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CHAPTER 1

A WORLD MADE RIGHT

The first major theme of the story of everything is that God intended for the world to be perfect—entirely and completely right. A world *nearly* right is not enough. God desires us and the world around us to be made *completely* right with Him. Our deepest suspicions and demands are that the world be made *right* right now! This is more proof that we are part of a big story, a story that encompasses everything around us. In our everyday longing for things to be right, we see how we were made for a perfect world.

Although some days in life are like a storybook and some are like a nightmare, our wedding day was as near to perfect as it could be. My wife and I were spending our wedding night at the finest hotel in town before flying out in the morning for our honeymoon. I remember the gold luggage carts spun atop granite

floors; bellhops marching to the beat of ubiquitous, aromatic music; exuberant and earnest staff waiting on our every need. Our world on our wedding day was *nearly* perfect; all was *nearly* right—with one glaring exception. Just days before our wedding, I slipped during an ice storm and broke my ankle. I still remember the gasp of hundreds of wedding guests when I walked into the church sanctuary for the ceremony—not even my own mother knew I had broken my ankle. The accident happened during a crippling early spring storm. In the days before the wedding, all I could do was get bandaged and booted up while taking care of all the last-minute wedding plans, and so nobody knew about my accident. Showing up on our wedding night on crutches made the staff of the fine hotel even more energized to serve us. They rolled out the red carpet, adding all kinds of optional services to our stay at no extra cost. We were treated like a king and queen, and all was *nearly* right in our world, all except my broken ankle.

There is a significant difference between a very high-end hotel and the vast majority of what I now experience as a frequent traveler. As a conference speaker, I spend between 120 and 140 days away from home each year, and I've become painfully aware of the nuanced differences in hotel accommodations. Most of the time, a hotel experience is what I would call "adequate": a free snack, a warm breakfast, a nearly clean room, reliable Wi-Fi, and a "good

enough” television. Every now and then, however, I am able to enjoy something special, like I did on my wedding night. While the brushes with hotel greatness are certainly few and far between, the difference is simply astounding. Fresh strawberry blintzes served by gloved and polished waitstaff, the clanking of real silverware against fine china plates, turndown service with plush robes, spa treatments where I am called by name. I can count on one hand the times I’ve had these experiences, and I certainly count myself among the lucky few who have. Most people will never visit this kind of hotel, and were it not for the generosity of others, I may have never done so either. Hobbling into that hotel on my wedding night made my day nearly perfect, but it was also the beginning of a realization, an awakening of sorts. You see, now I know what I’ve been missing and it has tainted me for good and for bad as a frequent traveler.

Whether or not you travel often, this disparity plays itself out in all kinds of places all around us every day. There is another level to almost everything—a hidden set of upgrades usually reserved for the wealthy and powerful. Whether one is experiencing baseball games, movie theaters, shopping, hotel stays, or air travel, there is almost always a secret and expensive version of most services and events. In some ways, it would be better to never have known very high-end treatment than to do so and not be able to experience it again. In some ways,

my few brushes with hotel greatness have tainted my frequent “adequate” hotel stays. “Good enough” in the back of my mind is always defined by what I know could be: a better bed, better food, generous and attentive staff, and pampering. The great news is that hotel stays, good and bad, are not everyday reality. They are temporary experiences based on nothing more than a financial transaction. The entire visit is compressed into a hotel bill. However, something profound in the hotel stay gives us a glimpse into the story of everything.

BOUNTY IN A GOOD WORLD POINTS US TO THE BOUNTY OF THE WORLD TO COME

The one thing all very high-end hotel experiences have in common is that they hint at an aspect of the story of everything we’ll call “bounty.” Bounty in this world points us to a hint that there should be something more and that there will be something more in the world to come. The gold luggage carts, the hotel emblems embossing each granite entryway, the white gloves, and the ever-present and smiling staff of very high-end hotels express excess, luxury, and personal care. My definition of the word *bounty* is “A wide variety of good things given freely and in large amounts.” The idea of bounty, then, has these four contours:

- variety,
- goodness,

- free or “unrecompensed,” and
- abundance.

