

Everything

“In the beginning, God created . . .” (Genesis 1:1)

“This is what God the Lord says – He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it . . .” (Isaiah 42:5)

“This is what the Lord says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool . . . Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the Lord” (Isaiah 66 1-2).

“I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:6-7).

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:36).

As Creator, God owns everything. Everything! Not just the cattle on a thousand hills. He owns time, space, matter, and all life. He also is the author of everything that happens in time and history. It’s all His! We belong to Him; we’re His possession to do with as He pleases according to His holy will. Everything that’s here and everything that happens is for His great and good purposes. I suspect that we fail to understand all that this truth means. So this Sunday School lesson will attempt to unpack what it means that God owns everything, though I confess I have neither the wisdom nor the intelligence to adequately carry out such an undertaking. But let’s give it a try.

First, a few fundamentals: (1) Because God created us and the world we live in, He has the right to specify how we’re to live. He has the authority to determine how life is to be pursued. As the Author of life, He sets the standards and He will hold us to them. He has authority over us. (2) He also has the right to determine what is moral, that is, what is right and what is wrong. His holy presence pervades Creation, so He can rightly expect us to honor Him by doing what He says is right. (3) He has the right to demand obedience. He owns us, and that gives Him the prerogative of commanding us to do His will. And He has given us commands! That means we must obey Him because, if we don’t, we’re in defiance of Him. (4) He has the right to judge us according to whether we used the freedom He gave us properly. Creation and the gift of moral freedom *require* accountability. (5) He has the right to expect truth in everything humans say or do. As the owner of all humanity, and as a Being who is Himself truth, He can rightly expect—and hold us responsible for—truthfulness. (6) He also has the right to demand that we honor Him, serve Him and trust Him, and be exceedingly careful not to offend Him. (7) the most important basic fact of all is, God owns *us*. We are His property. He therefore has a prior claim on all human lives, to deal with or dispose of according to His holy will. Any notion that we have our own life to be and to do as we please is, well, delusional.

The seven basic truths above follow inescapably from God creating, and therefore His ownership of everything. Because He’s invisible to us, in perfect wisdom and integrity, God has revealed to us all the above in permanent form, the Scriptures. He has also placed deep within each of us an awareness of Himself. We are responsible to Him and without excuse for ignoring or repudiating His personal revelation, or ignoring or defying Him. Following are ten thoughts on what the above truths actually mean to us.

1. We need to be more humble than we are. We’re dependent creatures. We have breath and heartbeat only by God’s good pleasure. We have no reason whatsoever to boast about anything we have in life. Whatever we have – and I refer not only to assets, property and wealth, but health and smarts and strength and freedom and moral understanding and yes, our salvation too – *all* that we have, is a gift. So we’re simply stewards of whatever we have. Stewardship means we’re responsible to God for how we use what has been loaned to us, which is everything we have. Pride in anything is so out of place as to be risible. We may not understand lots of things, election and predestination, for example. But . . . so what? God does, and that’s all that matters. Life itself is God’s good gift.

2. We have the bizarre idea that I’m here with my life to live, and that God – if He’s really even there! – is in heaven and He can watch if He’s interested. That’s complete nonsense. We need to understand that God is Spirit. He does not occupy time or space. He’s everywhere at once. His entire creation is transparent and open to Him. He not only sees what we’re doing, He knows our thoughts and motives and values and beliefs. So we live every moment of life in His presence. That’s scary for an unbeliever. But for us who are trusting in Christ and have received forgiveness of sins and justification, that’s the most thrilling and wonderful thought we can have. We pass life – every moment – in the presence of the living and eternal God who loves us. Let’s be filled to overflowing with joy at this, and never mind

seeking happiness elsewhere. God deliberately made, ordered and owns the array of blessings that make life fulfilling, and He's extended them to us in love to enjoy.

