



**REDISCOVER THE GOD WHO IS
BIGGER THAN BIG, CLOSER THAN CLOSE,
AND GOODER THAN GOOD**

**A
Million
Little
Miracles**

MARK BATTERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR
A MILLION LITTLE MIRACLES

“Mark Batterson reminds us, in a wise and whimsical way, that life is nothing short of a miracle. Read this book and recapture childlike wonder for a million little miracles.”

—BOB GOFF, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Love Does*, *Everybody Always*, *Dream Big*, and *Undistracted*

“In *A Million Little Miracles*, Mark Batterson takes us on a journey through God’s grace in the details of life. This book will refresh your perspective on who God is and what it means to live with purpose in the identity that is ours in Christ. I was moved, inspired, encouraged, and strengthened—you will be too!”

—DR. AMY ORR-EWING, honorary lecturer, School of Divinity at the University of Aberdeen

“Mark Batterson’s *A Million Little Miracles* invites us to explore the vastness and intimacy of God’s presence in our lives. It draws us into a perspective of wonder as we rediscover the miraculous among the mundane and the God who is behind it all.”

—STEVEN FURTICK, lead pastor of Elevation Church and *New York Times* bestselling author of *Crash the Chatterbox*, *Greater*, *(Un)Qualified*, and his latest book, *Do the New You*

“If life has brought you to a place of wondering what it’s all about, whether you’re languishing in hurt or mired in humdrum, Mark Batterson says the answer is to rediscover a holy curiosity. In *A Million Little Miracles*, he demonstrates what to do when God seems far away or too small to help us, teaching us how to gain perspective on situations and replace our worry with wonder. This book is a microscope, telescope, and pair of glasses to

help us see the miracles all around us with new eyes—and to find the God who is so much bigger and closer than we could ever ask or imagine.”

—W. LEE WARREN, neurosurgeon, award-winning author, and host of *The Dr. Lee Warren* podcast

“In a world that seems to be growing more cynical, Mark Batterson steps up with a brave new work filled with the hope, wonder, and encouragement we all need. This book will help you take a step back and see, through convincing evidence, what the story of God and humanity is truly all about. You’ll be much better for it.”

—CAREY NIEUWHOF, bestselling author, speaker, and podcaster

“*A Million Little Miracles*, simply put, is a masterpiece in miraculous proportions. A must-read for those who are chasing the dreams that are planted by the God who is still in the miracle business. Mark Batterson has an uncanny ability to uncover life’s most inexplicable nuggets that ironically are right in front of us, yet we complacently fail to see. From the majestic vastness of the universe, observed through the most powerful lens of a telescope to the microscopic intricate cells that form each of us so uniquely, the wonders of God’s creation are boundless. *A Million Little Miracles* brings God’s craftsmanship to life. Upon completion of the book’s challenge, leave your tent, go outside, and embrace the awe-inspiring miracles that surround you, counting blessings that frankly are too numerous to count.”

—RICKY DICKSON, retired CEO and president of Blue Bell Creameries, and author of *One Scoop at a Time: Stories and Lessons from Fear to Faith*

“Mark Batterson has done it again: This is a book that not only speaks to his own heart cry, but it also beautifully unpacks the creativity of the Creator God at work in the world. It’s been a huge privilege to get to know this author—his thirst to see the things of God known in this generation is totally infectious. *A Million Little Miracles* is an essential reminder that, in a frenetic world full of distraction, God is at work at all times and in all places and is running after all of us.”

—AL GORDON, rector at SAINT

“Following Jesus requires our imaginations to be stretched beyond their limits, for them to be attuned to the beauty and goodness of the world that is before us but that we frequently do not see. This is a journey that is at times as painful as it is glorious. With *A Million Little Miracles*, Mark Batterson joyfully and unapologetically expands our often underdeveloped imaginations, leaving us breathless and astounded at whom the God of the Bible intends for us to become. For those looking for hope, comfort, conviction, and confidence in what it means to be a son or daughter of the living God, read this book.”

—CURT THOMPSON, MD, psychiatrist and author of *The Soul of Desire* and *The Deepest Place*

“If you threw paint at a canvas a billion times, you would never get a *Mona Lisa*. Intelligent design is written all over creation. Mark Batterson takes us on an incredible journey exploring the mind-blowing dimensions of creativity in the art and design of life, but the true genius of this book is how he then uses this to introduce us afresh to the Artist behind it all and the galaxies of love flowing from Him in infinite directions. Life-changing!”

—PHIL CUNNINGHAM, founder and CEO of Sunrise Animation Studios

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MULTNOMAH

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Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.

—C. S. LEWIS

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PROLOGUE

A MILLION LITTLE MIRACLES

Before you were conceived, you existed as an egg cell in your mother's ovaries. An interesting way to start a book, but why not begin at the beginning? That ovum measured one-tenth of one millimeter^[1]—a microscopic miracle-in-waiting. The average woman carries more than a million eggs in her ovaries,^[2] which makes you one in a million, once-in-a-lifetime. Of course, that's only half the equation. The average ejaculation contains as many as three hundred million sperm.^[3] In other words, there once was a swim meet—300,000,000 swimmers lined up in the starting blocks—and you, my friend, you won that race!

You go, swimmer!

You have been defying the odds since day one! But it gets even more amazing. You also spent five months in your grandmother's womb. Wait, what? Yes, you read that right. All the eggs a woman will ever carry are formed in her ovaries while she is in her mother's womb, which means the egg that was destined to become you was in your mother's womb when your mother was in *her* mother's womb.

From the moment of conception until the day death knocks on our door, life is more mysterious and miraculous than we can imagine. Truth be told? Most of us take everyday miracles for granted. This book is about taking them for gratitude. Why is that so important? Because whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride! It doesn't just rob God of the glory He deserves; it steals our joy.

I know people who say they have never experienced a miracle. With all due respect, you have never *not*. In fact, you are one!

With the help of fluorescence microscopy, embryologists have captured the moment of conception. Within moments of a sperm penetrating an egg, that egg releases billions of zinc atoms that look like tiny sparks.^[4] Stop and think about this: The miracle of conception mirrors the miracle of creation. Coincidence? I think not. In the beginning, God said, “Let there be light.”^[5] When you were conceived, it’s like God said it all over again: “Let there be you.”

There never has been and never will be anyone like you. That’s not a testament to you. It’s a testament to the God who created you. No one can worship God like you or for you. No one can love like you or lead like you. No one has your fingerprint, voiceprint, eyeprint, or even sweatprint.

Fun fact?

The 373 chemicals that compose sweat combine in a way that makes your sweat unlike anyone else’s.^[6] Did you need to know that to live a long, happy life? I’ll let you be the judge of that, but buyer beware, I’ll sprinkle some fun facts along the way. The uniqueness of your sweatprint may seem trivial, but I think of this and a million other details as creation clues. They are the trail of breadcrumbs left by the Creator since His evening strolls through the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. I hope they add a little levity, a little dimensionality, to your understanding of the everyday miracles that are all around us.

WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

It’s not only God’s mercies that are new every morning. It’s His miracles! Every day, without exception, we experience miracles big and small, visible and invisible, tangible and intangible. As you read this book, it may feel like you are sitting still, but that is an illusion of miraculous proportions. The reality? You are on a giant merry-go-round that is spinning on its axis at 1,000 miles per hour and speeding through space at 67,000 miles per hour.^[7] That is nothing short of miraculous, but we don’t give it a second thought.

Even on a day when you didn't get much done, you did travel 1.6 million miles through space. But wait, there's more. The Milky Way galaxy is spinning at 468,000 miles per hour,^[8] and we don't even get dizzy. Meanwhile, the Milky Way is moving at 1,342,162 miles per hour toward something astrophysicists call "the Great Attractor."^[9] The Great Attractor? Things that make you go, *Hmmmmm*.

Question.

When was the last time you thanked God for keeping us in orbit? For most of us, the answer is never. We don't kneel at the end of the day and pray, *Lord, I wasn't sure we were going to make the full rotation today, but You did it again!* Why? Because God is so good at what God does that we take most miracles for granted.

When was the last time you praised God for dopamine? Or the seventh cranial nerve? Or the 118 elements that compose the periodic table? Or the 330 billion cells your body will recycle today?^[10]

"There is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day," said John Donne, "but would seem a Miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once."^[11] It's true, isn't it? If the sunrise or sunset were a one-off, we'd be overwhelmed with awe. But because God does it every day, we're nonplussed.

We tend to think of miracles as the exceptions to the rule, and that's one kind of miracle. There are miracles that defy the laws of nature, but the laws of nature are miraculous and mysterious in and of themselves. "We should always endeavor to wonder at the permanent thing, not the mere exception," said G. K. Chesterton. "We should be startled by the sun, and not by the eclipse."^[12] Speaking of, it was Chesterton who made this observation: "God is like the sun; you cannot look at it, but without it you cannot look at anything else."^[13]

We praise God for anomalies and epiphanies, as we should. But this book is about praising God for everything else—a million little miracles all too often overlooked and underappreciated. Why is this so significant? There is a fine line between the mundane and the miraculous. If you see the

miraculous as mundane, life becomes a bore. If you learn to discern the miraculous *in* the mundane, welcome to wonderland.

NEVER LOSE A HOLY CURIOSITY

When I was a senior in college, our basketball team took a road trip that changed the trajectory of my life. I can't remember if we won that away game, but I do remember popping into a bookstore and picking up an 878-page biography on Albert Einstein.

Up until that point in my life, I had read fewer than a dozen books not assigned by a teacher. It's a mystery why I bought that biography, but it turned into an out-of-body experience.

The important thing is to not stop questioning.... One cannot help but be in awe when [one] contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day. Never lose a holy curiosity.^[14]

That tagline changed my life—"Never lose a holy curiosity." I read it as if Einstein were issuing a personal challenge. From that moment forward, there was next to nothing that I didn't find endlessly fascinating.

This book is about curating a holy curiosity about the Creator and His creation. It's about recapturing childlike wonder for ordinary miracles, which is an oxymoron. There is nothing ordinary about anything or anyone! Much of this book is based on a simple principle, but it's a principle of great importance. In Aristotelian terms, it's a first principle.

Nothing is as simple as it seems.

Everything is more miraculous than we can imagine.

According to quantum mechanics, every cell in the human body is 99.99 percent empty space.^[15] There are thirty-seven sextillion biochemical reactions happening in your body every single second.^[16] If your double-

helix DNA were stretched end to end, it would reach to the moon and back nearly 150,000 times.^[17]

Never experienced a miracle?

You have never not.

“There are only two ways to live your life,” said Einstein. “One is as if nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is.”^[18] Which way are you living your life? Are you taking miracles for granted? Or are you taking them for gratitude? Is your holy curiosity waxing or waning? In the pages that follow, we will explore the art and science of not just perceiving those miracles but praising God for them.

TAKE A BREATH

Take a breath.

You just inhaled half a liter of air containing twenty-five sextillion molecules. That’s more molecules than all the sand on all the seashores on earth, including sandcastles. “All the world’s roads and all the world’s canals,” said Sam Kean, “haven’t handled nearly as much traffic as our lungs do every second.”^[19]

The average person has thirty trillion red blood cells. Each of those red blood cells contains 260 million proteins called hemoglobin that carry oxygen molecules to the one hundred trillion cells in the body. With every heartbeat, six quarts of blood FedEx that oxygen through sixty thousand miles of veins, arteries, and capillaries.^[20] That’s twice the circumference of planet Earth. The average heart will pull this off more than two billion times without skipping a beat.

There are no ordinary people.

There are no ordinary days.

There are no ordinary things.

The premise of this book is simple yet sweeping: Miracles are happening all around us all the time. The problem? We’re like Jacob, pre-Bethel. “Surely the LORD is in this place,” said Jacob, “and I was not aware of it.”^[21] Before Bethel, Jacob was sleepwalking.

The same thing happens to us, doesn't it? Over time, we stop noticing the sunrise and sunset as something spectacular. We become numb to the simple pleasures of life. We lose our childlike sense of wonder. This book is a wake-up call to rediscover the millions of mysteries and miracles that are hiding in plain sight, and I might as well start with the breath you just took.

I suffered from severe asthma for four decades. There weren't forty days in forty years that I didn't take multiple puffs of a rescue inhaler. I slept with it under my pillow and played basketball with it in my sock. My earliest memory is an asthma attack, so it was hard to imagine anything else. I prayed hundreds of times that God would heal my lungs, but it didn't happen. Until it did. For some reason that is beyond my paygrade, God answered my prayer on July 2, 2016. I haven't taken a single puff of an inhaler since. My point? I don't take a single breath for granted. But it shouldn't take an asthma attack to praise God for each and every breath.

We experience millions of little miracles every day, just like the last breath you took. How much happier would we be if we took them for gratitude rather than taking them for granted? We can't live life to its full potential until we recognize it for what it is—a miracle from start to finish.

HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

It was a picture-perfect day in Miami, midwinter. For those who live north of the Mason-Dixon Line, *midwinter* is key. I was doing a little vitamin D therapy in a pool when I had an epiphany. As I looked at the sunlight shimmering off the surface of the water, a question fired across my synapses: *What's really happening when what's happening is happening?*

It's a question I've asked thousands of times since then. I'm less and less concerned with what's happening. I'm more and more concerned with what's *really* happening when what's happening is happening! That's where the miracles are hiding!

The sunlight that was shimmering off the surface of that pool originated from a star that is ninety-three million miles from Earth. The sun is 333,000 times the mass of Earth, which is massive. But compared with other stars, it

ranks as a mere yellow dwarf. Every second, the sun turns four million tons of matter into energy via nuclear fusion. That's the energy equivalent of a trillion megaton bombs every second of every minute of every hour of every day.^[22] If Earth were a little farther from or a little closer to the sun, we would freeze or fry. Providentially, our planet is perfectly positioned in the Goldilocks Zone.

If you could catch a flight to the sun—five hundred miles per hour, twenty-four hours per day, 365 days per year—it would take more than two decades to get there. Sunlight is so fast—traveling 186,282 miles per second—that the light shimmering off the surface of that pool in Miami was only eight minutes and twenty seconds old.^[23] Along with releasing vitamin D in me, sunlight is responsible for a million other little miracles.

Without light, there is no photosynthesis. Imagine a world without green watermelons or ruby-red grapefruits. For that matter, imagine a world without sky blue, hot pink, or Prince purple. Without light, there is no color. Without light, there is no sight. Without light, there is no nothing!

The etymology of every atom in the universe traces back to the first four words spoken by God—“Let there be light.”^[24] Everything you *see* was once *said*. And those four words are still creating galaxies at the edge of the universe.^[25] The universe is God's way of saying, “Look at what I can do with four words!” Light is God's first gift, and it's the gift that keeps on giving.

“Every good and perfect gift is from above,” said the apostle James, “coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”^[26] Can I make a confession? I've always loved the first half of that verse, but the second half felt awfully ethereal. My perspective on that phrase—“Father of the heavenly lights”—radically changed in that pool in Miami. I realized that I was reading it wrong. I was interpreting it figuratively rather than taking it literally.

What was God *really* saying when He spoke light into the darkness? Scientifically speaking, God was saying, “Let there be electromagnetic radiation with varying wavelengths. Let there be radio waves and microwaves and X-rays. Let there be bioluminescence, photosynthesis, and

aurora borealis. Let there be satellite communication, laser surgery, and Crayola crayons. Oh, and let there be rainbows after rainstorms.”

Light is not as simple as it seems!

According to quantum mechanics, light is both a particle and a wave. The duality of light is one of those creation clues that point to Paradox with a capital *P*. “It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question,” said Kallistos Ware. “God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.”^[27] The duality of light points to the triality of the Trinity.

God said, “Let us make mankind in our image.”^[28]

Did you notice the plural pronouns—*us* and *our*? The church fathers referred to this plurality as *perichoresis*—a divine dance involving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe in one God, three persons. Mathematically speaking, $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. That doesn’t add up, but that’s because we make the mistake of thinking about God in four-dimensional terms.

News flash: God doesn’t exist within the four dimensions of spacetime He created. There is no past, present, or future for Him. Time stamps don’t limit the Eternal Now. There is no here, there, or anywhere. Why? Because God is here, there, and everywhere—the Eternal Here.

FLANNELGRAPH GOD

When I was a young boy—and this will date me—Sunday school teachers used felt figures to reenact the stories of Scripture on a green flannelgraph background. That two-dimensional storytelling technique might have been a step up from a one-dimensional reading of the story, but that’s where many of us get stuck in our relationship with God. For many, the God of the Bible never escapes the pages of the Bible. We end up with a flannelgraph god who can never amaze us, never overwhelm us, and never transcend us. That is when we need to deconstruct and reconstruct our understanding of who God is.

In the beginning, God created us in His image. We've been creating God in our image ever since. That is our ancient error. We project our history, our personality, our politics onto God. We think of God in purely human terms. The result is a god—lowercase *g*—that looks like us, thinks like us, and, yes, even votes like us. But when we filter our theology through our history, personality, or politics, it's called idolatry.

Part of us wants a God we can manage. Better yet, micromanage. But when you attempt to box God in, you actually box God out of transforming your perspective and your priorities. There's no room for mystery, no room for miracles. You end up with a downsized version of God—a flannelgraph god. That god isn't big enough to overcome our shortcomings. That god isn't good enough to sustain us in the midst of pain and suffering. That god doesn't even graduate high school science. This is when and where many people lose faith.

At some point, many of us experience a crisis of faith because we outgrow our elementary understanding of God. That can be scary, but it's a necessary stage in spiritual growth. It's the chrysalis whereby a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. This book is about rediscovering a million little miracles, but it starts with reimagining the God of miracles.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are my ways your ways,”
declares the LORD.
“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”^[29]

Last time I checked, the co-moving distance from one side of the universe to the other is ninety-three billion light-years. God likens the difference between our thoughts and His thoughts to the distance from one side of the universe to the other.^[30] That means that your best thought on your best day is ninety-three billion light-years short of how great and how good God really is! Simply put, your god is too small.

All of us have problems—health problems, relationship problems, money problems. And as the Notorious B.I.G. noted, “Mo Money Mo Problems.” I don’t say this to negate the size of your problems, but our biggest problem is our small view of God. “The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils,” said A. W. Tozer.^[31] The smaller your God, the bigger your problems! A high view of God, on the other hand, is the solution to “ten thousand temporal problems.”^[32]

I know God can seem so distant sometimes—a million miles away. I know our experience of God can betray our expectations. When we feel let down by God, what do we do with the doubt, the disappointment, the disillusionment? Some people throw the baby out with the bathwater. My advice? Deconstruct the man-made box you’ve put God in. Then reconstruct your faith by reimagining the God who is bigger than big, closer than close, and gooder than good. In the process, you’ll rediscover a million little miracles!

“How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be,” said G. K. Chesterton, “if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos.”^[33]

HEAVEN IN A WILDFLOWER

The Nobel Prize–winning physicist Richard Feynman once described the relationship between art and science by holding up a flower to a friend who was an artist. “Look how beautiful it is,” said Feynman. Then he made an interesting distinction. As an artist, his friend viewed the flower aesthetically, outside in. Feynman viewed it scientifically, inside out.

“I see much more about the flower than he sees,” argued Feynman. “I could imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside, which also have a beauty.”^[34] In the pages that follow, we will explore microscopic and macroscopic miracles. We will look at them aesthetically and scientifically—outside in and inside out. We will approach the miracles and mysteries of life as both art and science.

“The fact that the colors in the flower evolved in order to attract insects to pollinate it is interesting,” noted Feynman. “A science knowledge only adds to the excitement, the mystery and the awe of a flower.”^[35]

Jesus gave a curious command in the Sermon on the Mount: “Consider the lilies.”^[36] It’s not as widely known as the Golden Rule. It’s not as popular as the Lord’s Prayer. It’s not as quoted as the beatitudes. But it’s no less imperative than any of these. It’s an invitation to study, to research, to explore, to discover, to enjoy God’s creation. “To see a World in a Grain of Sand,” said the poet William Blake, “And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.”^[37]

A single grain of sand.

A single flower.

A single cell.

A single breath.

A single heartbeat.

A single drop of water.

None of these are as simple as they seem. All are more miraculous, more mysterious than what meets the eye. We live in a strange and mysterious world. Our bodies and brains are fearfully and wonderfully made. And there is a God who is ninety-three billion light-years beyond anything we can ask or imagine.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT YOU

I love the story about the little boy who was drawing a picture. When his father asked him what he was sketching, he replied, “I’m drawing a picture of God.” The father said with a smile, “Son, no one knows what God looks like.” The little boy declared, “They will when I’m done!”

None of us is capable of drawing a portrait of God, but I love this little boy’s determination to try. By curating a holy curiosity toward the world around us, we add dimensionality to our theology. In this process, called progressive revelation, we’ll rediscover the God who is bigger than big, closer than close, and gooder than good. The technical terms are

transcendence, immanence, and benevolence. He is God Most High, God Most Nigh, and God Most Good.

In part 1, we'll go outside, look up, and count the stars. We'll pull out our telescopes and do some stargazing. We'll start with a two-foot field trip that takes our manmade ceilings off Almighty God. The goal is rediscovering the God who is bigger than your biggest problem, bigger than your biggest mistake, and bigger than your biggest dream. Even when you feel like you're a day late and a dollar short, it's never too little and it's never too late. God is always writing a bigger story.

God is great not just because nothing is too big but also because nothing is too small. In part 2, we'll trade the telescope for a microscope. We'll lean into that curious command: "Consider the lilies." In so doing, we'll rediscover the God who is closer than close. He knows the number of hairs on your head. Your name is tattooed on the palms of His hands. Your tears are so precious to God that He counts them and collects them in a bottle. Simply put, you are seen, heard, and loved by God.

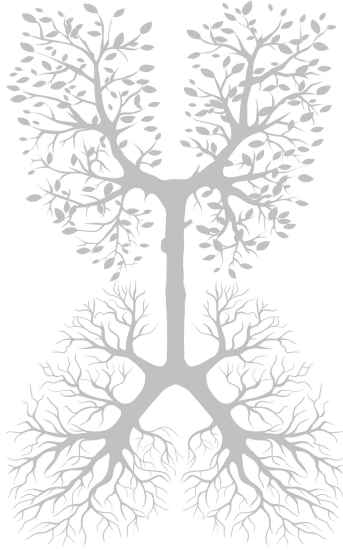
In part 3, we'll chase butterflies. We'll pull out a stethoscope and hear the heart of God. Many people are deconstructing their faith these days, which is normal and natural if done right. But some of those who deconstruct fail to reconstruct their faith. They give up on God altogether. The result is nostalgia for God—a holy homesickness. The good news? God has not given up and will not give up on us! We may run away from God, but the Hound of Heaven runs after us. If we turn around, we'll discover the heavenly Father with arms wide open. Part 3 is an invitation to come back home—to rediscover the God who is gooder than good.

Ready or not, here we go.

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PART ONE

GOD MOST HIGH



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ON NOVEMBER 11, 1572, a Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, was staying at his uncle's castle in Denmark. That castle, Herrevad Abbey, functioned as both a religious monastery and a scientific laboratory. It was there that Brahe established the first glassworks in Denmark.^[1] He also practiced spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and meditation. Like double-helix DNA, science and spirituality were interwoven. "Those who study the stars," said Brahe, "have God for a teacher."^[2]

That combination—monastery and laboratory—is a metaphor for the pages that follow. "What is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab?" asked Annie Dillard. "Are they not both saying: Hello?"^[3]

"The Religion that is afraid of science," said Ralph Waldo Emerson, "dishonours God [and] commits suicide."^[4] Simply put, science is our friend. Albert Einstein said it this way: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind."^[5]

The sad reality is that many of those who deconstruct their faith do so because they can't reconcile what they've heard in church with what they've been taught in a science classroom. How did we get here? The short answer is Pope Urban VIII. In 1633, an Italian astronomer named Galileo was accused of heresy for challenging the Catholic Church's belief that the earth was the center of the universe.^[6] It's a classic case of cognitive entrenchment. The powers that be got scared, got defensive. The pope turned allies into enemies. The net result? A bitter divorce between science and the church. Pope John Paul II apologized for this on October 31, 1992.^[7] But that was a little late, wouldn't you say?

