

The background of the book cover is a scenic photograph of a town nestled in a valley, viewed from an elevated position. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted tree branches and a wooden railing. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent, light-colored rectangular area in the center.

FOREWORD BY
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PRIOR

WHAT
ARE
CHRISTIANS
FOR?

LIFE TOGETHER *at the*
END *of the* WORLD

JAKE MEADOR



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AN IMMENSE INHERITANCE

A Christian Account of Nature

When you're a college student, you never want to find yourself in a position that requires a late-night call home for help. Unfortunately, on New Year's Eve 2009, I found myself in such a situation. I had stopped by a New Year's Eve party for a short time that evening but left early without talking to many people or even having a drink. I spent a bit of time at home by myself—my roommates were all at the party—before deciding to get in my car and drive out into the country.

I would be graduating in five months. Then two days after graduation I was planning to move six hours away from the only home I'd ever known—Lincoln, Nebraska—to St. Paul, Minnesota. I had a lot on my mind and needed the stillness of the country. One benefit of living in Lincoln is that you're never more than twenty or thirty minutes away from gravel country roads and the silence and starlight they can offer after dark. So I bundled up, got in my car, and drove out into the dark and cold of the Nebraska winter night. It was two degrees Fahrenheit when I left home.

I got about twenty miles southwest of town and decided to pull onto the shoulder of the road and get out to walk a bit. I hadn't seen a car for some time and figured I'd be safe if I stayed far enough to the side of the road. I rang in the New Year smoking my pipe

and looking at the stars. There is a quiet about rural Nebraska that I find captivating.

There is something uniquely beautiful about cold winter nights. The snow seems to absorb sounds, lending a quiet to the place that exceeds even what is normal for rural America. What you are left with is silence and the immensity of the sky, stretching out into infinity across the farmland, while stray plants poke up through the white, and the occasional tree, branches heavy with snow, reaches upward in a muted gesture of praise to its maker. It's cold and ominous, yet somehow still feels homelike.

There's just enough life cracking through the snow and reaching skywards to know that these are not unending snows, but rather an interim, even a necessary part of the life of the place. The snowmelt will help nourish the ground and prepare it for planting come spring. Even in winter there is life to be seen if you know where to look and how to listen. What looks "dead" to many people is actually thrumming with life.

Such knowledge changes how you look at the place. When you look up to the stars you do not see a sterilized "space," a blank expanse of cold deadness. You see the heavens, the fields of the gods, peopled by more stars than you'll ever see in the city.

On that night I needed to feel small and yet still at home in the world. To be alive and yet to know oneself to be only a portion of something similarly alive and yet much greater is a comfort. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins.¹ I can think of few ways to be better reminded of that than to walk on gravel country roads late at night, hearing the crunch of snow beneath your feet as you stare at the stars above, almost imagining that they are, as many who came before us believed, living beings looking down on you.

Then I turned to walk back to my car. And as I approached it, my attention was roughly drawn back to more banal matters, like "being able to get home." Had I really pulled *that* far onto the shoulder? I approached the passenger side of the car and noticed both passenger-side tires had sunk alarmingly deep into

the snow. Swallowing slowly, I got into my car, turned it on, and tried to steer back onto the road. Instead of pulling onto the road, I heard the dreaded sound that many Midwesterners know well: wheels spinning futilely in the snow.

I got out, used a snow shovel I had in the trunk (a gift from my parents, who know me well) and tried to scoop some of the snow away. It didn't work. I then tried calling my roommates—no answer. And so I found myself stuck on the side of Denton Road, twenty miles southwest of Lincoln in zero-degree weather a little after midnight on New Year's Day 2010. I had two choices.

First, I could sit in my car and hope my hat, heavy wool coat, gloves, wool socks, and boots could keep me warm till morning, when I could call my roommates to come dig me out. (When would they be up anyway?)

Second, I could call my parents. (There are many benefits to living in one's hometown.)

I called my parents.

Mom groggily answered, her voice immediately becoming sharper and more alert when she realized who was calling and what time he was calling at. I assured her I was okay and then asked if I could talk to Dad. She passed the phone, and I explained my situation to him. "Stay there," he said. "I'm on my way." So Dad got out of bed, got dressed, and drove out to meet me, arriving about forty-five minutes later.

