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Our Works
on the Altar

MARK FEEZELL

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Soli Deo gloria

This book is dedicated to Christians who create, pastors and authors of Bible studies and sermons, and academics who expand the boundaries of biblical knowledge.

How far will your gifts reach?

How will you steward them?

Will your work matter in a century?

Measure thy life by loss
 and not by gain,
Not by the wine drunk, but
 by the wine poured forth,
For love's strength standeth in
 love's sacrifice,
And he who suffers most has most to give.

— Ugo Bassi, as quoted by
Lilias Trotter in *Parables of the Cross*

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INTRODUCTION

Wisdom or Folly?

BETWEEN FEBRUARY AND December 2024, I released nearly all my life's work to the public domain on my website—over 700 works, including poetry, landscape photographs, classical compositions and arrangements, Christmas carols, hymn arrangements, my doctoral dissertation, and a new book about Psalms. In about eight months, I relinquished all the copyrights for nearly everything I had ever made, renouncing my royalties and my control over my creative output of three decades.

Think of everything you have ever created that glorifies Jesus: all your Christian books or songs or paintings or sermons or poems. Now imagine removing your copyright notices from them

and posting them on the Internet with no use restrictions. Did your heart just go up into your throat? Does this sound foolish? Impractical? Irresponsible? Stupid? Maybe it is, but this book tells the story of how I came to pursue this path with complete certainty and peace.

I have been creating things for over 40 years, and I have been in academia for almost 30 of those years. During this journey, the Lord has given me unique opportunities to observe and experience many ways of carrying the blessings and burdens of creativity. I've lived long enough now to see how those many different choices have played out. My prayer is that the stories in this book will help you to think practically about your creative gifts and that the Lord will guide you as you choose how to best steward them.

CHAPTER ONE

The Blessing and the Burden

THE CREATIVE SPARK is both a blessing and a burden.

The blessing flashes on us like a lightning bolt. We wake up from a dream with a melody in our head. We see the perfect angle for the sunlight, the perfect combination of colors, the perspective and scene all wrapped together into a unified vision. A turn of phrase hits us, and it quickly grows into a poem or lyric for a song. Or perhaps the Lord sparks into vibrant life some latent connections amongst scripture passages, and we realize we have never read or heard an insight into God's Word quite like this one.

And so we jump out of bed in the dark or pull the car over or run into our study or go to the piano or pick up our guitar, and the ideas pour out. It's an exhilaration like no other. We become, for those brief moments, a pure channel for beauty, wisdom, and insight flowing into this world. It is of us, and we shape it, and yet somehow it is also not of us. And at the best of times, it feels as if we are nothing more than observers of a river flowing through us—yet somehow past us—and onto the page before us, like putting our fingers into a waterfall and watching it change as it flows ever on its course. We may shape it, but we cannot stop it.

The Narnia scholar Michael Ward, in Chapter 3 of his book *The Narnia Code*,¹ describes how he had a sudden “eureka moment” while reading Lewis’s poem “The Planets.” He jumped up and began to grab books off his shelves, making discoveries that would challenge and change the entire world of Lewis scholarship. In a single evening, Ward suddenly envisioned a dramatic new approach to reading Lewis that would become his dissertation and the basis of his books *Planet Narnia* and *The Narnia Code*.

This lightning bolt of creative insight seems to be a common coin among creatives and academics. Composer Igor Stravinsky wrote his Octet for

1. Michael Ward, *The Narnia Code* (Tyndale House, 2010), 27–29.

wind instruments after dreaming about which instruments to include. Rich Mullins famously wrote “Our God is an Awesome God” in his head while driving to a conference. I could cite many more examples, but if you are a creative or a scholar or a pastor, you do not need them. You know this is true because you’ve lived it yourself.

And yet, sadly, the lightning fades. The storm blows past. The sunset’s crimson flame grows grey. And we are left with the burden and the questions. We look over what we typed or wrote or painted or composed or researched or photographed, and a crushing doubt settles over us. What began as an avalanche of joy and a waterfall of insight sooner or later transforms into mountains of uncertainty and a burden we can never quite release.

Maybe we read our poem to a dear friend, and they give us only a blank stare in return. Or perhaps we read a bit of our article or dissertation idea to a colleague, and they tell us it sounds like something a famous scholar published already. “That song sounds like so-and-so,” we hear when we play our new worship song for the keyboardist at church.

The questions bombard us relentlessly: Is this worth anything? Will anyone care? Why am I wasting my time with this? When will I finish it? Can I finish it? Should I? What will I do with it when I’m done? Why should I work on this when I should be

doing more “productive” things? And what about my other ideas that I still haven’t finished? How can I start a new painting or book or song when I can’t even finish the last one? Is my work really any good? Am I really any good? Or am I just fooling myself and pretending? Will my work change the world, or am I just another deluded nobody?

Then we recall our calling to proclaim God’s good news and glory with our work, and a whole new level of questioning begins: Is this idea a gift from God, or did I just make it up? Is this true to the Lord’s character? Is it true to the Bible? Will God want it? Will He bless it? How can I justify spending time on my own creative or academic work when God needs people to do such-and-so? And how do I know which project or song or poem or painting or article or textbook or sermon God really wants me to work on?

We feel guilty when we work on our creative ideas because we should be doing day-to-day things that “need” to get done. Yet we also feel guilty when we do the day-to-day things that “need” to get done because we are taking God’s giftings for granted and not stewarding them well. We long to share our work with others because we desperately hope it will bless them. Yet we shrink from sharing because we are sure they won’t understand it or care about it the way

we do. We crave recognition and applause. Yet we feel guilty if anyone ever gives us any because we know God wants us to be humble.

And so it continues for years, the cycle of blessing and burden, of lightning and languor, of praise and put-downs, of guilt over time spent creating and guilt over time spent not creating, of broadcasting our work and burying it. All of us who create new things live suspended amongst all these states of being, like a quantum superposition. We learn to work through it or pray through it or ignore it—for a while.

Eventually, many of us give up and decide it is easier not to struggle with it anymore. We put away our poetry books and sketchbooks and guitars and dreams about sharing new insights from the Bible, and we settle into a comfortable life like “normal” people. We have no more guilt about not finishing things, and we have no more guilt about pursuing the activities and obligations of “normal” life. All those poems or paintings or photographs or book drafts or songs are safely tucked away in a drawer or filing cabinet or on a backup hard drive, and our hearts are safely tucked away from the pain and raw vulnerability of it all. Nobody knows we are creative, and nobody needs to know. We are safe.

And heaven weeps.

CHAPTER TWO

A TCU Tale

I STUDIED MUSIC COMPOSITION and music theory at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. One day my main professor received a request for help with a local music-related project, and he decided to pass it along to me as a learning opportunity.

And so I found myself in the late spring of 1996 driving to the home of one Frances Marion Allen with the promise of earning \$15 per hour to help with some sort of music project. Her house was in Fairmount, a historic district of large, “old money” houses near downtown Fort Worth. Finding the 1910s-vintage house, I walked up the driveway, pulled open the external, screened storm door, and cautiously knocked.

After a few moments of awkwardly wondering whether I had the correct address, the door opened, and I was greeted by an 88-year-old woman who introduced herself as “Miss Allen.” (I learned soon enough that nobody would dare call her “Frances.”) Miss Allen invited me into her house and into a world I couldn’t have imagined.