If all truth is God's truth—and I believe it is—then dividing things into sacred and secular is a false dichotomy. Every ology is a branch of theology! The apostle Paul said it this way in his letter to the Romans:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.^[8]

On a cloudless November night in 1572, Tycho Brahe observed an unusually bright star in the northern sky that suddenly appeared in the constellation Cassiopeia. It had been assumed since antiquity that anything beyond the moon's orbit was eternally immutable. That star, SN 1572, is now classified as a supernova that is 7,500 light-years from Earth.^[9]

By 1592, Tycho Brahe had cataloged 777 stars. His mapping of those fixed stars blazed a trail for his protégé, Johannes Kepler, to discover the laws that govern planetary motion. Several centuries later, it was a telescope named in Kepler's honor—the Kepler space telescope—that would catalog 530,506 stars and discover 2,662 exoplanets.^[10]

Tycho Brahe is widely regarded as “the greatest observer of the skies who had ever lived,”^[11] but even Brahe couldn't have imagined the existence of half a million stars. And that's the tip of the iceberg. Astronomers now estimate the existence of more than two trillion galaxies, only two of which are visible from the Northern Hemisphere—the Milky Way and Andromeda. Each of those two trillion galaxies has an average of one hundred billion stars. Do the math, and that adds up to two hundred sextillion stars in the observable universe.^[12] That's twenty-five trillion stars per person on planet Earth! That is a lot of stars to wish upon!

My point? Creation is much larger than any of us can imagine! And the same goes for the Creator. Like Tycho Brahe, some of us are quite content with our catalog of 777 stars. We think that's all there is. We've settled for a god we can measure and manage—the flannelgraph god. If that's you, your god is too small.

Our frame of reference, when it comes to God, always falls short. It's a cognitive bias called narrow framing, and all of us are guilty as charged. I might sound like a Luddite, but the television screens, computer screens, and smartphone screens that we stare at all day, every day, aren't helping! Smartphones aren't making us smarter. All too often, those digital devices

are distraction devices. Most of us spend more time gazing at screens than we do stargazing, and then we wonder why we've lost touch with the Creator.

Many years ago, I was driving down the George Washington Parkway with my family when our youngest child, Josiah, asked one of those quantum questions that only kids can ask: "Dad, God is bigger than cars, right?" I answered in the affirmative, but evidently, the issue wasn't settled. Josiah upped the ante: "Dad, God is bigger than trees, right?" I assured Josiah that God was bigger than giant sequoias. Then Josiah must have thought of the biggest thing he could think of: "Dad, God is bigger than Target, right?" I, of course, asked a clarifying question: "Target or Super Target, son?"

Josiah was doing what we all do instinctively; he was sizing God up. The challenge with that is this: All of us underestimate God by at least ninety-three billion light-years. God doesn't fit within the four dimensions of spacetime He created, much less the logical constraints of our left brain.

Is your God getting bigger?

Or is your god getting smaller?

The answer to those questions is one of the best barometers of spiritual growth. And, I might add, mental health. Is your understanding of God's power expanding or contracting? How about God's love? His grace?

A low view of God results in a narrow framing of His power, love, and grace. A high view of God, however, puts things in proper perspective. What things? Everything! How might a bigger view of God change your perspective on your biggest problems? Or your biggest dreams? Show me the size of your dream, and I'll show you the size of your God. Please don't dismiss that as a Jedi mind trick. I've realized that, for me, the bigger God gets, the less anxious I become. The bigger God gets, the more holy confidence I have.

A high view of God doesn't just change what we believe. It changes who we are. You are more than a conqueror! Even when you don't feel like it, it doesn't change your identity in Christ. You can overcome trauma. You can overcome divorce. You can overcome a difficult diagnosis. You can

overcome the mistakes that haunt you, that taunt you. How do I know this? Because Jesus overcame!

The psalmist said, “Magnify the LORD with me; let us exalt His name together.”^[13] How do we do that? We have to leave room for unknowable mysteries. We have to allow for irresolvable paradoxes. We have to take into account impossible miracles.

In part 1, my hope is that you will have a renewed appreciation for the God who hung the stars in the sky. Permission to speak frankly? Most of us pray like God is omnipotent, but we act like God is impotent. We believe God can heal—until we get sick. We believe God can reconcile—until we’re faced with irreconcilable differences. We believe God can deliver—until the addiction has our name on it. If we believe God is omnipotent, let’s live like it.

To the infinite, all finites are equal.

There are no degrees of difficulty.

There is no impossible.

It’s time to take the eight-foot ceiling off God.

It’s time to rediscover the God who is bigger than big.

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COUNT THE STARS

I have four pictures that hang behind my desk in my office—my personal Mount Rushmore. All of the people pictured died long before I was born, but each of them has had a profound impact on my life.

The first picture is Albert Einstein with his puppy-dog eyes, unkempt hair, and wrinkled forehead. Remember the 878-page biography on Einstein? Five words on page 755 changed the trajectory of my life: “Never lose a holy curiosity.” There was something about the juxtaposition of those two words—*holy* and *curiosity*—that captured my imagination. It’s almost like holy curiosity was conceived in my soul right then. My prayer is that this book would conceive that same holy curiosity in you! Curiosity about what? About everything! About everyone! About the million little miracles that are all around us all the time!

The second picture is the man, the myth, the legend—George Washington Carver. Few people embodied holy curiosity like Carver. Born a slave, Carver would become one of the greatest chemists and agronomists the world has ever known. His curriculum vitae includes three hundred uses for the peanut. His life verse was Job 12:8: “Speak to the earth, and it will teach you.” That’s precisely what Carver did during his daily prayer walks through the woods at four o’clock in the morning.

The third picture is Teddy Roosevelt riding a moose through a river. Who *does* that? The same guy who navigated uncharted portions of the Amazon, scaled the Matterhorn in the Alps, and flew in a Wright Brothers’ airplane.^[1] Part of my affinity for Roosevelt is the fact that he overcame a crippling case of asthma, as did I. Roosevelt’s love of books was legendary.

He somehow managed to read five hundred books a year as a sitting president. I know that seems unbelievable, but remember, he wasn't distracted by television screens, computer screens, and smartphone screens. Few people on the planet have possessed a holy curiosity on par with our twenty-sixth president.

The fourth and final picture is of John Muir standing atop Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park, the park that he and Roosevelt helped protect for posterity. Muir believed in baptism by water and baptism by fire, but he also believed in baptism by nature. His mission was "saving the American soul from total surrender to materialism."^[2] Muir once charged a bear to study its running gait, which is almost as crazy as chasing a lion into a pit on a snowy day!^[3] Not only did he study sixty-five glaciers in the Alaska territory; he even sledged down several of them.^[4] But one moment stands above the rest in his résumé and serves as both a metaphor and a manifesto.

CLIMB THE TREE

In December 1874, John Muir was staying at a cabin nestled in the Sierra Nevada when a storm whipped through the valley. Instead of seeking shelter, Muir sought adventure. He located the tallest cluster of Douglas fir trees he could find, climbed one of those trees to the very top, and held on for dear life. "On such occasions, nature always has something rare to show us," he said. "The danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof."^[5]

Can you picture John Muir hugging a hundred-foot-tall tree as it swayed? It may seem like Muir was tempting death, but that's how he came to life. He feasted his senses on the sights, sounds, and smells of earth, wind, and snow. Eugene Peterson referenced that moment as an icon of Christian spirituality. He called it "a standing rebuke against becoming a mere spectator to life, preferring creature comforts to Creator confrontations."^[6]

Are you a mere spectator to life?

Do you prefer creature comforts to Creator confrontations?

Are you settling for creation or seeking the Creator Himself?

This book is an exhortation to brave the storm and climb the tree. That's where the miracles are hiding! Like most people, I appreciate the roof over my head. I appreciate air-conditioning, running water, indoor plumbing, high-speed internet, and hundreds of other luxuries that technology affords us. I prefer glamping to camping. I once hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, but I brought along an inflatable mattress. Did I feel less manly than the other guys in our group? Yes, I did. Did I regret it? Not for a single second of sleep!

I'm grateful for the comfort and convenience of modern life, but there is a hidden tax. When we lose touch with nature, we lose touch with nature's God. Edison's lightbulb is a gift to early birds and night owls, but it fundamentally altered the built-in rhythms of sunrise and sunset. Refrigeration allows us to enjoy exotic foods from faraway places, but farm-to-table is lost in the mix. If we aren't careful, we'll fall victim to the numbing effect that Robert Michael Pyle called the "extinction of experience."^[7] We'll stop climbing trees. We'll become mere spectators to life. We'll settle for creature comforts.

Leonardo da Vinci, "the most curious man who ever lived,"^[8] was a self-proclaimed *discepolo dell'esperienza*—"disciple of experience."^[9] I don't know if he ever climbed a tree like Muir, but his lust for life is evidenced by twenty-eight thousand pages of journal notes.^[10] It was da Vinci who once observed that the average human "looks without seeing, listens without hearing, touches without feeling, eats without tasting... inhales without awareness of odour."^[11]

Looking without seeing is the symptom of a deeper problem that psychologists call inattention blindness.^[12] It's missing the forest for the trees. It's failing to see what is hidden in plain sight. We are as blind to beauty as Bartimaeus. We are as unaware of the presence of God as Jacob before Bethel. We are as oblivious to mysteries and miracles as Moses before the burning bush.

"The less we see, and hear and smell," said Michelle Derusha, "the less we are able to see, and hear and smell."^[13] We turn a blind eye to the

everyday miracles that surround us. It's not intentional, but that doesn't make it any less harmful. The miracle of life is lost on us. So is the God of miracles.

This book is meant to be a wake-up call. The good news? You don't have to go far to find a million little miracles. All it takes is a two-foot field trip. All you have to do is go outside, look up, and count the stars.

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

There are decades when nothing happens.

There are days when decades happen.

It had been twenty-years of frustration, disappointment, and heartbreak. God had promised to make Abram into a great nation, but Sarai couldn't get pregnant. At their age, it was too late. Hundred-year-old men don't get ninety-year-old women pregnant. The window of opportunity had closed. Not gonna happen. But God.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless?...You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”^[14]

God had blessed Abram in a thousand ways, but Abram was fixated on the one thing God had *not* done. This is a function of the negativity bias, which I believe is one by-product of the curse. Like Abram, we have a tendency to complain about what God hasn't done rather than thank Him for what He has done. Abram played the blame game with God: “What can you give me since I remain childless?” Is it just me, or does that sound

passive-aggressive? *It's not Your fault—but it is.* Abram was throwing a pity party inside his tent when God invited him outside. God took Abram on a two-foot field trip that changed the trajectory of his life.

The LORD took Abram outside and said to him, “Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!”^[15]

It’s easy to read right over what happened here, but this was a defining moment. Notice Abram was inside the tent one minute and outside the next. What difference did that make? As long as Abram was inside his tent, he was staring at an eight-foot ceiling. The second he stepped outside? The sky was the limit. God was saying, in no uncertain terms, “Quit putting an eight-foot ceiling on what I can do! Quit putting manmade ceilings on My sovereignty! It’s never too little, and it’s never too late.”

THE THREE-DAY EFFECT

There is a phenomenon in science called the three-day effect. It takes three days in the wild to reset your brain. According to cognitive neuroscientist David Strayer, after three days in the wild, our ability to problem-solve escalates.^[16] So does inductive reasoning. When we get outside the tent, it’s easier to think outside the box. We start noticing everyday miracles.

One measure of creativity is something called a RAT—Remote Associates Test. It’s about connecting the dots creatively. For instance, what connects *cream*, *skate*, and *water*? The answer is *ice*—*ice cream*, *ice skate*, and *ice water*. How about *age*, *mile*, and *sand*? The answer is *stone*—*Stone Age*, *milestone*, and *sandstone*. What about *manners*, *round*, and *tennis*? The answer is *table*—*table manners*, *roundtable*, and *table tennis*.

David Strayer administered a RAT to one set of subjects *before* going on an Outward Bound Adventure. He then administered the same test to another set of subjects *after* going on that adventure. Those who tested on

day three of that Outward Bound Adventure scored 50 percent higher. Not only did creativity skyrocket, but stress levels also plummeted.^[17]

In a similar study, a twenty-minute walk through a city park produced feelings of calm and a sharper focus with one curious caveat. “People who used their cellphone on the walk,” noted researcher Rachel Hopman, “saw none of those benefits.”^[18]

I have yet to meet the doctor who writes “twenty-minute walk, three times a week” on a prescription pad, even though it might be more effective than popping a pill.

Fun fact? Wild animals have larger brains than their domesticated counterparts! The brains of wild boars are 35 percent larger than those of domesticated pigs. The brains of domesticated cats are 30 percent smaller than the brains of feral cats.^[19] The question, of course, is, Why? The short answer is pretty simple. When you’re a domesticated animal, your food is provided for you. You don’t have to use your brain to track or hunt. The old axiom “Use it or lose it” applies to pets as well as people.

What does any of this have to do with Abram? God was taking him on an Outward Bound Adventure, and Abram wasn’t the only one. Moses encountered God at a burning bush on the backside of the desert. David hid from Saul in the crags of the wild goats. Elijah heard the still small voice of God in a cave on Mount Horeb. John the Baptist lived off the grid, west of the Jordan. Even Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness.

Go thou and do likewise!

If your life has become a little too routine, maybe it’s time for a reset. And there’s no better way to do it than a two-foot field trip.

Go outside.

Look up.

Count the stars.

REWILDING

One of the most unforgettable weeks of my life was spent in one of the most undomesticated places on the planet, the Galápagos. Hundreds of

miles off the coast of Ecuador, the archipelago of islands may be the closest thing to Eden left on Earth.

We watched pelicans that looked like prehistoric pterodactyls dive-bomb into the ocean and come back up with breakfast in their beaks. We went snorkeling and saw exotic fish every bit as beautiful as Nemo, Dory, and Bubbles. *Where did God come up with those color schemes?* We encountered enormous iguanas and two-hundred-year-old tortugas in their natural habitat. We even went swimming with sea lions, which I later learned isn't altogether safe!

A few weeks after returning home, we took our kids to the National Zoo. While it's an amazing zoo, it's not the same seeing a caged animal. It's too safe, too tame, too predictable. We were walking through the Great Ape House looking at four-hundred-pound gorillas behind Plexiglas when a thought fired across my synapses: *I wonder if churches do to people what zoos do to animals?* We try to tame people, in the name of Christ. We try to remove the risk and mitigate the danger. We think we're discipling people, but all we're doing is domesticating them. It's more behavior modification than it is true transformation. When did we start believing that God has called us to safe places to do easy things with nice people? Part of taking up our cross is taking risks for the right reasons.

There is a concept in ecology called rewilding. It's letting nature take care of itself by not overcontrolling it or overprotecting it. Jesus said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."^[20] That doesn't sound safe, does it? News flash: The will of God isn't an insurance plan; it's a dangerous plan. Jesus didn't die just to keep us safe; He died to make us dangerous. Discipleship, I daresay, is a form of rewilding.

"The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore," said Dorothy Sayers. "On the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies."^[21]

Do you remember what Jesus did after His baptism? I'll give you a hint: He didn't go to seminary. "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan." Then the gospel writer added this little nuance: "He was with the wild animals."^[22]

We could afford some religious rewilding, could we not? I'm not saying we have to go on a safari, but I wouldn't advise against it. Our alienation from the Garden of Eden began what Chellis Glendinning called "our disconnection from the earth."^[23] It is our original trauma—detachment from the presence of God. It's alienation from Creator and creation, and part of our soul is amputated in the process. The solution is doing what Jesus did—He walked beaches, climbed mountains, and withdrew to the wilderness with a degree of regularity. The wilderness is where many of God's greatest miracles are on full display. Maybe that's why Jesus spent so much time in solitary places.

When we stare at two-dimensional screens all day, when we retreat to our manufactured environments, there is a loss of sensual knowledge. Most of us can't get anywhere without GPS because we've lost our internal sense of direction. The result is a feeling of lostness, a feeling of homelessness. We aren't at home in our bodies. We aren't at home in our homes. We aren't at home in nature. Honestly, we aren't at home anywhere. In the words of Henry David Thoreau, "We know not where we are."^[24]

Did you know that kids spend 50 percent less time outdoors these days?^[25] Why go outside when you have virtual reality at your fingertips? But that's how we lose our childlike sense of wonder! When we lose touch with nature, we lose touch with human nature.

BAPTISM BY NATURE

Remember John Muir?

He was a student of Scripture and a student of nature. Muir memorized the entire New Testament. Yes, you read that right. He also enrolled in what he called the "University of Wilderness."^[26] If all truth is God's truth, then

all of nature is God's classroom. "Climb the mountains," exhorted Muir. "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine into trees."^[27]

My friend Phil Cunningham, a filmmaker, grew up in Zimbabwe. He didn't watch television or see his first film until he was fourteen years old. Pretty funny that he now makes movies for a living! He didn't go to film school, but he did enroll in the University of Wilderness. "I fell in love with God," said Phil, "on the Zambezi River."^[28] And it's that intimate knowledge of creation that fuels the animation studio he founded and the films he produces.^[29]

The Old Testament tabernacle and New Testament church are referred to as the house of God. "I was glad when they said unto me," said King David, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."^[30] As a pastor, I can profess that there is a supernatural synergy when God's people gather to worship. That said, the first sanctuary wasn't brick and mortar. There were no walls or ceilings. It was an open-air cathedral.

There is a principle in hermeneutics called the law of first mention. The first mention sets precedent. As such, it carries a little extra weight. The first mention establishes a baseline and a trendline. What is the first reference to the house of God? It was an open heaven in the middle of nowhere—a campsite near the ancient city of Luz. That's where Jacob went to sleep and woke up to a million little miracles.

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it," said Jacob. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God."^[31]

Most of us are like Jacob, pre-Bethel. We sleepwalk our way through life, unaware of the macroscopic and microscopic miracles all around us all the time. The good news? All we have to do is go outside. When? Whenever. Where? Wherever.

THE LAW OF REQUISITE VARIETY

The key to spiritual growth is routine. We call them spiritual disciplines. But once the routine becomes routine, we have to change the routine. It's the law of requisite variety. If you do the same set of exercises in the same

sequence every time you go to the gym, it loses effectiveness. Why? Because your muscles adapt to the routine. You have to confuse your muscles by changing the routine, and the same is true of spiritual muscles.

That's why I read different translations of the Bible every year.

That's why I pray in different postures.

That's why a change of scenery can be so transformative.

"Change is endlessly fascinating to brains," said Will Storr in his book *The Science of Storytelling*. And neuroscientist Sophie Scott said, "Almost all perception is based on the detection of change."^[32]

According to psychologist Daniel Berlyne, the arousal potential of stimuli is a result of complexity. It has to involve some degree of ambiguity, incongruity, or novelty.^[33] This is why new revelations tend to happen when we change our routine. A small change can make a big difference! I live by a little formula:

Change of pace + change of place = change of perspective

I'm not suggesting that the grass is greener on the other side. The grass is greener over the septic tank! That said, a change in scenery can work wonders. "Methinks that the moment my legs move," said Henry David Thoreau, "my thoughts begin to flow."^[34]

I get some of my best ideas when I'm hiking or biking or running. Why is that? Scientific studies suggest that exercise intensifies brain-wave amplitude and frequency. It also improves slow-wave sleep, which reduces brain fog.^[35] Even something as simple as a change in posture can shift your perspective. When I kneel, that body posture affects my heart posture. I also close my eyes to open them!

Did you know that when you exercise, your muscles secrete chemicals into the bloodstream called myokines? Known as hope molecules, myokines are so small they pass through the blood-brain barrier and function as an antidepressant.^[36] Your muscles are a built-in pharmacy, and exercise fills the prescription. According to a UCLA study, those who

exercise regularly experience a 40 percent drop in poor mental health days!
[\[37\]](#)

If you want to experience miracles, sometimes it's as simple as introducing a change of pace or a change of place. Go on a silent retreat. Establish a Sabbath ritual. Do a social media fast. Pick up a copy of *Draw the Circle*, and take the forty-day prayer challenge.[\[38\]](#) You do you, but do it differently than you've done it.

Robert Madu, who pastors Social Dallas, recently spoke at our annual revival at National Community Church. He mentioned that he did a twenty-one-day water-only fast prior to planting the church. When I asked why, he said that the still small voice of the Spirit whispered, "Your current level of discipline won't sustain what I want to do."

Many of us want God to do a new thing while we keep doing the same old same old. Can I speak the truth in love? Your system is perfectly designed for the results you're getting. More of the same doesn't always get us where we want to go. If you want a different outcome, change the input. You tell me the last time you got outside your comfort zone—outside the tent—and I'll tell you the last time you grew!

THE MYSTERY OF THE PEANUT

George Washington Carver ranks as one of the greatest scientific minds of the twentieth century. Along with teaching at Tuskegee University for forty-seven years, Carver is credited with saving the agricultural economy of the South by introducing the concept of crop rotation.

Carver encouraged the farmers to plant peanuts, which replenished the soil. But there was no market for peanuts, so the farmers complained to Carver. What did Carver do? He did what he had always done. He went for long prayer walks through the woods early in the morning.

Ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you.[\[39\]](#)

That was George Washington Carver's life verse, and he took it literally. There is no greater classroom than God's green earth, and Carver enrolled every morning around four o'clock.

"To me," said Carver, "Nature...is the little window through which God permits me to commune with Him, and to see much of His glory, by simply lifting the curtain and looking in. I love to think of Nature as wireless telegraph stations through which God speaks to us every day, every hour, and every moment of our lives."[\[40\]](#)

On January 20, 1921, George Washington Carver testified before the House Ways and Means Committee on behalf of the United Peanut Association of America. The chairman, Joseph Fordney of Michigan, granted him ten minutes. An hour and forty minutes later, the committee told Carver he could come back anytime and have as much time as he wanted. Carver had captivated that committee by demonstrating dozens of uses for the peanut—glue and fertilizer, shaving cream and soap, insecticides and cosmetics, wood stains and linoleum.

"Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough," said George Washington Carver. "Not only have I found that when I talk to the little flower or to the little peanut they will give up their secrets, but I have found that when I silently commune with people they give up their secrets also—if you love them enough."[\[41\]](#)

I used to feel tremendous social pressure to be *interesting*. I have since discovered, that's not how you win friends and influence people. The key is to be *interested*. You have to cultivate a non-anxious curiosity about other people, and the master key is questions.

If you had a personal Mount Rushmore, like the four photographs that hang in my office, whose pictures would you hang? Who left their fingerprints on your soul? Who believed in you more than you believed in yourself?

People will give up their secrets if you love them enough.

Does that challenge you as much as it does me? The only limit is love! That is the secret to life and to leadership. It's love that unlocks a million little miracles!

STARDUST

When God took Abram on that two-foot field trip, He told him to look up and count the stars. In a sense, Abram was looking back in time.^[42] Many of the stars we see in the sky don't even exist anymore. Some of them died before Abram was born, but they are so far away that their light is still traveling toward us.

When Abram looked up, he was also looking in a mirror. When stars explode, it's called a supernova. Those exploding stars eject most of their mass, which is where elements on the periodic table come from.^[43] It's also where you come from.^[44] You aren't just dust; you are stardust, which is way cooler! Chemically speaking, you are 65 percent oxygen, 18.5 percent carbon, 9.5 percent hydrogen, and 3.3 percent nitrogen.^[45] And, I might add, 100 percent awesome.

Can we have a little fun with this? Nearly a century ago, it was estimated that the chemicals in the human body were collectively worth ninety-eight cents.^[46] Of course, that estimate has fluctuated over the years.

A few years ago, *Wired* magazine conducted a reassessment. Patrick Di Justo did a market valuation of fifty chemicals and components contained within the human body. Your body contains \$7.12 worth of phosphorus and \$5.95 worth of potassium. According to Di Justo, your heart is worth \$57,000, while your kidneys would fetch \$91,400. Your DNA is valued at \$9 million. Your most valuable asset? Your bone marrow is worth \$23 million. Your total market value is \$45,618,575.82.^[47] That ought to make you feel like a million bucks—or maybe I should say, forty-six million!

