

## “Who Really Owns Your Property?”

Psalm 24 (NRSV)

For those of us fortunate enough to own a house with some property, **private property ownership is a bit of a sacred privilege and right.** Some say it's the foundation of democratic, western society, part of what it means to belong to the capitalist, as opposed to the communist, system. Title to land ownership is carefully controlled by real estate agents, conveyed by lawyers, as well as recorded and registered in land title offices. For those of us who live in the lower and middle Fraser Valley, New Westminister is both the name and the location of our land titles district; those who live in the upper Fraser Valley will likely find their land titles registered in the Yale District, located in the city of Kamloops.

**Who owned the land before you and I did?** Well, a search in the respective land titles offices may reveal some of the history of the land ownership in this area. We know that many Mennonites and Dutch people, as well as people of British and Hungarian origin, once owned large numbers of the farmland properties – dairy farms and berry farms -- that have now been turned into suburban developments in and around what were once the little villages of Yarrow, Arnold, Huntingdon, Sumas, Kilgard, Clayburn, Abbotsford, Bradner and Mount Lehman. Yet what the land titles offices cannot tell us is that likely, for thousands of years before, various aboriginal groups had the use if not the ownership of most of these lands!

The rights and privileges of ownership have **a long and noble history.** A provision that guards against any unreasonable search on our land or in our houses and seizure of our land and/or our houses was most recently protected in our **Canadian Bill of Rights**, adopted by Parliament in 1985. In article 1. it states:

It is hereby recognized and declared that in Canada there have existed and shall continue to exist without discrimination by reason of race, nation origin, colour, religion or sex, the following human rights and fundamental freedoms, namely, a) the right of the individual to life, liberty, security of the person and **enjoyment of property and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law;** b) the right of the individual to equality before the law and the protection of the law; c) freedom of religion; d) freedom of speech; e) freedom of assembly and of association; and f) freedom of the press.

**This protection has roots that go back** through ancient Anglo-Saxon common law to the good soil of the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. What are the eighth and tenth commandments, for example, against stealing and “coveting” but divinely ordained rules to safeguard peoples’ property? Boundary lines, deeds, even the contemporary question of aboriginal title, as well as already established laws against harsh foreclosure, provisions for settling disputes over ownership, the right of an owner to pass his or her property on to his/her heirs – all of these rights that are fundamental to our society – have a biblical basis. **Queen Jezebel** learned at great cost the dangers of tampering with these rights when she and her wicked husband, **King Ahab**, commandeered the vineyard that belonged to **Naboth**, and she paid with her life for her greed (1 Kgs. 21; 2 Kgs. 9).

**Titles** to property are important. But they are also **incomplete**. Undoubtedly, especially in British Columbia where land treaties were never signed, significant portions of their traditional lands and perhaps some of what we now term “Crown Land” ought likely to revert to **the First Nations peoples** who roamed the land far before the Europeans “rediscovered” Canada, and to **the great Creator, God**, who first made and ultimately owns all the lands of this wonderful, captivating earth.

### 1. **God’s ownership of all creation.**

Human rights to ownership are undoubtedly important – but not ultimate. The Bible guards them, but it does not deify them. The prophets and the apostles recognized the title beyond titles, the Owner above all owners.

They took their cue from the psalmist who celebrated God’s ownership of all creation: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (24:1). This biblical truth is **a comprehensive statement**. To “the Lord” – the Hebrew word order names him first – belongs the world with all its goods and peoples. No thing, no place, no body is exempt from God’s prior claim. There is no partnership in this; there are no stockholders who own a share; God is the sole proprietor, the exclusive and total owner of all that is.

This biblical statement is also **a bold affirmation**. By using the personal name of God revealed to Israel, the rival claims of rival gods are brushed aside. As far as the nation of Israel is concerned, Dagon, the god of the Philistines is not the master of the great coastal plain. Yahweh, the great

Lord of the universe, also Lord of Israel, is. Chemosh, the god of the Moabites is not the ruler of the highlands east of the Dead Sea, Yahweh, the true living God, the God of the tribes of Jacob is. Neither can Marduk the god-like king of the northern Tigris-Euphrates valley be god; only Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is.

The nations of the earth may pursue their conquests, shape and reshape their boundaries and borders, and make and remake their maps, but the whole earth still belongs to the Lord. The captains of industry may cut the timber, pump their oil, refine their ore, but the earth and its contents still belong to the Lord. You and I may save our money, make our purchases, pay off our mortgages, keep our taxes current, but the earth – including those bits of it that we claim as our own – still belongs to the Lord.

This biblical reality is also **a reasonable assumption**. Why is the Lord the owner of everything? Because **he made it**: “... for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” (24:2). God is not some squatter on someone else’s property, nor a rustler of the goods of others; God owns the world and everything in it because he made it, not someone else. Israel knew this and successive generations of biblical people have known this. And, interestingly enough, this is an assumption that is also deeply grounded in most aboriginal peoples’ thoughts as well.