The house was dim inside, dusty and overflowing with evidence of a life lived well and a life well-lived. Everywhere I looked there were shimmering momentos, papers, artwork, lace table coverings, framed diplomas and certificates and tables full of faded postcards and Asian statuettes and jeweled music boxes with rich colors. There was a fireplace—or fireplaces?—and thick-padded furniture with velvet, richly-colored upholstery. I struggled to absorb the intensity of it all in the dim sunlight that slipped through here and there past the old curtains. Those curtains were elegant and expensive once, I thought.

I was left with very little time to process all of this. Miss Allen was already walking ahead of me straight through the spacious front entry parlor and into the back of the house. She was not moving quickly, but I realized she was not a woman that expected to wait for anyone. I imagined she walked quite fast when she was younger. Remembering my place, and really wanting to

secure her goodwill and the \$15 per hour, I followed her obediently and quickly to the back sitting room.

Miss Allen motioned me to sit down in a chair across from her beside a heavy, dark wood table that was overflowing with stacks of papers. Then she began an extraordinary tale. Some of the details came out in bits and pieces over months to come, but in the end, this was her story:¹

Miss Allen's mother, Dr. Daisy Emery, graduated from Fort Worth Medical College in 1897 at the age of 21, the first woman to graduate from any medical school in Texas. She married Dr. Walter Allen, a former schoolmate. The couple had two daughters, Frances Marion Allen ("Miss Allen"), born in 1908, and Sheila Emery Allen, born in 1911. Walter and Daisy invested their earnings from medicine, and soon the family had substantial land and oil holdings.

The Allen sisters never married and lived most of their years in their mother's home (in which I now sat to hear the story). Miss Allen pursued a career in social work; she told us tales of being

1. I have streamlined this "TCU tale" a bit for readability. In addition to my notes, I consulted Daisy Emery Allen, M.D., 1876–1958: Scholarship and Loan Funds (brochure, University of Texas Medical Branch, Office of University Relations), 1993(?) and Judith N. McArthur, "Allen, Frances Daisy Emery," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/allen-frances-daisy-emery>.

attacked in prohibition-era Chicago and of once meeting Al Capone. Miss Allen's sister, Sheila Emery Allen, earned a Master of Music from North Texas State Teachers College (now The University of North Texas in Denton), and taught in the Fort Worth public school system from 1935 until 1965.

At this point in the story, Miss Allen waved toward the piles of papers on the oak table beside us and said, "Before she died, my sister Sheila made me promise her that I would get her music transcribed and published." The papers, it seemed, were in fact music manuscripts: stacks and stacks of handwritten scores including many art songs as well as pieces for choir, piano, and chamber groups.

As she neared death in 1992 at the age of 81, Sheila Allen had made her sister Frances Allen promise to take care of her life's creative work. For four years, Miss Allen had been struggling to find a way to do just that, and now she wanted me to help.

Overwhelmed, I tried to explain to Miss Allen that I did not know how we could get all of these compositions published. In those days (before the Internet), there was no viable path to self-publish your works, and I had no connections with "real" publishers. Urged on by her own sense of mortality and the deathbed promise she made to her sister, Miss Allen would not be deterred.

And so, while I continued writing my own compositions for my undergraduate music degree at TCU, my spare hours became dedicated to the creative world of Sheila Emery Allen. I felt an urgency about the work. Frances Allen's days were numbered, and I wanted to help her honor her promise to her sister.

More than that, though, I wanted to help Sheila's musical vision live on. In truth, she was not one of the "great" composers, but she was a good composer. Regardless, she had a unique voice, and her personality and experiences shone through in her music. The list of compositions that Miss Allen eventually found for me amongst the papers spanned the years 1932 to 1988—in all, fifty-six years of work.

Sheila wrote an interesting piece for soprano, flute, and piano in 1969, inspired by Neil Armstrong's moon landing (*Moon Walk*). There was a piano suite about a visit she made to Soviet Russia from 1970; patriotic compositions for the 1976 bicentennial; pieces and poems about breezes, butterflies, and mockingbirds; art songs inspired by Texas culture; and even hymns. In all, there were several hundred pages of manuscript for me to sift through and edit.

Sadly, in February of 1997, less than a year after we met her, Miss Allen died. Although I finished typesetting eight of Sheila's compositions and was in the middle of a ninth, the evaluations by

critics and publishing that Miss Allen envisioned never happened. Instead, I was contacted by the executor of the estate (a bank officer) who told me to finish the ninth piece and report to a bank trust office to be paid.

That meeting with the bank officer was one I will never forget, and it is the reason I tell this story. I remember vividly the elegant floor-to-ceiling wood panelling of the waiting area. I remember being called back to a man at a desk who seemed to have too much work to do. He asked me for my invoice, the manuscripts, and the engraved music, which I handed to him. He looked it all over unemotionally for a moment, then pulled out a checkbook and wrote me a check for the amount due on the invoice. As I left the office, I saw him nonchalantly throwing the score and manuscript into a big box on the floor next to his desk.

I never saw that music again—and neither have you. Frances Allen did make sure that some of the important historical documents from her family were preserved (you can find them online).² But I suspect that all the work I did and all the pages and pages of Sheila Allen's handwritten manuscripts ended up thrown out, deemed of no value.

2. "Frances Marion Allen Collection in The Portal to Texas History," University of North Texas Libraries, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/FMAC/>.

This was a sobering lesson for me. I imagined Sheila, toiling countless hours over more than fifty years, going to her piano again and again and again to craft her music. I imagined her puzzling over this or that phrase, erasing, reworking, perfecting each note. I could almost hear her rehearsing with the performers, her skilled hands joyfully gliding across the piano keys. And then, after decades of effort and emotion and art, it all ended with some bank officer tossing it absent-mindedly into a box and moving on to the next estate item.

What if that were *my* music or poetry or book?
What if it were yours?

Actually, there is one copy of the Sheila Allen scores I engraved. I kept one copy of the project for myself, and I used it to do a student academic presentation about Sheila's music at the 1998 College Music Society South Central meeting at the University of North Texas.³ Aside from that brief glimmer, Sheila's music is gone—and I cannot share it with you because it is under copyright.

Despite what her sister Miss Allen believed, works are automatically copyrighted in the United States immediately upon completion. Since Frances Allen had no heirs, her estate (and

3. During the Q&A after the presentation, one jaded UNT professor asked me, "Why do you think these compositions are even worthy of a presentation? Aren't they rather unremarkable?"

presumably Sheila's copyrights) went mainly to the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. Even if I did find the scores, and even if I could ask their permission for the copyright, who at a busy medical school would care about Sheila's music?

I do not tell these stories to slander Sheila Allen or Frances Allen. In fact, they ended up giving generously to charities in their estate plans (I once wasted an afternoon looking it all up online). My point is this: neither of them fully appreciated the brevity of life. Seeing Sheila Allen's creative work carelessly thrown into a box in a bank office left me unsure what my own path should be.

INTERLUDE ONE

Keith Green and Rich Mullins

SINGER-SONGWRITER KEITH GREEN (1953–1982) began life as a childhood music sensation, but soon began to use drugs and explore Eastern mysticism. He married Melody Steiner at the age of 20, and two years later Keith and Melody became followers of Jesus. Initially Keith pursued the usual Christian music path: he signed a recording contract with Sparrow Records in 1976 and began touring and selling records.¹

1. “Keith Green,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified November 25, 2024, 13:36 (UTC), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_Green.