Count the stars if you can.^[48]

Taken literally, this would rank as the hardest command in Scripture. Remember, there are two hundred sextillion stars in the observable universe. If Abram counted one star per second for five thousand years, he'd only be on 157,680,000,000. Besides that, an estimated 275 million new stars are born every single day!^[49] So Abram would be further behind

than when he started. I know these numbers seem ridiculous, but that's the point. God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."^[50] And not by a little, but by a lot.

"Men can always be blind to a thing so long as it is big enough," said G. K. Chesterton. "A thing can be hid by being big."^[51] That's how we miss the forest for the trees. That's how we miss the Creator for His creation.

The largest organ in the human body is the recently discovered interstitium, and many people have never even heard of it. Why? Because it was hiding a few millimeters beneath the surface of the skin. How did we miss millions of microscopic channels that move interstitial fluid? It was hiding in plain sight, like a million other little miracles!^[52]

No matter how wide-angled we look at the world, God is bigger still. Whether we're looking through a microscope or telescope, we can't not narrow frame God.

Looking up into the night sky had to rank as the most existential moment of Abram's life. It bordered on an out-of-body experience. "The sublime is limitless," said Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, "so that the mind in the presence of the sublime...has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt."^[53] That comes awfully close to what Abram must have experienced—"pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt."

"Mystery is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend."^[54] Mystery is immeasurable beauty. Mystery is inexhaustible grace. Mystery is incalculable love.

Why did God tell Abram to count the stars? God was messing with his mind, in a good way. God was sanctifying his expectations by supersizing them. He was giving Abram a nightlight—a visual reminder of both his history and his destiny. The same God who hung the stars in the sky can give you descendants. The same God who keeps the planets in orbit can reconcile broken relationships and heal broken bodies. The same God who created the universe can help you conceive.

There is a calculus to theology that defies conventional logic. What we believe isn't logical or illogical. It's theological. Faith adds God to every

equation. When you do that, five loaves plus two fish equals all-you-can-eat for five thousand people. And there is more left over than you started with!

THE FOURTH DRIVE

Yann Martel grew up an atheist but came to believe in God while writing his award-winning novel, *Life of Pi*. “Reason is very empowering,” noted Martel. “Our entire Western Democracies are a meticulous result of reason. Reason is just a tool and it doesn’t in and of itself give you a reason to use it.” What prompted Martel’s soul-searching? “I was sick to death of being reasonable.”^[55]

Biologists suggest that, along with food, sex, and shelter, there is a fourth drive that makes us uniquely human: curiosity.^[56] Porcupines don’t ponder the purpose of life. Butterflies, as beautiful as they are, don’t study the stars. There is something unique about humankind, and it’s called the *imago Dei*. We may have much of the same DNA as the animal kingdom, but the *imago Dei* is the difference maker. “Those who run to the apes to explain our behavior,” said W. H. Auden, “are chuckleheads too dumb to know their arse from a hole in the ground.”^[57] Tell us what you really think, W. H. Auden!

Creation is God’s cabinet of curiosities. It’s full of mysteries and miracles. Astrophysicists recently discovered a doughnut-shaped galaxy called Hoag’s Object that has stellar rings surrounding its Boston cream center. Some observers call it a “cosmic turducken.”^[58] Either way, it makes me hungry! What is so strange and mysterious about Hoag’s Object? Inside this galaxy is another miniature galaxy. So-called ring galaxies represent less than one-tenth of a percent of galaxies. That galaxy within a galaxy is a rare beauty. It’s one of a million *big* miracles—so big that it’s easily overlooked.

Reason is a gift from God, but reasonableness doesn’t ring the bell. It’s revelation, not reason, that reveals our *raison d’être*. Reason can’t explain suffering or beauty or love. It can’t even make a kiss make sense.

GOOSEBUMPS

Remember your first kiss?

Biologically speaking, you exchanged eighty million bacteria with whoever it is you kissed.^[59] That number is much higher in France, if you know what I mean. My point? Reason can suck the romance right out of life! There is more to life than the conscious mind can compute. Meaning isn't mechanical or computational; it's mysterious and miraculous.

Few things are more magical or miraculous than a first kiss. All right, it can be a little awkward too. But that first kiss produces a tingly sensation that goes by a few names—neuropathic tingle, aesthetic chills, psychogenic shivers, or good old-fashioned goosebumps. Regardless of which name you prefer, it's one of a million little miracles that make life worth living.

We have about five million body hairs that on occasion will stand at attention like soldiers saluting an officer. That physiological response is a somatic marker that stamps memory. And I'm pretty sure that's what Abram experienced when he counted the stars. Simply put, he got goosebumps while stargazing.

Did you know there are different types of goosebumps? A researcher at Columbia University, Matthew Sachs, has created a formula for musical goosebumps. Taking lyrics, melodies, and harmonics into account: $P_{\text{goosebumps}} = CF (Sc + Id + Ap)$.^[60]

I recently heard Tori Kelly cover Leonard Cohen's all-time classic, "Hallelujah." It's the same song she sang as Meena, the elephant in the movie *Sing*. I got goosebumps! I get goosebumps when I hear "It Is Well with My Soul," the song we sang at my father-in-law's graveside service. I also get goosebumps when I hear "Sirius," the song used to introduce the Chicago Bulls during the Michael Jordan era.

What songs give you goosebumps? Go ahead and applaud the musical artist, but don't forget to praise the God of music. Every melody echoes the original song of creation. There are only twelve notes in Western music—C, D, E, F, G, A, and B, plus flats and sharps.^[61] So few notes yet so many songs! The last time I checked, there were more than one hundred million songs on Spotify.^[62]

Goosebumps can be produced by kissing and by music, but the most common type of goosebumps are those caused by wonder. According to Mitchell Colver of Utah State University, wonder goosebumps are triggered by the time lag between the emotional and intellectual parts of our brain.^[63] Thoughts travel at five hundred milliseconds per second, while emotions travel a few hundred milliseconds faster.^[64] Fun fact? We can read facial expressions in two hundred milliseconds flat.^[65] That's pretty impressive given the fact that we are capable of seven thousand different expressions!^[66] According to Colver, the emotion of wonder gives us goosebumps before the intellectual part of the brain can rationalize away what's happening. This is also how we get gut feelings—but let's get back to kissing.

There are health benefits to kissing. It increases the flow of saliva, which keeps your teeth and gums healthy. Studies have shown that kissing boosts immunity, lowers anxiety, and burns calories. It even relieves headaches, reduces cholesterol, and lowers blood pressure. But none of those explain why we kiss. There are reasons beyond reason, and one of them is called romance.^[67]

"We can study the scientific nature of love," said Monica Parker. "It can't capture reveling in the mystery and marvel of love at first sight, the birth of a child, a strain of music heard in a darkened concert hall that is so beautiful and pure it brings tears to your eyes."^[68]

The biology, chemistry, and neurology of kissing is one of a million little miracles.

Butterfly kisses.

Air kisses.

Angel kisses.

When was the last time you thanked God for good old-fashioned goosebumps?

Don't take those goosebumps for granted. Take them for gratitude. While you're at it, put together a playlist that produces those goosebumps! I have very different playlists for running and writing, but music helps put me in the right mood or the right mode. I write to instrumental music so I'm

not distracted by words. My running playlist, which might reveal my age, has lots of power ballads from the eighties!

THE SCIENCE OF AWE

The feeling of awe is one of God's greatest gifts and comes in lots of shapes and sizes. For some, it's climbing a Douglas fir during a winter storm or taking long walks through the woods in the wee hours of the morning. For others, it's canoeing a river or counting stars on a cloudless night.

"Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world," said professor of psychology Dacher Keltner.^[69] It's a paradigm shift. It's a feeling of smallness in the presence of greatness. That feeling can be triggered by things large and small. The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich saw the universe reflected in a hazelnut.^[70] The same is true of an acorn that turns into a giant oak tree, is it not?

What gives you goosebumps?

When and where do you feel most alive?

What experiences produce feelings of awe?

For Dacher Keltner, it was room 837 at the Louvre in Paris. He was staring at a painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch called *La Buveuse* when he was captivated by its stillness. "Standing in front of the painting," said Keltner, "was like a psychedelic experience."^[71] Henri Nouwen had the same kind of epiphany the first time he saw *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by the Dutch artist Rembrandt.^[72]

By definition, awe defies definition. We don't have words for awe, but it's unmistakable when we experience it. It's holding your newborn baby for the first time and seeing your reflection in the pupils of their eyes. It's witnessing the northern lights or Great Barrier Reef. It's looking up at El Capitan or Glacier Point or Half Dome from the floor of the Yosemite Valley.

Speaking of Half Dome, a study on tourists who had hiked Half Dome found them to be kinder and more generous after having done so. Like the

three-day effect, perhaps there is a five-thousand-foot effect? What I find fascinating about that study is that those tourists, when asked to draw a self-portrait, pictured themselves as small. There's something about nature that acts as an antidote to narcissism.

Where do we find awe? The answer is *anywhere*! I love art galleries and national parks, but that may not be your jam. Awe is more of a mindset than a circumstance. It might have more to do with pace than place. The psalmist said, "Be still, and know that I am God."^[73] Notice the change of pace prescribed by the psalmist. The slower you go, the more you notice! There is something about awe, no matter when or where we experience it, that deactivates the default mode network in the brain.^[74] This is how heaven invades earth.

FULLY ALIVE

Many years ago, Dr. Tony Campolo was teaching a class at the University of Pennsylvania when an ordinary lecture turned into an unforgettable life lesson. He asked an unsuspecting student, "Young man, how long have you lived?" The student answered his age, as most of us would, but that isn't what Dr. Campolo was asking. "That's how long your heart has been pumping," he said. "That's not how long you have lived."

That's when Tony Campolo told the class about one of the most memorable moments of his life—a fourth-grade field trip to the top of the Empire State Building. Rising 1,250 feet, it was the world's tallest building in 1944. When nine-year-old Tony got off the elevator and stepped onto the observation deck overlooking New York City, time stood still. "In one mystical, magical moment I took in the city," he said. "If I live a million years, that moment will still be part of my consciousness, because I was fully alive when I lived it."^[75]

Looking back on your life, what are the moments when you were most alive? Most present? Most filled with awe? When were you overcome by childlike wonder or holy curiosity? Where did heaven invade earth? What experiences will be part of your consciousness forever?

I'll never forget the day I got my first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. Time stood still as the sunset painted those canyon walls majestic pinks and magnificent purples. *Awe-inspiring* is an understatement. Then I hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim with my son Parker. That field trip may be the most memorable 23.2 miles I've ever walked. That kind of experience can turn you into a different person.

In his book *Against an Infinite Horizon*, Ronald Rolheiser told a story about a retired couple traveling the globe. "Of all the things you've seen on earth," asked Rolheiser, "what was the most impressive?" The old man responded,

This will sound strange, but it's true! Of all the things we've seen, what impressed me the most was the stones at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. They're only stones! But, as we were standing on the floor of the Grand Canyon, I was reading the tourist brochure and it said: "The stones you are standing on are 2 billion years old." Two billion years! When I think of my life in relationship to that, it isn't even as long as a snap of my fingers. I believe in eternal life, and so two billion years from now we are all going to still be alive. Putting life against that background kind of puts us into perspective now, doesn't it?

Rolheiser concluded, "When we live in depression or obsession we have lost perspective. We have forgotten how young we are, how understanding God is, and how old are the stones at the bottom of the Grand Canyon."[\[26\]](#)

"One of the secrets to faith," said Karl Rahner, "is to always see your life *against an infinite horizon*."[\[27\]](#) How do we do that? Go outside, look up, and count the stars!

Have you put an eight-foot ceiling on God?

It's time to come out of your tent and take a two-foot field trip.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.^[78]

There are a million little miracles right under your feet.
All you have to do is take off your shoes!

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CHAPTER 2

PLAYFELLOWS

On the occasion of our fifteenth anniversary, Lora and I spent an unforgettable week in Italy. We toured Rome, hitting all the usual suspects—the Colosseum, Trevi Fountain, and the Sistine Chapel. Then we relaxed for a few days on the island of Capri, where we visited one of the natural wonders of the world, the Blue Grotto. I share the context because *when* and *where* you read a book matter. Some books read best on a plane at thirty thousand feet. Other books read best by the beach. If you're reading a book titled *Wonder*, doing so on the same day you visit one of the natural wonders of the world adds a little umph!

There was a chapter—"The Night the Stars Fell"—that changed the way I live my life. "Sometimes a moment overwhelms me, splinters me, or shouts at me to *finally wake up!*" said Steven James in his foreword to Arthur Gordon's book.^[1] This is what the Celtic Christians called a thin place—a place where heaven invades earth, a place where eternity invades time. We are a little more alive because we are a little more aware. It was Gordon's father who orchestrated one of those holy moments. "He had a way of generating in me an excitement about things I had always taken for granted."^[2] What a gift that is—carpe wonder!

When he was a boy, Arthur Gordon's family spent their summers at a seaside cottage. Late one night, long after Arthur had fallen asleep, his father came into his room, picked him up, and carried him down to the beach. Then he told a sleepy Arthur to look up into the night sky and watch. Remind you of something? Arthur's father did for him what God did for Abram, and that two-foot field trip changed his life. As Arthur looked up,

he witnessed shooting stars streak across the northern sky—one after another, after another, after another. On magical nights in the month of August, his father explained, the sky would put on a fireworks display far greater than any Fourth of July celebration.

Even six decades later, the night the stars fell ranked as one of the most memorable moments of Arthur Gordon's life! Reflecting on his father's influence, Gordon said that his dad believed that a new experience was more important for a small boy than a night of unbroken sleep. "I had the usual quota of playthings," said Gordon, "but these are forgotten now. What I remember is the night the stars fell, the day we rode in a caboose, the time we tried to skin the alligator, the telegraph we made that really worked."^[3]

If you have children, what will they remember from their childhood? It probably won't be anything you planned. It'll be the improvisational moments when you appreciated life for what it really is—a million little miracles. Curating that kind of wonder is one of our primary responsibilities as parents. Stewarding moments is no less important than stewarding money.

Many years ago, we took our three young kids on the obligatory trip to Disney World. Felt like a sin of omission not to. We had a ton of fun on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. We loved the Electrical Parade down Main Street and the fireworks show over the Magic Kingdom. But what we remember most is laughing hysterically during a torrential downpour. We got way more wet than Splash Mountain and had even more fun running through the rain!

For better or for worse, moments are what you make of them!

"My Father had, to a marvelous degree, the gift of opening doors for his children," said Gordon, "of leading them into areas of splendid newness."^[4] This, surely, is the most valuable legacy we can pass on to the next generation: not money, not houses or heirlooms, but a capacity for wonder and gratitude, a sense of aliveness and joy. Anything less, according to Gordon, is non-living! And his father wasn't the only one who curated awe-filled moments. "We had a remarkable aunt who was a genius at suggesting spur-of-the-moment plots to blow away the dust of daily drudgeries."^[5]

If we aren't careful, our lives can gather the dust of daily drudgeries. We choose sleep over shooting stars. We all live under the same sky as Arthur Gordon and his father. What's keeping you from living your life the way they did? All it takes is a little intentionality.

Time is measured in minutes.

Life is measured in moments.

All that stands between you and a million little miracles is your capacity for wonder. And all it takes is a two-foot field trip, at odd hours if need be.

HIDE-AND-SEEK

He sat on the most magnificent throne anyone had ever seen. It was overlaid with gold and inlaid with ivory, onyx, and pearls. There were six steps with sculpted lions on both sides.^[6] A crown sat on his head, and royal robes draped his shoulders. His name was Solomon, king of Israel. He was the wisest man the ancient world had ever known.

Every day, he feasted at his king-size table. Every night, he slept on his king-size bed. At first, Solomon seemed to love the pomp and circumstance, the perks and privileges. Over time those things lost their luster—but his wanderlust did not. The palace was palatial, but what Solomon really loved were long walks through God's palace. Towering trees and flowering plants. Flying birds and crawling creatures. He loved watching his trading ships sail out of harbor and he dreamed of one day sailing away with them.

Nature is where the king came alive. There was nothing that Solomon didn't find endlessly interesting, nothing that didn't pique his holy curiosity. After all, all truth is God's truth. It was after one of those long walks—legs tired, mind wired—that Solomon penned this proverb. More than words, more like a manifesto!

It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out.^[7]

More than two millennia after Solomon penned that proverb, Sir Francis Bacon—the father of empiricism and originator of the scientific method—said this about it:

Solomon, although he excelled in the glory of treasure and magnificent buildings, of shipping and navigation, of service and attendance, of fame and renown, yet he maketh no claim to any of those glories, but only to the glory of the inquisition of truth, as if, according to the innocent play of children, the Divine Majesty took delight to hide his works, to the end to have them found out; and as if kings could not obtain a greater honor than to be God's playfellows in that game.^[8]

No greater honor than to be God's playfellows? Sir Francis Bacon saw science as a grand game of hide-and-seek. The earth is God's playground, and we are God's playfellows. If that's true, then no one gets more excited about scientific discovery than the God of science.

Galileo may have been banished from the Catholic Church for his heliocentric view of the solar system, but I think God was thrilled. When Francis Crick and his compadres cracked the genetic code and discovered double-helix DNA, I think God applauded. When astronomers discover new galaxies or physicists discover new subatomic particles, God is like a proud parent who puts our accomplishments on His refrigerator. When Neil Armstrong took one small step for man by landing on the moon, I can imagine God turning to His angels with a smile on His face and saying, "I knew they could do it."

There is an old saying: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." That's one reason we take our entire staff, including spouses and children, on an annual retreat we call Play and Pray. Any guess what we do on that retreat? The team that prays together and plays together stays together!

The praying part may sound more spiritual than the playing part, but not if you have a theology of fun. We take God seriously. Ourselves? Not so much! I would argue that praying and playing are equally spiritual. God

certainly loves it when we pray. He knows and loves our voices! But God doesn't love them any less when we play. How do I know this? Any other parents love watching your children play games, sports, or instruments? I rest my case.

"You say grace before meals," chided G. K. Chesterton. "I say grace... before painting, swimming, fencing...walking, playing, dancing."^[9]

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author James Michener believed that the distinction between work and play is a false construct. I, for one, concur.

The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence at whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him, he's always doing *both*.^[10]

FORMED TO FROLIC

"What comes into our minds when we think about God," said A. W. Tozer, "is the most important thing about us."^[11] Close your eyes—unless you're listening to the audiobook while driving. What comes to mind when you think about God? What expression is God wearing on His face? Is He frowning? Or are there smile lines around His almighty eyes? How about posture? Are His arms crossed, retreating? Or are His arms wide open, inviting? Is God in a good mood or a bad mood?

It's not easy parsing God's personality, but one undeniable dimension is playfulness. This is the God who created us with the capacity to laugh. Speaking of, when was the last time you thanked God for the ventromedial prefrontal cortex? That is the metacognitive part of the brain that enables us to juxtapose things and find them funny. The playful part of God's personality was even highlighted by the psalmist in Scripture:

There is the sea, vast and spacious,

teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.^[12]

We aren't entirely sure what kind of sea creature Leviathan was, but we know *why* God created it. It was “formed to frolic.” Wait—what? You're telling me that God created sea creatures—whales and walruses, dolphins and seals—for the express purpose of play? That's precisely what the psalmist was saying. Other translations say “formed to have fun,”^[13] “formed to sport,”^[14] and “made to play.”^[15] What's true of animals is true of people—play is part of our divine design.

“[Play] energizes us and enlivens us,” said Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play. “It eases our burdens. It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities.”^[16] According to Dr. Brown, “play deficit” is as detrimental to our health as “sleep deficit.”^[17] That's why he employs play therapy to cultivate empathy and creativity.

I have gathered and analyzed thousands of case studies that I call play histories. I have found that remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being.... If that seems to be a big claim, consider what the world would be like without play. It's not just the absence of games or sports. Life without play is a life without books, without movies, art, music, jokes, dramatic stories. Imagine a world with no flirting, no day-dreaming, no comedy, no irony.^[18]

You may think I'm overstating the importance of humor and laughter and playfulness, but that's part of what got my wife and me through two bouts with cancer. When Lora got her first diagnosis, we started hitting comedy clubs and watching stand-up comedians. I'm not an oncologist, but

if you've gotten a difficult diagnosis, I would prescribe Nate Bargatze as part of your protocol.

Jesus pushed the playfulness envelope further than anyone. He said that we can't enter the kingdom of heaven unless we become like little children, [\[19\]](#) and part of becoming like little children is recapturing what they are best at—playfulness.

There is a prophecy in Zechariah that I regularly pray over the city where I pastor: "The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there."[\[20\]](#) In 2017, we turned an abandoned apartment building into the DC Dream Center.[\[21\]](#) We operate sixty-four different programs out of the Dream Center that serve thousands of kids and youth. Many of those programs include an element of play like art or dance or sports, and we make no apologies for that. Why? Playfulness is the fulfillment of the prophetic picture that Zechariah painted.

When I read that verse, I have flashbacks to playing kick the can, capture the flag, and hide-and-seek with all my friends who lived on Utah Avenue North in New Hope, Minnesota. Regardless of what we played, having fun was the name of the game.

"I want to die young," said Ashley Montagu, "at a ripe old age."[\[22\]](#) Me too! One of my favorite words is *neoteny*. It's a zoological term that refers to the retention of youthful qualities into adulthood. I discovered this word in a book titled *Geeks and Geezers*.

Neoteny is more than retaining a youthful appearance, although that is often part of it. Neoteny is the retention of all those qualities that we associate with youth: curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth, energy.[\[23\]](#)

Think about the people you admire the most. What qualities do they possess? For me, playfulness ranks right up there. Why? Those people are fun to be around. I have a spiritual father, Dick Foth, who has made more than eighty trips around the sun. I often tell him he's the most neotenic

person I've ever known. He did a life plan in his seventies, which I love. He's still trying to figure out what he wants to do when he grows up!

The people who worked with Walt Disney described him as “innocence in action.”^[24] How did Walt retain a playfulness toward life, toward people? “I still look at the world with uncontaminated wonder,” he said.^[25]

Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, said, “Adults are obsolete children.”^[26] The good news? It's never too late to become who you might have been. The key? To become like Christ is to become like a little child, and to become like a little child is to recapture the sacredness of play. What kind of play? Anything you can imagine! Play a game. Play an instrument. Play with Legos. Just play!

SIX LEGO BRICKS

Many years ago, I was part of a gathering of entrepreneurs in Las Vegas. One of the speakers was a brand architect at the world's most valuable toy maker, Lego. Lego manufactures 125 million bricks every single day. If you have young children, you've probably stepped on hundreds of those bricks strewn across every square foot of your house. Thank you, Lego.

In 2003, the Danish toy company was facing a \$220 million deficit. That's when Lego reimagined their business model by turning those toy bricks into hundreds of brick-and-mortar stores. They opened eight Legoland amusement parks, where awesomeness awaits. They even made a movie. The theme song from the soundtrack, “Everything Is AWESOME,” is still stuck in my head. But that is part of playfulness, is it not? When you take a playful approach to life, everything *is* awesome!

During his presentation, this brand architect handed us six Lego bricks. Then he asked us to estimate the number of unique combinations that could be created with those six bricks, which sounded like a trick question, so I aimed high and guessed several hundred combinations. That left me several hundred million short of the actual answer!

It was a mathematician, Søren Eilers, who wrote a computer program that modeled all the potential combinations. Are you ready for this? The

total number of possible permutations—six bricks with eight studs each—is 915,103,765. Nearly a billion possible permutations with six Lego bricks! That is pretty unbelievable. Of course, it's not as unbelievable as feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. It's not as unbelievable as speaking the universe into existence with four words—"Let there be light."

"We think people are smart who make lightbulbs and computer chips and rockets out of 'stuff' already provided!" said Dallas Willard. "He made 'the stuff'!"^[27] And He made it ex nihilo, out of nothing.

Whether we're playing with Legos, playing games, or playing music, God takes joy in our enjoyment. It's a reflection of His playful personality, which we greatly underestimate. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "Joy is the serious business of Heaven."^[28]

GOD IS IN A GOOD MOOD

Thirty-four miracles are recorded in the Gospels, and that count excludes the big three—the Virgin Birth, the bodily Resurrection, and the Ascension.

With each miracle, Jesus was asserting His authority. Over what? Over everything! The metanarrative of the Gospels is a progressive revelation of His authority over all things.

