.**"
Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns,
And I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths.
She will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them;
And she will seek them, but will not find them ...*

*For she does not know that **it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil,
And lavished on her silver and gold,**
Which they used for Baal (or, "made into a Baal")
Therefore, I will take back My grain at harvest time
And my new wine in its season.
I will also take away my wool and my flax ...*

*I will visit upon her the days of the Baals
When she used to offer sacrifices to them
And adorn herself with her earrings and jewelry,
And follow her lovers, so that she forgot me, declares the Lord.
Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Bring her into the wilderness And speak to her heart.
Then **I will give her** her vineyards from there,
And the valley of Achor as a door of hope.
And she will sing there as in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt ...*

*In that day I will also make a covenant for them
With the beasts of the field,
The birds of the sky
And the creeping things of the ground.
And I will break the bow, the sword and war from the land,*

*And will make them lie down in safety.
It will come about in that day that I will respond, declares the Lord.
I will respond to the heavens, and they will respond to the earth,
And the earth will respond to the grain, to
the new wine and to the oil ...*

Hosea 2:5-22

*For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands
and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on
you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness
and from all your idols. Moreover, **I will give to you** a new heart and
put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from
your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **I will give my Spirit** within
you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful
to observe my ordinances. You will live in the land **that I gave to**
your forefathers; so you will be my people, and I will be your God.
Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for
the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you. I will
multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you
will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations.*

*Thus says the Lord God, "On the day that I cleanse you from
all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and
the waste places will be rebuilt ... They will say, 'This desolate
land has become **like the garden of Eden**; and the waste,
desolate and ruined cities are fortified and inhabited."*

Ezekiel 36:24-35

Israel entered the land of abundance and promptly forgot who gave it to them. They act like it's all theirs and like there's not enough, which leads to war and to Israel's self-destruction. The Old Testament ends without the promises of the restored gift fulfilled. Yet it seems the hope for eternal life is life back in the land as a new Eden. How will God's long-term plan come to fruition?

The Story of the New Testament: Culmination of God’s Generosity

We open up the pages of the New Testament and God has not given up. God gives humanity the ultimate gift—himself. Jesus lives with the conviction that there is enough and that our generous host can be trusted. The fundamental depiction of God in the New Testament is of a generous gift-giver whose generosity should effect a transformation of our lives. Let’s look at some key passages that expand on this concept.

In his most famous teaching—the Sermon on the Mount—Jesus reflects the generosity of God toward all humanity. This mindset of abundance allowed him to live sacrificially and generously, even toward his enemies.

*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for **he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete.”*

Matthew 5:43-48

The apostle John tells the story of Jesus through generosity language.

*God so loved the world, that he **gave** his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16

*See how great a love the Father has **given** on us, that we would be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

1 John 3:1

*And the testimony is this, that God has **given** us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*

1 John 5:11

The apostle Paul pushes followers of Jesus to respond to his radical generosity. The love of God shown through Jesus is a love that can turn death into life and scarcity back into abundance.

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but **gave him over** for us all, how will he not also with him **freely gift** us all things?*

Romans 8:31-32

James combines the portrayal of God as Creator (Genesis 1) with Jesus’ own teaching about God as a generous father (Luke 12:22-34).

*Every good thing **given** and every perfect **gift** is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*

James 1:17

Creation as Outpouring of God's Love

The New Testament authors wanted to show that God's generosity in Christ was nothing new. From the beginning, creation itself is the generous gift that is the outflow of the love between the Father and Son.

"God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that he may love and perfect them."

C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 127.

*This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on the earth, having accomplished the work which you have given me to do. Now, Father, glorify me together with yourself, with **the glory which I had with you before the world was.***

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 1:1-3

*The glory which you have given me I have given to them, **that they may be one, just as we are one; I in them and you in me,** that they may be completed in unity, so that the world may know that you sent me, and loved them, even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, be with me where I am, so that they may see my glory which you have given me, **for you loved me before the foundation of the world.***

John 17:3-5, 22-24

Exploring Grace as Gift

The gift of life in creation was restored through the gift of God's love and life in Jesus. Jesus opened up a whole new way to be human as we wait for the promised new creation. These concepts are developed at length in Paul's writings through two important Greek words.

- *Charis* (noun: "grace, gift")
- *Charizomai* (verb: "to give a gift, forgive")

Paul makes clear God's generous action toward humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the gift of the Spirit.

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by **grace** you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by **grace** you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the **gift** of God;*

Ephesians 2:4-8

The gift/grace given should energize a response from God's people. This includes sharing the gift and being generous in actions toward each other.

*To me, the very least of all saints, this **grace** was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.*

Ephesians 3:8

*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving** (lit. gifting) each other, just as God in Christ also has **forgiven** (lit. gifted) you.*

Ephesians 4:32

The Six Nuances of Grace

Think of different types of gifts you have received—for example, a birthday gift or a thank you card. Maybe you have received a gift that came with some sort of obligation. The meaning of gifts can often be nuanced and change based on the context. So when Paul talks about grace as a gift, what kind of gift is he talking about?

In Paul's writings, grace has six distinct nuances of meaning (John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*). This multifaceted definition of grace/gift allows us to read Paul's words with deeper understanding.

- 1. Superabundance:** This is about the scale of the gift—the more excessive and more all-encompassing the gift, the more perfect it appears.
- 2. Singularity** (benevolent motivation): This is about the spirit in which the gift is given, so that the giver's sole and exclusive motivation is goodness and generosity.
- 3. Priority:** This is about the timing of the gift, which is made perfect by being prior to any demand or request of the recipient; it is spontaneous and not obliged by the previous gift.
- 4. Incongruity:** This is about the worthiness of the recipient; the most perfect gifts are given indiscriminately without regard for the worth of the receiver.
- 5. Efficacy:** This is about the purpose of the gift; the perfect gift will fully achieve what it's designed to do.
- 6. Non-Circularity:** This is about the expectation of return for a gift given; almost all gift giving in human history begins a series of reciprocal giving.

With this fuller definition of grace, let's ponder a passage from Paul. Although he emphasizes aspects of God's "gift" in Jesus and the Spirit in many of his letters, 2 Corinthians 8-9 provides a particularly powerful explanation of grace at work.

*Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the **grace** of God which has been **given** in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they **gave** of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the **grace** of participation (Greek: koinonia) in the service of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first **gave** themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this **grace** as well.*

*But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this grace also. I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.** I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.*

2 Corinthians 8:1-12

*And God is able to make all **grace** abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written,*

*"He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor,
His righteousness endures forever."*

*Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing **grace** of God in you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable **grace**!*

2 Corinthians 9:8-14

Paul was convinced of the power of God's grace, turning death into life and scarcity back into abundance. He challenged his readers to live lives transformed by this truth.

What Have We Learned About Generosity?

Creation is an expression of the generous, creative love of God. As humans, we are called to keep the party going and spread his goodness. However, we find ourselves in a world of scarcity and struggle. The biblical portrait of evil began with an act of desire for what is not rightly ours and taking it for ourselves. In the story of the Old Testament, God continually combats this scarcity mindset through his generosity and love toward humanity.

The story culminates in Jesus. The host himself comes to join the spoiled party. Jesus' death was the ultimate expression of God's love. It's a love that can turn death into life and scarcity back into abundance. Jesus followers now have the opportunity and responsibility to live like the real party has begun! One of the most important ways that we can experience the abundance of God's new creation is sharing with others and believing that there is enough. This is the purest expression of our trust that God is the generous host.

Sources

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