

LESSON ONE

Our Generous God

FOCAL TEXT

Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100;
John 3:16;
2 Corinthians 8:8–9;
Philippians 2:5–8;
James 1:17–18

BACKGROUND

Genesis 1:1; Psalm 100;
John 3:16;
2 Corinthians 8:8–9;
Philippians 2:5–8;
James 1:17–18

MAIN IDEA

All the Bible reveals
God's generous nature
and actions in creation,
redemption, and all of life.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Is the God you believe in
uncaring, stingy, or generous?

STUDY AIM

To acknowledge God's
generous nature and actions
and to state what God's
generosity means for my life

QUICK READ

From beginning to end, the
Bible confirms that God is a
giving God. We see this aspect
of God most clearly through
the life and sacrifice of Jesus.



As important as it is to know what we believe about God, we also need to be clear about what we *do not* believe about God. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright shared a dialogue he had with students while serving as a chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford, England. He wrote that each year he met with the new students to get to know them and welcome them.

. . . Most were happy to meet me; but many commented, often with slight embarrassment, “You won’t be seeing much of me; you see, I don’t believe in god.”

I developed [a] stock response: “Oh, that’s interesting; which god is it you don’t believe in?” This used to surprise them. . . . So they would stumble out a few phrases about the god they said they did not believe in: a being who lived up in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally “intervening” to do miracles. . . . Again, I had a stock response for this very common statement of “spy-in-the-sky” theology: “Well, I’m not surprised you don’t believe in that god. I don’t believe in that god either.”¹

Misconceptions and divine caricatures of God abound. Televangelists can leave the impression of a greedy and needy God. Others may think of God as humanity writ large, that is, petty, jealous in the worst sense, selfish, and grasping. The Bible, however, from beginning to end, paints a very different picture. At the core of God’s relationship with us lies a relentless and consistent generosity.

In his imaginative work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis constructed correspondence among demons about the best ways to tempt humans. He described the demonic goal as *absorption*. They take others and draw them in—absorbing them and their power to increase Satan’s own. Think of the shattered, dominated life of the Gerasene man in Luke 8. His body and mind were in utter slavery to the “Legion” of demons until Jesus set him free (Luke 8:30).

Yahweh’s goal is the opposite of absorbing others. God *gives* life and freedom. God desires to liberate us from those things that enslave us so that we can be the people he made us to be. “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).²

GENESIS 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

PSALM 100

- ¹ Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth.
- ² Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing.
- ³ Know that the LORD Himself is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
- ⁴ Enter His gates with thanksgiving
And His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him, bless His name.
- ⁵ For the LORD is good;
His lovingkindness is everlasting
And His faithfulness to all generations.

JOHN 3:16

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:8–9

⁸ I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. ⁹ 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.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–8

⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not

regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, [and] being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

JAMES 1:17–18

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Ex Nihilo (From Nothing) (Genesis 1:1)

The first thought of the Bible in Hebrew is literally, *in beginning, God*. God's first recorded action is creation. "In the beginning God *created* the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, italics added for emphasis). One of the earliest Christian doctrines about creation is that God created *ex nihilo* (Latin for *from nothing*). God did not, like a tinkerer, order the material that was already lying around. Rather, God created out of nothing.

Only an artist can transform a blank canvas into something inspiring and captivating. Likewise, God's universe is a masterpiece of beauty, complexity, and sharing. The first verse of Scripture describes God like the source of a great river—by his very nature sharing an ever-flowing torrent of life.

Shout to the Lord (Psalm 100)

The psalms celebrate the graciousness of God's nature over and over again. Psalm 100 describes a worship scene, with the congregation outside the temple singing and shouting praise and thanksgiving to God.

The reason for this jubilation is God’s gracious nature. This nature should spark praise beyond the confines of Israel, since God’s goodness reaches “all the earth” (Psalm 100:1). The psalmist described the expressions of God’s love in God’s creation of humanity, in God’s shepherding care (Ps. 100:3), and in God’s nature of goodness, lovingkindness, and faithfulness (100:5).

“Lovingkindness” is the Hebrew word *hesed*—one of the most common descriptions of what we find at the heart of God. It wraps together the ideas of covenant, love, faithfulness, commitment, and kindness. This psalm assures us that these things are abundant in the divine nature. We need not worry about diminishing returns or scarce resources. The supply is everlasting, and God’s faithfulness will remain as long as one generation succeeds another.

A Depth of Love (John 3:16)

The New Testament bears powerful witness to God’s generosity and graciousness in recording and celebrating God’s fullest revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. One of Scripture’s most famous verses confirms these aspects of God’s nature. In the midst of his conversation with Nicodemus, a “ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1) and “teacher of Israel” (3:10), Jesus pushed the focus beyond Israel. God’s love is for “the world” (3:16).

The nature of this love surpasses expectations. Most dictionaries define love with words of affection, feeling, passion, or desire. God’s love, however, is defined by a boundless depth of self-sacrificial giving. God’s love for us is not confined to divine feelings but was displayed in the great act of generosity: the giving of the “only begotten Son” (3:16).