Jesus asserted His authority over sin by forgiving it seventy times seven. He asserted His authority over evil spirits by casting them out. He asserted His authority over wind and waves by rebuking them. He asserted His authority over neuroanatomy by installing a synaptic pathway in a man born blind. He asserted His authority over quantum mechanics by multiplying five loaves and two fish. He asserted His authority over latitude and longitude by healing in absentia. Finally, He asserted His authority over time and space, over life and death, by resurrecting a man four days dead with three words: "Lazarus, come forth."^[29]

The very first miracle that Jesus performed publicly happened at a wedding in Cana. The bridal party ran out of wine at the reception, which isn't the end of the world. Honestly, it was poor planning that probably

prompted the bride and groom's first fight as a married couple. That said, running out of refreshments was shameful in that culture. Jesus didn't just save the day, He helped the couple save face. He asserted His authority over the periodic table of elements by turning the molecular structure of water into wine.

Six Lego bricks or six jars of water—same difference. There is nothing God can't do! In our hands, six jars of water are six jars of water: $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 6$. But if you put what you have in your hands into God's hands, it doesn't add up anymore. Now it multiplies. Those ancient urns each held up to thirty gallons of water, which translates into 757 bottles of wine! And not just any wine, but fine wine.

How did Jesus do it? By definition, miracles are mysteries. Hundreds of chemical reactions were involved in that transformation, but any way you distill it, that miracle involved molecules. Jesus was asserting His authority over the atoms He called into existence. Evidently, the Creator has the authority to *make* and *break* the laws of nature. The same God who made water can turn it into wine. Or walk on it. Or make a sidewalk through the sea.

I'm amazed by the mechanism of miracles—the *how*. But we must be careful not to miss the *why*. In this instance, it's almost like Jesus was saying, "We're not done laughing. We're not done celebrating. We're not done playing. Party on!"

There are those who think of God as a cosmic killjoy, but nothing could be further from the truth. "God leads a very interesting life," said Dallas Willard. "Undoubtedly he is the most joyous being in the universe." Simply put, God is pure joy! "All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth."^[30]

All of that to say this: God is in a good mood. Is that a Pollyanna denial of pain and suffering? Absolutely not. I have no doubt that God is heartbroken by anything less than His good, pleasing, and perfect will. But that doesn't diminish His infinite capacity for joy.

It wasn't until I was in my forties that I started processing painful emotions. At some point, you can't repress them any longer! With the help of counselors, I finally opened the closet of sadness. That closet is full of disappointment, but you know what I found? There is a God who gives the oil of joy for mourning.^[31] In my experience, grief creates capacity for joy! Or maybe I should say, sanctified grief.

We all want to know the power of the resurrection. Sharing in his suffering? Not so much. But it's a package deal. There's something about suffering that frees us, that empowers us, that helps us discover who we are and who God is. Just as bad days help us appreciate good days, sometimes pain helps us appreciate pleasure.

"Pleasure is a divine decree that we ignore at our peril," said David Gibson. "For it is precisely in enjoying the world God has made that we show we have grasped the goodness of the God we say we love."^[32] According to Douglas Jones, the primary reason Christian cultures have failed throughout history isn't insufficient education or inadequate evangelism or incompetent leadership. They fail for lack of joy.^[33]

In the Middle Ages, there was a litmus test within the church that asked this question: Did you take pleasure in it? If the answer was yes, it was considered sinful. What a terrible test! God Himself would have failed that test on day one, day two, day three, day four, day five, and day six of creation.

At the end of each creation day, God's reaction was recorded: "And God saw that it was good."^[34] The English word "good" is the Hebrew word *tov*. *Tov* isn't just good; it's gooder than good. It's as good as it gets! *Tov* is the definition of all that is good and true and beautiful.

Tov is original emotion—it's equal parts unadulterated pleasure, pure delight, overwhelming awe, unspeakable joy, and childlike wonder. Like an artist at the unveiling of their own masterpiece, it's almost like God stepped back from the canvas that is creation and said, "I outdid Myself, if that were possible!"

HOLY GRAIL

More than a millennium ago, a monarch named Prince Vladimir ruled over a region that is now Russia. In an effort to unify his people, Vladimir commissioned envoys to investigate the religions of neighboring countries. The entourage that traveled to Constantinople discovered a Christianity characterized by the same transcendent beauty that typifies *tov*.

“We knew not whether we were in heaven or earth,” they reported, “for on earth there is no such vision nor beauty, and we do not know how to describe it; we only know that God dwells among men. We cannot forget that beauty.”^[35]

Imagine a church where the presence of God is so visceral that it’s undeniable—God is really among them.^[36] Imagine a church where attention to detail manifests the glory of God. Imagine a church where beauty is its apologetic.

Remember my friend Phil Cunningham? On his first visit to France, he was wowed by the Arc de Triomphe. The scale of that monument is awfully impressive considering when it was constructed—1806 to 1836. But along with the scale, Phil was awed by the original architect’s attention to detail.

The same could be said for the Creator, could it not? Creativity reveals the image of God in us by reflecting the Creator. The Great co-mission is all about co-creating.

Phil has been working on an animated film for almost as long as it took to construct the Arc de Triomphe.^[37] Maybe that’s why he calls that film his *Arc de Triomphe*. Permission to speak freely? Those who can *do*. Those who can’t *criticize*. One of our core values at National Community Church is a tip of the cap to Michelangelo: *Criticize by creating*.

Fun fact? Before creating *Ratatouille*, the animators at Pixar spent two weeks in France dining at Michelin-starred restaurants. Must be nice! Of course, they also ventured into the sewer system to study Parisian rats. Why? They wanted their animations to reflect reality. Before animating *Up*, they went to Venezuela so they could visualize Tepui—the tabletop mountain that Paradise Falls was patterned after. They also brought an

ostrich into Pixar's headquarters to help the animators who were modeling the movements of Kevin, the giant tropical bird.

A few questions. Have you ever been to Tepui? Me neither! Have you ever been in a Michelin-rated French kitchen? Not many people have. And I'm guessing you've steered clear of the Parisian sewer system. Most of us wouldn't know the difference, but those creatives would. They are so dedicated to their craft of creating art that they won't settle for anything less than their creative best.

Can I share a pastoral conviction? When people miss church, they should actually *miss* church! You can call me a romantic, but a church gathering ought to be the most enjoyable hour of the week. You should always feel better when you walk out than when you walk in. Sure, you may experience conviction of sin, but conviction leads to confession, and confession is good for the soul. I don't know anything that produces joy unspeakable or peace that passes understanding like good old-fashioned grace. It's one of a million little miracles we've experienced countless times. What's so amazing about grace? The only way you qualify for grace is by not qualifying for it. By definition, it is undeserved. "The only sin Jesus ever knew was mine," said A. W. Tozer, "and the only righteousness we'll ever know is His."

THE APOLOGETICS OF AESTHETICS

"What impressed the envoys and persuaded Prince Vladimir to embrace Christianity was not its apologetics or ethics," said Brian Zahnd, "but its aesthetics—its beauty."^[38] It's not intellectual propositions that make most of us believers. According to English apologist Francis Spufford, it's feelings. "I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings," said Spufford. "I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas."^[39]

Can I say it like it is?

If your life lacks joy, no one wants what you have!

I have a friend, Bob Goff, who is the life of the party wherever he goes. When I visited his lodge in Canada with a few dozen of his friends, Bob

greeted us with a marching band on a flatbed boat that was towing water skiers. You read that right. When we left Fantasy Island, Bob said goodbye by running down the dock, waving his arms, and jumping into the water. Who does that? People who never lose their playfulness—that's who!

What is it that attracts people to faith in God? It's not the seen but the unseen. It's not the tangible but the intangible. It's not words but things that can't be put into words. It's beauty and creativity and mystery. In the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Beauty will save the world."^[40]

Faith is more than a subjective feeling—that's for sure. It's absolute truth! But the God who took delight in His creation is the same God who created us with a remarkable range of emotion. "We are not thinking machines that feel," said Dr. Antonio Damasio, "but emotional machines that think."^[41] The amygdala is part of the *imago Dei*. And like our thoughts, emotions must be sanctified.

If you have ungoverned anxiety, you will project nervous energy everywhere you go. The alternative? To approach problems, approach people, with a non-anxious curiosity that we will explore in part 2. In the meantime, keep having fun! It's one of a million little miracles, and it honors the God who formed us to frolic.

THE CHIEF END OF MAN

One of my annual rhythms is choosing a word of the year. My word this year? It's the Hebrew word *tov*. The emotional overtones of that Hebrew word are tough to capture, but let's try. What is the most beautiful thing your eyes have ever beheld? That is *tov*. Is there a moment when time stood still? That is *tov*. When were you most alive? That is *tov*. What is the best feeling you've ever had? That is *tov*.

There are moments in life when it's nearly impossible not to praise God. You guessed it—that is *tov*. They are those out-of-body experiences when heaven invades earth. They can't be captured in words, and the memory of them gets better with time. I'll never forget swimming with sea lions in the Galápagos, going on a game drive in Awash National Park in Ethiopia,

hiking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, or being serenaded with “O Sole Mio” in the Blue Grotto in Italy.

Tov is the creativity of God that gives expression to the goodness of God. Light is *tov*. Seed-bearing plants are *tov*. Fish and birds are *tov*. Last but not least, humankind is *tov*. On the sixth day of creation, God stepped back one last time and surveyed all that He had made. He declared it not just *tov* but very *tov*.

There are more than 170,000 words in the English language, while biblical Hebrew has only 8,000 words. The English language may have more words, but Hebrew words have more meaning. “The richness of Hebrew comes from its poverty,” said Lois Tverberg. “Because this ancient language has so few words, each one is like an overstuffed suitcase, bulging with extra meanings that it must carry in order for the language to fully describe reality.”^[42]

Tov is like an overstuffed suitcase that barely fits in the overhead bin. We’ll explore this further in part 3 as we rediscover the God who is gooder than good. In the meantime, let’s have a little fun with this mysterious yet miraculous little word.

Remember the law of first mention? *Tov* is God’s original reaction to His own creation. God takes delight in light. What else does God delight in? God delights in truth. God delights in justice. God delights in you and me. God even rejoices over us with singing.^[43]

God is *tov*, all the time.

All the time, God is *tov*.

Surely *tov* and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.

He is a *tov*, *tov* Father.

He gives *tov* gifts to His children.

The gospel is *tov* news.

Taste and see that the Lord is *tov*.

God is inviting us to rediscover how big, how close, how good He really is. In the process, we reexperience original blessing and recapture original emotion. What if we made it our goal, every single day, to end the day the

way God did? How? By taking delight in the work of our hands. Our lives would become what they were meant to be—a daily delight.

The first tenet of the Westminster Catechism states, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”^[44] The first half makes perfect sense—creation exists to glorify the Creator. One way we do that is by co-creating with Him. The second half is less intuitive. Why? Because we’ve failed to connect enjoyment with original emotion. What if the first half of that tenet is fulfilled by the second half? God is most glorified in us when we delight in Him. We glorify God by enjoying God and all that He has made. We worship God by exploring, by naming, by stewarding, and, yes, by enjoying His creation.

“The more I considered Christianity,” said G. K. Chesterton, “the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.”^[45]

THE GENESIS COMMISSION

Long before the Great Commission, there was the Genesis Commission. We falsely assume that Adam and Eve would have stayed in the Garden of Eden if they hadn’t eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.^[46]

The original commission is an invitation to exploration. Adam and Eve could travel 24,901 miles in any direction and not see the same landscape twice. There were 196,949,970 square miles of terra incognita. Every view was a never-before-seen wonder to witness. Every experience was novel and produced feelings of *toiv*.

We started this book with a question: What’s *really* happening when what’s happening is happening? Let me push that envelope a little bit: What are we *really* doing when we’re doing what we’re doing? It’s so easy to

learn *how* and forget *why*! That's when we need to reverse engineer our reason for being.

The exhortation to subdue the earth is often misunderstood. Or worse, used and abused as an excuse for poor stewardship. Make no mistake: We are called to be caretakers of God's green earth. The Hebrew word for "subdue" is *kabash*. It may sound like a Batman fight word—*Kapow! Kerplop! Kabash!* But it means "to bring something under control that was out of control." Remember when the hovering Holy Spirit brought order out of chaos? That was *kabash*. *Kabash* is beauty for ashes. *Kabash* is nurturing nature, but it has broad applications and implications. It's innovating and renovating. It's curating and cultivating. We can *kabash* creation in a thousand ways.

The astronomer who charts the stars, the geneticist who maps the human genome, the oncologist who seeks a cure for cancer, the oceanographer who explores the barrier reef, the ornithologist who studies rare bird species, and the physicist who catches quarks all have one thing in common. One way or the other, all of them are fulfilling our original job description.

When an artist paints a picture, she is kabashing colors. When a songwriter makes music, he is kabashing notes. When an author writes a book, she is kabashing letters. When a barista pulls a shot, *kabash*. When a lawyer files a brief, *kabash*. When a congressional staffer drafts legislation, *kabash*. When an Uber driver gets you where you want to go, *kabash*. All of them are subduing something in their own unique way. Each is bringing order to chaos. Each is giving room for good things to run wild.

Few people have kabashed a tennis ball better than Andre Agassi. He won 224 Grand Slam matches and eight Grand Slam titles. When Agassi showed up for a match, he had eight rackets and would always start with the racket strung least recently. Why? It was the one with the least tension. In his autobiography, Agassi tipped his cap to his racket stringer:

My racket stringer is old school, Old World, a Czech artiste named Roman. He's the best, and he needs to be: a string job can mean the difference in a match, and a match can mean the difference in a

career, and a career can mean the difference in countless lives. When I pull a fresh racket from my bag and try to serve out a match, the string tension can be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Because I'm playing for my family, my charitable foundation, my school, every string is like a wire in an airplane engine....

So vital is Roman to my game that I take him on the road. He's officially a resident of New York, but when I'm playing in Wimbledon, he lives in London, and when I'm playing in the French Open, he's a Parisian.^[47]

Truth be told? I didn't even know that there was such a thing as a racket stringer! Now I know that there is no one better at kabashing a tennis racket than a man named Roman. I have no idea what you do for a living, but you are called to *kabash*.

When I write a book, I take off my shoes because, for me, it's holy ground. I don't just type with my keyboard. I worship God with the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. I take every thought captive; then I *kabash* them into a book.

Art is the place where *kabash* meets *tov*. It's a good book, good music, a good meal. It's a good argument, a good game, good craftsmanship. Speaking of, have you ever considered that the same God who crafted the universe with His voice crafted furniture with His hands? And I have no doubt that Jesus did it *tov*. "No crooked table legs or ill-fitted drawers," said Dorothy Sayers, "ever...came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth."^[48]

ENCORE

Many years ago, Lora and I enjoyed a performance by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center, but the guy next to me enjoyed it more. When the conductor stepped onstage, this guy gave him a standing ovation. It was my first symphony, so I was a little surprised, to say the least. They hadn't even played a single note! I almost went deaf in my left ear from this guy's clapping! Mr. Symphony kept yelling, "Bravo!"

To be honest, I thought this guy was a little over the top. I thought he was enjoying the playing of instruments a little too much. But perhaps I was enjoying it too little! That moment reminds me of an old proverb: “Those who hear not the music think the dancer is mad.”

Beauty is in the ear, not just the eye, of the beholder. It’s too late now, but I wish I would have asked Mr. Symphony why he enjoyed it so much. Best guess? He had a better ear for music. And because of it, his experience was more *tov* than mine!

In his brilliantly titled book *Mozart’s Brain and the Fighter Pilot*, Richard Restak shared a simple yet profound truism: “Learn more, see more.” Restak said, “The richer my knowledge of the flora and fauna of the woods...the more I’ll be able to see.... Our perceptions take on richness and depth as a result of all the things that we learn.... What the eye sees is determined by what the brain has learned.”[\[49\]](#)

We don’t see the world as it is.

We see the world as we are.

When astronomers look into the night sky, they have a greater appreciation for the constellations. They see more because they know more. When sommeliers sample a wine, they have a greater appreciation for the flavor, texture, and origin. They taste more because they know more. When musicians listen to a symphony, they have a greater appreciation for the chords. They hear more because they know more.

“The secret to love—and a sense of joy and gratitude toward all of life,” said M. J. Ryan, “is to see, feel, and hear as if for the first time. Before the scales of the habitual clouded the brilliant blue sky outside your office window, and the tangy juiciness of an orange, or the softness of your loved one’s hands. Before you got so used to her kind words, his musical laughter, that they became invisible.”[\[50\]](#)

Is it possible that the scales of the habitual have clouded your vision? There is a very fine line between taking things for gratitude and taking things for granted. Once we cross the line, a million little miracles are lost on us.

We don't appreciate our anterior cruciate ligament until we tear it. This I know from personal experience—twice! The same is true of the third metatarsal in our feet and the C7-T1 intervertebral disc in our backs. It's a form of inattentional blindness. We are largely unaware of the thirty-seven sextillion chemical reactions happening in our bodies unless something goes wrong!

Why do we take so many miracles for granted?

"Grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony," said G. K. Chesterton. "But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon.... The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical *encore*."^[51] That is precisely what the psalmist suggested thousands of years ago:

Bravo, GOD, bravo!...

All angels shout, "Encore!"^[52]

That's what's *really* happening when what's happening is happening!

TIPTOE

Nikola Tesla is one of history's most prodigious inventors. He was granted 308 patents, but who's counting! His most famous invention is the alternating-current generator. Every time you flip a light switch, you owe Tesla a tip of the hat.

Where did his creativity come from? The short answer is curiosity! As a young boy, Tesla was petting his cat's back when it produced a shower of sparks. "This is nothing but electricity," said his father.^[53] Curiosity may have killed the cat, but that cat kindled Tesla's curiosity.

I cannot exaggerate the effect of this marvelous sight on my childish imagination. Day after day I asked myself what is electricity and

found no answer. Eighty years have gone by since and I still ask the same question, unable to answer it.^[54]

If you reverse engineer the mystery called electricity, it traces back to this moment. Like the night the stars fell, this was a day when decades happened. Few people possessed more curiosity when it comes to God's creation, and Tesla had a unique way of showing his appreciation. During thunderstorms, he would go outside and climb a Douglas fir. I'm kidding! Only John Muir would do that. Tesla would sit on a couch near the window, and every time it would lightning and thunder, he would get on his feet and give God a standing ovation.

When was the last time you clapped for the Creator?

When was the last time you gave God a standing ovation?

The angels in heaven never stop!

In Judaism, different prayers entail different postures. One of them is called the *kedushah*. It includes a recitation of Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." My favorite part of that prayer is the posture—it was recited on tiptoe, with legs together! According to rabbinic tradition, angels had one fused leg. So they prayed this prayer by striking an angelic posture.

It's not easy keeping your balance on tiptoe, with legs together, but it puts you in the tallest posture possible. It's a posture of holy anticipation. It's symbolic of sanctified expectations. When we pray on tiptoe, it takes the eight-foot ceiling off what God can do!

What's *really* happening when we pray this way, when we worship this way? We are harmonizing with heaven. We are adding our voices to a song that predates Genesis and postdates Revelation. It's a song sung by angels, elders, and living creatures that will echo through eternity. Worship is as close as we'll come to an out-of-body experience. Worship is when and where and how heaven invades earth! Worship sets the stage for a million little miracles.

"The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living," said Abraham Heschel. "What we lack

is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.” Heschel then said our goal should be to live in “radical amazement.”^[55]

How do we do this?

“Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible.... To be spiritual is to be amazed.”^[56]

Before turning the page and starting the next chapter, take a few moments to play. Play with Legos. Play a song that gives you goosebumps. Play a game of Twister and try not to laugh. You can’t do it, can you? That’s *tov*. Regardless of what you play, please know, God enjoys it as much as you do.

How much are you enjoying God?

That’s a pretty good measure of spiritual maturity.

The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And not just in good times, but bad times as well. Life is not just fun and games. It’s pain and suffering too. But even when sorrows like sea billows roll, there is a peace that passes understanding.

I have a friend who was recently diagnosed with hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis (HLH). The median survival rate for someone with HLH is two to six months. “HLH began to rob me of the beauty of life,” said Jim. So what did he do? The short answer is *carpe wonder*! He and his wife of thirty-five years decided to *seek beauty*. How? By noticing the everyday miracles we so often overlook. That is *tov*.

One year after that devastating diagnosis, Jim was declared HLH-free by his doctor at Johns Hopkins. “A miracle had occurred,” said Jim. And indeed it had. But the bigger miracle was waking up to wonder. In Jim’s words: “Beauty is so woven into my everyday life that I hardly noticed it. I have learned to appreciate that everything in life is a miracle.”

FLATLAND

In 1884, an Anglican priest named Edwin Abbott wrote a brilliant little book titled *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Though it was written a long time ago, it ranks as one of the most mind-bending books I've ever read. Part of what makes it so remarkable is that it predates Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and Erwin Schrödinger. At the time of its writing, doctors were still practicing bloodletting.

From start to finish, *Flatland* is an extradimensional thought experiment. Abbott called one dimension Lineland. It consists of the one dimension a Linelander can conceive of—length. In Lineland, the only direction you can move is forward. Abbott called two dimensions Flatland. Flatlanders can move sideways, as well as forward, because a second dimension called breadth is added to length. Then Abbott introduced a mystical, miraculous, three-dimensional place called Spaceland. It's very hard for Linelanders or Flatlanders to conceive of anything above them, because they never look up. Why would they? They have no category for a third dimension called height.

Remember what God said to Abram? “Look up!”^[1] Abram was acting and thinking like a Flatlander until God took him on a two-foot field trip. By inviting Abram outside the tent, God was ushering him into a new dimension of reality that is accessible only by faith.

Faith is a many-splendored thing, so let me share a few of my favorite definitions. Faith is taking the first step before God reveals the second step. If doubt is letting our circumstances get between us and God, faith is putting God between us and our circumstances. Faith is the willingness to

look foolish. Faith is unlearning fear. Perceptually speaking, faith is seeing the invisible and hearing the inaudible. Faith is a sixth sense—extrasensory perception—that enables us to imagine realities beyond what we can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. And that brings us back to Flatland.

Flatlanders sense a mysterious presence, and they wonder what it is, but they look every direction but up. That's when an extradimensional being named Sphere enters the equation. An archetype of the Almighty, he is, according to Abbott, "a fit apostle for the Gospel of Three Dimensions."^[2] Sphere reveals himself to Linelanders and Flatlanders this way: "You do not even know what Space is. You think it is of Two Dimensions only; but I have come to announce to you a Third."^[3]

I know this sounds awfully esoteric, so let me get down to brass tacks. Our biggest problem is our small view of God. We tend to think about God in four-dimensional terms because that is all we've ever known. Like the Flatlanders in Abbott's fable, we have a hard time imagining omniscience or omnipotence or omnipresence. Newsflash: God doesn't exist within the four dimensions of spacetime He created.

Remember what A. W. Tozer said? A low view of God is "the cause of a hundred lesser evils," while a high view of God is the solution to "ten thousand temporal problems."^[4] That is where spiritual battles are won or lost. Albert Einstein said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."^[5]

In a world that politicizes almost everything, we're called to theologize. Yes, that's a word. It's thinking about things in theological terms. What things? Everything. And, I might add, everyone! It starts with a theology of dignity—the image of God in me greets the image of God in you. That is how we begin to tap into our God-given potential. That is how we exercise prophetic imagination. That is how we solve seemingly impossible problems.

AVOIDING GOD

In 1961, a Soviet cosmonaut named Yuri Gagarin was the first person to orbit Earth. When he returned from space, Gagarin famously said, “I looked and I looked, but I didn’t see God.”

C. S. Lewis responded to Gagarin’s quip with a comical yet commonsense analogy: “Looking for God—or Heaven—by exploring space is like reading or seeing all Shakespeare’s plays in the hope that you find Shakespeare as one of the characters.” As the author, Shakespeare’s voice is ever-present. Every character, every scene, and every plotline is a function of his imagination. Shakespeare’s fingerprints are on every page, not unlike the creation clues the Creator has left us. Simply put, Shakespeare is nowhere to be found and everywhere to be found. “To look for Him as one item within the framework which He Himself invented,” said Lewis, “is nonsensical.”