Fancy hotels are nearly perfect. They come very close to this concept of bounty with one exception, the cost, which makes them unavailable to most people. Nothing is free in the hotel transaction—not really. Even the smiles come at a fee in the end as they are tucked neatly into the cost of the overall service for the stay. The “given freely” aspect of bounty is nearly unheard of in our world. This, however, is where we see the very center of the story of everything unfold. In the ultimate conclusion to the story of God, there is wild, extravagant bounty offered freely to all people. Although we do a pretty good job at creating “near perfect” days for special occasions like a wedding, it comes at a price that very few can afford. In contrast, God is in the process of creating a world of variety, goodness, and abundance that, while costly (we’ll get to that), is offered to all peoples free of charge.

Growing up poor and often homeless, my family was always on somebody’s radar. People often want to do things for those in need. Some of the reasons people offer help are good and altruistic; others are bad and merely serve the person who is “helping.” When you are the person always receiving help, determining which kind of “help” you are getting is pretty easy, even for a child.

One Christmas my mother drove my brothers and me to the store where she had registered us in a

shopping spree with Santa for underprivileged kids. The store was closed, open only to the few children who had been accepted by the community group sponsoring the event. Our sponsor greeted us at the door, welcomed us in, and gave each of us a voucher worth thirty dollars! I felt like lucky Charlie in his chocolate factory with the winning golden ticket. The sponsor told me that I could buy *anything* in the store. *Anything!* I was overwhelmed by both the size of the store and the amount of money I had to spend. My sponsor chaperoned me up and down the aisles. For the first five minutes or so, he seemed as excited as I was, but quickly he became distracted, looking at his watch and asking me over and over again if I had made my choices. I took my time, however, choosing a gift for each of my brothers and my mother before determining how much I had left over to spend on myself. Of course, the gifts I was buying my family were all in the three- to six-dollar range to leave the bulk of the money for me—it only stands to reason.


After putting a few items in my cart, I told my sponsor I needed to go to the record section (this was the mid-1970s, so we're talking vinyl!). There I didn't need any time at all. I made my way to an all-black album on display with Gene Simmons covered with makeup along with the three other band members from my favorite rock band—Kiss! “I want Kiss Alive 2!”

The sponsor said, “That’s inappropriate, kid. Why don’t we go look at the toys?”

Immediately, I threw his words back at him. “You *said!* You said *anything* in the store! This is what I want!” Looking at his watch, the sponsor said, “Whatever. Knock yourself out.” I picked the album up with excitement, holding it by its edges so as not to smudge the artwork, and made my way to the checkout counter with him.

At the end of the shopping spree, the local newspaper shot a photo with all the sponsors and their organization’s sign. After the picture the sponsors took off and the kids scattered back to their parents. It was a glorious day of self-indulgence and self-congratulations. Both the person giving the gifts and the children receiving the gifts were mutually benefited, as documented by the local newspaper. Helping went both ways that morning. I felt I owed nothing to that man or his group; he seemed to benefit from the event as much as I did.

I spun that record over and over for years to come, and with each spin I remembered that day vividly, the day when I received a wide variety of good things given freely to all registered children by people trying to help. Giving and receiving in the *normal* world is often like this, but in God’s story, it is not. As the recipient in the story of everything, we cannot give anything back to God. There is no “recompense,” no possible repayment or mutual contribution we can give when God is involved. All of our “doing” for God is meaningless compared to what He did (and does!)



God invites us to good things, not the least of which is a relationship with Him—a covenant relationship, where we belong to God and to the people of God!

#dosomethingbeautiful

for us. And He gives not out of guilt for being wealthy, but freely and gladly to those who don't deserve it.

GOD'S DINNER TABLE IS SET!

God's gifts to us are not like a shopping spree where we selfishly indulge our wants (whether they're good for us or not). True bounty, the bounty God is offering, is more like a family feast where we are included not in a posed photo op but at the actual table. In Isaiah 55:1-3 we see God's invitation to bounty, an invitation that is both for today and ultimately for all peoples in the forever after of the story of God:

“Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
 and you will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me;
 listen, that you may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
 my faithful love promised to David.”

Now, doesn't that sound like a dinner bell, a great invitation to a fantastic five-diamond hotel feast?!

This is a picture of God's story. This is a snapshot into God's heart, a heart that longs to sound the dinner bell and set the table where all are invited.