When he got there, he looked around and under my car, and then he looked briefly at me. He didn't say much. Without a word or even a shake of his head, he shoveled a bit more of the snow away. Then he told me to start the car. He said to put it in the lowest gear and slowly depress the gas pedal. He opened the passenger door, stood just inside the open door without getting in the car, and braced his shoulder against the frame of the vehicle. Then he pushed. As he pushed, he coached me on how to steer the car out. Slowly, we got the car onto the road.

I thanked him, then I apologized for probably the third or fourth time. He said it was okay. He asked if I knew how to get back into town.

“Yeah, I can manage that,” I told him.

He looked at me for a moment and then said, “Why don’t you follow me anyway.”

It wasn’t a question.

Chastened, I followed him back into town. As we reached the western edge of the city, he turned into a gas station. I turned in after him and we both got out of our cars. By now it was nearly two in the morning. The temperature was well below zero.

“Don’t do that again,” he said.

“I won’t,” I said. “Thanks.”

Dad laughed for the first time since he arrived on the scene.

“I had an old truck when I was your age. You should’ve seen the ways I got it stuck. My dad always came to get me.” Then he said good night, got in his car, and drove home.

I arrived at my duplex a few minutes later and saw, somewhat to my relief, that my roommates were still out. I went to bed.

AGAINST DEBT-FREE LIVING

Behind that simple story of a father going out into the dark and cold to rescue his child is a profound truth, at least if you understand the story as my dad did. Responding to this situation was not difficult for him, at least in one sense. There was no question for him of what he needed to do as soon as he heard about my situation. He needed to go out there and find me and get me out of the ditch and get me safely home. There could be no other choice. It was simply the “right” thing to do. How did he know this? Well, there are many ways that he knew it, but the reason he gave that night when we were standing out in the cold was simple: his dad did the same thing for him. One generation’s patient kindness and care for the next creates a sort of debt, but unlike the financialized forms of debt that most of us know so well today, this is good debt.

The idea of good debt might sound strange. We are mostly familiar these days with student loan debt, or credit card debt, or perhaps the exorbitant and unjust debt foisted on the poor by

payday loan companies. Even the debts that help us accrue wealth, such as mortgages, can create an enormous amount of stress and anxiety. This is, perhaps, why so many people have become preoccupied with “debt-free living.” Whether from the financial gurus on the right who advise people how to get out of debt on their own, or from the economic populists of the left who seek federal-level solutions to the problem of consumer debt, the normative assumption across much of the United States today is that debt is bad and living free of debt is good.

What this ignores, however, is that living completely free of debt is to live completely free of relationships, or at least to live free of formalized relationships that have defined expectations of what is given and received between the two parties. To live without debt is to live without dependencies, and dependencies are a central part of the good life. Indeed, living in relationships of mutual dependence is something humans do naturally. Consider the complex web of interdependencies that shape a family. Such dependent relationships can, like all things, be twisted and perverted, as is the case with financialized debt in the United States. The solution to this problem is not to eradicate dependence but to establish better grounds for our relationships and to recognize how relationships of care are a necessary part of providing for the weak and how every single one of us will, at many points in our life, be weak.

The Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner said that each of us receives an “immense inheritance” at our birth.² Inheritances, of course, are beneficent gifts passed on to us by those who came before. They are graces we receive through no merit of our own. For Brunner and for Christianity, in fact, the world is a gift; indeed, existence is a gift. It is not without its pain because we live in the aftermath of the cosmic disaster that was humanity’s fall into sin. But even so, there remain vestiges of nobility in humanity and vestiges of beauty in the world. And so each of us enters the world being owed certain things and, eventually, owing things to others. The newborn baby is owed care and attention by his or her parents. The business owner owes a just wage to his employees. Husbands

owe love, honor, and fidelity to their wives. Parents owe the fruit of their work to their children. The government owes physical safety and security to its citizens. This is justice, of course; justice is merely giving to a person what they are owed. When we speak of justice, we are inextricably speaking in terms of inheritances and obligations.

A healthy society recognizes these truths and hardwires them into its life through a variety of means—laws, certainly, but also customs, traditions, and rituals that all help undergird and solidify the relationships of mutuality and care that allow for human flourishing. It is to our great detriment and loss that we do not live in a society that recognizes these truths. If we are to return to flourishing, health, and life, then we will need to figure out how the inheritance was lost and how we came to forget that we exist in natural webs of affection, care, and obligation.