Then Lewis riffs on how to avoid God, as only Lewis could.

Avoiding God is extremely easy. Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and above all on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation.

This is also how you avoid a million little miracles! You stay inside the tent instead of going outside. You look down instead of looking up. Instead of counting stars, you focus on your problems. Do that long enough and miracles do a disappearing act, like God in space.

At the end of his soliloquy, Lewis comes to this conclusion: “I never had the experience of looking for God. It was the other way round; He was the hunter...and I was the deer.”^[6] The Hound of Heaven never gives up on us, never stops wooing, never stops pursuing. All we have to do is turn around, and when we do, we discover a God with arms wide open.

DEGREE OF FREEDOM

In physics, every dimension of spacetime is called a degree of freedom. In one-dimensional Lineland, there is freedom to move forward. In two-dimensional Flatland, there is freedom to move forward and sideways. In three-dimensional Spaceland, there is freedom to move forward, sideways, and upward. Each additional dimension adds a degree of freedom, allowing one to move in new ways. Every degree of freedom redefines what is and isn't possible.

"You can leap over a four-dimensional barrier in five-dimensional space," said K. C. Cole, "untie an eight-dimensional knot in nine-dimensional space. Magical things are made possible by a mere change in the dimensions of space."^[7]

Juxtapose that with this.

Jesus said, "I have come to set captives free."^[8] We tend to think of that in legal terms, and one dimension of freedom is forgiveness. We are justified—*just as if we had never sinned*. Our sin is forgiven and forgotten by virtue of what Christ accomplished on the cross. Religion is spelled *DO*—it's all about what we can do for God. Christianity is spelled *DONE*—it's all about what God has done for us. We are saved, healed, and delivered because of what Christ accomplished at Calvary. But wait—there's more. There is a physics to our faith. Jesus adds a degree of freedom to our lives. Not only did He redefine reality with each and every miracle; He also told us that we would do "even greater things."^[9]

How do we do even greater things? It starts with prayer! Prayer is the difference between the best we can do and the best God can do. And that's an awfully big difference—a ninety-three billion light-year difference! Prayer is escape velocity. It's how we get outside our spacetime limitations. Prayer is the way we write history before it happens. It's like our prayers exit the dimension we call time, and we never know when or where or how God will answer. But this I know for sure: There is no expiration date on prayer.

The same goes for the gifts of the Spirit. They add a supernatural dimension to our lives. They help us maneuver in new ways that defy four

dimensions. The gifts of the Spirit are our passport out of Flatland. They are a portal to the impossible. When we exercise gifts of faith or gifts of healing, words of knowledge or words of wisdom, the result is miracles.

ADJACENT POSSIBILITY

There is a concept introduced by Stuart Kauffman called the adjacent possible.^[10] It's the thing made possible by something else. The computer was made possible by the microchip. The skyscraper was made possible by the elevator. Florida was made possible by air-conditioning. Prior to the advent of air-conditioning, the population of Florida was less than a million people. It's now the third most populated state thanks to millions of retirees and an invention called air-conditioning.

It was a foggy night in 1902 when a twenty-six-year-old engineer named Willis Carrier had a eureka moment while standing on a train platform. *Could fog be recycled to cool a building?* Carrier patented the idea and pitched it at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. That exhibit, called the Carrier Igloo of Tomorrow, revealed the adjacent possible to millions of people. Eighty-five years later, Carrier is a fifteen-billion-dollar business.^[11] The domino effect of that one idea is the radical redistribution of population to warmer climates, which profoundly affects where we vacation, where we retire, and who we elect via the Electoral College.

The adjacent possible is a biological principle, but let me apply it to theology. The metanarrative of the Gospels is Jesus exercising His authority. Over what? Over everything. How did He do it? One miracle after another. With each miracle, Jesus pushed the envelope called impossible until that word was eliminated by an empty tomb.

John's gospel records seven miracles that double as seven signs. Jesus turned water into wine, revealing His authority over the periodic table of elements. He healed a nobleman's son long distance, revealing His Lordship over latitude and longitude. When He healed a man who hadn't walked in thirty-eight years, He revealed Himself as the Time Lord. When He fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, He is Math Lord.

Yes, I'm taking a little liberty with these names, but how else would you describe what He did? Jesus walked on water, defying the laws of physics. Jesus healed a man who was born blind, defying the laws of neuroanatomy. If you are born blind, there is no synaptic pathway between the optic nerve and visual cortex in the brain. This miracle is nothing short of synaptogenesis. Then Jesus raised a man who was four days dead with three words: "Lazarus, come forth."[\[12\]](#)

All of these miracles point to the adjacent possible. When Jesus walked out of the tomb on the third day, all bets were off. All things are possible! Simply put, Jesus *is* the adjacent possible! He is bigger than any impossible situation you may find yourself in.

A COURSE IN MIRACLES

This book is about everyday miracles, not the anomalies and epiphanies that we typically think of as miracles. But I would be remiss if I left those miracles out of the equation. I've experienced more than my fair share and learned a few lessons along the way.

First of all, everyone wants a miracle. Of course, no one wants to be in a situation that necessitates one! But you can't have one without the other. Just as there is no comeback without a setback, impossible situations set the stage for God's most amazing miracles.

I celebrate July 2, 2016, as a personal holiday—my healing day. After suffering from severe asthma for forty years, God healed my lungs. As I already testified, I haven't touched an inhaler from that day to this day! But let me share the setup and the payoff.

The genesis of that miracle happened one month prior. I hiked Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park with a handful of friends. The elevation is only 1,530 feet, so it was relatively easy, but what made it remarkable is that I didn't have to use my inhaler. In fact, I went five consecutive days without using my inhaler, which is something I hadn't done in forty years. It filled my heart with hope, but it ended with an asthma attack. Instead of getting discouraged—glass half-empty—I decided to praise God for

progress. My advice? Don't wait to celebrate. Praise God for partial miracles!

Some miracles happen instantaneously, while others happen in stages, like the healing of the blind man from Bethsaida.^[13] Part of what makes that miracle unique is that Jesus had to pray twice, not just once. That miracle involved two stages, which invites the question, What if the blind man had gotten frustrated with a partial healing? He could have walked away half healed, and that's what many of us do. But that partial healing was a stepping stone to complete healing. I don't want to draw too many conclusions from a single data point, but praising God for partial miracles may be a prerequisite for full healing.

Here is one more lesson learned.

Along with praising God for progress, we have to participate in our own healing. If you want God to do the *super*, you have to do the *natural*. To celebrate my healing miracle, I decided to do what I couldn't have done previously—run the Chicago Marathon. Did I win? Not even close! But I finished without a single respiratory issue. And I have no doubt, seventy-two training runs over six months helped expand my lung capacity.

When God does a miracle, you don't go back to square one. You benchmark it by believing God for the next one! If managed properly, miracles earn compound interest. You steward the miracle by believing God for even bigger, even better miracles. The God of miracles gets bigger and bigger, as does your faith capacity.

REALITY DISTORTION FIELD

In 1981, Bud Tribble used the phrase *reality distortion field* to describe the charismatic co-founder of Apple Computer, Steve Jobs. What is it? A reality distortion field is a force field. It's refusing to accept limitations. It's bending reality with willpower. It's mind over matter. Spiritually speaking, it's getting out from under the eight-foot ceilings we put on God.

During the development of the Macintosh computer in 1984, Steve Jobs told one of his engineers that they needed to reduce boot time by ten

seconds. When the engineer said it couldn't be done, Steve Jobs pushed back on that perceived impossibility. "If it would save a person's life, could you find a way to shave ten seconds off the boot time?" Jobs made the point that five million users wasting ten seconds every time they rebooted their computer would be the equivalent of a hundred lifetimes lost every year! That engineer, Larry Kenyon, rewrote the code, managing to save twenty-eight seconds.^[14]

It's impossible only until it isn't. In the Lewis Carroll classic *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice says, "One can't believe impossible things." The White Queen replies, "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."^[15]

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a *day*.^[16]

This verse reminds me of a story I once heard about a man who said, "Lord, how long is a million years to You?" The Lord said, "A million years is like a second." The man asked, "How much is a million dollars to You?" The Lord said, "A million dollars is like a penny." The man asked, "Could You spare a penny?" The Lord answered, "Sure, just wait a second."

The four dimensions of spacetime are all we've ever known, which means we're stuck in a moment and we can't get out of it. Time is divided into past, present, and future. The arrow of time points in one direction. But the God who created the dimension of reality called time isn't limited by it. He is an ever-present help in time of need.^[17] He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is I Am Who I Am.^[18]

"The Lord travels in all directions at once," said Thomas Merton. "The Lord arrives from all directions at once." God is omnipresent. Chronologically speaking, He is past, present, and future. Geographically speaking, He is here, there, and everywhere. "Wherever we are, we find that He has just departed," said Merton. "Wherever we go, we find that He has just arrived before us."^[19]

One more Merton?

March 18, 1958, was an ordinary day in every way, but it was a day when decades happen. Thomas Merton was running errands downtown Louisville when the reality of God's presence became so visceral it was undeniable. A statue marking that spot—the corner of Fourth and Walnut—still stands to this day in honor of Merton. Not unlike the burning bush where Moses encountered God, Merton had a divine revelation:

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs.... It was like waking from a dream of separateness....

I almost laughed out loud....

If only everyone could realize this! But it cannot be explained.[\[20\]](#)

The presence of God is one of those mysteries, one of those miracles we take for granted. We don't miss it until we can't feel it. Maybe that's why Merton believed that the holy person was someone whose senses were so sanctified that they were ready to notice the slightest sign of the divine—the God winks, if you will. The divine presence is often revealed in the most mundane sensations, and I might add, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. The most mundane of sensations is where we find a million little miracles hiding in plain sight.

THEOLOGY OF TIME

We live at the intersection of two realities, two theologies. The faithfulness of God is pursuing us from the past—so far, so God. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”[\[21\]](#) Not only is the faithfulness of God pursuing us from the past, but the sovereignty of God is also setting us up for the future. God is preparing good works in advance, [\[22\]](#) which means the best is yet to come!

We live our lives forward, but God is working in our lives backward. When the disciples gathered in an upper room, they were counting up—1,

2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 days. God was counting down—10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The same was true at Jericho.

The LORD said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands.”^[23]

This is the wrong verb tense, right? It should have been future tense because it hadn’t happened yet, but the Lord spoke as if it had already happened. Don’t miss this: *Everything is created twice*.

The first creation is internal, while the second creation is external. The first creation happens in the spiritual realm, while the second creation happens in the physical realm. The Israelites circled Jericho for seven days, and I’m guessing they were counting up—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. God was counting down—7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

According to the Talmud, along with everything God spoke into existence during the six days of creation, he made seven provisions. One, God commanded the Red Sea to split apart for the Israelites. Two, God commanded the sun to stand still for Joshua. Three, God commanded the ravens to feed Elijah. Four, God commanded the whale to swallow, then spit out Jonah. Five, God commanded the fire not to burn Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Six, God commanded the lions not to harm Daniel. Seven, God created a ram and commanded it to get caught in the thicket on Mount Moriah at the very moment Abraham put Isaac on the altar.

It’s God who predestined those moments. In other words, we don’t have to manufacture the miracle. Having said that, let me say this: If you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat. You have to step into the Jordan River if you want God to part it. You have to circle Jericho if you want the walls to come down.

There are two words for time in the Greek language. The word *chronos* is where we get *chronology*. It’s clock time. The word *kairos* refers to redeeming the time or seizing the opportunity. *Chronos* is measured in minutes, while *kairos* is measured in moments. *Chronos* is linear, while *kairos* is circular.

Human history is linear in one sense, but it's circular in another. "What has been will be again," said King Solomon. "There is nothing new under the sun."^[24] If you juxtapose the first few chapters of Genesis with the last few chapters of Revelation, the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know that place for the first time.

In Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth.^[25]

In Revelation, God re-creates the heavens and the earth.^[26]

In Genesis, the curse was pronounced.^[27]

In Revelation, the curse is broken.^[28]

The tree of life disappeared in the book of Genesis.^[29]

The tree of life reappears in the book of Revelation.^[30]

In Genesis, God said, "Let there be light."^[31]

In Revelation, there is no more night, because God is light.^[32]

In Genesis, death entered the equation.^[33]

In Revelation, pain and suffering are things of the past.

There is no more death.

There are no more tears.^[34]

We are right back where we started—unbroken fellowship with our Creator.^[35]

QUANTUM WEIRDNESS

There is nothing harder to imagine than *nothing*, but let's try. Imagine empty space, not a single electron. Imagine pitch black, not a single photon. That's how the Bible begins.

The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering.^[36]

Remember the law of first mention? The very first thing the Spirit of God did was bring order out of chaos, and I love the way this is pictured. The Holy Spirit was hovering like a hummingbird. Speaking of, is there any

bird more amazing? A hummingbird hovering over a flower is a miracle in motion.

Hummingbirds defy gravity by flapping their wings fifty times per second. It's no wonder that one-quarter of their body weight is devoted to their pectoral muscles. No other form of locomotion requires a greater output of energy. Hummingbirds visit more than a thousand flowers per day, flicking their tongues 15 times per second as they lick the nectar. Their tiny hearts beat 1,260 times per minute. They also take 250 breaths per minute without hyperventilating.^[37] It's no wonder that deep sleep is one of their superpowers. Their metabolic rate drops by 95 percent, which is more than a hibernating bear. Hummingbirds have the fewest feathers of any bird species, but those feathers feature some spectacular colors. When Spanish explorers first saw them, they named them "flying jewels." Maybe that's why a group of hummingbirds is called a charm.^[38]

Where were we? Ah yes, the Holy Spirit hovering over the chaos. The Spirit of God wears lots of hats. The Spirit is always comforting and convicting, gifting and guiding, healing and sealing and revealing. Long before you wake up and long after you go to sleep, the Holy Spirit is interceding for you with groans that can't be put into words.^[39] That's what's *really* happening right now. That's where our holy confidence comes from.

But it's this first revelation of the Holy Spirit that tips the hat to both the transcendence and the immanence of God. The Hebrew word to describe this is *paniym*, and it can be translated as "face" or "surface," "presence" or "countenance." It's a wide-scale word, but it's also incredibly intimate.

In regard to time, it refers to the split second *before* and the split second *after*. Well, which is it? Yes! In regard to space, it refers to the space *in front of* and the space *behind*. *Paniym* is like a parenthesis in time, a parenthesis in space.

God is above, but He's not pushed up. He's beneath, but He's not pressed down. He's outside, but He's not excluded. He's inside, but He's not confined. God is above all things presiding, beneath all

things sustaining, outside of all things embracing and inside of all things filling.[\[40\]](#)

The shortest possible time is 5.4×10^{-44} seconds—it's called the Planck time. Any shorter, and quantum mechanics can't tell whether events are simultaneous. The shortest possible distance is 1.6×10^{-35} meters—it's called the Planck length. Any shorter, and quantum mechanics can't tell between here and there.

God is 5.4×10^{-44} seconds before and after.

God is 1.6×10^{-35} meters ahead and behind.

Just as the universe keeps getting bigger and bigger, quantum mechanics keeps discovering smaller and smaller subatomic particles. We'll explore some microscopic miracles later, but the average atom has a radius measuring one-tenth of a nanometer. To put that in perspective, you could fit five million hydrogen atoms in the head of a pin.[\[41\]](#) And the nucleus of said atom is ten thousand times smaller than the atom itself.[\[42\]](#)

The smallest particles are called quarks, and quarks are quirky! They seem to defy the laws of physics. How so? A quark can be in one place, disappear, then reappear in another place. And that quark can do so without traveling the distance between them. Wait—what? And just as photons function as both a wave and a particle, waves can occupy two places at the same time. The technical term is *quantum weirdness*.[\[43\]](#)

SPOOKY ACTION AT A DISTANCE

In 1964, an Irish physicist named John Stewart Bell wrote a paper, “On the Einstein Podolsky Rosen Paradox.” Referred to as Bell's theorem, it disproved the principle of local causes. Regardless of distance, every atom is somehow connected to every other atom. For instance, split a quark in half, the way you would a candy bar. Let's say one Twix stays in the city I call home, Washington, DC, and the other Twix catches a flight from DCA to LAX. If you reverse the spin of the quark in LA, the other half in DC will reverse its spin at the exact same moment. It's called instantaneous

nonlocality, or simultaneous duality. Einstein called it “spooky action at a distance.”^[44]

Most of us have a Newtonian understanding of the world—for *every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*. Bell’s theorem calls that into question. The invisible link between atoms is superluminal. In other words, it breaks the speed limit we call the speed of light. That link defies time. That link defies space. And that brings us back to *paniym*.

Paul was a philosopher and a theologian, not a physicist. But his words give us context clues to the nature of God. They offer a sneak peek into the structure of reality. In a sense, this is Paul’s TOE—theory of everything.

In him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.^[45]

Fun fact? Every atom is 99.99 percent empty space! I don’t really understand that, but I’m fascinated by it. The size of an atom is dictated by how far its electrons’ orbits extend. The outer orbit, or electron shell, is ten thousand times larger than the nucleus, which is where most of its mass comes from.

It’s not easy putting that into perspective, but when I go to a Washington Nationals game, I always get salted peanuts. It’s a sin of omission not to! If one of those peanuts were the nucleus of an atom, the electron shell would be Nats Park. As I mentioned earlier, your body is almost entirely empty space! Juxtapose that with Paul’s description of God as “him who fills everything in every way.”^[46] It’s easy to read right over that, but if every atom is 99.99 percent empty space, that is a lot of filling!

FOOTSTOOL

It’s time for a little thought experiment.

This is what the LORD says:
“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.”[\[47\]](#)

If heaven is God’s throne and the earth is His footstool, how big must God be? Taken literally, at least ninety-three billion light-years and eleven dimensions![\[48\]](#) I’m not sure which is harder to comprehend—omnipotence, omnipresence, or omniscience. All three are mindboggling, but let’s try to put them into perspective.

Earth isn’t the largest planet in our solar system, but it’s no lightweight. Our planet weighs more than thirteen septillion pounds, and its diameter measures just shy of eight thousand miles.[\[49\]](#) As large as that is, the diameter of Jupiter is ten times that of Earth and its volume is 1,321 times greater. Of course, that pales in comparison with the sun, which has a diameter ten times the length of Jupiter’s. But the sun is a relatively small star, a yellow dwarf. There are stars known as supergiants that are 1,500 times the size of the sun. The brightest known star in the universe is called Godzilla. It’s eleven billion light-years from Earth, located in the Sunburst galaxy, and its luminosity is two hundred million times that of the sun.[\[50\]](#) Of course, stars are minuscule compared with galaxies.

The Milky Way galaxy is one hundred thousand light-years from one side to the other. That is 3.6×10^{13} times larger than Earth. If Earth were a grain of sand, the Milky Way would be 5.1 million miles across by comparison.[\[51\]](#) That is so big that even though our galaxy is rotating at 468,000 miles per hour, it would take two hundred million years to do a single rotation! And the Milky Way is half the size of the Andromeda galaxy!

Galaxies come in lots of shapes and sizes—spirals, ellipticals, rings, and irregulars, to name a few. The largest galaxy? It’s a radio galaxy called Alcyoneus. It’s 3.5 billion light-years from Earth, and it’s sixteen million light-years in diameter, making it 123 times larger than the Milky Way. We could keep going, but we’ll hit the brakes there.

How big is your God?

When I say God is bigger than big, I don't just mean bigger than Earth or Jupiter or Alcyoneus. God is bigger than the whole kit and caboodle. He's got the whole world in His hands!

God's got this!

God's got you!

INNER UNCONQUERABLENESS

A few years ago, National Community Church was given a sacred assignment. We started hosting the Easter sunrise service at the Lincoln Memorial. Started by our friends Amos and Sue Dodge in 1979, thousands of people gather on the National Mall every Easter to celebrate an empty tomb. The rush of adrenaline as the sun rises over our city—as we declare that Christ is risen—is worth a trip to the nation's capital.

The night before preaching the Easter sunrise for the first time, if I'm being honest, I was a little nervous. All right, a lot nervous! Why? Because that moment feels so much bigger than me. And it is. But guess what? It's not bigger than the God who robbed the grave! One of the hard lessons I've learned speaking in lots of places to lots of people is this: If I'm nervous, it usually means my ego is getting in the way. I'm too focused on my gifts and abilities, or lack thereof. I have to remind myself of this simple truth: *It's not about me.*

If I focus on the size of the crowd, I get nervous.

If I focus on the size of our God, I get confident.

Emotion—be it ungoverned anxiety or non-anxious curiosity—is a function of focus. Perhaps that's why the apostle Paul advocated that we focus on things that are true and noble, lovely and admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.^[52] That's why we fix our eyes on Jesus. “You keep him in perfect peace,” said the prophet Isaiah, “whose mind is stayed on you.”^[53]

When Peter fixed his eyes on Jesus, he walked on water! When Peter got distracted by the wind and the waves, he ended up doing the doggy paddle. Focus is the difference between possible and impossible. Focus is

the difference between mundane and miraculous. Focus is the difference between taking things for granted and taking things for gratitude.

I'm often overwhelmed by situations I can't control and problems I can't solve. I'm overwhelmed by God-sized dreams that are beyond my ability, beyond my resources. If I focus on the size of the problem or the size of the dream, I get scared and I get stressed. That's when I pray this prayer: *It's bigger than me, Lord, but it's not bigger than You!*

That prayer is inspired by a Jewish spy named Caleb who did reconnaissance in the promised land. Ten spies came back with a negative report. They let their negativity bias get the best of them. They were focused on the wrong thing—the size of the inhabitants rather than the size of their God. Negativity may not be the unpardonable sin, but ten negative people cost the nation of Israel forty years—one year for each day the spies were in the land.

“They are stronger than we are,” said the spies. “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes.”^[54] It is true that the Israelites were outsized, but that never has been and never will be the issue. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. David and Goliath can testify to that truth. Those spies made the wrong comparison—the giants may have been bigger and stronger than the Israelites, but they weren't bigger and stronger than the God of Israel. If you leave God out of the equation, good luck with that. You'll forever feel like a grasshopper. But if you factor God into the risk-reward ratio, game on!

Caleb tried to quiet the people as they stood before Moses. “Let's go at once to take the land,” he said. “We can certainly conquer it!”^[55]

Caleb had a different spirit.^[56] He was positivity personified, but that positivity wasn't a function of personality. It was a function of theology. The locus of his confidence was the character of God and the promises of God. God is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”^[57] That's the difference between self-confidence and holy confidence.

That different spirit is what turned Caleb into a reality distortion field. That is how the Israelites claimed the adjacent possible called the promised land. “No power on earth or in hell,” said Oswald Chambers, “can conquer the Spirit of God in a human spirit, it is an inner unconquerableness.”^[58]

GO BIG OR GO HOME

In August 1996, I felt prompted to pray a perimeter around Capitol Hill. At the time, we were a few months into planting National Community Church. Our average weekly attendance was fewer than twenty-five people, and our total income was two thousand dollars a month. I detail that 4.7-mile prayer walk in *The Circle Maker*, but the biggest miracles have happened since that book was published.

I wasn’t praying for property when I prayed that circle around Capitol Hill. I was praying for people. I was praying the Lord’s Prayer: *May Your kingdom come, Your will be done, in DC as it is in heaven*. Honestly, I never thought we’d own property, because the going rate was ten million dollars an acre. Of course, that would be a fire sale now! Fast-forward a few decades, and NCC owns half a dozen properties right on that prayer circle. The location of those properties is no coincidence—it’s providence. Each property feels like a piece of promised land because each acquisition involved a miracle.

On the northwest corner of that prayer circle was a crack house that we turned into Ebenezers Coffeehouse. The southeast corner is a city block that we purchased for \$29.3 million. I promise you, we didn’t have a category for that price tag! We didn’t have a category for a one-hundred-thousand-square-foot building just a few blocks from the Capitol. But God has blessings in categories we can’t conceive of. This I know for sure: God’s vision for your life is bigger than yours!

Show me the size of your dream, and I’ll show you the size of your God. God makes big people by giving them big dreams. Why? It keeps us on our knees! If God doesn’t do it, it can’t be done. And that way, when the

miracle happens, we can't take credit. God gets all the glory! My advice? Go after a dream that is destined to fail without divine intervention.