According to his wife Melody, Keith began to feel strongly that the gospel should be free. Keith felt God wanted him to follow Matthew 10:8: “Freely you have received; Freely give” (Berean Standard Bible). Keith believed he should not deny ministry to anyone because of money—whether that ministry took the form of a music recording, a gospel tract, or a concert. So starting with a performance in Tulsa at Oral Roberts University in March 1979, Keith and Melody began paying for all the concert expenses personally, and Keith stopped taking offerings at his meetings.²

Keith’s thinking continued to evolve. By August 1979, Keith began planning for his third album, *So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt*. They had already stopped charging for concerts, but his records and tapes were still being sold across the country. Keith decided that although these recordings could probably be considered “products,” since his motives for doing them were ministry, he should make a way for people to get them regardless of money.³ In other words, Keith concluded that if he thought of his music as ministry, it should not be sold.

At Keith’s request, Sparrow Records released him from his contract, and Keith and Melody decided to give 25,000 copies of the album away

2. Melody Green and David Hazard, *No Compromise. The Life Story of Keith Green* (Sparrow Press, 1989), 186.

3. Green and Hazard, 218.

by mortgaging their house to do it. Keith felt that they had to do this even if no donations came in to offset the costs so that he would know he had “obeyed the Lord.”⁴

May 1980 came, and Keith put the new album policy into effect. According to his wife Melody, Keith always kept the record tables covered until the end of the evening’s ministry, because he didn’t like the commercial feeling it gave to sell things before the concert started.⁵ After the altar call, Keith announced they would not be selling his records or setting a price. Instead, people could give whatever they wanted or even nothing if they had no money.

This first attempt was a bit of a disaster. Melody recounts that people started scooping up handfuls of albums and pushed the table so hard that she was “pinned between the wall and the record table.”⁶ They later refined the policy to limit free albums to one per household and encouraged people to give something if they could.

Keith was passionate about decommercializing ministry. He once confronted a gathering of the Fellowship of Contemporary Christian Ministries (FCCM), a group of artists, promoters, producers, and record company representatives. Keith began his argument by stating that ticket prices were “a

4. Green and Hazard, 221.

5. Green and Hazard, 227.

6. *Ibid.*

nail in Jesus' hand"⁷ since people who didn't follow Jesus knew they shouldn't have to pay to hear about Him. Keith distinguished between a man's job or skill and his ministry gift. He next cited Paul, who made tents for a living so he could give the gospel for free.

Then Keith quoted 1 Corinthians 9:18, which in the Berean Standard Bible reads "What then is my reward? That in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not use up my rights in preaching it." Needless to say, all of this did not go over very well in the group.

In the summer of 1982, Loren Cunningham (the founder of Youth With a Mission) and Keith Green made plans to tour together to raise up 100,000 missionaries,⁸ but Keith died in a tragic plane crash on July 28, 1982. Crushed by grief, his wife Melody was led to John 12:24: "Truly, truly, I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Berean Standard Bible).⁹

Miraculously, around the world in Japan, Loren Cunningham was led to the very same scripture passage when he first heard of Keith's death,¹⁰ and it came true in abundance. Many young people committed to serve the Lord in a more serious

7. Green and Hazard, 233.

8. Ibid.

9. Green and Hazard, 263.

10. Green and Hazard, 279.

way, including many that moved overseas to serve with Youth With A Mission. Melody Green led their Last Days Ministries to reach countless people. And Keith's music and his passion for purity and wholehearted devotion continue to speak and minister today.

SINGER-SONGWRITER RICH MULLINS (1955-1997) grew up in Indiana before moving to Cincinnati in order to attend Cincinnati Bible College. His music became famous when Amy Grant decided to include his song "Sing Your Praise to the Lord" on her album *Age to Age*. Amy Grant, describing what it was like to tour with him, said that "other artists would watch him from the side of the stage."¹¹ Michael W. Smith said that there's "nobody who wrote songs like Rich."¹²

God gifted Mullins in astounding ways. Steve Cudworth, who wrote "If I Stand" with him, relates the story that Rich Mullins wrote "Awesome God" in his head while driving to a conference. According to Cudworth, Rich said that he felt like he was just hearing the song instead of writing it.¹³ The music, it seems, was a free gift from God.

11. David Leo Shultz, Director. *Rich Mullins: A Ragamuffin's Legacy* (Bridgestone Multimedia Group, 2015), Amazon Prime, <https://www.amazon.com/Rich-Mullins-Ragamuffins-Shane-Claiborne/dp/B0719C4KWH/> , 39:00.

12. Shultz, 41:02.

13. Shultz, 54:01.

Perhaps Mullins is most famous for his troubled relationship with corporate music and financial success. Partly to avoid the corporate feel of Nashville, he moved to Wichita, Kansas and went back to school to get a music degree, hoping to teach children music on a reservation.

Although Mullins kept his work under copyright, he chose to give away all the earnings beyond a living wage. Mullins never came to peace entirely with the financial side of his success. He asked his CPA, Jim Dunning, to establish a company that would pay Rich an average American's salary and give all the remaining earnings to help the children of the reservation.¹⁴

Rich Mullins was killed in a tragic car accident on September 19, 1997.

14. Shultz, 1:07:25.

CHAPTER THREE

Monetize Monetize Monetize

SHORTLY AFTER EARNING my Ph.D. in Music Composition, I began to take stock of what I might do with my free time since I was no longer writing a dissertation night and day. I decided the best way to serve the Lord with my creativity was to monetize it in as many ways as possible, then give all the money away.

My first line of attack was my music. I was a pretty good amateur programmer, and the music engraving software *Sibelius* had a built-in programming language. After several weeks of work,

I figured out a way to “autogenerate” music that would conform to the playing ranges (how high and low they play) of various instruments. I quickly realized the profitability potential of this.

By entering any music just once, I could use my script to create multiple arrangements. For example, I could enter a hymn or Christmas carol or scale exercise one time, then click a button, run my script, and come up with versions of that music for flute, clarinet, oboe, trumpet, trombone, violin, viola, and on and on. I could then sell those arrangements online directly, or give them away free on a site with ads that would earn money—money that I could give away to ministries. (Perhaps I would keep *some* of the money also, I thought, since there would be so much.)

Soon I was spending many hours on this project. I created hundreds of scale sheets and arrangements, then created simplified versions I would give away for free on my new website. The website would need ads, so I spent many hours figuring out how to run Google ads on my site in the most optimized way.

Soon the ad management was demanding most of my time and effort on my burgeoning free sheet music website. I realized that I could purchase Google ads that would bring people to my site, a certain percentage of whom would then click on ads that would make money.

It was complicated. How many ads should I purchase? What was the optimum amount to make sure I made the most money? Where should the ads be placed on the page? How could I structure the site so that the free sheet music would get listed organically in search results for free sheet music?

This process went on for months, maybe years. Multiple times a day, I would log into my Google AdSense page to see how many clicks I had and how much money I had earned that day. At first, it seemed to be going well. I was netting several dollars a day with no additional work! All I had to do was grow that by purchasing more clicks and adding more free sheet music. This could work!