To understand how this was lost, we need to consider the historical story we find ourselves in more closely and examine the key turns in our thought that have led us to our current state in which our society is increasingly cold, cruel, and heartless. How did a people who once understood and passed on the “immense inheritance” come to trade all that in for what Pope John Paul II has called “the culture of death”?³

ORPHANS IN THE COSMOS

In one sense, of course, it is not hard to understand how so many people came to this view. Even if we limit ourselves to considering the past hundred years of human history, we find ourselves facing two horrible world wars, the Russian Revolution, the Holocaust, the American firebombing campaigns in Europe and Japan, and the advent of the atom bomb, to say nothing of a host of lesser-known atrocities. It is not difficult to understand how someone could look at all that, judge the earth to be an unimaginable cavalcade of cruelty and calamity, and imagine an escape from it as being their best hope for salvation.

Theologian Paul Griffiths speaks truly when he says that “the nonhuman animate world is an ocean of blood flowing from violent

death; and the human world differs from it in this only in the scale of the violence and the ingenuity of its performance, in both of which our world far exceeds the nonhuman one. . . . We are born into a damaged world, and we then proceed to damage both it and ourselves further.”⁴

Our world can often seem like a cold, indifferent machine whose chief output is misery and mayhem. Talk of an “immense inheritance” by contrast can seem remote or perhaps even an insult that ignores or trivializes the presence of suffering, evil, and pain.

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa summarizes this experience of the world by saying that under modernity, particularly late modernity, you and I encounter the world as “a point of aggression.”⁵ And, of course, if the world is chiefly a point of aggression, then the only thing for people to do is either to escape it or, failing that, to acquire power and assert their control over it.

The struggles that define our day, then, are not new. These difficult questions—concerning questions of public justice; or the human person, sexuality, and gender; or the myriad issues related to climate change—are all predictable questions that will arise when our primary experience of the world is one of suffering and alienation, when the world feels to us like it is chiefly a point of aggression.

A PLAN OF LOVE AND TRUTH

Despite all this, I think we are still on good ground when we view the world as our immense inheritance, as a gift rather than a prison to be escaped. The Dutch Calvinist Herman Bavinck, who lived and wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, can be a helpful guide in answering that question. Bavinck was concerned by a felt dissonance in the soul that seemed to pervade the Europe of his day, a dissonance that will sound familiar to us today: “The peculiarity of this moment is that everyone feels an epoch of change, when all people realize they cannot remain the same, and that some long for this moment to pass by more swiftly than others. There is a disharmony between our thinking and feeling, between

our willing and acting. There is a discord between religion and culture, between science and life.”⁶

Bavinck believed that the dominant spirit behind all these questions and social transformations was that of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche, Bavinck argued, recognized that if Europe really had moved beyond Christianity, then everything would need to change because virtually everything about European culture, politics, and even practical day-to-day life was shaped in some measure by Christianity. If Christianity were to be rejected, everything else would need to be “reset,” one might say. Value systems, human communities, national politics—everything—would need to be redefined and reevaluated in the aftermath of the failure of Christianity and the ascent of late modernity. Ultimately, Nietzsche called for the rise of the *Übermensch*, or the “over man,” who “prefers the concreteness of domination to the flighty pursuit of happiness.”⁷ If the world is a point of aggression, then one way of dealing with that is to rise above the world in power and might.

Bavinck saw his task in *The Christian Worldview* to be offering his readers an alternative to the Nietzschean account of the world—to recatechize Christian people, as it were, and to help them once again find in Christianity a plausible and life-affirming account of reality. He did this in a way that might surprise contemporary readers. He did not begin by attempting a propositional defense of certain core Christian doctrines, nor did he provide an overview of the Christian story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Instead, Bavinck took up several classic philosophical problems, devoting one chapter to each, and tried to demonstrate two things: First, the Nietzschean account of these questions, “What am I?” and “What is the world?” and “What is my place and task in the world?” are unsatisfying because they are too simplistic. Second, the Christian account is more satisfying because it is able to affirm reality in its complexity, rather than subduing reality to its ideological aspirations, like a philosopher trying to cram the square peg of reality into the round hole of his particular philosophy.

In particular, Bavinck was concerned with distinguishing between the “organic” element in the Christian worldview and the “mechanical” elements he saw as being inextricably bound up with the Nietzschean framework. It may be helpful to consider a specific example to help make the difference between the two a bit clearer: What does the Nietzschean mean when he talks about “nature”? And what, in contrast, does a Christian mean when talking about “nature”?