If God is for us, who can be against us?^[59]

The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us!^[60]

I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength.^[61]

TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

There is a concept in theology called the infinitude of God. By definition, God is measureless. Every thought we have of God is an underestimation of how good and how great He really is. We can't wrap our finite minds around God Most High, because He exists in a category by Himself—God is God. There is a progressive revelation of God's character from Genesis to Revelation, but we still see through a glass dimly.^[62] That's why I remind our congregation frequently, "As soon as I'm omniscient, I'll let you know, but I wouldn't hold your breath."

If you think you have God figured out, think again. "Those who think they know," said the apostle Paul, "do not yet know as they ought to know."^[63] The more you know, the more you know how much you don't know! Knowledge of the Holy doesn't lead to pride; it leads to profound humility.

There is a litany of sixty-seven unanswerable questions in Job 38–39 that I ask every so often. They are a prescription for pride. Here's a sampling of said questions:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?^[64]

What is the way to the abode of light?^[65]

Does the rain have a father?^[66]

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades?^[67]

Can you loosen Orion's belt?^[68]

Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?^[69]

Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane?^[70]

The answer to each and every one of those questions is no—sixty-seven times, no!

In the philosophy of science, there is a concept called critical realism. It's the recognition that we don't know what we don't know. We can never be entirely certain of our theories, because there are discoveries yet to be made. Dare I suggest that we need a degree of critical realism when it comes to our theologies as well as our theories?

Can we know the Truth? Absolutely! We can know the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And the Truth will set us free!^[71] That said, we preface our core beliefs at National Community Church with something that a German theologian, Rupertus Meldenius, said four hundred years ago: "In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."^[72]

FAR-SIDE COMPLEXITY

The poet and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes delineated two kinds of simplicity. There is simplicity on the *near side* of complexity, which could be equated with ignorance. I'm certainly not advocating for that kind of simplicity. I'm advocating for simplicity on the *far side* of complexity.

For the simplicity on this side of complexity, I wouldn't give you a fig. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have.^[73]

As we approach the end of part 1, I hope you're overawed and overjoyed by the God who is bigger than big. That said, you don't need to be overwhelmed. If you wrestle with doubt, welcome to the club—the doubters' club! That means you're human! Remember the man who said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" He speaks for all of us.^[74]

There is no finish line when it comes to faith. You never arrive! But don't let that discourage your deconstructing and reconstructing. Seeking God is the adventure that never ends!

“Because He is infinite,” said A. W. Tozer, “that love can enfold the whole created world in itself and have room for ten thousand times ten thousand worlds beside.”^[75] The infinitude of God is how both of us can be His favorite simultaneously! God’s love knows no limits. Neither does His power, His purposes, or His providence. His grace is sufficient. For what? Any and every situation we find ourselves in.

Benoit Mandelbrot, the father of fractal geometry, is famous for his study of complex shapes. Some shapes—like clouds and coastlines—are infinitely complex. Any detail can be magnified to reveal even more detail, ad infinitum.^[76] This is certainly true of God. Every attribute of God is infinitely complex. Believing anything less is believing in a flannelgraph god, and you get stuck in Flatland.

The Ancient of Days can’t be reduced to time or space.

The Alpha and Omega can’t be reduced to numbers or letters.

The Omniscient One can’t be reduced to our finite thoughts about Him.

GOD WINKS

In 1932, a theoretical physicist named Werner Heisenberg won the Nobel Prize for a groundbreaking discovery in the field of quantum mechanics. For hundreds of years, physicists believed in a clockwork universe that was measurable, quantifiable, predictable. According to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, there is inherent uncertainty in measuring the position and momentum of a particle. The imprecise measurement of initial conditions precludes the precise prediction of future outcomes.^[77] Simply put, everything is infinitely uncertain. Or as my grandma Johnson used to say, “You can’t never always sometimes tell.”

Nothing is as simple as it seems.

Everything is more miraculous than we can imagine.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His character doesn’t change, but one dimension of His character is unpredictability. When you follow Jesus, expect the unexpected. Why? God is predictably

unpredictable! Whether you call them divine appointments or God winks, God has some holy surprises up His sovereign sleeve.

We read Scripture with hindsight bias. Because we know how every story ends, even the miracles lose the element of surprise. Scripture is full of head-scratchers—talking donkeys, floating axheads, and sticks that turn into snakes. This is the God who causes the sun to stand still, creates a sidewalk through the sea, and makes the lame walk and the mute talk. In real time, you wouldn't have seen those miracles coming! And that's par for the course—God works in strange and mysterious ways!

If you're obsessive-compulsive, the unpredictability of God can be unsettling. But at some point, you have to let go and let God. If God created the universe with four words, what are we worried about? The Sabbath is a weekly reminder that we don't keep the planets in orbit. We can't manufacture miracles, and we don't have to. All we have to do is let God love us, let God grace us, let God heal us, let God empower us, let God repurpose us.

“Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity,” said A. W. Tozer, “must remain forever futile.”^[78] Again, that may sound discouraging. But there is no greater thrill. Eternity won't be long enough to discover all that God is or praise Him for all that He has done.

At the end of the C. S. Lewis classic *Prince Caspian*, there is an endearing dialogue between Lucy and Aslan, the lion who represents Christ in the book. They haven't seen each other in more than a year when Lucy says, “Aslan, you're bigger.” Aslan responds, “That is because you are older, little one.” Lucy says, “Not because you are?” To which Aslan replies, “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”^[79]

Is your God getting bigger?

Or is your god getting smaller?

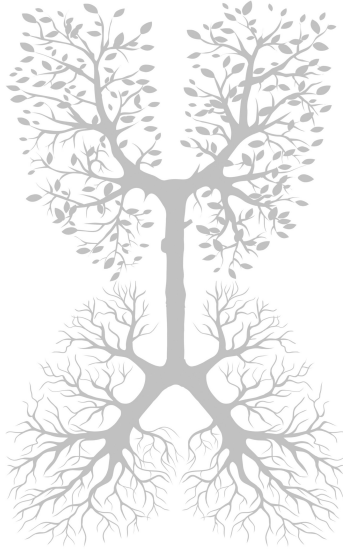
Go outside.

Look up.

Count the stars.

PART TWO

GOD MOST NIGH



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WE ALL BEGAN as a single cell.

That is mind-boggling, is it not? Yet conception is so common that we take it for granted rather than taking it for gratitude. But next to creation, there is no miracle more amazing. A fertilized egg measures one-tenth of a millimeter. How is that even possible?

“The mere existence of that cell,” said Lewis Thomas, “should be one of the greatest astonishments of the earth. People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell.”^[1]

At the moment of conception, our genetic makeup is already encoded into our double-helix DNA. At full term, the average baby measures twenty inches and more than seven pounds. That’s more than five thousand times the size of that fertilized egg, in nine months no less. If that’s not miraculous, I’m not sure what is!

In part 2, we’ll trade the telescope for a microscope. The discovery of the microscopic cell was as revolutionary as the idea of a heliocentric universe. Your body is an ecosystem that contains 37 trillion cells, and each of those cells is made up of one hundred trillion atoms. “I am large,” said Walt Whitman. “I contain multitudes.”^[2] There are more bacteria in your gut than there are stars in our galaxy!^[3] Fun fact? More than half your body is not human. Human cells only make up 43 percent of your total cell count. The other 57 percent are bacteria, viruses, and fungi that make up your microbiome.^[4]

Even more miraculous? The two hundred varieties of cells in the human body are as different as blood cells, nerve cells, and skin cells.^[5] Yet somehow each one knows its destiny. Eye cells do eye things, while stomach cells do stomach things. We take these microscopic miracles for

granted, but it's one of the great mysteries of life. No wonder Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, referred to the human genome as "the language of God."^[6]

The greatest mystery in the universe isn't dark matter or the Higgs boson—it's you! "Each of us has our own distinctive microbiome," observed Ed Yong, "sculpted by the genes we've inherited, the places we've lived in, the drugs we've taken, the food we've eaten, the years we've lived, the hands we've shaken."^[7] Science has yet to identify many of the microbes that make up our microbiome. Suffice it to say, every cell in the human body is a microscopic miracle!

Recorded human history is five thousand years, but it wasn't until around 350 years ago that we discovered the cell. We have gained much scientific ground in the last century, but the mysteries and miracles of the human body never cease to amaze. It could be argued that inner space is more marvelous than outer space. It doesn't just defy imagination; it defies definition. "We are still struggling to define the very thing that defines us," said biologist Siddhartha Mukherjee.^[8]

In the late sixteenth century, a Dutch father and son, Hans and Zacharias Janssen, placed two magnifying lenses on the top and bottom of a tube and discovered that they could magnify a hitherto-unseen world. Opticians by trade, the Janssens had created a compound microscope.

A few decades later, a Dutch cloth merchant named Antonie van Leeuwenhoek started using a microscope to examine the quality and integrity of thread.

On May 26, 1675, a flash flood left puddles of water in its wake. Leeuwenhoek put a single drop of water under a microscope and was instantly spellbound. He saw dozens of tiny organisms that he called "animalcules."^[9]

"No greater pleasure has yet to come to my eye," said Leeuwenhoek, "than these spectacle of thousands of living creatures in a drop of water."^[10] I hope he didn't say this to his wife, Cornelia, but you get the point. A single drop of water isn't as simple as it seems. It's an ecosystem unto itself.

Many years ago, I had a breakfast meeting with Bob Demoss. During the course of our conversation, he did something curious. He put his finger on the end of the straw in his water glass to create a little suction, pulled it out, and released one drop of water onto his index finger. Then he asked, “How many atoms do you think are in that one drop of water?”

A drop of water is awfully small, about five-hundredths of a milliliter. I assumed he probably wouldn’t ask the question if it wasn’t some crazy number, so I figured it might be as much as a million or a billion or a trillion. Bob leaned over the table and said, “There are five sextillion atoms in that one drop of water.”

I had no reason not to trust Bob, but I found that a little hard to believe. I did some research, and sure enough! There was an Italian scientist, Amedeo Avogadro, who calculated the number of molecules in one mole of a substance. It’s called Avogadro’s constant, and that number is $6.02214076 \times 10^{23}$.[\[11\]](#)

A drop of water isn’t as simple as it seems. And that’s true of its gaseous, liquid, or solid form. Wilson “Snowflake” Bentley took his first photomicrograph of a snowflake on January 15, 1885.

Under the microscope, I found that snowflakes were miracles of beauty; and it seemed a shame that this beauty should not be seen and appreciated by others. Every crystal was a masterpiece of design and no one design was ever repeated. When a snowflake melted, that design was forever lost. Just that much beauty was gone, without leaving any record behind.[\[12\]](#)

Remember John Muir, who climbed a tree during a snowstorm? Wilson Bentley was cut from the same cloth. Instead of retreating to his home during snowstorms, Bentley went for long walks. In fact, he died on December 23, 1931, after contracting pneumonia from walking six miles through a blizzard. I’m sure he would have had it no other way!

If a drop of water is more complex than we can imagine, how do we quantify God? The answer is, we don't. By definition, God is incomprehensible. His power is unimaginable. His love is immeasurable. His goodness is inconceivable. His mercy is incalculable. I'm running out of adjectives, so I'll stop there. The psalmist celebrated this two-sided coin we call the transcendence and immanence of God this way:

God's love is meteoric,
his loyalty astronomic,
His purpose titanic,
his verdicts oceanic.
Yet in his largeness
nothing gets lost;
Not a man, not a mouse,
slips through the cracks.^[13]

God is great not just because nothing is too big.

God is great because nothing is too small.

That includes the minute details of your life. God knows the number of hairs on your head, before *and* after you shower.^[14] God collects your tears in His bottle.^[15] Your name is written on the palms of His almighty hands.^[16]

You are seen, heard, and loved by God. God knew you before you defied the odds and won that swim meet. God knows you better than you know you! All the days ordained for you were written in His book before one of them came to be.^[17] And He doesn't just love you; He actually likes you. In fact, you are His favorite! Of course, so is the person you like the least.

It's time to rediscover the God who is closer than close—God Most Nigh.

He is an ever-present help in time of need.^[18]

He is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.^[19]

He will never leave you nor forsake you.^[20]

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CHAPTER 4

HOLY CURIOSITY

When I was a freshman in college, I took a class on immunology at the University of Chicago Medical Center. I've since completed three graduate degrees, but that undergraduate class on immunology ranks as my all-time favorite. I'll never forget walking out of one of those lectures, praising God for hemoglobin! I have no idea if my professor believed in intelligent design, but the entire class felt like an exegesis of Psalm 139:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body
and knit me together in my mother's womb.
Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!
Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.^[1]

I walked out of that medical center with a new conviction: *Every ology is a branch of theology*. God's invisible nature is made evident by His creation, which includes every facet of the human body.

We've already reverse engineered the miracle called respiration, but it's worth another deep breath. The oxygen you inhale gets absorbed into your bloodstream through a process called diffusion. The average adult has thirty trillion red blood cells, and each of those red blood cells contains approximately 260 million proteins called hemoglobin. Oxygen molecules hitch a ride, and hemoglobin gets them where they need to go.

When was the last time you thanked God for hemoglobin?
Or the red blood cells that deliver them on time every time?

Or any of the other microscopic miracles taking place inside your body?

If that kind of nuanced gratitude seems like overkill, maybe that's why you haven't been overjoyed in a long time. Generic gratitude results in generic joy—we aren't sure why we feel what we feel. Nuanced gratitude results in nuanced joy.

Orthodox Jews pronounce a minimum of a hundred blessings a day, which is quite the quota. Those blessings cover the gamut of human experience, but their breadth is matched by their depth. A blessing is spoken *before* and *after* enjoying a meal, as well as *during* the meal. Freshly baked bread, for example, is a double blessing. The smell and taste are two separate blessings! And if it's fresh out of the oven, add a third blessing for melted butter. Add a fourth blessing for a dash of Himalayan salt. If you want to push the gratitude envelope even further, praise God for each of the ingredients in the bread.

“A man embezzles from God,” says the Talmud, “when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing.”^[2] Again, if we don't take things for gratitude, we take them for granted. And if we take them for granted, it's as if we've stolen them from God. That's why identifying everyday miracles—and praising God for them—is at the core of spiritual growth.

I'M STILL HERE

Many years ago, National Community Church did a gratitude challenge. The challenge? Try to thank God for the things you typically take for granted. A medical doctor in our church wasted no time. Drawing on her extensive knowledge of human anatomy, biology, and chemistry, she nuanced her gratitude like a postgrad:

Thank You, God, for aerobic respiration. Thank You for mitochondria, which right now are creating ATP. Thank You for glycolysis. Thank You for pyruvate.

To be honest, I had to look up *pyruvate* in the dictionary! It's a three-carbon acid formed during glycolysis. It's oxidized in the mitochondria, where it fuels citric acid cycles and boosts oxidative phosphorylation.^[3] In simple terms, pyruvate plays a major role in cell metabolism by breaking down fat.

Thank You, God, for glycine. Thank You for leucine. And isoleucine. And tryptophan. And for the fact that all organisms that form amino acids have the same chirality so that my body can reuse the nutrients and cellular building blocks of the food I break down.

I can barely spell some of those words, much less understand them. But those are just a few of the million little miracles happening in your body right now. For the record, you don't need a medical degree to do this! There are things you know that I don't. It doesn't matter if your expertise is in automobile engines or parenting toddlers or roasting coffee. Start with that and see if it doesn't result in a laundry list of gratitude. Your gratitude list should be as unique as your fingerprint.

As for that doctor, later that afternoon, while taking a walk, she began praising God for bones and ligaments and tendons. She thanked God for genetic recombination, which made the cotton clothes she was wearing possible. While listening to music, she thanked God for the ear's cochlea. While making dinner, she thanked God for the xylem in the plants she was preparing to eat. She thanked God for the bacteria in her colon that helped her digest food.

As the sun began to set, the Spirit said, "You can stop now."

Needless to say, this woman won the gratitude challenge hands down!

You may be rolling your eyes at the level of detail, but this is more than a game of Trivial Pursuit. Whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride. Until you have sufficiently counted your blessings, you aren't ready for the next one. *But, Mark, if I pronounce a hundred blessings a day, I wouldn't have time to do anything else!* Like what? Complain?

One of the things my wife, Lora, and I are religious about is sharing our gratitude journals with each other on our Sabbath. We count our blessings by numbering them. Last time I checked, I was on 541, while Lora's tally was 1,141. Does that mean Lora is twice as good at gratitude as I am? After two bouts with cancer, I think she is. And I'm the beneficiary. When we share our gratitude lists with each other, it doubles our joy. We literally rejoice, which squeezes the juice out of every blessing.

Can I share one point of gratitude that makes it into Lora's journal with a degree of frequency? "I'm still here." I tear up every time she says it. After ringing the bell on cancer, you don't take much for granted.

RETICULAR ACTIVATING SYSTEM

In the human brain stem, there is a cluster of cells called the reticular activating system. Without it, we'd be as distracted as a dog surrounded by squirrels. A key component of consciousness, the reticular activating system determines what we notice and what goes unnoticed.

We don't see the world as it is. We see the world as we are. Or to say it another way, we see only what we're looking for. This is a function of confirmation bias, perceptual bias, and response bias. If you're looking for something to complain about, you will always find it. If you're looking for something to be grateful for, you will always find it. "Enjoy the little things," said Robert Brault. "For one day you may look back and realize they were the big things."^[4]

When you keep a gratitude journal, you train your brain to notice everyday miracles. It creates a category in your reticular activating system for any and every blessing. It becomes a virtuous cycle where gratitude is both cause and effect.

There is a concept in neuroscience called Hebb's law: "Neurons that fire together wire together."^[5] Gratitude may not be a muscle, but it is a neural circuit. Like everything else, use it or lose it. When you train yourself to identify things you're grateful for, like a game of I Spy, those neural pathways get larger and stronger.

Did you know that gratitude and anxiety can't coexist in the human mind?^[6] There is something about gratitude that flips the switch on anxiety. If you increase gratitude, you decrease anxiety by default. Gratitude puts us into a parasympathetic state, which releases dopamine and serotonin. Gratitude is the difference between fight-or-flight and rest-and-digest.

In part 1, we counted stars. While you're at it, count your blessings! But don't stop counting once you've listed all the obvious ones. Keep digging deeper and deeper. Remember how God ended each day of creation? He paused and took joy in His creation. What if you set aside a few minutes at the end of the day to count your blessings? It might not change your circumstances, but I guarantee it would change *you*! After you count your blessings, flip those blessings for other people, and gratitude will grow like compound interest.

IT BEATS A COVERED WAGON

Many years ago, Lora and I had one of those travel experiences that turn into a total disaster. We were flying cross-country, and our itinerary fell apart when our first flight was delayed. Then a flight was canceled. Then we ended up in New York City instead of DC, so we had to rent a car that cost more than the flight and drive through the night to get home. Not fun—but these are the moments when we need to keep things in perspective. At some point during that debacle, waiting for a connecting flight, I turned to Lora and said, “Well, it beats a covered wagon.”

In psychology, there is a concept called cognitive reappraisal. It's telling yourself a different story. One way to do this is called downward counterfactual thinking, and it's a little bit of a Jedi mind trick. In the words of Jedi Qui-Gon Jinn, “Your focus determines your reality.”^[7]

Reality check: The fact that we could get from the West Coast to the East Coast in less than twenty-four hours would be nothing short of miraculous prior to the twentieth century.

We travel on two-hundred-ton airplanes that fly five hundred miles per hour, and we don't give it a second thought. We sit in reclining seats in

pressurized cabins that are air-conditioned. If we're lucky, we might even get Biscoff cookies. Imagine trying to explain the hardships of modern travel to someone loading up their wagon and preparing for the arduous journey along the Oregon Trail. "You won't believe it, but our plane was delayed." Your what? "Then I had to endure the middle seat for five hours!" Overlanders who survived the Oregon Trail would probably give you a silly slap at that point! Why? Your problem is someone else's miracle!

Remember when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and God provided breakfast in bed called manna? They started to complain, as they were apt to do:

If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna![\[8\]](#)

The last time I checked, manna was a miracle! They literally lost their appetite for miracles! By the way, the fish they ate were free because *they* weren't. Talk about selective memory. Of course, we'd never complain about a miracle, right?

Just as one person's junk is another person's treasure, one person's problem is another person's miracle. Gratitude isn't getting what you want; it's wanting what you have. It's a growing awareness of and appreciation for a million little miracles, like the ability to read this book.

You, my friend, are able to do with relative ease what was impossible for most people on the planet for most of human history. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the world literacy rate was 12 percent.[\[9\]](#) The rise in literacy has rewired our brains and changed neuroanatomy in remarkable ways. The parts of the brain related to language—Broca's area and the left ventral occipitotemporal region—are larger than our ancestors'.[\[10\]](#) "Literacy changes people's biology and psychology," said Joseph Henrich, "without altering the underlying genetic code."[\[11\]](#)

When we see a word, our brain retrieves the associated sound from our memory and maps it to the word. It's called phonemic awareness. Then, with the help of semantic processing, we attach meaning to that word.^[12] Did you know that we can also read numbers instead of letters? The brain's ability to read jumbled letters is called typoglycemia. If you don't believe me, try reading this paragraph:

According to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.^[13]

Spell check had a fit with that paragraph, but you didn't, did you?

THE INNER EAR

Some of you are listening to this book rather than reading it, and it's no less miraculous. Sound waves crash into our ears like ocean waves on a beach. They travel through a labyrinth that naturalist Diane Ackerman likened to a "maniacal miniature golf course" complete with "curlicues, branches, roundabouts, relays, levers, hydraulics, and feedback loops."^[14]

The outer ear functions like a funnel, catching sound. After traveling through the ear canal and hitting the eardrum, the vibrations bump into three of the tiniest bones in the body—the hammer, the anvil, and the stirrup. Those vibrations spiral through a snail-shaped tube called the cochlea, which contains thousands of microscopic hair cells that amplify the sound along the way. Then the eighth cranial nerve transmits those impulses like Morse code to the auditory cortex, where pitch, volume, tone, distance, direction, and meaning are translated into actionable information.

Never experienced a miracle? Every time sound waves make their mysterious journey through your outer, middle, and inner ear, it's nothing

short of miraculous. One of the mysterious capabilities of the human ear is tuning out some sounds while tuning in others. When I played basketball in college, no matter how loud the fans were yelling and screaming, I could always discern my dad's voice above the crowd. The same is true of mothers and their babies' cries. Did you know we have this capacity because we actually hear things twice?

"Whoever has ears," Jesus said, "let them hear."[\[15\]](#) That command deserves a double take. Remember the concept of inattentional blindness? There is also a phenomenon called inattentional deafness.[\[16\]](#) We don't hear what we aren't listening for—especially when it comes to kids and chores! Are you listening to God with your outer ear or inner ear? Maybe, just maybe, it's the inner ear that gets us into the inner courts!

Fun fact?

Owls can turn their heads 270 degrees. They also have three eyelids—one for blinking, one for sleeping, and one for cleaning. Owls have remarkable night vision, but their most amazing sense is hearing. Not only are their ears asymmetrical, but they are also different sizes. This gives them an extraordinary ability to pinpoint the precise location of sound while hunting their prey.

You may not give a hoot about any of this, but is it all right if I riff? Almost anything you can do, some type of animal can do better. Owls hear better. Eagles see better. Kangaroos jump better. Cheetahs run better. Cats fall better. Dogs smell better. Speaking of, did you know that every dog has a unique noseprint? If you have a doodle or a dachshund, doesn't that make you love them that much more! Those unique noses have 300 million olfactory receptors, which is 294 million more than humans.[\[17\]](#)

When you inhale, you create a single airstream that enables breathing and smelling simultaneously. When dogs sniff, the air splits into two streams. They have a tributary devoted to smell and smell alone. They also have side-facing slits in their noses, which cause odors to waft into their noses while they exhale.[\[18\]](#)

An octopus doesn't just have eight arms; it also has three hearts.[\[19\]](#) Camels have three stomachs, and they can shut their nostrils during

sandstorms.^[20] Go ahead—try it. Can't do it, can you? The hippopotamus secretes hipposudoric acid through its skin, which functions as a natural sunscreen and antibiotic.^[21] Reindeer don't have red noses, but they do have eyes that change color. During dark arctic winters, eye pressure increases, pupils dilate, and brown eyes turn blue.^[22] And then there's the wood frog, which survives subzero winters by freezing for seven months. Its heart stops beating. It stops breathing. Biologically speaking, the frog has croaked. Yet when the warm weather returns, the frog thaws, and it's fully functional once again.^[23] Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction! Then there are elephants that can communicate and navigate via infrasound.^[24] They also poop 220 to 250 pounds per day, which is a good place to hit Pause.^[25]

We have much to learn from the animal kingdom.