3. God put us here on probation. He has His purposes, and evidently one of them involves our response to Him. The opening chapters of the Bible teach this. He's invisible to us, but we need to know that He's there nevertheless, gauging our response to the knowledge of Him and His will. Why? Because He intends to bless those who respond in a way that glorifies Him. So He's given us freedom – or at least a sufficient measure of it – so that we can respond in a way that pleases Him, or not. And He's revealed Himself and His will to us in a way that is readily accessible, Scripture, to which we respond as to Him personally. In the end, though, He will dispose of all that is His according to His goodness and holy pleasure. Trusting in Christ isn't an option! It's an absolutely essential component of human existence. A day is coming when God will judge His created beings on the basis of His own holy Being.

4. We fail to hold in our minds continually the awareness that God is there. So as we go thru life and experience things, we miss understanding that all that comes our way, all events, are deliberately sent by God. Something bad? God sent it. Something wonderful? God sent it. Whatever circumstances occur, God sent them. If we were born in some desolate African village where life is arduous and tenuous, that's God's specific doing. If we're born in America in luxury and comfort, that's His doing too. He has His reasons and His purposes for all He does, and they're all good and holy. A woman in Bangkok was rescued from prostitution and became a believer. She took a baby from another woman in worse shape than she was, to raise for her. That is now a problem child, poorly behaved and unable to learn. Yet, the woman continues to do what she can as God gives her grace, and she praises God for the privilege He's granted her to do something helpful. We glorify God by how we respond to all that He gives us, to all He sends into our life. Ownership means God sovereignly – yet lovingly – rules in the affairs of His human creatures.

5. Is our nation invaded by a raping, thieving and murdering pagan army? Most of humanity all thru history experienced such horrors. Should we scream "injustice" and blame God for it? I hope not. Romanian pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, understood that the Russian army that was invading his country after WWII ended was sent by God. So he and his church members printed Gospel tracts in Russian and freely, extensively, handed them out to the invading soldiers. Wurmbrand and his church people suffered terribly under the Russian boot. But many soldiers were saved. And God was glorified. If we understand that God owns all history, then all that happens in life is an opportunity for us to respond with grace and love, mirroring God's own character. And thus we glorify Him. What we call "evil" is because we fail to understand that God is not only Creator but the sovereign Ruler of history. And He's a good God.

6. Most of us live as if we're Deists. That's too bad, because we thus miss the thrill of an immanent God sharing His love in our lives. A certain believer in Communist Viet Nam was taking a box of Bibles to a pastor in a village up in the mountains. He had to go by bus, knowing that authorities would search all boxes along the way. But he went anyway, not knowing how it would turn out, though being caught and imprisoned was likely, perhaps even torture. He sat in a seat on the aisle with the box in the aisle next to him. At the next bus stop a policeman boarded the bus, sat down in an open seat right across the aisle, took off his hat and put it on the box! Up in the mountains, soldiers stopped the bus to search for Bibles. When they saw the policeman's hat, they passed by that box, then left. He safely delivered the Bibles. The believer could hardly contain his joy at the experience of the Lord working a miracle like that in his life. We need to understand that the God who has total control of everything *wants* to make His presence known to us, in even the details of life, because He's called us to experience Him. That's why He created us.

7. The animals have no choice but to obey the God who owns them. Decades ago, Bruce Porterfield was serving as a missionary in one of the countries of South America. Another missionary's child in a village deep in the Amazon jungle got appendicitis. He couldn't be evacuated right away because rivers were flooded. So, taking a syringe and vials of penicillin to hold the child over, Bruce set out on foot into the dangerous jungle. On the way, he was attacked by a herd of wild, vicious and hungry boars. He desperately climbed a tree and the pigs began chewing at the trunk of the tree to get at him. Bruce fired a couple of shots from his pistol, in vain. But then, miraculously they suddenly all turned and disappeared into the jungle. Bruce continued his trek, gave the penicillin, and the child survived. God made His presence – and His sovereign rule over His creation – known. Not all situations have such a happy ending, of course. God has His purposes. But we mustn't be indifferent to God's total control over all His possessions, over everything that exists.

8. God invented time. It's His, He owns it. He has split-second control over it. Time exists to serve Him and His purposes. He has gifted each of us with a small portion of it to pass either in His will or to waste it. We're all great

time-wasters. If we understood that the time given to us is also a stewardship, we'd (hopefully) be more aware of how to spend it. In a couple of places, Paul wrote, "Make the most of every opportunity." Yes! A fixed amount of time has been allotted to us to use serving God profitably and not by serving ourselves or other gods. Mozart died young. So did Kafka. So did lots of others, geniuses all. These people had such great potential, but they didn't use it to serve God. So God took their time away from them. We need an awareness that time is a stewardship just as much as wealth.