In the mechanical view of the world, Bavinck says, the universe is impersonal and indifferent to you and me. It is simply a sort of grand, cosmic machine, complicated to be sure, but ultimately predictable and devoid of any sort of ultimate goal or end. The universe isn’t bending toward any final destination. It simply is. So when the mechanistic person talks about nature, they mean a kind of order that is governed by these unbreakable physical laws that govern how the machine operates—gravity, entropy, and so on. Nature is governed by these laws, which are indifferent to morality or right or wrong. Thus nature has no moral content to it and so is finally “red in tooth and claw,” as Tennyson once put it.⁸

But this explanation is not altogether satisfactory. There is something beautiful in the natural world, and we encounter it nearly every day—the delightful song of birds singing in a tree, the smell of fresh flowers growing outside one’s front door, the amusing play of two squirrels chasing each other in the park. While the things that cause Tennyson to speak of nature in such brutal ways are true, they are not the whole truth of the natural world. Indeed, there is a genius in much of nature that supersedes that of humanity, as our climate crisis exposes for all to see. There is violence in the world to be sure, and it sometimes appears to be governed by an indifferent cruelty. But that is not the whole truth about nature.

Bavinck recognizes this:

Nature is no foolish, brutal, or demonic power but a means to the revelation of God’s thoughts and virtues. Nature is an unfurling of his wisdom and a reflection of his glory. In defiance of all disharmony between virtue and happiness, the

world is still a suitable place for the human being to live—not heaven, but also not hell, not paradise but also not a wasteland, a domicile that corresponds with his present condition. Under the influence of Darwinism, the thought has emerged that this world was nothing other than a scene of struggle and misery. But this representation is as equally one-sided as is the idyllic-nature view of the eighteenth century. Scripture avoids both extremes; it rejects the optimism and the pessimism in their falsehood but after having first fully recognized the elements of truth that are hidden in both.⁹

What Bavinck wanted to preserve was an account of the natural world that recognized that nature was more than mere matter and that nature was made with some future end or goal in mind. And even as nature itself groans beneath the weight of human sin, and even as human beings struggle to perceive nature's beauty and final end because we too are afflicted by sin, still these things remain true. The world as it exists today is not our final home because it is still the aftermath of a violent cosmic cataclysm. But it is also a coherent natural order even now, and we belong to it as creatures made within it. Thus we should not worship nature, but neither should we seek to escape it.

In preserving this more complex account of nature, Bavinck is simply standing in the broad Christian tradition. The same view of nature has been presented more recently by Pope Benedict XVI, who has said that “what we call ‘nature’ in a cosmic sense has its origin in ‘a plan of love and truth.’”¹⁰ And so, Bavinck argued, we can reckon with the real evil in the world while still recognizing that the world is best received by us as a gift, an inheritance left to us by our predecessors and, ultimately, by God himself. It may not be perfect, but even today it is a fit home for us.

CAN WE PERCEIVE NATURE TRULY?

This raises a second problem, however. Let's grant that Bavinck is right. Nature possesses a certain order within itself; it even has a moral trajectory that culminates in the restoration of nature to its full

and final glory by God. Participating in this order is how we experience the good life and pass on the good life to the next generation.

But how accessible to us is that natural order today? Can we look at reality as we experience it every day and, using our reason, say true things about it? Can nature, rightly understood, guide and shape us? Or is that natural order, to the extent that it still exists in our damaged world, totally inaccessible to us because of sin? And if it is inaccessible to us, how do we find our bearings in the world and know who we are and what we ought to do?

This was not a trivial question, particularly in the decades following Bavinck's death in 1921. The foremost critic of the idea that we could come to true knowledge of the world simply via our reason was the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. The Dutch-American theologian Cornelius Van Til arrived at a similar conclusion regarding nature in the US context. If Nietzsche imagined a bombed-out world of gray, dusty chaos waiting to be subdued by the *Übermensch*, Barth and Van Til held that, whatever the world might be, we stagger about in it like those who are blind unless we avail ourselves of the Word of God, which alone can help us see the world truly. Barth came by this view honestly. He feared that appeals to nature inevitably collapsed into a purely arbitrary attempt to legitimize one's personal beliefs and biases. At its worst, Barth warned, this sort of "natural theology" could be used to justify great evils, as he saw happening in Nazi Germany at the time.

In Barth's view, if we say that anything other than the Word of God revealed through Jesus is revelation from God, then we will end up elevating the arbitrary opinions of people to the status of divine revelation. Once you have done that, you can justify virtually anything—even a holocaust. This is why, in the mid-1930s, Barth issued an angry denunciation of "natural theology" as taught by Brunner in a tract titled simply *Nein!*, which is German for "No!" The only revelation humankind receives from God, Barth insisted, is the revelation of God in Christ. Any other source of knowledge is questionable and uncertain and must be kept firmly subservient to the Word of God.