What this means for you personally is that God has invited *you*, specifically *you*, to His dinner table of bounty. God doesn't just love the world; He loves the specific people of the world. God's great story, called the kingdom of God, is unfolding throughout the world, but it never unfolds without a specific invitation to each and every one of His precious children. In this invitation, you should read God's invitation to you, not just to the world around you. For some people, it is easier to think of God's love for the world or for the people around them than it is to think about God's love for them personally. Reread the words of Isaiah, but where you see the word *you*, put your name in and see what it would be like for God's great invitation to the story of everything to be made out to you!

At God's table a wide variety of good gifts are given freely and in large amounts. Without "recompense" or repayment, God invites "everyone" to come to the table and enjoy these good gifts. And the most valuable gift we enjoy when we come to the table is a relationship with Him—a covenant relationship, where we belong to God and to the people of God! This is the very core, the center of the bounty God is offering.

Bounty is expressed in physical abundance, like a great feast at the table. It's seen in the connection

and intimacy between the people around the table. But the most valuable and indispensable aspect of bounty is the relationship we have with the host of the feast, God Himself. Famous and somewhat controversial missiologist Stanley Hauerwas talked about a “story-formed community” as the primary way to understand our place in the story of God. He says, “A people are formed by a story which places their history in the texture of the world.”¹ We become a people, a meaningful community, as we find ourselves together involved in a greater story than just the story of the individual.

His provision for His people goes beyond our physical needs and extends to things like love, belonging, relationship with Him, and togetherness with each other. We see this in every single aspect of the story of God. In the garden of Eden, God planted a well-positioned garden, made it aesthetically pleasant with trees that flourished and grew fruit to feed the newly established community, Adam and Eve. What made the garden a place of true bounty, however, was the fact that God was there, that He walked with Adam and Eve daily, that they were all together. The promised land God invited Moses to bring the Israelites into was a land so full of bounty that it was described as good, spacious, and flowing with milk and honey. What made the promised land so special, however, was that God chose to make His home there, to dwell with His people as a foreshadowing of a time

when God would make His dwelling with us.

The story of God is punctuated with imagery of wedding feasts, singing and dancing, festivals, art and architecture, rich food and wine, but most of all, relationship with Him. The story of God is about making things right and people whole, binding up broken hearts and ankles. True bounty is God's ultimate intent because it is in His nature. God is a God of bounty! Most of the time in our world, bounty is seen as wasteful, luxurious, or excessive—because we almost always experience a cheap counterfeit of true bounty. We experience “near-bounty,” broken expressions of bounty that cost us more than we have, are not intrinsically good, or lead to division between the haves and the have-nots of the world.

That's why when we chase after near-bounty it never satisfies us, because even if we can get into that fancy hotel, it is all a cheap imitation of what we've been designed for. Even if we found a way to get around problems of exclusion through expense, we still fail to experience true bounty because we forget true bounty is intertwined with a relationship with God. Bounty is bound up with being made right with God, and it requires a relationship with Him. All the active expressions of God, including creation, salvation, and restoration, are gifts of true bounty. The story of everything ultimately leads us to the experience of knowing Him personally, and that requires something beyond justice, something called “righteousness.”

GOING BEYOND JUSTICE

The next Firefly Idea we'll look at is Righteousness. Bounty is about the world made right. Righteousness is about people being made right so they can participate in and contribute to Bounty. Humans long for both Bounty and Righteousness, but neither can be obtained unless God makes it happen. And both are built on relationship with Him. The etymology of the English word *righteousness* dates back to the early sixteenth century, to an Old English word meaning *rightwise*. The fullest sense of "rightwise" goes beyond justice or justification; it goes beyond being in the right or morally acceptable—it means to participate in and contribute to the bounty in the world.

Righteousness: *The state of being made morally acceptable to God.*

The experienced reality of righteousness, at least from the English etymology, is bounty! The theological word in the Bible for righteousness, however, means simply to be morally acceptable to God, to be right. The great news is that the reality of a person who is right with God (we'll talk shortly about how that can happen) is bounty. We see this in Ephesians 1:3–14, where the bounty of the righteous is described. In this passage we see how God gives freely and in large

amount the wide variety of good things to those who have been made “rightwise” with Him:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

Take a second and reread these verses slowly. Notice that, as we’ve seen before, the bounty of God includes

things like belonging, blamelessness, joy, forgiveness, unrecompensed eternal riches, knowledge, wisdom, hope, inheritance, life, and connection to God and to God's children through the Holy Spirit. But notice too how all this Bounty is tied to being "rightwise." These gifts are jam-packed here at God's dinner table in just fourteen verses. This is just one of many passages in the Bible that tell us what the experienced reality is like for those made "rightwise."

