



The Simplest Gift

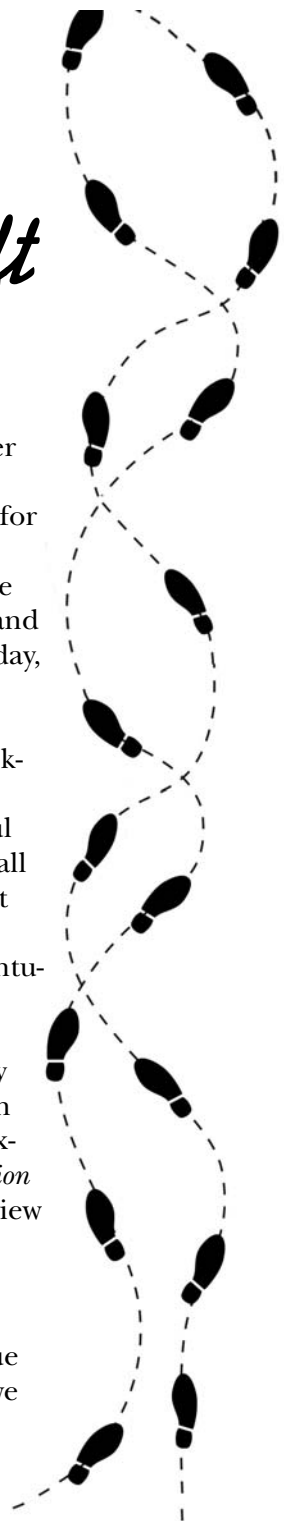
The phrase sounds so appealing: “Life is a sheer gift!” But this notion can all too easily be like a Sunday morning song that makes us feel good for a few minutes . . . until reality hits! When the warm, cozy feelings of Sunday worship meet the cold reality of Monday morning’s alarm clock and we step out of bed to face the demands of the day, does believing that life is a gift really make any difference?

Our performance-driven world is always looking for one more easy way to achieve the good life. A few simple steps here and a list of helpful hints there might seem like the way to help us all reach the goal of experiencing life as a gift. But while that approach might benefit us for a few weeks or even a few months, steps and tips eventually grow old because our performance-driven appetite is never ultimately satisfied.

Experiencing life as a gift is not another way of *doing* life. It is a way of *seeing* life. Rather than beginning with a reformation of what we do, experiencing life as a gift starts with a *transformation* of how we think—a radical change in how we view living.

A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE

We are absorbed in a culture where the value of our lives is intricately related to how much we





contribute to our society, families, workplaces, and even our churches. As long as we are growing and fruitful, we are deemed valuable. However, as soon as brokenness, frailty, or weakness emerges and our productivity decreases, our worth is devalued.

Our lives look a lot like the stock market sometimes. As productivity increases in our lives, our value rises. But as productivity decreases, our value falls. If we're not careful, the world tells us, we could even fall into human bankruptcy.

Is this really what it means to be human? Is the core of our human identity based upon the feats we accomplish during our relatively short lifetime? Are we only as good as our next production?

As the curtain rises on the biblical drama in the Book of Genesis, a radically alternative vision of the meaning and purpose of human life confronts and challenges our common performance-driven perception. Here we get a stunningly vivid picture of God's design for human life as a sheer and pure gift that can only be received and never achieved.

The story of our beginnings in Gen. 2 is one of deep intimacy. The life-giving, air-breathing Creator of the universe refuses to be aloof and stand at a distance from His creation. Instead, our God is the Potter who gets His hands dirty in the mud and water as He tenderly and intimately shapes His most prized artwork.

Having sculpted His perfect treasure, God proceeds in the most personal manner to breathe the very breath of life into this clay shell. As divine breath circulates through the empty earthen vessel, human life is animated: eyes open, nostrils flare, hands move, legs walk, a heart beats. This previously limp, lifeless piece of clay did absolutely nothing to achieve the breath that brought it to life. And yet, without accomplishing a single thing, it is fully alive.

This story is so much more than a sentimental childhood tale. It is profound; it is deep! Even more, it is mind-transforming as it paints a portrait of what it means for us to be

human. It tells us who we are—here, now, today. The gracious and loving breath of God continues to animate, awaken, and enliven us. The breath we inhale is not a product of our own creative powers, intelligence, wealth, or personality. We can't manufacture it; we can't buy it; we can't earn it. It is a gift—a sheer, simple, and pure gift from a graciously loving God. Our capacity to inhale life is the result of our loving God's willingness to exhale it. *The very core of our identity is not what we produce but what we receive.*

The Divine Potter then becomes the Divine Gardener as He plants a luscious, tree-filled garden that provides not only life-sustaining nourishment for the body but also beauty for the eye to see and the ear to hear and the hand to feel and the tongue to taste and the nose to smell.

Imagine that! This God cares so deeply for the human life that He creates a garden that provides nourishment to sustain our bodies and beauty to enliven our senses. He provides all that is necessary to nurture us and bring moments of enjoyment and celebration. What a gift! We did not plant the garden; we only received it.