It might be worth adding that the worshippers who sang this psalm in the Temple were reminded of the supremacy of the Lord every time they sang the phrases “**on the seas**” and “**on the rivers**” because both **the sea and the river were revered as deities by their Canaanite neighbours**. The Israelites knew better. They knew that the sea and the rivers were merely part of “**the building materials**” with which God has carried out his creative work of making this lovely planet earth.

As we sing this ancient psalm we can find in it a similar reminder. Our neighbours can speak with awe about the spiritual wonders of “mother nature”; they can cite with curiosity the mysteries of a radically secularized concept of evolution; they can salute with pride the admittedly impressive achievements of our scientists. But we know better. We know that behind and throughout all such wonders, mysteries and achievements lie the presence and the power of the Creator – the Builder and the Owner of all creation. Try as we might, we cannot found the earth upon the sea or establish it upon the rivers. Only God can do that.

## 2. Our response to God's ownership.

What we can do is to **respond to God's ownership**. The psalmist shows us how. The strong statements about God's ownership and his creative power are followed by **a couple of questions** – questions that shows how impressed, how awed, we should be when we consider God's greatness: **“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?”** (24:3). If God is this great, the question is asked, if he is this powerful, if he is the owner of all of us and everything we think we own, who of us would dare to approach him? Who of us would begin to think we might be allowed to invade even a small space of his holy, awesome presence? What then is our proper response to God's ownership of the earth, the galaxies, and everything else in space, including us mere mortals?

The pilgrims who asked these questions as they approached the gates of Jerusalem and the Temple precincts were on the right track. The very fact that they took God's greatness so seriously showed that they knew what part of their response must be – **worship**.

God was not their pal, their buddy, their crony. God was not their doll or plaything. **God was and is their and our Owner and Maker**. They had to meet his demands; he did not have to meet theirs. And the first of his demands was worship -- their declaration of dependence upon him, their affirmation of allegiance to him, their confession of faith in him, and their pledge of love and willingness to commit to acts of devotion for him.

**Obedience** as well as worship was to characterize their response. As Owner and Maker God sets the standards of our lives. The answer given by the priest to the pilgrims' questions show what some of those standards might be. We would summarize them today in the biblical word stewardship – how we ought to use and what we ought to do with our property. The pilgrims asked what qualifications a worshipper needed to stand safely and securely in God's presence. The priests' answer centered in loyal obedience, in faithful stewardship of all that we have been given: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully” (24:4).

It's a marvelous summary of godly obedience and stewardship.

When the priests mention **“clean hands”** they do not mean mere outer cleanliness, but inner and outer freedom from violence, from harsh or cruel dealings with others. It means the active practice of hospitality. It means the active pursuit of justice and kindness and mercy. This is what the prophets asked all along of every believer: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:8). And when the priests spoke of **“a pure heart”** they pointed to the importance of our motivation. “Heart,” in biblical language, is the place where we do our choosing. It speaks of the single mindedness of our devotion to God’s will. We not only want to **do** what he wants, but we **want** to do what he wants. And to **“lift up [one’s] soul to what is false”** is a clear reference to the sin of idolatry, substituting some one else or something else for God. The Creator-Owner has no tolerance for rivals. Our false gods and godlets are not in his class; and he urges us to set them aside as a mark of our loyal obedience to him.

Worship, obedience and **delight** are to be the ingredients of our response to God’s ownership. God not only demands our exclusive allegiance; he promises exquisite blessing to those who are faithful in their stewardship of our life, the earth, and all its riches and resources.

They will receive blessing from the Lord,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob (24:5-6).

Our loyalty and obedience to God is more than matched by his loyalty and kindness to us. God will do all that his relationship to us requires. Protection, provision, forgiveness, affirmation, victory over all that seeks to defeat us – these are a few of the blessings that the ancient priests promised to those who cast their lot in with the Lord as Owner of all.

Our delight in God is not only based on what he will do, but on who he is. The final verses of this psalm ring with this kind of delight. The pilgrims, eager for worship, call for the Temple gates to be opened for God. They want God to flood the Temple with his living, loving presence:

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

And the priests within asked, testing the people's loyalty:

Who is the king of glory?

The people answer:

The Lord, strong and mighty,

The Lord, mighty in battle.

This final, triumphant answer of the people was the signal for the gates to be opened, welcoming them into the presence of the divine Lord and saving God. It was an answer that summed up all the power and the glory of the Lord who made the world, and who owns – as another psalm puts it -- “every wild animal in the forest” as well as “the cattle on a thousand hills” and “all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field” (Ps. 50:10-11), including us and our property:

“The Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory” (KJV).

The Lord of the armies of heaven and earth, the Lord who has the stars, the angels, and the nations at his beck and call – he is the glorious King, our King. We can delight in his ownership; we can delight in him.

This psalm is much more than a simple liturgy repeated by priests and pilgrims. It is a song of life, a life-giving song. It tells us what our Owner is like, and what he asks of us. It reminds us that the title to our property goes back, way back, not just to the European kings and queens in whose name the early explorers claimed the lands of the so-called “new world,” nor even to the First Nations who were there for thousands of years before them, but to the King of glory, God Almighty, the Creator of this world. And it reminds us that the title to our hands, our hearts, and our souls goes back to him as well.

Amen

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