Role Reversal (2 Corinthians 8:8–9)

In addition to seeing the Father’s willingness to give the Son for us, we find the character of generosity in Jesus himself. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul used Jesus’ example as he sought to inspire the Corinthians to give for the offering for the Jerusalem church. While their participation was assumed in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, their enthusiasm had seemingly waned.

First, Paul appealed to the example of the churches in Macedonia, who gave out of their own poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1–2). Then, in verse 9 he turned to the ultimate example of Jesus, who displayed this special nature of God. Rather than acting to increase his own power at the expense of others, Jesus gave profoundly and completely for the benefit of others.

Downward Mobility (Philippians 2:5–8)

In Philippians 2, Paul captured clearly and powerfully the attitude of giving. This language pushes beyond what we normally understand as *generous*.

We tend to evaluate the generosity of others based on the absolute amounts given. Evidence of such evaluation is the naming of such things as buildings and libraries after wealthy donors who give tremendous amounts. Jesus evaluated gifts, however, on the amount that was left. The widow he commended in Luke 21:1–4 gave much less in absolute terms than the rich of her day, but the sacrifice of her gift caught the Savior’s eye.

KENOSIS

In Philippians 2, we learn that instead of grasping equality with God, Jesus emptied himself. The Greek word for emptying, *kenosis*, has become an important term in theology for understanding the degree of God’s giving nature. In many ways, creation itself was a *kenotic* act of God. In creating us and giving us freedom, God chose to limit himself. Philippians 2 describes the *kenosis* of the incarnation.

The glory of Jesus’ heavenly existence lies far beyond our imaginative reach. C.S. Lewis attempted to describe the degree of *kenosis* in the incarnation in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis wrote, “The Eternal Being, who knows everything and created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a *foetus* inside a Woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.”⁴ Our God empties himself in radical *kenosis*. Do you?

Perhaps Jesus saw a reflection of himself in her giving. He did not give only a little of the excess of his heavenly holdings. He did not offer a percentage of what he had to cover the sins of humanity. The language goes far beyond that. Jesus “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7).

If someone had told us before it occurred that God would take on flesh and live among us, we would have been shocked and amazed. We probably would have imagined a figure so compelling that he would dwell in the greatest of palaces, with the kings of the entire world bringing tribute. If Jesus had come in such a way, we likely would still celebrate his humility of releasing heaven to take on flesh. Paul recounted, however, a very different model of incarnation. Jesus took the very form—the essence—of a slave. His downward mobility did not end there, for Jesus was obedient to death. His death was not just any death, but “death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). This was the death of the despised, the condemned, and the cursed.

If our picture of God is of a demanding and grasping deity, we have missed entirely the meaning of Jesus’ life. Jesus held nothing back as he gave himself to complete and utter emptiness for you and me. He had nothing left to give. Here we find the clearest evidence for the essential nature of God’s generosity.

Every Perfect Gift (James 1:17–18)

In his epistle, James beautifully highlighted the giving heart of God as he addressed one of the most fundamental life questions. Do such things as struggles, hardships, testing, and persecution come from God? James 1:13 answers the question with a definitive *no*. God does not tempt us to evil, scheming against us and delighting in our failures. The problem lies with our own evil desires, which give birth to sin and result in death (James 1:15). These wounds are self-inflicted.

James reminds us that God’s nature is constant and sure as a giver of good things and “every perfect gift” (1:17). Verse 17 mentions “lights” and “shifting shadows.” Some scholars see here a reference to heavenly bodies and to the belief of some that human fortunes are determined by the alignment of the planets or stars.³ James left no room for such an appeal to fate. Our giving God is the “Father of lights,” and his loving desire is for a very different progression to take place in us than the

MISSIONAL CHURCH

One of the important concepts about the church in recent years is the idea that a church should be *missional*. The term has come to mean different things to different people, but one important element is the idea that *sending* is at the heart of the church. Even as we seek to draw others to our churches to know the truth and hope of the gospel, how can we follow Jesus' example of giving in our sending?

downward spiral of verse 15. Rather, God freely chose to give us life and desires that we thrive as his “first fruits” (1:18).

Conclusion

Occasionally you might hear the phrase that a company or nation or product *sucks all the oxygen out of the room*. That image captures the essence of a cut-throat, zero-sum game, in which success leaves competitors gasping on the sidelines, with only one winner.

The biblical picture of God is the complete opposite. God gives from beginning to end, wholly and completely. Scripture's final image confirms it. In the depiction of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation 21–22, God's throne is the source of “a river of the water of life, clear as crystal” (Revelation 22:1). God is a giver for eternity.

This Lesson and Life

Philippians challenges us to a Christ-shaped life with the words, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Instead of grasping equality with God, Jesus emptied himself.

Life presents us with abundant opportunities to choose Jesus' path over a grasping one. Very basic things reveal our hearts. Do we spend most of our time on our own pursuits, ambitions, and entertainment, or do we invest our lives in ministry to others? Do we max out every ounce

3. Do you think or act as if good things in your life come from someone or something other than God?

4. How can you imitate our giving God?

NOTES

1. N.T. Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* (1998): 44.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–7 and the introductions to units 1 and 2 are taken from the 1995 update of the New American Standard Bible®.
3. Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 42.
4. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, New York: HarperCollins Press, 2001), 179.