STUDY THE ANT

Remember Solomon's manifesto? "It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out."^[26] In a sense, science is a grand game of hide-and-seek. That same Solomon also said to study the ant and be wise.^[27]

Admittedly, that proverb is a relatively obscure verse of Scripture. But that doesn't make it any less inspired. I interpret that verse literally and universally. There's something to learn from everyone and everything. There's not much that I don't find fascinating, which is why this book is all over the map. Welcome to my world.... Squirrel!

There are at least twelve thousand species of ants with a total population of twenty quadrillion—that's 2.5 million ants per person.^[28] There is one species called clonal raiders, of which every member is a female that can reproduce by cloning itself.^[29] Argentine ants create colonies that function like superorganisms and extend for miles. Then there are the leaf-cutters, which are so sensitive to their trail pheromone—chemical messages—that a single milligram is enough to blaze a trail that circles the earth three times over!^[30]

I've purchased my fair share of ant traps. After all, they don't pay rent to live in our home. But according to Patrick Schultheiss, an ecologist at the University of Hong Kong, "Most ecosystems would simply collapse without ants."^[31] An ant apocalypse probably doesn't keep you up at night, but just in case, remember that they help sustain human life. Of course, the same is true of bees.

If bees were to go extinct, life as we know it would cease to exist. Bees pollinate seventy of one hundred crop species that feed 90 percent of the world. They are a key link in the food chain, responsible for thirty billion dollars a year in bumper crops.^[32] And then there's the honey that bees produce. Along with antioxidants that reduce inflammation, honey contains thirty-one minerals, like magnesium and potassium. Studies have shown a plethora of benefits ranging from cough relief to cholesterol reduction.^[33] Plus, honey never spoils. Bees fan it furiously with their wings, causing water to evaporate. The low water content and high acidity make it resistant to bacteria.^[34] That's why properly preserved honey never expires.

It's no wonder that a child's formal education in ancient Israel began with a lesson on honey. At age six, kids were enrolled in their local synagogue school called a *bet sefer*. The rabbi would cover their slates with honey, then instruct the students to lick the honey while reciting Psalm 119:103: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"^[35]

"Every ant knows the formula of its ant-hill," said Fyodor Dostoevsky, "every bee knows the formula of its beehive. They know it in their own way, not in our way. Only humankind does not know its own formula."^[36]

FLY HIGHER

When Solomon said, "Go to the ant, study her ways, and be wise," it had universal application. There is something to learn from every plant and animal on God's green earth. Jesus said it this way: "Consider the lilies, how they grow."^[37] Jesus and Solomon were using different things—ants and lilies—to advocate the same thing: holy curiosity.

In May 2014, a bird photographer named Phoo Chan captured a once-in-a-lifetime photo of a crow landing on an eagle in mid-air.^[38] How is that even possible? The amazing thing is that the eagle seemed unfazed. As some of the largest birds of prey, eagles are harassed and heckled by smaller birds all the time. How do they deal with it? They fly higher! An eagle's wingspan and lung capacity enable it to fly above ten thousand feet. Crows get dizzy and faint around seven thousand feet. My point? Instead of reacting to hecklers, be the eagle and fly higher!

I'm not suggesting that Nehemiah took his inspiration from the eagle, but he certainly followed its example. A trio of trolls named Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem tried to sabotage the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. They made false accusations against Nehemiah and requested a meeting in the plain of Ono. They were plotting an ambush, but Nehemiah saw through their smoke screen. Instead of reacting to their gaslighting, Nehemiah flew above it. "I am doing a great work," said Nehemiah, "and I cannot come down."^[39] The result of flying higher? Of ignoring the naysayers? Of refusing to be distracted by sideways energy? Nehemiah rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem in fifty-two days flat.

Another fun fact? When cows sense a storm coming, they moo in the opposite direction. Sorry—I meant *move*. The problem with that is this: Moving in the same direction as the storm only prolongs the effects of the storm. Buffalo do the exact opposite. Instead of running away from snowstorms, they run toward them. Why? Buffalo instinctively know that you can't outrun a storm. The point is this: If you run away from your problems, you'll be running for the rest of your life. Hard decisions only get harder. Hard conversations only get harder. The fastest way to the other side of your problems is to run toward them, run through them. This I learned from a buffalo with snow frozen to its face.

One more? In order to protect their young, reindeer move in a circular fashion as a defensive strategy. It's called a reindeer cyclone. Predators cannot target the weaker members of the herd because they are surrounded by a super herd moving in circles. In the words of Santa, "Now, Dasher! Now, Dancer!" Not only is that brilliant, but it's also biblical.

Study the ant.
Study the eagle.
Study the buffalo.
Study the reindeer.

Can I play a risk chip right here? I've spoken to tens of thousands of pastors over the last two decades. For the record, there are easier things to do than pastoring! I hold pastors in high esteem, but that doesn't keep me from speaking the truth in love. If your sermons are boring, it's probably because your life is boring! You don't need to get a sermon; you need to get a life. The good news? That is precisely what Jesus promised: "I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly."^[40]

I have a theory: You can't follow Jesus and be bored at the same time! Never a dull moment when you follow in His footsteps. Perhaps that is what Søren Kierkegaard was hinting at when he said, "Boredom is the root of all evil."^[41] The cure for boredom? Holy curiosity!

"Love and curiosity are dance partners," said Seth Goldenberg, "and learning is the musical score."^[42] Holy curiosity is a humble approach to everyone and everything. It's a learning posture. It's a growth mindset. Remember what George Washington Carver said? If you love something enough, it will reveal its secrets. That's not just true of creation; it's true of the Creator. If you don't love God, it's because you don't *really* know God. How do I know this? Because *God* is love! True faith is always unlearning and relearning. It's always deconstructing and reconstructing. It's always downloading and updating. But this I know for sure: To know God is to love God.

THREE THOUSAND PROVERBS

I split my undergrad education between the University of Chicago and Central Bible College. Those were two very different experiences, and I'm grateful for both. It was at CBC that I took a class on homiletics. It was my first time preaching behind a pulpit, and my first text was a bit of an outlier.

I could have chosen the Great Commission or the Great Commandment, but I chose 1 Kings 4:32–34.

[Solomon] spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls.

Solomon was captivated by a species called the cedar of Lebanon. That tree is known for its longevity and resilience. It doesn't flower for thirty years, but it can live for up to a thousand! Its trunk can grow to a girth of 25 feet, and it can reach a height of 120 feet. The thing I find most fascinating, however, is that the cedar of Lebanon contains a chemical compound that repels snakes! If you're hiking through the woods and you need to rest, it's best done under the canopy of a cedar of Lebanon.

"I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree," said the poet Joyce Kilmer, who was killed by a sniper's bullet during World War I. "Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree."^[43]

When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, he didn't use trees that were native to Israel. He struck a deal with the king of Tyre and imported cedars of Lebanon by shipping them across the Mediterranean Sea. So what? If that detail matters to the Designer of the temple, those kinds of details should matter to us!

[Solomon] also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.^[44]

Solomon was a poet and a songwriter. He was an entomologist, botanist, and dendrologist. He was an ornithologist and ichthyologist. Simply put, Solomon was the patron saint of holy curiosity. It was his ability to connect the dots by cross-pollinating different disciplines that made him the wisest man on earth.

“When you step into an intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures,” said Frans Johansson, describing a concept he called the Medici Effect, “you can combine existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary ideas.”[\[45\]](#)

Serial entrepreneur Sir Richard Branson has a philosophy of life and leadership called ABCD—always be connecting dots! Whether we’re talking about entrepreneurs or entertainers, poets or prophets, athletes or artists—genius is pattern recognition. It’s seeing ecosystems where others see unrelated incidents. It’s taking unintended consequences into account. It’s recognizing intelligent design when we see it. It’s connecting the dots—creation clues—between nature and nature’s God.

Leonardo da Vinci, one of history’s greatest inventors, believed that to fully understand something, we need to view it from at least three perspectives.[\[46\]](#) Edgar Allan Poe, one of America’s best-known poets, would often look up three words at random in a dictionary and attempt to tie them together.[\[47\]](#) Go thou and do likewise! It’s often at the intersection of ideas that we discover a million little miracles.

STAB OF JOY

Theologically speaking, there are two kinds of revelation. The Bible is special revelation, and I believe it to be God-breathed. You don’t just read the Bible; the Bible reads you. Why? Because it’s “living and active.”[\[48\]](#) It’s “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”[\[49\]](#) It’s the final authority when it comes to matters of faith and doctrine. That said, the distinction between sacred and secular is a false dichotomy. If all truth is God’s truth, then every ology is a branch of theology. That’s where general revelation comes into play. God has left us clues in His creation.

Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.[\[50\]](#)

When was the last time you marveled at something God made? That's every bit as worshipful as singing lyrics on a screen—maybe more so! Remember John Muir, who climbed a tree during a storm and feasted his senses on the sights and sounds? Or Nikola Tesla, who gave God a standing ovation during storms? Or George Washington Carver, who took prayer walks through the woods? Or Phil Cunningham who canoed the Zambezi River? That was their unique way of worshipping the Creator. What's yours? Consider the context God has put you in. How can you express praise at home, at work, and at play? How can you turn your daily routines into worship rituals?

One of my rituals is clapping for trees when they change color. They are too beautiful not to! I'll even pat them on the bark and tell them they are beautiful. Of course, I say this soft enough so only the tree can hear me!

One of my favorite books is *The Hidden Life of Trees*. A tree isn't just a tree—it's an ecosystem unto itself. Did you know that trees communicate by releasing some of the same neurotransmitters as humans? Maybe that's why exposure to plants releases the feel-good neurotransmitter called dopamine.^[51] It should come as no surprise that “forest bathing” has such positive physiological and psychological effects.^[52] Perhaps that's why God gave them to us.

My point? A walk through the woods can turn into a ticker-tape parade of praise. A visit to the botanical gardens can raise the roof in worship. An ordinary hike can turn into a two-foot field trip that changes your perspective on life and love and leadership.

When C. S. Lewis was a young boy, his brother handed him a biscuit tin filled with moss and decorated with twigs and flowers. That simple little garden toy elicited what Lewis called a “stab of Joy.” He found himself overwhelmed with a profound longing for something he couldn't quite name. That biscuit tin became holy ground. It was the beginning of a lifelong search for the Source of that joy! “The central story of my life,” said Lewis, “is about nothing else.”^[53]

“I have found my life punctuated by these stabs of joy,” said a writer at the Rabbit Room, in a tip of the hat to Lewis. “For just a moment the joy is

bigger than I am and I know without doubt that it comes from somewhere deeper than picnics and good conversation. Sometimes it comes apparently out of nowhere, an unexpected gift on a grey Thursday in February.”^[54]

ONE RASPBERRY

On September 3, 1939, German troops invaded Bielsko, Poland. A fifteen-year-old girl, Gerda Weissmann, and her family bunkered themselves in a Jewish ghetto until June 1942. That’s when Gerda was torn from her mother, Helene, who was sent to a death camp. Gerda would spend three years in a Nazi concentration camp, followed by a 350-mile death march that she somehow survived. By the time she was liberated by American troops, Gerda was a sixty-eight-pound human skeleton. The atrocities of the Holocaust are unconscionable, but Gerda’s story ends even better than a Hallmark movie. In what must be one of the most improbable love stories ever, Gerda married the soldier who found her, Lieutenant Kurt Klein.^[55]

There are six glass towers at the Holocaust Memorial in Boston that represent the six extermination camps where six million Jews lost their lives. Five towers tell the story of unimaginable cruelty and suffering, but the sixth tower stands as a testimony to hope. Inscribed on it is a short story written by Gerda Weissmann Klein—“One Raspberry”:

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to a friend.^[56]

Remember God’s reaction to His creation? “And God saw that it was good.” In my opinion, *tov* is all about appreciating the simple pleasures in life like biscuit tins and raspberries. It’s recognizing the good, the true, and the beautiful for what they really are—a million little miracles.

Every square inch of earth is holy ground, even a concentration camp.
Every moment is a holy moment, even a grey Thursday in February.

ENJOY THE JOURNEY

One of the most memorable days of my life began in a rather inauspicious way. After a wonderful week of serving Beza International Church in Addis Ababa, our mission team decided to visit Awash National Park in the outback of Ethiopia. A few hours outside the city, we stopped for lunch. That's when we were held at gunpoint by armed shepherds carrying AK-47s. We had taken some pictures of their cows, and they wanted payment for said pictures. Evidently, they were *cash* cows! One of my rules of life is to live in a way that is worth telling stories about. That said, getting held at gunpoint wasn't what I had in mind.

Have you ever had an experience that was absolutely terrifying while it was happening? But it was incredibly awesome immediately afterward? This was that.

After that incident, we drove several hours into the outback of Ethiopia, then went off road. Our guides took us to a natural spring heated by a volcano, where we went swimming. They told us the water was 114 degrees, and I don't doubt it. One of the guys on our team fainted in five minutes flat. Another guy on our team caught it on camera! As we watched that video over and over again, we weren't laughing at him. We were laughing with him, of course!

We finally arrived at Awash National Park and checked into our campsite. We were greeted by dozens of baboons swinging in the trees. Have you seen the backside of a baboon? Don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor! One of them even pooped on someone on our team. At first I thought she was a little unlucky, but how many people can pull that story out of their back pocket at parties!

That evening, with the African sun setting over the horizon, we hopped on Land Rovers and did a game drive. I saw animals that I'd never seen in a zoo. I didn't even know their names! Few things are as exhilarating as seeing wild animals in their natural habitat. Later that night, we were worshipping around a campfire, and it was one of those holy moments when you can't not worship!

I crawled into my tent at the end of the day, and this is what I wrote in my journal: *Don't accumulate possessions; accumulate experiences*. That is the stuff miracles are made of. It has since become a rule of life. I've met very few people who are possessed by a demon, but I've met lots of people possessed by their possessions. They don't own things. Things own them. Friendly reminder? All the toys go back in the box at the end of the game! So once more for good measure—*accumulate experiences*!

Cartographers have a charming name for blank spaces on maps—they're called "sleeping beauties."^[57] They beckon us, like the call of the wild. Whether it's climbing a Douglas fir like John Muir, taking walks through the woods like George Washington Carver, or stargazing like Abram, the call of the wild is the intense yearning to be immersed in nature. The instinct to explore is as old as Eden.

There are sleeping beauties yet to be discovered.

There are biscuit tins filled with joy.

Quit taking things for granted and start taking them for gratitude.

Enjoy the journey!

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SLEEPING BEAUTIES

In the middle of the South Pacific, there is a tiny island called Pingelap. The highest elevation on the island is just ten feet above sea level, and the total landmass is less than three square miles. In 1775, Typhoon Lengkieki killed most of its inhabitants and destroyed most of its vegetation. The twenty survivors resorted to fishing as a means of survival until the island revegetated.

In the generations that followed the great typhoon, a genetic peculiarity became quite pronounced. Elsewhere in the world, fewer than one in thirty thousand people are colorblind. On the island of Pingelap, one in twelve inhabitants were unable to differentiate between colors. The high percentage of colorblindness is traced back to the typhoon. Several people in the surviving gene pool carried a rare genetic mutation responsible for congenital achromatopsia.

A healthy human retina has millions of light-sensitive cells called rods and cones. Those receptors translate light into nerve impulses that travel through the optic nerve into the visual cortex. The 120 million rods in each eye process black and white, while the six million cones enable us to differentiate among a million colors.^[1]

The inhabitants of the island of Pingelap who have achromatopsia have no functional cones. They rely exclusively on low-light photoreceptor rods in the retina, which cause hypersensitivity to light, forcing them to wear very dark wraparound sunglasses. The sad irony is that few places on earth are as colorful as this tropical paradise. “It was striking how green

everything was in Pingelap,” noted Oliver Sacks in his book *The Island of the Colorblind*, “not only the foliage of trees, but their fruits as well.”^[2]

Achromatopsia among Pingelapese islanders is caused by a genetic mutation of the gene CNGB3.^[3] I didn’t even know we had one of those! When was the last time you thanked God for that gene? Next time you’re looking at a swatch to choose a paint color, throw in a thank-you for CNGB3—the gene that unlocks a million little miracles we call color. While you’re at it, thank God for the entire human genome!

THE HUMAN GENOME

Every human shares 99.9 percent of the same DNA.^[4] That said, our 0.1 percent genetic variance makes a huge difference, doesn’t it? Each of us is unlike anyone ever! That diversity is a testament to God’s creativity. There never has been—and there never will be—anyone like you. You have a unique genetic fingerprint, compliments of your parents.

The Human Genome Project has identified approximately one hundred thousand genes with a wide variety of functions. Like the software that runs hardware, those genes control countless bodily functions. TP53 is a tumor suppressor known as the guardian of the genome because of its anti-cancer functions.^[5] FGF5 regulates the length of hair, including eyelashes.^[6] Those with long eyelashes have an autosomal recessive trait. Then there is ACTN3, called the sports gene because it helps make a protein, alpha-actinin-3, that controls fast-twitch muscles.^[7]

You already know what’s coming next, don’t you? When was the last time you thanked God for TP53, FGF5, or ACTN3? Like most other microscopic miracles, they are taken for granted.

Fun fact? Everyone has dry earwax or wet earwax. It was a group of Japanese geneticists at Nagasaki University School of Medicine who made this discovery. The difference is determined by a single-nucleotide mutation in a gene that controls various forms of secretion—ABCC11. The mutation that causes dry earwax also eliminates armpit odor.^[8]

If your ancestors are from Europe or Africa, there is a 90 percent chance your earwax is wet and your armpits stink. Sorry—not sure how else to say it. If your ancestors are from Korea, Japan, or China, you almost certainly have dry earwax and your armpits have no odor. “That’s the main reason,” said neuroscientist David Linden, “why the subway at rush hour in Seoul smells so much better than it does in New York City.”^[9] Pretty amazing that one mutation in one gene can make such a dramatic difference!

“Variation in two different genes,” said Linden, “can add up to more than the sum of their small effects.” In mathematical terms, “ $1 + 1 = 5$, if you will.” Of course, “two genes can cancel each other out, yielding a $1 + 1 = 0$ situation.”^[10]

The human genome is a four-letter code—ACGT—that is three billion letters long. “A live reading of that code,” said geneticist Francis Collins, “at a rate of one letter per second would take thirty-one years.”^[11] Collins, who spent many decades studying the human genome, made this observation about a day when decades happened.

I will never forget the day when my sequencing effort revealed a G instead of a C in a specific position just “upstream” of one of the genes that triggered fetal hemoglobin production. That single letter alteration turned out to be responsible for leaving the fetal program switched on in adults. I was thrilled but exhausted—it had taken eighteen months to discover this single altered letter of the human DNA code.^[12]

You can hear the awe in his voice, can’t you? We are fearfully and wonderfully made! I believe in nature and nurture—individuality is a function of both heredity and history. But the psalmist tipped his hat to the Creator this way:

You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.^[13]

CHOOSE YOUR MIRACLE

In 1831, a twenty-two-year-old geologist named Charles Darwin boarded the HMS *Beagle* and embarked on a five-year expedition. Darwin's contribution to science is undeniable, but his conclusions are not. At the end of his two 450-page volumes titled *The Descent of Man*, Darwin came to this conclusion:

Man, with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin.^[14]

With all due respect to Darwin, I could not disagree more! In fact, I believe the exact opposite. Man, with all his *ignoble* qualities, still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his *divine* origin. Simply put, you are the image of God. You were made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory.^[15]

Origin stories matter.

Some people may call this correlation without causation, but you can't take God out of the equation of creation and it not have ethical side effects. If your cosmology is based on natural selection—survival of the fittest—there is no inherent argument against things like racism or sexism. There is no moral path to dignity or equality. It's a crapshoot that ultimately leads to a cul-de-sac where materialism, relativism, and nihilism make their permanent residence.

I don't want to discount what Darwin discovered, but in the words of Emily Dickinson, he “could not see to see.”^[16] Some fraction of the shaming and blaming that are happening in our culture, in my opinion, is the result of being spoon-fed a steady diet of Darwinism, which denies ultimate accountability to a Creator. You can't prove or disprove intelligent

design, but intelligent design makes more sense than some scientists are willing to admit. Even if you don't believe in a Creator, you still need a cosmological starting point.

“Let's be scientifically honest,” said Sir Fred Hoyle, the scientist who coined the term *big bang*. “The probability of life arising to greater and greater complexity by chance through evolution is the same probability as having a tornado tear through a junk yard and form a Boeing 747 jetliner.”^[17]

Life doesn't come from non-life.

Much of what we accept as common knowledge violates common sense. The ability to evolve is a testament to God's ingenuity, no doubt. But it doesn't happen by default. If left to its own devices, everything in the universe moves toward disorder and decay. Metal rusts. Bread molds. Ice cream melts. Bodies break down. It's the second law of thermodynamics—any spontaneously occurring process leads to an escalation of entropy.^[18]

Can we have a little fun with this?

The most complicated clock in the world is found in Copenhagen. Jens Olsen's World Clock consists of 15,448 parts. The fastest gear does one revolution every ten seconds. The slowest gear does one revolution every 25,753 years. It took two years to design the clock and twelve years to build it. Can you imagine a tour guide suggesting that the clock was the result of a lightning strike? Or an earthquake? Or happenstance? No one would believe them. Why? We recognize intelligent design when we see it. There had to be a clockmaker! If someone suggested that the clock started working in perfect synchrony, no intelligent design whatsoever, we would dismiss that person as illogical.

I believe in an infinite God who created the heavens and the earth ex nihilo—out of nothing. Does that take faith? Absolutely! But it takes no more faith than any other cosmology! “Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus,” said Glen Scrivener. “Atheists believe in the virgin birth of the universe. Choose your miracle.”^[19]

THE COLOR PURPLE

In the shallow waters of the Mediterranean Sea, there lives a sea snail that looks like an ordinary mollusk in every way. These snails have incredibly slow nervous systems, but they have a defense mechanism that makes up for it. The *Hexaplex trunculus* defends itself with a rather unique bioweapon—an inky secretion containing a rare compound called dibromoindigo. As the name suggests, that snail secretion is the color of indigo.^[20]

A rare shade of purple, indigo was chosen as imperial dye. The Roman emperor Augustus made it illegal for anyone other than royalty to wear the color purple. Of course, its exorbitant price made it nearly impossible for anyone else to afford. It took twelve thousand of these sea snails to produce a single gram of Tyrian purple.^[21] As a result, one pound of purple-dyed silk cost twice as much as gold.^[22]

Fun fact? Those sea snails and the color purple helped fund the apostle Paul's missionary journeys. Scripture says he was supported by a commodities trader named Lydia of Thyatira who brokered purple cloth. The patron saint of dye workers, she is purported to be the gospel patron who funded the church at Philippi.^[23]

Pick a color, any color.

Every color absorbs and transmits different wavelengths of light. It's also a unique combination of chemicals. The formula for Tyrian purple is $C_{16}H_8Br_2N_2O_2$.^[24] Next time you put on something that is purple, perhaps you'll have a heightened appreciation for the thousands of snails that first made it possible!

"The purest and most thoughtful minds," said art critic John Ruskin, "are those which love color the most."^[25] Color is one of God's greatest creations! I have a little book in my library titled *Children's Letters to God*. One of my favorite letters was written by a young boy named Eugene: "Dear God, I didn't think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday."^[26] I second that notion, and I would double down on the majestic pinks and magnificent purples of a Grand Canyon sunset.

Those colors are a precursor to what we will witness with glorified eyes in heaven.