But eventually I grew weary of the process. Google is not stupid; there is no such thing as a perpetual motion machine. As time went on, it became clear that purchasing clicks to get people to click on a free sheet music site was not going to be my path to making money with my creative talents. Eventually I quit purchasing clicks. The site continued to get visitors from search results, and I made a few cents a day on it, but the focus of my attention moved on.

Selling the arrangements directly worked a bit better. Using my script, I was able to create many Christmas carol and hymn arrangements. Of course, I only arranged public domain music, because I knew I could then sell it without having

to pay any royalties to the original composers. After building up my catalog, I was quite excited one Christmas season when I made nearly a thousand dollars from arrangement sales! That was a good start, but it still didn't seem like the best path to monetize my gifts.

I am also a photographer, and by this point I had some photos from a trip to Hawaii. Perhaps I could monetize those pictures somehow, then use that income stream to advance God's Kingdom (while providing some for our family as well, of course). I quickly fell down another rabbit hole.

My first attempt was to sell the photos directly. I spent countless hours figuring out how to upload the photos to a photo-selling service where people could pay for poster-sized prints of them. I set the prices at around \$50 per print—people would surely pay that for great photo art for their wall, right? The whole process took weeks: sizing the image files, uploading them, writing the descriptions, setting up the storefront, and on and on. At last I finished and waited for the money to flow in.

It never did. I never sold a single photo.

Perhaps combining my photos with my knowledge of Google Ads would be the ticket. Surely with all my great photos, I could create an amazing Hawaii tourist website, right? And where there's a great website, there's a great ad revenue

stream. This launched yet another huge project. This time I would do it right. This time the income stream would be dependable—and substantial.

I decided to hire my good friend who made his living as a website database programmer. He brought in a graphic designer to create logos, banners, and the site layout. I wrote the text copy for hundreds of tourist destinations in Hawaii. We spent several thousand dollars on the professional website design and the graphic designer. Actually the amount I spent on the project was more than all the money I had earned so far from all my other projects. It didn't matter though, because once I got the income stream going from all the ad revenue, those several thousand dollars would seem like nothing.

Can you guess how this ended up? Of course, the site got very few visitors. I am not the first person to think of making a website for Hawaiian tourists; large corporations with teams of online marketing experts were already fighting hard for that traffic. For all my efforts, the site never earned more than a few cents a day, on average. At least this time I had the sense not to pay for advertising on top of it all!

I began to wonder if my drive to *monetize*, *monetize*, *monetize* was misguided. I had not created anything new in years; all my thoughts and efforts were poured into doing everything possible to squeeze money out of my creative “products”

rather than creating anything new. After all the effort and sacrifice, I was really no closer to coasting on passive income streams derived from my art.

You may be saying, “Ah, I see. He’s a failure at making a go of it with his music, poetry, and art photos, so he decided to just give it away to make himself feel better. I am (or will be) successful, so I don’t need to be so desperate as to give things away. My stuff (music or books or poetry or paintings or photos or sermons or whatever) is actually good, so mine will make (or now makes) money.”

Perhaps.

The trouble with that hypothesis is that it leaves someone out of the equation: *God*. You see, this entire journey I was walking closely with the Lord. My wife and I were praying, worshipping, and serving regularly in our church. We were partnering with missionaries and ministries and giving away significantly more than ten percent of our income. I was teaching myself Greek and Hebrew to read the Bible in the original languages.

And yet, none of my business plans succeeded. There is exactly one reason none of my efforts worked: God Himself slammed every door in my face. *His plans are better than our plans.*

In chapter 28 of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis writes that when we become prosperous, when our plans are profitable and successful, we believe we are finding our way in the World when in fact

the World is working its way into us.¹ As a rule, the price of being financially successful as a creator is loss of control over your work. Publishers, distributors, and music companies usually take control of the copyright, and the creator then takes a back seat. If you have not been “successful” with your work, thank the Lord that you probably still have control to keep, sell, or give it away as you feel led.

On the other hand, you might have had incredible financial success with your creations. Perhaps you are a bestselling author of Christian books or a musician whose music creates an income stream worth millions of dollars. You might be at the head of a powerful publishing firm or a Christian music distributor with control of thousands of copyrights and income streams in the millions. Or you could be a very successful Christian influencer with an audience of millions and substantial passive income online.

To you I say this: God is in control of your story as much as mine, and God has raised you up for a purpose. The Lord humbles, and the Lord exalts. Be open to His voice. God is stronger than contracts and business obligations. Keith Green had to be released from a contract with Sparrow Records before he could freely give away his third album. Ask God to show you *what* you need to do, and once He gives you peace about *what* to do,

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Macmillan, 1982), 132.

He will show you *how* to do it. The *what* of God's calling always precedes the *how*. That's the walk of faith for all of us.

INTERLUDE TWO

BibleProject

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD of BibleProject. Since 2014, they have posted over 300 videos to YouTube. With nearly 5 million subscribers and almost half a billion video views as of early 2025, odds are good that you've run into their work.

The BibleProject website recounts their history. Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, who were roommates at Multnomah University in Oregon, decided to work together to help people understand the Bible while avoiding misunderstandings.¹ Mackie holds a degree in theology as well as a

1. "About BibleProject." BibleProject Website, BibleProject, 2025, <https://bibleproject.com/about/>.

Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies,² while Collins has a BA in Bible and Theology and extensive experience in video production and design.³ The BibleProject website does not say how many people they employ, but it does list eight executives on their leadership team.⁴

For such a large organization, with so many projects underway and such vast reach online, the note at the bottom of every page of their website stands out:

“Everything we make is available for free because of a generous community of supporters.”⁵

Incredibly, BibleProject gives away everything they create for free. It doesn’t matter whether you can afford to pay them or not; there is no obligation or expectation whatsoever to pay them anything when you watch their videos. Their YouTube channel is not monetized, and you won’t see advertising plastered all over their videos. How can they afford to do this?

2. “Tim Mackie, PhD: Biography.” BibleProject Website, BibleProject, 2025, <https://bibleproject.com/tim-mackie/>.

3. “Jonathan Collins.” BibleProject Website, BibleProject, 2025, <https://bibleproject.com/jon-bio/>.

4. “About BibleProject.” BibleProject Website, BibleProject, 2025, <https://bibleproject.com/about/>.

5. Ibid.

BibleProject is “crowdfunded.” As of early 2025, BibleProject has over 48,000 people supporting their work financially, with an average monthly gift of \$40 per month.⁶ So in the BibleProject model, people who are searching receive the ministry they need without hindrance or distraction, and people who are ready and able to partner financially get the eternal rewards of serving the Lord by joining in His work.

BibleProject has to trust the Lord to speak to His people to provide for the substantial expenses of running such a large ministry, and their partners give out of love for God and His message, without expecting to receive anything back in this life. Both the ministry and the financial partners grow in faith, and God alone gets the glory.

6. “Building BibleProject Together.” BibleProject Website, BibleProject, 2025, <https://bibleproject.com/give/>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Your Most Valuable Earthly Possession

FOR THE NEXT chapter of the book, I'll need you to get out a piece of paper or open a new document online. At the top, please list everything that you've created that explicitly glorifies God in any way. I'm not talking about car manuals or technical drawings you did for work, only anything that you created that you consider to be explicitly dedicated to glorifying God. You decide what goes on the list. If you don't want to take the time to list everything, pick your five creations you are most proud of.

