

God is the great giver. God is the great provider. God is the fount of every blessing. Absolutely generous and utterly dependable.

Read Psalm 104

Giving characterizes God's creation. God is a philanthropic creator. God produces stars, plants, birds, animals. And every gift God gives, God gives in bulk, multiples, and medleys. God begets Adam and Eve into a "liturgy of abundance" and tells them to follow suit: "be fruitful and multiply." I love what pastor and author Max Lucado offers on this, "Scrooge didn't create the world; God did." Isn't that what the psalmist is declaring so boldly? Twenty-three verses of itemized and lavish blessings from God. God is the source of "innumerable teeming things, living things both small and great."

God is not only the creator of the heavens and earth, and the mountains and the seas, and the animals and humankind. God is also the great giver of all we need and all we know that is good for us. For example...

God is the great giver of grace and love. From the earliest scribal notes of scripture, we read about God's grace. The word grace isn't used (we don't get that word until Jesus enters the scene generations later) but what God gives to Adam and Eve in the garden after their big adventure with the snake is indeed grace, isn't it? God doesn't send them away and try to start over saying, "Ok, let's try this again." God shows mercy and out of love, God graciously works with Adam and Eve to be more faithful. The gift of grace is specifically spoken of by Paul in his letters to the Church in Corinth as a gift to the Macedonians. We are getting a little closer to our time today. God's grace was a gift in all those years. It is God's grace that the entire foundation of the Christian church exists and places its hope, for we believe that we are ultimately saved by God's grace through faith." Without God's grace, I am not sure how and why you and I would be here today.

God is the great provider of promise and power. We have talked a lot over the last few years about God being a God of promises. We often sing the hymn *Standing on the Promises of God* as a reminder. God's faithfulness to God's promises is what assures us of God's power, so much so that we can claim possibility of what many might think is impossible, say can when so many want to throw in the towel and say can't, and believe we are able when another tries to convince us that we are unable. With God as our rock and refuge and fortress, with God for us, who, I confidently say, has a chance against us? There is no one greater than God and we shall worship and honor and praise and glorify no other god besides God.

If this were a movie script or a line in a novel, this would be the point when the music shifts and the script indents, and humankind's impeccable ability to not only worship other gods but even create other gods is illustrated somehow.

Even when God is the fount of every blessing, with all of God's greatest gifts available to us and filling us, there tends to be something else going on, a block in the channel of outflow, a build up of hesitation, a clog of extras that don't fit.

The scriptures are clear: God owns it all. God shares it all. God is the great giver!

To whom is God the great giver? For whom is God the great provider? To whom and for whom is God the fount of every blessing? To whom and for whom is God absolutely generous and utterly dependable? With whom is God sharing it all? You! Me! God's beloved children! We are the recipients and inheritors of all God's gifts. How awesome is that? How fortunate are we?

Do you know what that means? It means we are rich. Now, I know when we hear the word "rich" we immediately think "cha-ching- \$\$\$\$". I want to push that immediate reference further. To be rich isn't only measured in money. One can be rich in joy. One can be rich in love. One can be rich in family. One can be rich in friends. One can be rich in talent and skills. One can be rich in time. One can be rich in grace and mercy and compassion. One can be rich in strength and courage and perseverance. Indeed, sisters and brothers in Christ, as God's children, we are rich! I want to come back to this in a moment because before we get lost in thought of our richness, there is a very important element of relationship here that requires our attention.

Have you ever stopped and wondered why God has given so much? Think about it. Here we are claiming God as the great giver, the great provider, the fount of every blessing. Why? The scriptures reveal to us that God gives and provides out of love for God's people. The scriptures reveal to us that God gives and provides because God wants humanity to know of God's goodness and what better way to encounter God's goodness than through all the "good" God has created. The scriptures also reveal to us that God gives and provides because God is setting the example for what it means to hold up and honor an end of a covenant relationship. A covenant relationship is the type of relationship we, as God's children, have with God, as our creator and Lord and savior.

By definition, a covenant is a relationship that has been formalized and has been brought under sanctions, agreeing on promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities. God has made promises to us as God's people and God has provided the commands to which we are to follow and uphold. God is faithful in upholding God's promises and God is faithful in providing for us all we need to be who God has created us to be.

Five main covenants in scripture help us understand more about covenant relationships. The first is the covenant God makes with Noah after the flood. The second is the

covenant God makes with Abraham. The third is the covenant God makes with King David. The fourth, is the new covenant made in Jesus, the Christ. This is the most important one for us today, because it is through the gift of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and our faith and commitment to him, that we become God's people. The fifth is the understood ecclesiastical covenant, or solemn agreement, we hold with one another as members of Christ's church to act together in harmony with the good news of the gospel. Each of these covenants reveal God's true and loyal nature.

Throughout history, covenants have been a serious and sacred matter. In biblical times, when a covenant was made between two people, there was a ritual associated with it. First, an animal was sacrificed and cut in half. The two parties would then walk in a figure eight around the bloody pieces, reminding them of the seriousness of the agreement they were making. Next, a cut was made on the hand or forearm of each party. The hands were joined, allowing the blood to mingle, symbolizing that the two parties had become one in this covenant. Then dirt or ashes were rubbed into the wound to stop the bleeding. This left a scar to be a constant reminder to each party of the covenant. The parties would then exchange their coats, symbolizing that all that they owned was available for the other, and their belts, symbolizing that they would use their strength for each other. They would then sit down and tell the other party everything they owned, a complete accounting of their assets. Sharing a meal together completed the ritual.

Covenant relationships are commitment and devotion. We symbolize our covenant relationships today a little differently- wedding rings, baptism, communion, a signature on a piece of paper. Our ways today are not as flesh and blood forward. I wonder if they are as faithful, strong, and loyal?

The reason for discussing covenant relationships within the expression of God as the great giver is because being in a covenant relationship with God qualifies and empowers each of us then to also be great givers. We need to think about this. What does it suggest if all we did was receive from God and take? Out of God's great giving, we are to be great givers in return, in thanks. Great givers of what? Great givers of all we have that has come from God. And to whom? We give back to God in partnership with one another and we give to one another.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 concerning generosity. He is clear to outline that like the grace God has given to the Macedonian churches, "see that you also excel in this grace of giving." God has provided for us some of God's grace to enable us to be generous to those in need. In 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, Paul adds, "If you give a little you will be blessed a little and if you give a lot you will be blessed a lot. Each should give what he/she has decided in the heart to give." We are to be cheerful givers, not reluctant to share with those in need.

I told you I wanted to return to the part about being rich and here it is. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says, "those who are rich in the present age are commanded to be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share." We are rich in so many things! Money maybe, and that is great. Money is very helpful, especially in this economic age. However, giving grace to someone who could use a break or offering prayer of compassion for someone who could use some encouragement, those are great gifts. Whatever God has provided us, may we be ready to give and willing to share.

The amount we are to give is the amount we are to give. In Romans 12:3-8, Paul explains that we should look at ourselves soberly, "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." He goes on, "We each have different measures of faith and different gifts and God expects different results from each of us." What we are to be warned of is to stop looking in comparison to one another to determine what our giving should be. Faithful giving, or covenant giving, is between you and God. What God, the great giver, wants of us is to follow God as God provides for us and speaks to our hearts. No more, no less.

Maybe we too, in being faithful to God and all God's good gifts, can be known by God as "the great giver."