Righteousness requires that a person or world be just, but it is much more than mere justice. You see, justice focuses on rights, on equity, on restitution; but righteousness is fundamentally about bounty. Justice makes someone pay what is owed; righteousness comes to us without "recompense" or required payment. God gives righteousness freely, liberally, to all who come and get it while it's hot! Justice is important, but it only balances the scales to equality, to what is due. Beyond justice, as a totally free and unearned gift, we see righteousness. Righteousness isn't about earning a cosmic merit badge or feeling like a better person than someone else; righteousness is about experiencing abundance, bounty, eternal life, which includes things like joy, belonging, hope, togetherness, and so much more.

God wants to give us many things, but He wants to start with righteousness. Righteousness is not merely the absence of wrong, but the presence of what is right, beautiful, and true—the experienced reality

of bounty. For many people, our longing for a world made right—a world with God’s true Bounty—begins with the desire for justice. But mere justice by itself is always dissatisfying, isn’t it?

We can never experience a world “made right” simply by establishing justice. Justice is merely the doorway through which we must walk to get to righteousness. Even when justice wins the day, so much more is needed to have an experience of bounty. Imagine someone who is falsely incarcerated but set free after years of suffering. He may have finally gotten justice, but he is not living into the blessing of bounty. A community that suffers under the tyranny of a despot may be freed through winning a war or fleeing their land, but the ravages of death, displacement, disease, and despair along the way fall far short of bounty. The story of God does, in fact, include the establishment of justice, but the great news is that it goes much, much further.

THE STORY OF EVERYTHING IS LIKE A WEDDING

When Jesus began His public ministry, He chose to do so during the bounty at a wedding feast. While the wedding feast was happening, Jesus’ mother begged Him to intervene in a small crisis. The wine had run out when the party was far from over. Jesus responded with the first “sign” of His power and identity. In John 2:6–11 we read,

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Signs are more than miracles. They are also prophetic metaphors pregnant with meaning. Signs are events that show us the world to come, what God is like, artifacts of another time and space. This particular sign is important because it is the first in the story of Jesus. This sign shows us the nature of the world we were made for, the world God is in the process of creating. In this sign we see the very core of the story of everything, and we see our place in that story! This sign places value on joy and celebration, togetherness and community. It acknowledges the centrality of

bounty. This sign has nothing to do with what is adequate; in fact, just the opposite. It is about large amounts of very high-end wine. It is about breaking with tradition to lavish people with something truly extraordinary. This sign “revealed his glory” as well, meaning that it unveiled the essential nature of Jesus Christ and the story He seeks to establish.

Here it is, our “firefly idea.” Bounty is the experienced reality of righteousness of those made right with one another and made right with God! In the next chapter, we’ll consider doing something right, but first we need to ask the question, “How do I *become* right?” This is the fundamental question that will drive everything else. In the story of everything, we understand that something went wrong, much worse than a broken ankle in an ice storm.

Bounty: *A wide variety of good things given freely and in large amounts.*

Right in the beginning of human history, there was a major, earth-shattering, heartbreaking detour. Adam and Eve decided to turn their eyes to “near-bounty” by seeking a bounty that came without God. In fact, it came in opposition to Him and with that decision they became “un-rightwise.” They came under His wrath, subjects of His justice. That decision became an

infection that has been passed on to every single man, woman, and child personally and has also broken every culture of every people group, every structure and system throughout all time. The decision to seek near-bounty without a relationship with God brought just the opposite of bounty—it brought want and need, death and pain, despair and destruction. That decision was a “sign,” an indication of humanity’s true desire to live life, to enjoy life, to consume life without God at the center.