If you are a musician, you need to include all the songs you wrote or pieces you composed that explicitly glorify God. Include any arrangements you made of hymn tunes or Christmas carols. Put those songs or pieces that have had the most success—the ones you’ve earned the most money from, the ones that have given you the most performances or exposure—at the very top of the list.

Poets should list their poems, starting with the poetry that was the hardest for you to write or that came on like a lightning bolt of pure inspiration. You know the poems I mean: the ones you love so much that you recall lines from them at odd times when you least expect it.

Painters and photographers should include all the images you believe glorify God by reflecting His creation in the most inspiring way. Your list should be topped by that picture or painting you got because you were in the exact right place at the exact right time for the Lord to show you something beautiful or powerful. If it is one you refined in post-production for months and months to get just right, that’s even better.

Pastors, please list all the messages you’ve shared with your church over the years. Put your very best sermon series—that one God used to fill the front of your church with people meeting Jesus—at the very top. If you have your sermons online, list the one with the most views or downloads first.

Authors who publish about Christian topics should put those things on the list also. This includes Bible studies, blogs, social media, Christian books, commentaries, or biblical studies or biblical languages textbooks.

If you are in academia and your academic work explicitly glorifies the Lord, put that on your list. This includes all the articles and research you've done that teach about spiritual things or the Bible or glorify the Lord in any way. Your thesis and your dissertation (if you have one) go at the very top of the list. That's right: the thesis or dissertation you spent so many years on, that your spouse worked extra to allow you to finish, that you stayed away from your kids late at night in the library to research, that you had to redo at the last minute because your major professor demanded a change, that you worked on for 36 hours straight then drove an hour to submit on time—that needs to go at the very top of your list.

Next, I need you to write up a contract underneath your list. The terms are as follows:

You will grant to me all rights to every item on your list. You are granting to me an irrevocable, permanent, total right to use everything on your list any way I want to, including the right to give away for free, sell for a profit, make new versions, publish in any format, and make new works using all your ideas. This contract will be valid in all states and jurisdictions, including all countries of

the world. I will receive these rights without having to pay you for them, and I am not required to give you credit for your work, acknowledge that it came from you, or share any of my royalties with you. Underneath the contract, sign your name. Then send it to me via my website.

Do I have your attention yet? Did your heart go up in your throat, even though you figured out at some point that I wasn't entirely serious? Did you feel your temperature increase? Were you irritated or angry I was even saying these things?

Those feelings you felt reflect an underlying reality. Your most valuable earthly possession is not your car or your phone or your money or your house or even your retirement account.

*Your most valuable earthly possession is
your life's creative output.*

You may have heard of a principle called "the law of supply and demand." Basically the idea is this: the more of something there is, the easier it is to get, the less expensive it is. The less of something there is, the harder it is to get, the more expensive it is. Rare things cost a lot; common things are cheap. Dirt is everywhere; diamonds are rare.

Nobody else has created the things you created. Nobody else can paint quite like you can, or write poetry quite like you can, or craft sermon messages quite like you can. By definition, if you

wrote a thesis or dissertation, yours is the only one in the world that covers your topic the way that you did. Otherwise you would never have earned your degree.

The creative capacity God gave you is singular. That is why your gut instincts are true: the things you have created that glorify God really are your most valuable earthly possessions.

Have you ever thought about what it might be like to give them away? To fully and completely release them, without reservation or any ability to maintain control? To release them not in a theoretical or spiritual sense, but in an actual, practical sense in this present physical world? What might happen if God offered you that privilege and you accepted the offer?

INTERLUDE THREE

King David the Psalmist

KING DAVID OF Israel shaped the history of worship through his psalms, and his artistic influence continues to shape worship today. David was also incredibly generous.

In 2 Samuel 24, there's a fascinating story illustrating David's approach to giving. In a moment of weakness, David ordered his military commander to count up all the military assets of Israel. For David, this became a sin. By counting his military he was trusting in human strength rather than in the Lord.

The Lord commanded an angel to send a plague on Israel, and 70,000 people died. When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem, the Lord relented and stopped the plague at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. The prophet Gad told David to build an altar there.

When David told Araunah that the Lord had commanded him to build an altar on Araunah's threshing floor, Araunah offered to give David the threshing floor and even provide wood and oxen for the sacrifice. David's reply is perhaps one of the most profound statements on giving ever:

"No," replied the king, "I insist on paying a price, for I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."

—2 Samuel 24:24, BSB

So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen with his own silver. He insisted on paying a price. Then he offered the sacrifices the Lord had commanded.

CHAPTER FIVE

Why Public Domain?

IT IS CLEAR by now that I believe the best way to serve the Lord with the God-honoring things we create is to release them into the public domain. But why? Isn't this irresponsible stewardship, and isn't the worker worthy of his or her wages?

To clarify, I do not believe in abolishing copyright. I do not believe an organic chemistry book or a technical drawing or a graphic design for an advertisement should all be public domain—far from it. What we create in this world for this world belongs to this world, and it is ours to sell as we see fit.

But everything we create *for* God and *about* God belongs to God: anything that explicitly glorifies God, encourages or guides His Church, or shares the Good News of Jesus with the world. While it's hard to define precisely, you know in your gut which things you have created fall into this category. My poetry about the Lord is *for* the Lord in a way that my music theory worksheets are not.

Narrowing down to only our creations *for* the Lord and *about* the Lord, then, what is the best way to handle these holy things?

The default option is to safeguard them with copyright. If you do nothing, in the United States all creative works are immediately copyrighted automatically at the moment of creation. You do not have to file for the copyright or register it or even label it for it to be legal; it just is, automatically, at creation.

Others use Creative Commons licenses.¹ These licenses are free and easy to use: you simply label your work with the license you wish to apply. The most common Creative Commons licenses are:

1. CC-BY (Creative Commons Attribution), which requires users to name the original creator in any derivative works;

1. See <https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses/>.

2. CC-BY-SA (Attribution Share-Alike), which requires any derivative works to name the original creator and also allow sharing under the same license; and
3. CC-BY-NC (Attribution Non-Commercial), which requires derivative works to name the original creator and allows non-commercial use only.

Creative Commons also has a license for public domain release (CC0 1.0). This license is useful because it attempts to make the work as legally free from restriction as possible in all countries of the world.

So which of these 3 paths (copyright, one of the Creative Commons licenses, or public domain), is the best option? By far, most Christian creators, authors, and speakers maintain their copyrights, selling their works at a profit with the goal of making a living and giving away any excess to other ministries. Probably the quintessential example of this model is Crossway.

Crossway's popular (and quite well-marketed) English Standard Version has sold millions of copies worldwide, and they state on their website that any surplus is used for ministry and not personal profit.² Millions of people have been blessed by this model, both those who purchase and use

2. "Who We Are." Crossway Corporate Website, Crossway, 2024, <https://www.crossway.org/who-we-are/>.

their products and those who benefit from the ministry funded by those purchases. Crossway's goals of supporting ministry are laudable, yet we must consider carefully whether this is the best path to pursue.