The Divine Gardener then invites us into a cooperative partnership with Him. We become the caretakers of His garden. God is incredibly vulnerable as He shares with us the care and protection of His creation. We are not passive observers of His good gift of creation; we are active participants and celebrants in it. We are integral members of this garden of life, not because we created it but because we are *given* it.

As beautiful as this gift is, God pauses and announces that there is something in His creation that is not appropriate. Up to this point, everything that God has created is pronounced as *good*—even *very good*! However, as He looks upon His human creation, He declares that it is just not fitting for the human being to experience this garden of life alone (Gen. 2:18).

God concludes that human beings must share life, intimacy, community, and fellowship with others who also



laugh and cry and dream and hope and play and think and talk and imagine and love. This gift of life is designed for relationships. Human community becomes an integral part of the divine gift.

It's a sweeping contrast to viewing the source of life as human performance and achievement—breath freely given by an intimate Creator, a garden of nourishment and beauty, cooperative participation in what the Creator is doing, shared life in human community. It sounds too simple. It seems too childlike. However, God's counterintuitive vision of what it means for us to be human has far-reaching and life-impacting ramifications in even the smallest areas of our lives.

From the moment we step into the world, this life of breath and nourishment and partnership and community is a divine gift to unwrap and experience . . . *now*. What are we waiting for? Why do we keep it wrapped up and saved for tomorrow? It doesn't begin when we graduate, say "I do," climb to the top of the career ladder, move to the country, or cash in the 401(k). The breath is in us *now*. The garden of nourishment and beauty with all of its creatures surrounds us *now*. The opportunity to let our hearts and hands vulnerably melt into the hearts and hands of other warm bodies who laugh and dream and hope and cry is here . . . *now!*

According to the Giver, this gift of life is good—in fact, it is very good! Into our lives, this breath-breathing, garden-planting, partnership-sharing, community-forming God announces, *I give it to you . . . receive it, inhale it, eat it, rejoice in it, watch over it, play in it, share life in it. Take this gift of your humanity and be more than satisfied with it. Do more than cope with it. Live it! Breathe it! Celebrate it!*

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

We learn rather quickly in life to be skeptical of anything described as a free gift. As we mature, our adult cynicism adamantly states, "Nothing in life is free" or "If it sounds too

good to be true, it probably is.” We eventually stop asking, “Are there strings attached?” and instead ask, “Just how many strings are attached?”

In contrast to our awkward, adult way of receiving gifts, consider children. They instinctively know exactly what to do with a gift. They rarely scrutinize how beautifully the gift is wrapped or care how much the gift might have cost. With bright eyes of anticipation, they run to the gift and tear it open, even when an adult somewhere in the background is saying, “Save the ribbon!” They show their pleasure in a smile and exclamation of joy as they receive the gift and immediately try it on, play with it, or embrace it. In other words, they receive the gift as a gift and begin to *live it*.

The vision of life as a pure and simple gift seems like a fanciful, childish dream, and so we receive it like the seasoned, cynical adults that we are. The sheer joy of intimacy and partnership with God in what He is doing in His world disintegrates into a religion of legalistic performance in which we earn the grace of God through various acts of piety and service because, remember, nothing in life is free . . . not even the gift of life.

God is no longer viewed as the Gift-Giver but as the despot from whom we must hide out of fear. His creation is no longer received as a gift to experience but as an obstacle to overcome. The intimacy that we were created to experience with other human beings breaks down into relationships of competition and manipulation. Other people are no longer experienced as people with whom we mutually share this gift of life but as objects to use for our own benefit or obstacles to overcome and avoid.

Our inability to receive life as a gift goes back to the very beginning of the human story. Even though God announces that the garden of life is ours as a gift and that we are to take it, eat from it, live in it, see its beauty, taste its nourishment, experience its wonder, we say from the start, “This just sounds too good to be true.” Nevertheless, God keeps saying, *I’m the Creator; you’re the creature. I’m the Garden-Giver;*



you're the garden-receiver. Just trust Me. Let Me keep being the Life-Giver; you keep being the life-recipient. Trust Me!

In spite of God's tenacity to keep giving the gift of life, it seems that His alternative vision just can't penetrate into the way we think. Every now and then we get hold of a good suggestion or two on how we might more boldly embrace the gift of life. From time to time, we even resolve to rest in God for a while. But when we have to face realities of the world, we just can't quite believe it. We live like there is a catch.

Maybe we've been told so often that life really is what we can accomplish and produce that we become numb to any other option. Just like the first human beings, we keep eating from that one tree that promises we can be little gods of our lives—little creators, producers, achievers.

THE DILEMMA OF A FALSE IDENTITY

We are left with a huge dilemma! While at the very heart of our identity we are created and designed to be gift people, we end up with a false identity as performance people. As a result, we spend entire lifetimes absorbed in trying to discover who we are by what we accomplish and produce. One more incentive is always dangling just in front of us. We jump a little higher and achieve a little more so that *this time* we can really experience life to its fullest.