There are other reasons to sympathize with Barth besides his own experience with the German church's capitulation to Nazism. If you have spent much time around certain conservative evangelical circles, you have likely seen certain gender roles that developed in the postwar era of the 1950s discussed as if they are the "natural" way of relating for men and women. So too appeals to nature often undergirded much racial injustice in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Appeals to nature can be abused in precisely the way Barth feared.

Yet the argument against natural theology is not as airtight as some might think. C. S. Lewis observed the same events that drove Barth to reject natural theology but arrived at opposite conclusions. He begins his case for Christianity in *Mere Christianity* with an observation that nearly every day we hear people of all sorts speaking to one another in terms that suggest they share common moral commitments. If a boy at school complains that he shared his candy with a friend yesterday, but the friend is not returning the favor today, he is appealing to a moral standard that he thinks both he and his friend are subject to. Likewise, today when economic populists complain about growing discrepancies between CEO pay and worker pay, they're appealing to a certain standard of fairness they think should apply to worker and CEO alike.

This simple belief is more significant than it might first appear. What this means is that, in at least this one area, people are able, simply on the basis of reason, to recognize a commonly shared reality that both of them are subject to. These somewhat intuitive norms regarding fairness, justice, and so on suggest that it is still, even after the advent of sin, possible to arrive at truth through our reason. It is not a perfect process, nor is it immune to error. But it is *possible*.

Indeed, Lewis recognized something else in making his appeal against both Nietzsche and Barth. If we do not share any common facts or common reality with our neighbors, if we are all inextricably locked up in our own prejudices and follies and can only arrive at truth through the Word of God, then there is actually no

basis for life together among those who do not confess the Christian faith. The possibility of persuasion and a healthy pluralism is intrinsically dependent on the idea that two neighbors can access the same reality together through observation and careful thought, and then reason about it together. If there is no shared reality, there is no basis for shared reasoning. Ironically, the Barthian turn against reason actually leaves us in the same place as the Nietzschean revolution that Bavinck opposed: There is no natural order that you and I exist within and must share; there is only our competing wills. In such a state, the only way of avoiding conflict is for each of us to make what some have called the “retreat to commitment.”

The retreat to commitment happens when a person says that they have committed themselves to a certain identity, belief system, or community, and their commitment to it is, in itself, what keeps them there. In Christian theology this has sometimes been called “fideism.” But a similar logic can be seen outside the church today, as when a person simply declares that “whatever a person thinks they are, that’s what they are.” That person’s commitment to their identity is, therefore, immune to any claims that might be made through moral reasoning.

The difficulty here is that such an argument is immune to any sort of real critique because it is grounded entirely in human choice. There is no basis for distinguishing between choices and no way for people committed to one belief or community to communicate meaningfully with those who have made other commitments. All reasoning, all exchanging of ideas and seeking after grounds for a common, pluralistic life together, is lost in the haze of a reasonless human choice.

This, then, is why we need a firm commitment to the idea that there is such a thing as a natural order that can be observed and understood. Apart from it, we will be condemned to the very thing we are now experiencing in the Western world: cloistered-off communities unable to talk to one another or even to understand one another, for they have nothing in common about which to talk. Bavinck’s appeal to nuance and complexity was not simply

an academic being pedantic; it was a serious recognition that apart from such things it will be very difficult to form and maintain authentic community.

WHAT IF THE INHERITANCE ISN'T PASSED ON?

Suppose it is true that we are not, in fact, cosmic orphans but rather the recipients of a great inheritance. And suppose that we can discern what that inheritance is and how we ought to pass it on to others. Even granting all of that, one obvious problem remains: we human beings constantly fail to honor the debts we owe to one another. The greatest problem for the idea that nature is the product of “a plan of love and truth” is not necessarily the sophisticated arguments of nineteenth-century philosophers or twentieth-century theologians. It is, rather, the plain fact that the debts we owe to one another are constantly defaulted on—that we constantly fail one another. In a world of such constant failures, it makes a certain sense to say, “I will take control of my life and take care of myself.” If no one else will do it, you are all that you have left, or so the common wisdom goes.