God had told them they would die if they ate the fruit. And even if all the ramifications of that one decision could never have been known at the time, through that one decision came a spiritual infection the Bible refers to as “sin.” Sin is a hereditary spiritual darkness. Like it or not, you have it and so does every single person in the world. From the beggar on the streets of Bangalore to the richest man on earth, all of us have a darkness within that disqualifies us from the bounty of God. This spiritual infection shows up in the symptoms of life. We see it in things like greed, envy, lust, hatred, racism, abuse, self-indulgence, gossip, and other maladies. These maladies do not make us unrighteous; we are unrighteous to start! They are the symptoms of our unrighteousness. These symptoms do, however, require justice. Remember, justice is the doorway through which we *must walk* to have the experienced reality of bounty—a relationship with God. A relationship with anyone, let alone God

Himself, requires grace and mercy. God's grace is not "leniency," as if God is soft on unrighteousness. Mercy in a relationship with God is about His understanding of our limitations because of the condition we have. We are sickened with sin; we have a spiritual disease, and because of this, God is patient and slow to anger. God strives with us and it is in the striving that we experience a moment-to-moment "mercy" from God. Why does God give mercy? Simply because what He is ultimately after is a relationship of love and that just can't happen if justice and mercy are at odds with each other. God is both just and merciful, and He is able to be both because of Jesus. Jesus paid our debt, and without that payment there could be no merciful justice, no grace whatsoever.

THE FIRST STEP INTO THE STORY OF EVERYTHING

If we are going to be made right with God and enter into the story of everything, justice must be met first. The story of everything is not primarily about justice; however, it is the first step into the story of righteousness and what is ultimately beautiful. The justice that addresses the infection of sin and the consequences of our symptoms is itself the greatest expression of the bounty of God.

The entire bill for our sin was given to Jesus instead of to us. Even though He was "rightwise," having no sin, He paid the penalty for all that we've done and left undone when He died on the cross. His death on

the cross pays the penalty for our wrongdoing, and the blood He shed has become the medicine to cure us from the infectious source of our maladies . . . sin itself. When we choose to acknowledge this great gift of recompense Jesus provides through His death, we can then receive the power to be made right with God. When we acknowledge that Jesus paid our debt, we can receive a “paid-in-full” receipt and experience the true bounty of a relationship with God.

Allowing Jesus to step in and pay our debt enables us to enter the story of God by *following Him* as our leader or master-teacher. While the turning of water into wine was Jesus’ first sign, and it promised great Bounty to come, His greatest sign came in His death and resurrection from the dead, which made a way for anyone who would trust Jesus with their life to be free from their unrighteousness, become righteous, and partake in God’s great bounty. Because Jesus rose from the dead, He is alive, we can follow Him today, and we can experience the righteousness that comes from a relationship with Him. Sounds like fireflies, doesn’t it? It is God’s cosmic dinner bell—seemingly too fantastical to be true, nevertheless it is. God says come, acknowledge your thirst, and eat and drink without payment; come to Me and experience intimacy through a covenant relationship with Me. As you are reading these words and you are sensing a desire to be made right with God, I want you to stop and consider saying these words out loud to God,

God, I want to be made right with You. I want to know You. I acknowledge that Jesus paid the debt for all that I've done and not done, and I receive the gift of His death in my place. I ask that You cure me from the infection of sin through the medicine of the blood of Jesus. Come into my life and lead me. I want You to be the Lord, the leader, of my life. Thank You for welcoming me into Your kingdom! I believe You are alive, Jesus. I believe You were raised from the dead, and I'm asking You to forgive me and include me at the dinner table You have prepared.

The words themselves can be said in different ways, but saying this to God is how we answer His invitation to come to the table, acknowledging that Jesus is the only way for us to both be made right and to experience the bounty of being right with God. This is the first step to finding our place in the story of everything and will ultimately lead us to a place where we can do beautiful things with God. This is the way we begin to live into bounty. Becoming right with God is the first step to doing something right, of becoming a source of bounty to the world around us. To be made right and to experience Jesus, we need to receive His righteousness. This not only changes our lives now; it prepares us to be a part of His forever family in the world to come. In my book *Making All Things New: God's Dream for Global Justice*, I wrote,

Our righteousness comes as a gift from God, and all righteous acts are only made possible only because of the

grace and empowerment of God. We will be clothed—made acceptable—to participate in this day of days because the Lamb was slain, providing the righteousness necessary to gain entry into the wedding feast of all time. This is a prerequisite of being able to experience the dream of God. Without the righteousness of Christ—these clean and bright linens—we would never experience the joy of this day.²

Jesus is not a nice add-on to our lives—He is everything. We need Him if we are to have righteousness, experience righteousness, and eventually participate in a world of righteousness. Taking this step to acknowledge Him is the beginning of finding our place in the story of everything!