Many others have released their works under Creative Commons Share-Alike, Attribution, or Non-Commercial licenses. These creators want to share what the Lord has given freely, but they also feel a responsibility to protect the integrity of the work. These creators are also laudable in their efforts to share and advance God's Kingdom.

And yet, these approaches are limiting. The first approach (sell under copyright + give away surplus) *limits people* in their ability to mirror God's character to the world. The second approach (Creative Commons) *tries to limit God's options* to use your work.

Let me explain.

Imagine you are serving food at a homeless shelter. As you stand there, smiling and praying for the guests while filling their plates with hot, delicious food, you know the presence and the power of God. You sense Jesus with you in that moment, fully approving your work, beaming with joy as you serve Him freely. He strengthens your hands and fills your heart with joy, and that joy flows over to the people you are serving. You know the Lord in a way you never could otherwise.

The people receiving the food are transformed also. Have you considered that? They aren't stupid. They know you don't have to be there. They realize you are only serving the food out of love. You aren't getting paid for it directly; you are trusting that the Lord will reward you in his time.

Some may respond with cynicism, but many of the people receiving the food are transformed forever. As they emerge from their pain, they begin to dream again: what can I do someday? What if I were the one serving? And their resolve strengthens. "Someday I will get out of this. Someday I will be the one helping others."

*The most joy-filled people serving are
the very ones who used to be receiving.*

The food line at the homeless shelter is holy. It is a divine interaction, and in it both the receivers and the servers become more like Jesus. It is beautiful and pure and free, without guile.

None of that happens when you go through a line at a restaurant and pay for your food. It's just a transaction: you trade money for food of equal market value. There's no divine spark, no transformation, no Holy Spirit presence, no glory. It may be done with love and excellence, but nobody's life is forever transformed by the transaction itself.

Obviously it isn't sinful to run a restaurant, and I'm not suggesting that all restaurants should give away their food for free. But we as creators have to decide what relationship we will have with those who benefit from our creative gifts. Am I serving the needy or running a restaurant?

When we sell explicitly God-honoring works under copyright, the person who purchases the work has paid a fair price for what they bought, and the person selling receives a fair price as well. Yet neither person gains spiritually *from the transaction itself*. There's no way around it: selling under copyright limits people's ability to mirror God's love into the world in the interaction itself.

What about being responsible with what God has given me? And what about sustainability and the worker being worthy of his wages? Shouldn't I use a license to protect what God has given and ensure I can make a living off my creative work or ministry gifts?

The worker is indeed worthy of wages, but who is the boss that pays your wages? Is it your "customer," or is it the Lord? The path of creating is a path of faith. It is biblical for those who minister to receive free gifts of partnership from fellow Christians who want to keep the ministry going. This can be as simple as setting up a Patreon page or as complicated as establishing an

entire tax-deductible organization. Yet the worker's wages come from the Lord of the harvest, not the wheat being harvested.

To enable true ministry, we must sever the direct connection between receiving something and paying for it; ministry and merchandise are mutually exclusive.

I must ask you a difficult question: if God is truly calling you to creative work, won't he also raise up partners to allow you to give it freely? And if you give your work freely and God doesn't provide for your needs (either from donations or an unexpected source), could it be that God is calling you to earn money in other ways while you pursue ministry?

Or perhaps what you are doing is not God's work at all? This sounds harsh, but it's actually liberating. That difficult creative work that seems to go nowhere may not be where you should put your life's energy. Pray for guidance, and He will show you a better path.

Beyond all this, when we maintain rights, even while sharing our work, we try to limit what God might do. Take the "attribution" requirement for starters. There are places in the world where the message God has given me can go that my name cannot. Our names are on the Internet already with a lot of cultural and nationalistic baggage

attached. What if God wants to strip my name off my work so it can enter a closed country where my name would hinder the spread of God's message?

What if my art or my poems or my music or my biblical teaching could be translated by a dear believer in another continent, then slipped into a dark prison cell to encourage a modern Paul or Silas *without* my name attached? Shouldn't we give God and our fellow believers the permission to do this? How small our vision is!

Where might God take your creative spark if you didn't have to demand the credit all the time?

The "no commercial use" requirement is also fraught. People who want to incorporate and expand your work will not always know what you consider "commercial," so they will be timid about using your work. For that matter, if a for-profit publisher decided to develop and distribute your work at a profit, wouldn't that mean your message and your art were blessing lots of people? Isn't that our highest goal as Christian creators, and won't God bless us for our generosity? Who is the *true* source and wellspring of your life?

Even the "share-alike" provision tries to limit God's options, and it limits how much we mirror God to the world. Consider this truth carefully:

When we give freely, with no restrictions or requirements at all, we give the recipients the gift of choice.

They can choose to be worldly and greedy and selfish, or they can choose to be generous. This is giving the way God gives, for “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45b, Berean Standard Bible). Demanding people share steals the blessing they themselves might have had by choosing to be generous.

Public domain is the only means available whereby we can disclaim all our rights and lay them down as an absolute offering, pleasing to the Lord—not as a partial offering, but as a whole offering; not as an offering in a theoretical, moral, “spiritual” sense, but as an offering in an absolute, practical, irrevocable, legally-binding physical reality. In other words:

Public domain is the one true altar of whole burnt offering for Christians who create.

Public domain is the only way we can identify fully in our creative life with our Lord and Savior, who on the Cross was completely exposed and unprotected and raw before the world. Some mocked Him. Some took advantage of Him. Some abused Him. But others were forever transformed

as they saw His absolute, irrevocable gift. Through their tears, they worshipped Jesus. “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54, Berean Standard Bible)

No student is above his or her teacher. To point the world to Jesus, our creative work must accept the same level of risk that Jesus did. Your art and teaching cannot be crucified halfway. The Lord does not *demand* that you take up this cross; He only *offers* it to you. If you are willing to let your Christian creative work fully die for the sake of Christ, God will resurrect it in ways you could never imagine.

CHAPTER SIX

My Valley of Decision

IN FEBRUARY 2024, multiple streams converged in a series of dramatic events in my creative life. It all happened so fast that it's difficult now to even put the events in order. It feels like they happened all at once.

The night that stands out as the ignition point was February 21, 2024. It was a regular Wednesday night meeting of our church's small group. These "LifeGroups" meet once a week in someone's home to worship, pray, and study the Bible together. The meeting was proceeding like every other week, and everyone was taking turns

praying for each other. I had just finished praying for another couple that had some areas of life where they needed the Lord to work miracles.

The praying ended, and everyone looked up in a quiet, reverent moment. Then our friend Deborah (which is not her real name), who was sitting across the room, suddenly turned the attention of the group toward me.

She said, "While we were praying I suddenly had a vision in my mind about you. It was in a forest of redwood trees, and you were like a small seedling in the midst of those trees. I feel like the Lord is going to increase your voice and grow you up among those tall trees, and that this group needs to pray for you."

After she said this, the LifeGroup came over and surrounded me. Placing their hands on me, they prayed that all that Deborah had seen and said would happen. They prayed that the Lord would begin to speak through me in a new way, and that I would begin to grow up like the seedling among the redwood trees she had seen in her mind. After a few minutes of fervent prayer, the meeting continued as normal.

Later, as I drove home and entered our neighborhood after the meeting, lines from a new poem unexpectedly began to form in my mind. Within minutes I had the entire poem. It was the first poem I had written in 19 years. To be honest, I had

thought I was done writing poetry, and I was not even thinking about it any more, so I was overjoyed to suddenly have this new poem.