It is true that families can fail to practice love. It is true that neighborhoods can be treacherous and friends can fail. And all these failures make it harder to discern, let alone embrace, the natural order that God imprinted on the world when he made it. Yet these failures are not the end of our indebtedness or the destruction of the natural order. Why is that? Answering the question will require a bit of theology, but being able to answer this objection is vital, and so the effort to think through the question carefully will be well rewarded.

Christianity has traditionally taught that God is *simple*. When we use that word conversationally, we mean something like “the opposite of complex.” But that is not what simplicity means when Christians are talking about God. When Christians say that God is simple, they mean he does not have multiple parts. He is one. Christianity teaches that when we talk about God, we cannot distinguish between God’s being—the blunt fact of his

existence—and God’s characteristics—his love, his mercy, his justice, and all the rest.

This can seem an abstract debate at first. Why do Christians care about this? What difference does it make whether God has separate parts to his identity? But the answer is quite practical. Classical Christian theism has said that there is nothing that can act on God from the outside, for there is nothing that exists independent of God that can sustain its existence without God. So we cannot think of God’s love and God’s holiness as being competing characteristics within his being, as if God confronts something happening in the world and has to decide how to respond by balancing his love for people with his regard for his own holiness. That is not how Christianity has understood God traditionally. If that were how we thought of God, we would implicitly be saying that something outside of God is influencing him, either nudging him to favor his love or to favor his holiness. Once we have done that, we have functionally reduced God to a kind of superpowered human, something closer to the Greek gods than to the Christian God. This we should not do—for if you know your Greek mythology, you know that the humanized gods of the Greek myths are often vindictive, petty, and cruel. But God is none of those things.

Rather, because his being and his attributes are the same, we can say that God is complete in himself. The needs and lacks that drive the Greek gods toward vicious behavior simply do not apply to God as he is described in Christianity. Alone among all the beings in existence, God needs nothing outside of himself to sustain his existence or to give him pleasure. He has no need within himself. This can, wrongly understood, cause God to seem aloof and distant. Yet this is precisely the opposite of what our conclusion ought to be from this teaching.

God is complete in himself. He does not need anything else to be satisfied. And yet you and I still exist. This world still exists. The flowers are dressed in splendor, the birds sing with joy, the ocean roars in praise of God. If God is complete in himself and lacks nothing, and if God still moved to create, then he did not create

out of some need or fear or insecurity. God did not act because he desires power or wishes to control people or cause them pain. He already is fully powerful, fully realized, fully satisfied within his own inner life. He did not create because he had to. He created because he loves. Creation is gratuitous. It is unnecessary. It is a gift. God in his action is utterly free from all the things that drive human creatures to act sinfully toward their neighbors. And in that there is great comfort because we know when he acts *toward* us, he acts *for* us, for he has no need of anything from us.

Our existence itself is a gift of God. Indeed, the entire cosmos is a gift of God. It is the product of divine intentionality, a means through which God can give of himself to us. Thus even if the more immediate ways in which the world can reveal its order to you—such as family or church or neighborhood—have failed you, that order can still be seen because you have been given the gift of existence by God. The late English theologian John Webster explains it well: “Because God is not one being and agent alongside others, and because he is in himself entirely realized and possesses perfect bliss, he has nothing to gain from creating. Precisely in the absence of divine self-interest, the creature gains everything.”¹¹ Elsewhere in that same essay, Webster quotes the nineteenth-century German Lutheran Isaak Dorner who said, “Love is also a lover of life.” And in that, there is some comfort—and even joy.

It is precisely because God exists outside of us that we can receive his law as good. It is because God, acting in love, made the world that we can be confident that the world is good, that the way in which God made the world to work is good. In one of his sermons, Webster writes that “God’s law is not an arbitrary set of statutes managed by some divine magistrate; still less is it a mechanism for relating to God through a system of rewards for good conduct and punishments for misbehavior. God’s law is best thought of as God’s personal presence. It is God’s gift of himself, in which he comes to his people in fellowship and sets before them his will for human life. God’s law is the claim that God makes upon us as our Maker and Redeemer.”¹²

God looks at this world and loves it, which is why we can and should do the same. This world is not something we should seek to escape through conquest or bend to our will through technique, power, or control. Rather, it is a gift given to us by God for our joy and his glory. Because God is love and his law is good, we can look at our neighbor and love him or her. Because God gave himself to us, we can give ourselves to others. We can confidently and joyfully enter into these debts of love that we build up over a lifetime of living in the world, and we can dispense them with extravagance, trusting that whatever wrongs we might experience today as a result of such living will be gathered up and made right in the glorious and perfect love of God.

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