In the face of failure, some of us move or get nudged to the sidelines of life. We must conclude that we were never fully capable of living a *real* life. We take a position in the spectator stands and watch with regret, indifference, or defeat as others pass us by.

The strange delusion that the creation of life is somehow in our control continues, perhaps even extends, into a belief that we can also provide life to significant people around us. It can lead to being absorbed in working from our own power to sustain friends, aging parents, needy co-workers, and children. We draw a direct correlation be-

tween the significance of our own life and the happiness and well-being of others.

We are failing to realize just how utterly dependent we are upon a life-giving God to remain the Source of life to both ourselves and the people for whom we care. Our daily tasks are no longer carried out cooperatively with the Life-Giver. Instead, the joy of partnership with God becomes the dull task of merely surviving another day with God, with His creation, and with other people.

OUT OF PRODUCTION

There is a powerful alternative to living 24/7 as if life is something we can ultimately gain through our performance. Into our hectic, production-oriented lives steps the God who has been breathing the gift of life into us from the very beginning—even in those times when we are most strongly under the delusion that life is our own accomplishment. He refuses to stand by and let us live under this false impression. This God just won't settle for our mistaken belief. He is determined to be the life-giving, grace-bearing God in our lives.

God steps into our overdriven, performance-oriented lives just like He has always come throughout the story of humanity. He breaks into the lives of weak, frustrated, anxious, production-oriented people, and He promises that He will be the Life-Giver. He will loosen the grip of yesterday's brokenness. He will be present with us in all of today's needs. He will guide us into tomorrow's future. In all things, He holds out the promise of life as a pure, simple, gracious gift.

The Bible is filled with stories of this God who bursts forth with promise into the lives of women and men who come to the end of their capacity to produce life for themselves. To a generation whose hopes are crushed and whose dreams are demolished, He announces, "I know the plans I have for you. . . . They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11, NLT).



To nomadic, landless families, God makes promises that they will settle in a land that flows with blessing and life.

To women who are barren, God makes promises that they will give birth to descendants who will eventually become as numerous as the stars in the sky.

To a runaway fugitive incapable of speaking publicly, God promises that he will lead a group of freed slaves.

To persons incapable of achieving and accomplishing, God makes promises that obstacles of great city walls will tumble down, that feared giants will be overcome, and that threatening enemies will be silenced.

Promises of hope continue in the life and ministry of Jesus as blind people receive sight, dead people are resuscitated, lepers become whole, sinners are brought back into the community, outcasts are accepted, and prisoners are released!

To a world that says only men with land can produce crops, only fertile women can produce children, only eloquently trained politicians can convince the power of the world to free slaves, and only physically elite warriors can carry out the battle, God declares an alternative and makes a promise. Those people who cannot produce or achieve or accomplish in their own strength receive sight, life, hope, and acceptance. The human delusion that life can be gained through what we accomplish is shown for what it really is through the vision of a God who comes with a promise to work in ways that we could never think or imagine.

The same God who set life into motion bursts forth into our empty, desolate, production-oriented lives with a word of hope as He makes a promise: *I will continue to pour out the gift of life to you. I will take the most barren, nonproductive places of your life, and I will act. I will take the most impoverished, desolate, empty places of your life, and I will work.*

CREATORS OF OUR OWN PROMISE

As God speaks of this incredible promise of life—a promise of a hope-filled tomorrow—we are prone to design

for ourselves just how that “promised life” from God should appear. In certain seasons, we might decide the promise should take the form of acceptance to the right graduate school, alleviation of financial debts, a career on the fast track, or a position of influence in the church or community. When we decide we’re ready, we might even feel the promise should orchestrate a lifelong, committed marriage with one whom we deeply love.

For some, we’re banking on the fact that God’s promise of life will mean freedom from the brokenness that we presently face. We design a future with no grief or tears, no fractured relationships, or no indecision about what we are to do.

When we begin taking matters into our hands and designing for ourselves what God’s faithfulness should look like in any area of life, we place limitations on God. If those details do not work out the way we expected, then we conclude that either God was not true to what He promised or we failed to perform well enough to attain His promises—key phrase: *failed to attain*.

God leads us into a tomorrow that is filled with His faithfulness and love, but His plans for us go far deeper and greater than the tiniest details of life that we attempt to design and then footnote with God’s approval. God’s plan for us is wholeness—life that is experienced as a sheer and total gift.

RECEIVING THE GIFT OF LIFE

Life does not suddenly become a gift when all of the pieces fit together in one neat package. It’s time to receive the gift wherever we are along the journey. Take it! Open it! Wear it, play with it, and delight in it!

The lifetime guarantee states that through good times and difficult ones, during routine and mundane days, when challenge and change are present, in seasons of peace and chapters of chaos, God is promising, *I gave you life and I will keep giving you life. Just trust Me.*



One thing is certain: this gift of life was never intended to be hidden away for safekeeping or simply used someday in the future. Unwrap it and experience it now!