God didn't stop there though. The next morning, February 22, I woke up with another poem in my head which I typed down as I got ready for work. Then while I was driving to work a third poem came, which I typed out as soon as I got to my office. That poem is 60 lines long and tells a story in rhymed meter. That afternoon, when I got home from work, I wrote down a fourth poem.

Three more poems came in the following two days. Altogether, after writing no poems whatsoever for nineteen years, I wrote seven poems in three days after Deborah's encouraging word and the group laying hands on me and praying.

God was bringing another journey to a destination also. For some time, I had been watching videos and reading articles on SellingJesus.org. On YouTube, they have a series of videos decrying what they call "the Jesus trade." As I watched these videos and read these articles, I became increasingly disgusted at all the ways that ministry gets commercialized. Actually, I was feeling quite self-righteous about it all.

I often watch YouTube on my laptop while cleaning up the dishes. One day in late February 2024, probably soon after the LifeGroup meeting where Deborah spoke about the redwoods, I was standing at the sink rewatching the third episode

of the “Selling Jesus” YouTube documentary series.¹ The episode talks about how publishers of biblical studies resources harm pastors and Bible translators around the world who cannot afford their high prices. As usual, I was feeling pretty good about looking down on them for their callous greed.

At 3:12 in the video, the narrator looks at the camera and says the following:

“The Word has always been intended to be a shared family feast, enjoyed together as the Church without hindrance. But imagine that, as you sit at the table, you say to your rich brother, ‘Could you please pass the potatoes?’ And he responds, ‘Pay me first.’ Or ‘Fill out this form, and maybe I’ll give you permission to have some.’ Does this kind of attitude belong at a family meal? ... Do you think that our Master who provided this fine meal is impressed when we charge those around us for every helping? Is he pleased when we

1. “How the Jesus Trade Harms the World—the Iron Curtain of Copyright & Cost—episode 3.” YouTube, uploaded by Selling Jesus, 14 02 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxUzRlbIsjM>.

block the hungry brothers and sisters sitting next to us from partaking simply because they haven't got the money?"

I continued watching (and feeling self-righteous indignation against the "evil" publishers). The video showed an Egyptian Bible student who shared that it cost half of a month's salary to buy a single book. "It's really hard to spend that much money on one book when you're trying to feed your family," he said. Next a theology professor from Brazil discussed how hard it is for South Americans to get the electronic Bible-study resources they need.

And then the interview began that changed my creative life. It was with Dr. Liriano, a Bible translation consultant from Dominican Republic. He spoke in Spanish, with subtitles.

"The average salary prevents you from continuously buying books," he began.

I thought about all the Christian books I had purchased in the past year. I had at least 20 Christian books sitting in my kitchen alone, with dozens more in my office and on my phone. There were at least 15 translations of the Bible neatly arrayed on my bookshelves.

"...For example, a master's degree taught in Spanish online is \$200 per month. If you earn \$400 a month, it's impossible for you to do."

I thought about how much I had spent at restaurants in the past several weeks. My self-righteous shell began to crack a little. Perhaps it wasn't just the publishers who were the problem. Dr. Liriano was still talking. I set my dish scrubber down in the sink and leaned over the laptop.

"...it's basically impossible for a person to pay \$1,000, \$1,500, \$600, only to later buy more materials for \$20, \$100, \$200. Our economic reality doesn't allow for that..."

Then he said the line that broke me:

"I can tell you that maybe I'm paid a higher salary than the average person in my country, but there are resources that I could never afford..."

There was an awkward pause while the translation subtitles caught up to the next phrase.

"...resources that I could never afford that I would like to have."

In an instant, the closing lyrics of my dissertation composition flashed across my mind, "...whoever will, let him take the water of life, freely" (Revelation 22:17).² I realized I was at that

2. Webster's translation, public domain.

very moment selling that composition and many others about the Lord on my website. I had the water of life locked behind a paywall!

An avalanche of realization poured down on me. I had dozens of hymn arrangements for sale—how could I monetize the struggles and hopes of those great writers of the past, my brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers in the faith? I had dozens and dozens of Christmas carols for sale—and what had I done to cause Jesus to be born? I had dozens of Christ-honoring poems locked away under copyright. I had hundreds of photographs of God’s beautiful creation that nobody could see, let alone use as God might direct. And all of these things were scattered across backup hard drives and folders in my office in places where even my wife wouldn’t know to look if I were to die.

Suddenly I sensed the Holy Spirit speaking:

“YOU are the one who has locked away what should be freely given! YOU are the one who has not shared the gifts the Lord has given you with your brothers and sisters around the world! YOU are that rich brother at the table who refuses to share the family meal!”

In that terrible moment, I buried my head in my arms on the counter and wept uncontrollably. And then, much like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, I resolved to change.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Poured Forth

DO YOU REMEMBER the contract I asked you to write up and sign a few chapters ago? It ran like this:

You will grant to me all rights to every item you have created for God. You are granting to me an irrevocable, permanent, total right to use everything you create in any way I want to, including the right to give away for free, sell for a profit, make new versions, publish in any format, and make new works using all your ideas. This contract will be valid in all states and jurisdictions, including all countries of the world. I

will receive these rights without having to pay you anything for them, and I am not required to give you credit for your work, acknowledge that it came from you, or share any of my royalties with you.

The rights listed in this contract, dear reader, are the very rights that I have given to you in all my own creative works that glorify the Lord, including this book. They are yours to give away, to sell, to republish, or to use to create new works in any format. I give these things to you freely and without any expectation that you must give anything in return. As Christ Jesus pours the sunlight through the windows freely and without condition, so also I pour forth to you all the creative gifts and ideas He gives to me. I pray that they bless you.

There's an amazing ending to the story of David's generosity told earlier in this book, the one in which David said, "I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24b, Berean Standard Bible). The rest of the story is told in 1 Chronicles 22.

David decides that the threshing floor he purchased—the gift he insisted should cost him something—would become the new site for worship of the Lord, and he begins to gather supplies to build the Temple there. David died before he

could see it, but on that very spot his son Solomon built the Temple of the Lord, Mount Zion, the place where thousands would sing in worship, where the sacred festivals of Israel would be celebrated—the very complex where the Ark of the Covenant itself would be held. David's *sacrifice that cost him something* eventually became the very spot where “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” while Jesus died on the Cross (Matthew 27:51a, Berean Standard Bible).

If God did all this with David's gift, I ask you:

*What might God do with works you give
Him that have cost you so much to create?*

So we come to your valley of decision. What will your path be? I will not condemn you for whatever path you choose. Your ability to choose your own path is real, and your choice must be made without guilt or coercion. As it is written, “Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not out of regret or compulsion. For God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7, Berean Standard Bible).

Choose carefully. Take all the time you need. Do not underestimate the seriousness of this decision. You must not feel deceived or pressured. To paraphrase Chapter 14 from C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, unenchantments

are not achieved in that way. You must know the seriousness of what you are doing, and why you are doing it, and all the ramifications of it.

Research your options online before you decide. Explore SellingJesus.org and copy.church. Read the book *The Dorean Principle* (which is free online and public domain). Read through the entire list of Creative Commons license options at creativecommons.org/share-your-work/cclicenses. Whatever you decide, make sure you have considered the options enough to be at peace with your decision.