9. Paul wrote that we're to be content with what we have. Greed, a desire for more of this or that, and blatant covetousness betray an absence of contentment. If we grasp that God gives us from His vast storehouse only what He knows we need to live a worthy life, which is our goal and purpose, we can be content. It's because we live as Deists, supposing that God is way up yonder and indifferent to us, that we seek always to have more. If God gives us more than we need, that too is deliberate; it's to test us if we will glorify Him by being generous in giving to others. Or not. Yes, lots of people on earth live in squalor. But however abysmal our circumstances, however filled with sorrow lives may be, God is there. Tens of thousands of Christians in the Middle East are sequestered in horribly filthy, disease-ridden refugee camps and fed one meager meal a day. Yet they're holding evangelistic meetings and Bible studies, knowing that God is there with them. Many of them have a deep, intimate relationship with Christ. And with that, they're content. God, who owns everything, has wisely allotted to us exactly what we need to glorify Him.

10. All life, all existence is *for God*. What that means is too big to explain in a few words. We are so parochial that we can't help but fail to get the really big picture. We too easily get obsessed with the little things in life, even things that, to us are of national importance, are in reality trivial to God. God has a time-line, a planned course for all history and He's seeing to it that it gets fulfilled. They are HIS goals and purposes that are going to be fulfilled in this creation. They have to be, because creation is for Him. Scripture here and there gives us clues as to what God's purposes are, but I suspect that even what we deduce from Scripture is only partial. It will be when we're in His presence in heaven that He'll reveal all that this existence is really for, and I think we'll be filled with wonder and amazement. But let's at least understand this: Our lives are for Him. We're not here to serve ourselves or pursue a life according to our own desires, nor are we here to aimlessly and purposelessly live out our days. The animals do that. My aunt Sylvia got cancer of the colon. And just before she died she called me, with weeping saying, "Is this all life is for? I get married and have kids. I see them grow up. Then I get cancer and die? *Is that it?*" No, that's not it. We're here to know God, to love Him and to serve Him according to His revealed will. That glorifies Him. Life, just as with all else in the cosmos, is *for God*. Can we grasp this?

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Physicists who specialize in cosmology attempt to formulate a grand Theory of Everything. They're on an ignoble quest that must fail, because they're too much in love with themselves to love God. In fact, they probably hate God. So their attempt to relate gravity, light, energy, time, space and matter and whatever else . . . must fail. But we who love God can easily suggest a theory of everything. It's this: Everything that exists and everything that happens is because God has deliberately placed them all on a grand stage, His Creation, as the setting on which a great drama takes place. Everything coheres in Scripture. Everything coheres in living forms. And so everything must cohere also in time and space, that is, in history. And the plot of this great, cosmic drama is God's great, transcendent love for unlovely, unworthy creatures. And somehow, as theologians more capable than I attempt to grasp, God is in all this glorified. Yes, there are sub-plots; we've discussed them again and again in our Sunday School lessons. But the big picture is there. Everything is to glorify God.

Let's summarize. God is dangerous. Yes! God is demanding. Yes. That too. But God loves. It's the most beautiful characteristic of His ineffable, superlative Being. He expresses His great love in revealing Himself in Scripture, in this world He created (think butterflies!), and in the daily circumstances of life. And He expresses His love in mercy, in grace, in forgiveness, by sending the Son to rescue us from deserved wrath and from the enslaving forces of evil. But love must be reciprocated for there to be a relationship. He created us and gave us life to know Him and to love Him – on His terms, of course. We don't have to if we don't want to. But it is why we're here. It's why everything is here.

Dear Reader: This attempt to understand something as big as God's ownership of all Creation is probably an exercise in vanity. But we need the lesson. And it's this: All of life must be a pursuit to know God. There's no more wonderful Being in existence, no greater reality than God, and He's invited us to not only know Him but to love Him and experience Him. Both now in this life and forever. Let's do it.