Most of all, pray. Ask God to guide you to the right decision. As James writes,

“Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith, without doubting, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.”

— James 1:5–6, BSB

Remember: if you release a work to the public domain, it can never be under copyright again. Like the mermaid becoming a human, there is no path back. It is a one-way journey. And you should expect that, like they did with Jesus, the world will take advantage of your generosity. I promise. You

don't need to wonder about it, because it will happen. Wicked people will take your work and abuse it. They may misrepresent you. They will alter it or remove your name or try to commercialize it. They will scratch and scrape and monetize and try to squeeze every cent out of it.

I can promise you this will happen, because this is how they treated Jesus. "Remember the word that I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well; if they kept My word, they will keep yours as well" (John 15:20, BSB).

But I will also promise you this: the more radically you trust the Lord, the more space you leave for Him to be glorified, the more you will see Him use your creativity to build His kingdom. God will give you ideas more powerful and more beautiful than your natural abilities can conceive. Your work will go to places you could never go and touch people you may never meet in this life, and the Lord will not fail to provide for your needs as you faithfully trust Him.

Lilias Trotter was a brilliant painter from London who gave up her painting career to serve as a missionary in North Africa from 1888 until her death in 1928.¹ Although she never again painted

1. Trotter's astonishing life story is poignantly captured in the documentary *Many Beautiful Things*, available free at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9g0VXJ7fiq4> and for purchase on various streaming services. For books

professionally, she continued to paint in her journals and used her paintings to create profound devotional books. One of these, *Parables of the Cross*, closes with a challenge that still rings true:

“It is when the sun goes out from our horizon to light up the dayspring in far-away lands, that the glory of the day comes on: it is in the autumn, when the harvest is gathered and the fruit is stored for the use of man, that the glow of red and gold touches and transfigures bush and tree with a beauty that the summer days never knew.

“So with us—The clear pure dawn of cleansing through the Blood—the sunrise gladness of resurrection life; the mid-day light and warmth of growth and service, all are good in their own order: but he who stops short there misses the crown of glory, before which the brightness of former days grows poor and cold. It is

about Trotter, see Miriam Huffman Rockness, *A Passion for the Impossible: The Life of Liliias Trotter* (Liliias Trotter Legacy, 2021) and Jennifer Trafton, *If Only We Could See: Reimagining Creativity, Compassion, and Calling through the Extraordinary Life of Liliias Trotter* (B&H Books, 2026). In addition to the enduring legacy of her art and writings, Liliias inspired the composition of the famous hymn “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus.” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Heavenly_Vision.

when the glow and radiance of a life delivered up to death begins to gather: *a life poured forth to Jesus and for His sake to others*—it is then that even the commonest things put on a new beauty, as in the sunset, for His life becomes ‘manifest in our mortal flesh;’ a bloom comes on the soul like the bloom on the fruit as its hour of sacrifice arrives.

“...And the outcome, like the outcome of the autumn, is this: there is a new power set free; a power of multiplying life around. *The promise to Christ was that because He poured forth His soul unto death, He should see His seed: and He leads His children in their little measure by the same road.* Over and over the promise of seed is linked with sacrifice, as with Abraham and Rebekah and Ruth; those who at His bidding have forsaken all receive an hundred-fold more now in this time, for sacrifice is God’s factor in His work of multiplying. ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.’

“It is the poured-out life that God blesses—the life that heeds not itself, if only other souls may be won. ‘Ask and it shall be given

unto you' is one of God's nursery lessons to His children. 'Give, and it shall be given unto you' comes further on."²

Our time together is at an end, dear reader. God, in His sovereignty, has entrusted you with stewardship over your unique creative voice. Only you will decide the path for your creative work.

Will it be *merchandise* or *ministry*?

Will it be *sold* or *shared*?

Will it be held in safety, or will it, like our Lord Jesus Himself, be *poured forth*?

2. I. Lilius Trotter, *Parables of the Cross* (Marshall Brothers, 1895?), 54–58. Available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22189/22189-h/22189-h.htm>. Reprinted in I. Lilius Trotter, *Facsimile Edition: Parables of the Cross* (Lilius Trotter Legacy, 2021). Emphasis mine.

Poured
Forth

APPENDIX

The Dissertation Challenge

DO YOU HOLD an earned doctorate? If so, do you still control the copyright to your dissertation? If so, would you say your dissertation is for God, not for this world?

If you answered “Yes” to all three questions, my challenge to you is this: would you consider giving your dissertation to the Body of Christ by dedicating it to the public domain?

Think of all the books you read that formed your thinking about the Bible. Now imagine each one of those books cost an entire month of your earnings. Even worse, imagine that those books were not available in your country at all!

The majority of the Church simply cannot afford to purchase quality books or commentaries or music at the prices that publishers set. In many countries one book costs as much as a month's wages—or more. Even if they had the money, many of our brothers and sisters don't have a credit card to make the purchase.

Ultimately, the solution to the global famine of biblical resources will not come from the publishers. Instead, there is an obvious first step: we can release our dissertations into the public domain.

This is not just idle theory for me. Like you, I remember studying constantly for months to pass my multi-day qualifying exams in my field so I could begin my dissertation. I remember countless hours of work in the library and meetings with professors. Like you, I faced the demands for changes from my committee after the defense, with only days to implement the corrections. Perhaps your spouse worked extra hours so you could focus on the dissertation; perhaps you spent evenings in the library instead of with your kids. Dissertations demand sacrifice.

Recall the words of King David: "I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24, BSB). Your dissertation is an alabaster box filled with precious perfume. Will you pour it out at the feet of Jesus so that the precious aroma can fill the earth?

Of course there are Creative Commons licenses other than CC0 (Public Domain). Yet none of these give true freedom for God to take your dissertation anywhere, anytime, in any form. I ask again: is your dissertation for this world, or is it for God? If it is God's, don't you believe that God will watch over what is His?

As long as your dissertation is under your control, God is limited by your capacity to oversee its use and dissemination. How many projects can you oversee? Five? Ten? Thirty? God has no such limits. Once you release your dissertation into His hands, God can send it to millions—perhaps billions—of people in hundreds of places, more places than you could ever imagine or reach. *Will you trust Him?*

There may be practical challenges when you attempt to dedicate your work to the public domain. Before I could free my dissertation, I had to remove quotations of Bible translations that were chained up by copyright and replace them with public domain translations. You may have extended quotes of copyrighted works that you need to convert to paraphrases or summaries. Dedicating your dissertation to the public domain will demand due diligence. *“I will not offer to the LORD my God that which cost me nothing.”*

Take time to consider this decision carefully. Once you dedicate your dissertation to the public domain, there is no going back. I can assure you

that some people will take advantage of you if you do this. We should expect this. How did the world treat Jesus? Is the student above the teacher?

No. There is no giving halfway to our King. Public domain is the only means available to give your work unconditionally and permanently into the Lord's hands. I will say it again:

*Public domain is the one true altar of whole
burnt offering for Christians who create.*

I have placed my dissertation into the public domain as a small spark on the altar. You can just barely see the glow of it deep down under the wood. Will you join me? Won't you add your work to the fire as well? The Church is waiting.