The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst.^[27]

We read right over passages like this, but the writer of Revelation took the time to specify each and every gemstone. Why? According to color therapy, emerald green, sapphire blue, and ruby red have psychological and physiological effects on us. It's not just the tree of life that has healing properties; each of those gemstones does as well. It wouldn't surprise me if, like the six Infinity Stones that power the Marvel universe, those twelve gemstones have supernatural capacities.

FOURTH CONE

If you were born after the Tournament of Roses Parade on January 1, 1954—the first national television broadcast in color—you probably take color television for granted. And that's fine, as long as you don't take color vision for granted.

Speaking of television, two-thirds of dog parents leave the TV on when they go to work. Why? Because 60 percent of them believe their dog has a favorite show! Dogs do have better motion perception than humans—seventy-five frames per second versus fifty-five frames per second.^[28] The refresh rate on most televisions is sixty hertz, which means it looks like a moving image to us but dogs see a flicker effect. If you really love your dog, get a high-definition television with a refresh rate of 120 hertz!

A dog's motion perception is greater than a human's, but when it comes to color vision, we have a leg up. Dogs are dichromats. They have only two types of cones that enable them to discern two primary colors—blue and

yellow. Humans are trichromats. The extra cone enables us to differentiate a million colors ranging from periwinkle to chartreuse.

There is, however, a rare breed living among us called tetrachromats. They possess a fourth cone, allowing them to see a hundred million colors that are invisible to the rest of us. For every color a trichromat sees, a tetrachromat perceives a hundred hues!

I can't help but wonder if we'll get a fifth cone in heaven, enabling us to perceive a billion colors. Or perhaps a sixth, seventh, or hundredth cone! By earthly standards, we'll have extrasensory perception. Everything will smell better, taste better, sound better, feel better, and look better. With our newly glorified senses, we'll hear angel octaves. I bet angel food cake will taste even better than it already does!

Remember when Elisha was surrounded by the Aramean army? He said to his very confused assistant, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."^[29] Elisha prayed that the Lord would open his servant's eyes, and it's almost like God created an extra cone. "He looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."^[30]

It may look like I'm surrounded, but I'm surrounded by You.^[31]

If our spiritual eyes were opened, what would we see? We'd see what's *really* happening! We'd see guardian angels. We'd discern the manifest presence of God. We'd perceive powers and principalities. That may sound surreal, but it's no more surreal than microorganisms called germs that we didn't even know existed until a few hundred years ago!

There is a reality that is more real than anything we can perceive with our five senses. It takes extrasensory perception, which is what the Spirit of God gives us. That is how we get words of knowledge and words of wisdom. That is how we hear the inaudible yet unmistakable voice of God—the still small voice of the Spirit.

A helpful way of thinking about this? Most films are shot in 24p—twenty-four frames per second—which equates to 42 milliseconds per frame.^[32] Does this mean that anything faster than 24 frames per second

isn't real? Of course not, but we aren't able to perceive those individual frames with the conscious mind. Like subliminal messages hiding in old movies—"drink Coca-Cola" or "eat popcorn"—this is where a million little miracles are hiding! How do we perceive them? Many miracles are only perceived with eyes of faith that see between frames.

"The only true voyage," said Marcel Proust, "would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees."^[33] When we get a God's-eye view, not only do we see a hundred universes, but we are also witness to a million little miracles!

EYES THAT SEE

Color vision is incredible, but depth perception and peripheral vision are no less miraculous. Same with the brain's ability to fill in the blind spot that exists in your retina. Even Charles Darwin paid homage to eyesight:

To suppose the eye, with its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree.^[34]

The retina contains about ten million light-sensitive cells. These cells have such a high rate of metabolism that they are recycled about once a week. Even more astonishing? The retina transmits data through the optic nerve at a rate of ten million bits per second.^[35] Talk about 5G—or maybe I should say, OG.

"To simulate ten milliseconds of the complete processing of even a single nerve cell from the retina," notes *Byte* magazine, "would require about 500 simultaneous non-linear differential equations and would take at least several minutes of processing on a Cray supercomputer. Keeping in mind that there are more than 10 million cells interacting with each other in

complex ways it would take a minimum of a hundred years of Cray time to simulate what takes place in your eye every second.”^[36]

I don’t even know what some of those words mean, and therein lies the miracle. “Ears that hear and eyes that see,” said Solomon, “the LORD has made them both.”^[37] You are fearfully and wonderfully made, and the eyes are exhibit A. “Let me look into a human eye,” said Herman Melville. “It is better than to gaze into sea or sky.”^[38]

In his book *Rumors of Another World*, Philip Yancey differentiated between two conversions.^[39] The first conversion is discovering the supernatural world. There is more to life than meets the eye. The second conversion is rediscovering the natural world, and that second conversion requires what many mystics have called the third eye.

SENSORY BUBBLE

Zoologist Jakob von Uexküll coined a word—*umwelt*—to refer to the sum total of physical stimuli that we can sense. It defines our perceptual limits, so to speak. Spiders, for example, have very limited ability to see or hear, but their sense of touch is far beyond that of a human. Their world is defined by vibrations coursing through the webs they spin.

Many animals have sensory capacities that humans do not. Rhinoceroses use infrasound to attract a mate, while whales use ultrasound to navigate the deep blue sea. Rattlesnakes can detect infrared radiation, while bees see ultraviolet light. Seals can trace the invisible trail left by a school of fish, while platypuses can detect electric fields.

We all exist in the same reality, but animals “experience it in wildly and wondrously different ways.”^[40] There are animals with eyes on their genitals, ears on their knees, and noses on their limbs. “Gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained,” said the naturalist Henry Beston, “living by voices we shall never hear.”^[41] Simply put, every species lives in its own sensory bubble. And that’s true of you and me.

This is a good place to point out that we have far more than the five senses proposed by Aristotle. We might have as many as thirty-three senses!

[42] Perception of pain is called nociception. A function of the fluid-filled cavity in your inner ear, equilibrioception helps us maintain balance. Then there's proprioception, which is poetry in motion. That is how ballerinas pull off a pirouette and baseball players hit a one-hundred-mile-per-hour fastball.

As remarkable as each of those senses is, our awareness of reality is a very thin slice! The human eye is able to perceive light only at wavelengths between 380 and 700 nanometers.[43] That represents 0.0035 percent of the entire rainbow of radiation.[44]

Our range of hearing is only twenty to twenty thousand hertz. Anything above or below that range is ultrasonic or infrasonic. But even if we can't hear it, that doesn't make it any less real. Sound isn't just hooked on phonics; it's physics. Ultrasound has the capacity to track submarines, pasteurize milk, break up kidney stones, and give you a glimpse of your unborn baby via sonogram.

What does any of that have to do with a million little miracles? Most miracles exist outside our sensory range, but that doesn't make them any less real. They are like AM and FM radio frequencies that go unnoticed unless we're dialed into the right frequency.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

"Without music," said Friedrich Nietzsche, "life would be a mistake." [45] Truth be told, life wouldn't exist at all. According to Leonard Bernstein, former director of the New York Philharmonic, the universe was sung into existence. Bernstein believed that "sang" was a better translation than "said" in Genesis 1:3.

God sang the universe into existence, and it's that song that sustains the universe. That first song—"Let there be light"—is still creating galaxies at the edge of the universe. But wait—there's more. God rejoices over us with singing.[46] God is singing songs of deliverance all around us all the time! [47] These songs may be inaudible to human ears, but that doesn't make them any less real.

I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever.”[\[48\]](#)

This is not a future-tense prophecy.

This is a present-tense reality.

What’s *really* happening right now? All of creation is singing in four-part harmony—in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea. “We are all participating in a larger creative act we are not conducting,” said Rick Rubin. “We are being conducted.”[\[49\]](#) I’m not sure if this is what Rubin had in mind, but all of creation is singing back to the Great Conductor, who sang them into existence.

We all know that bees buzz and hummingbirds hum, but they aren’t the exception to the rule. Even earthworms make faint staccato notes. “If we had better hearing,” said the legendary entomologist Lewis Thomas, “and could discern the descants of sea birds, the rhythmic tympani of schools of mollusks, or even the distant harmonics of midges hanging over meadows in the sun, the combined sound might lift us off our feet.”[\[50\]](#)

In 1967, a scientist named Roger Payne was on a research trip in Bermuda when a Navy engineer introduced him to whale songs he had recorded underwater while listening for Russian submarines. Payne took those songs and produced a multi-platinum album called *Songs of the Humpback Whale*.[\[51\]](#) It’s the bestselling environmental album in history, but that’s only one of ninety whale species, and whales are only one of seven thousand mammal species. Of course, the total number of plants and animals on Earth is an estimated 8.7 million species.[\[52\]](#) That’s an awful lot of albums!

Every kind of atom in the universe sings a different song by emitting sound at a unique frequency. Hydrogen, for example, has a resonant frequency of 1,420,405,752 hertz.[\[53\]](#) And that’s true of every element on the periodic table. Did you know that the carbon atom produces the same

harmonic scale as the Gregorian chant? Things that make you go, *Hmmmmm*.

When the prophet Isaiah said, “The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands,”^[54] it wasn’t hyperbole. That is good science! How do trees clap their hands? In my opinion, their leaves change color!

“Could it be that all sound is potentially musical,” asked Daniel Levitin, “if only we could understand its internal structure?”^[55] According to the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras, “A stone is frozen music.”

“Music is well said to be the speech of angels,” said Thomas Carlyle. “Nothing among the utterances allowed to man is felt to be so divine. It brings us near to the infinite.”^[56]

THE KEY OF DAVID

Half a century ago, Dr. Alfred Tomatis was invited to a Benedictine monastery in southern France. There was a marked depression among the monks, and the famed otolaryngologist was asked to diagnose what was wrong. Dr. Tomatis isolated an interesting variable—a few months earlier, the monks had cut back on time devoted to worship. Dr. Tomatis told them to increase their diet of Gregorian chants, and it worked like a charm. Within months, the joy was visceral.^[57] Gregorian chants may not be your jam, but music is medicine. “The vocal nourishment that the mother provides her child,” said Dr. Tomatis, “is just as important to the child’s development as her milk.”^[58]

Praise the LORD with melodies on the lyre;
make music for him on the ten-stringed harp.^[59]

The ten-stringed harp was a rather unique instrument. It was three feet tall, so it wasn’t the easiest instrument to haul back and forth to band practice! Unlike harps with uneven strings, the ten-stringed harp was two-sided. There were five strings on either side, which some scholars believe

represented the Ten Commandments on two tablets. The two-sided harp produced twice the praise of a traditional harp, since the two sides and ten strings allowed for a double melody.

Long before he defeated Goliath in the Valley of Elah, it was the harp that opened the door of opportunity for David. When King Saul was tormented by evil spirits, David would soothe his soul with the sound of music.^[60] Taking a cue from King David, the prophet Elisha put the harp on his playlist.

While the harp was being played, the power of the LORD came upon Elisha.^[61]

“The eyes are not autonomous organs,” observed David Abram, “and the way we see things is profoundly influenced by what we hear.”^[62] There is something about music that heightens prophetic imagination. It’s almost like the harpist struck a supernatural chord. Spiritually speaking, there was something about the frequency that activated the gifts of the Spirit.

Scientifically speaking, music has a profound impact on bioelectrical brain waves. Studies have found that Mozart’s Sonata for Two Pianos in D Major produces alpha waves.^[63] Do with that what you will, but the word *music* comes from the Greek word *muse*. The word *cantata* comes from the Latin *cantare*, which means “to heal.” A cantor is someone who heals with music.

C. S. Lewis once observed that the happiest and healthiest people praise the most, while the “cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least.” Lewis came to this conclusion: “Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.”^[64]

Music boosts immunity by increasing the level of interleukins and decreasing the level of cortisol. Music can release endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers. “Half an hour of music,” said Dr. Raymond Bahr, “produces the same effect as ten milligrams of valium.”^[65] Like laughter, music doeth good like a medicine!

SONIC BLOOM

Horticulturists in Denver who play different music in different greenhouses have found that playing Bach causes what they call a “sonic bloom.” At a monastery in France, musical monks discovered that cows serenaded by Mozart produce more milk. Businesses in downtown Edmonton, Canada, that pipe Bach and Mozart have found that criminal activity has dramatically dropped since Johann and Wolfgang arrived. At Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, a study of premature babies showed that sixty minutes of lullabies reduced a baby’s hospital stay by five days.^[66] Then there’s the bakery in Nagoya, Japan, that is famous for its “Beethoven Bread.” They claim that Symphony no. 6 helps the bread rise!^[67]

On that note, pun intended, music can accomplish miraculous things. “Music...lulls children to sleep, and marches men to war,” said musicologist Don Campbell. What else? “[Music] lets the child in us play, the monk in us pray, the cowgirl in us line dance, the hero in us surmount all obstacles.”^[68]

Can you imagine watching a movie without music? It would be boring, wouldn’t it? *Frozen* without “Let It Go” wouldn’t be the same. *Star Wars* needs “The Imperial March” just like *Rocky* needs “Eye of the Tiger.” A great movie demands great music, and the same is true of life. Worship is our soundtrack, and we need look no further than the Psalms. The Jewish people took three pilgrimages every year. What did they do while walking? They sang “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall.” I’m kidding! They sang the Psalms of Ascent. That soundtrack helped them make the journey to Jerusalem.

Neurologist and naturalist Oliver Sacks considered music a cure-all: “It is the profoundest nonchemical medication.”^[69] Henry David Thoreau said, “When I hear music, I fear no danger. I am invulnerable.”^[70]

Music can increase endurance when we exercise, aid concentration while thinking, and increase productivity while working. It stimulates digestion, relieves pain, inspires romance, and boosts confidence. Music helped many of us memorize state capitals, learn the alphabet, and navigate “Conjunction Junction.”^[71] Music has the power to “take us back to self-

generated healing systems.”^[72] The German polymath, Novalis, said, “Each illness has a musical solution.”^[73]

When we worship, we are harmonizing with heaven. “O for a thousand tongues to sing!”^[74] There is a heavenly frequency where there is no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.^[75] “ ’Tis music in the sinner’s ears,” said Charles Wesley. “ ’Tis life and health and peace.”^[76]

Remember the super superlative—“Holy, holy, holy”?^[77] That song is our A440—the reference frequency used to calibrate instruments before a concert. It’s the perfect pitch that tunes our body, mind, and spirit with God, ourselves, and others. And the benefits are not just theological; they are physiological. Nothing tunes vagal tone like worship! Vagal *what?*

VAGAL TONE

The longest cranial nerve in the human body is the vagus nerve—the linchpin in the brain-gut connection. Originating in the medulla oblongata, it wanders through the body, innervating everything from the ear and larynx to the heart and lungs, as well as the stomach, kidney, and liver. It’s an information superhighway that synchronizes our internal organs. It’s involved in releasing neurotransmitters, preventing inflammation, creating memories, catalyzing digestion, assisting respiration, controlling heart rate, and initiating relaxation.

It’s one of those miracles that remained a mystery until a German doctor named Otto Loewi had a dream on Easter Eve 1920. He woke up with a start, turned on the light, jotted down a note, and fell back asleep. When he woke up the next morning, the dream felt like, well, a dream. “I had written down something important,” said Loewi, “but I was unable to decipher my scrawl.”^[78] Spoken like a true doctor—or written like one! Eventually, the good doctor was able to decode his chicken scratch.

It was the design of an experiment to determine whether or not the hypothesis of chemical transmission that I had uttered 17 years ago was correct. I got up immediately, went to the laboratory, and

performed a simple experiment on a frog heart according to nocturnal design.^[79]

What did Loewi discover? When he stimulated the vagus nerve, the frog's heart beat more slowly. Why? It released an inhibitory neurotransmitter originally called "vagusstoff" but known today as acetylcholine. The significance of that discovery is this: The primary language of nerve cell communication is chemical, not electrical. For that discovery, Otto Loewi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1936.

Acetylcholine is the chief neurotransmitter of the parasympathetic system that controls blood vessel dilation, bodily secretion, and heart rate. It moves food through your intestinal tract. It controls near vision. It regulates urination. It aids memory formation—low levels of acetylcholine are associated with Alzheimer's disease. It also controls the release of adrenaline, tears, and digestive juices. It's responsible for involuntary reactions like coughing, sneezing, swallowing, and vomiting. Is that all? No, but we'll stop there.

Let me connect a few dots.

The autonomic nervous system regulates involuntary physiological functions in the human body and has two primary divisions of labor. The sympathetic nervous system triggers fight-or-flight. The parasympathetic system is responsible for rest-and-digest. The vagus nerve flips the switch between them. How? One way to get into a parasympathetic state is by taking a deep breath. Laughter and meditation work as well. But one of the most efficient and effective ways to flip the switch is singing. The vagus nerve controls the pitch of your voice by signaling the muscles of the larynx, but it's a two-way highway. When we sing, the vagus nerve is stimulated, thus improving vagal tone. "The vagus nerve is the conductor of the human body symphony orchestra," said Navaz Habib.^[80]

Few things are more cathartic, more catalytic than worship. Why? Because that's what we were created to do. You can't *not* worship. Either you will worship God with a capital G, or you will substitute a lesser god. Not only does worship improve vagal tone, but it also gets us on God's

wavelength. It helps us discern the still small voice of the Spirit. It activates the gifts of the Spirit, as well as prophetic imagination.

THE WONDER SWITCH

According to illusionist Harris III, all of us have a wonder switch. We are born with that switch in the *on* position—everything is awesome! To a toddler, sticks are lightsabers, and fireflies are fire-breathing dragons. “We are born able to sing to birds and read the clouds and see our destiny in grains of sand,” said Robert McCammon. “But then the magic gets educated right out of our souls. We get it church-ed out, spanked out, washed out, and combed out.”^[81]

Sooner or later, one way or the other, the wonder switch is turned off. All too often, it happens when we are robbed of our childlike innocence. For Harris III, it happened when he was molested by a magician mentor at the age of ten. Speaking from his own experience, Harris III said, “Without wonder, your life is ruled by cynicism, stress, worry, and anxiety.”^[82] The good news? Wonder can be resurrected in many ways.

All of us lose our innocence sooner or later. Parents tell us they’re getting divorced at an age when we don’t even know what that word means. A pornographic magazine opens innocent eyes far too soon. A terminal illness forces us to count down the number of days rather than counting up the number of years.

If your wonder switch is off, how do you flip it on? All it takes is a two-foot field trip. All you have to do is go outside, look down, and consider the lily! You can also go outside, look up, and count the stars.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.^[83]

It was a cold winter night—so cold you could see your breath. My grandpa was carrying me in his arms as we walked through a tree farm, hunting for the perfect Douglas fir. There were no clouds in the sky, so the stars were shining extra bright. Maybe that's what prompted my grandpa to quote Psalm 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God." Those words, spoken that night, are etched into my memory. Like Tony Campolo's experience on top of the Empire State Building, it is one of those holy moments I'll remember for a million years.

In Greek, the etymology of the word for "wonder" is the same as the word for "miracle."^[84] They are two sides of the same coin. If you want to recapture childlike wonder, it starts with rediscovering everyday miracles. *Sacramental* is the combination of two words—*sacred* and *mental*. We sacramentalize the world when we keep the sacred in mind.

"Worship is transcendent wonder," said Thomas Carlyle, "wonder for which there is now no limit or measure; that is worship."^[85] If Carlyle is right, then nothing glorifies God like childlike wonder. It's the most ancient emotion—*toiv*.

Western religion, according to the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, lost its luster when it lost its sense of awe. It's more of a telling judgment than an invitation to wonder as we wander.^[86] "The roots of ultimate insights are found," said Abraham Heschel, "on the level of wonder and radical amazement, in the depth of awe, in our sensitivity to the mystery."^[87]

The good news? Childlike wonder can be recaptured in a million ways. You can count the stars, like Abram. You can climb a tree, like John Muir. You can take a long walk through the woods, like George Washington Carver. You can sing a Gregorian chant, like Benedictine monks. You do you, but do it to the glory of God.

CONSIDER THE LILIES

In the world of nineteenth-century science, Louis Agassiz was widely considered America's greatest naturalist. Henry Ward Beecher called him "John Baptist of science."^[1] Agassiz taught at Harvard for a quarter century, but he didn't believe that the classroom did justice to the book of nature. He favored field trips and fieldwork.

"I spent the summer traveling," Agassiz once said to his students. "I got halfway across my backyard."^[2] Was he being facetious? I have no idea, but his attention to detail was infamous. His motto? "Learn to look." That's when and where and how "the microscopic becomes the macroscopic."^[3]

When I was in graduate school, I was assigned a rather curious essay: "The Student, the Fish and Agassiz." It told the story of an assignment given to one of his students, Nathaniel Southgate Shaler. Shaler was given a specimen jar with a fish inside. "Take this fish and look at it," said Agassiz, "by and by I will ask you what you have seen."^[4] An hour later, Shaler thought he'd seen everything there was to see. But Agassiz didn't question him that day or the next day or the day after that. A full week later, Agassiz finally said, "Tell me what you've seen."

As hours turned into days, Shaler had begun to notice things that had been hidden in plain sight—the symmetry of the scales, the number of teeth, the position of the gills, and the paired organs. But Agassiz still wasn't convinced Shaler had seen everything there was to see. So Shaler spent another week of ten-hour days looking at every aspect of that fish from every angle imaginable. At the end of two weeks, Shaler "had results which astonished myself and satisfied him."^[5]

There are a million little miracles hiding in plain sight. Of that I'm sure. But we must "learn to look" from different angles! When we do, we see new dimensions of who God is. "His science was infused with the presence of the divine," said Christoph Irmscher, "which he found wherever he went: in Swiss glaciers, American lakes, and the Amazonian rain forest."^[6] Agassiz saw it as "missionary work of the highest order."^[7]

There are naturalists who seem to look upon the idea of creation—that is, a manifestation of the intellectual power by material means—as a kind of bigotry; forgetting, no doubt, that whenever they carry out a thought of their own, they do something akin to creating.^[8]

Touché!

GENESIS IN A JAR

Louis Agassiz had a holy curiosity about all of creation, but of all the specimens he collected for his Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, he found precious few more fascinating than the jellyfish—a "token of God's love for the world."^[9] "Where there was a jellyfish," believed Agassiz, "we see the whole world."^[10] You could even call it "Genesis in a jar."^[11]

At first glance, a jellyfish seems like nothing more than a gelatinous mass, lacking any kind of internal organization. Upon further observation, "how remarkable and complicated their internal structure is."^[12] A study conducted by the University of Copenhagen revealed that, despite having no central nervous system, jellyfish can learn at a more complex level than first imagined. They learn from their mistakes and modify their behavior.^[13]

There are ten thousand species of jellyfish—evidence that God loves variety. Some are as small as one-half millimeter in diameter. The lion's mane jellyfish, on the other hand, can extend its tentacles as far as 120 feet. The box jellyfish has twenty-four eyes, helping it judge distance and hunt for prey. It also ranks among the most lethal creatures on the planet,

carrying enough venom to kill more than sixty humans. Its stings are so painful that the pain can actually kill you before the toxin does!^[14]

In 1865, Louis Agassiz's son, Alexander, published an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* celebrating the mystery and majesty of the jellyfish. At night, they illuminate the sea like Chinese lanterns. "The motion of your boat sets the sea on fire around you," wrote Alexander, "and a long undulating wave of light rolls off from your oar as you lift it from the water." Alexander described the experience as "wild and weird," such that it "fascinates and appalls the imagination."^[15]

That's more than you need to know about jellyfish, so let me make my point. A jellyfish is 98 percent water.^[16] That's why, if it washes up onshore, it will virtually evaporate. It doesn't even have a brain or a heart. But like every other creature in the deep blue sea, it's not as simple as it seems. Jellyfish aren't even classified as fish. Their taxonomic classification is "gelatinous zooplankton." They are some of the simplest life-forms in the sea, but seen through Agassiz's eyes, they are one of a million little miracles.

THE DANDELION PRINCIPLE

Remember C. S. Lewis and the biscuit tin filled with moss that brought him unspeakable joy? G. K. Chesterton experienced a similar stab of joy that changed the trajectory of his life. Chesterton was a mountain of a man—six feet four and 330 pounds—but he had a rare appreciation for little things. One day he was stopped in his tracks by a dandelion.

That dandelion, Chesterton said, kept him from becoming a pessimist. How so? The humble dandelion was irrefutable evidence that there was beauty in the world, not just brokenness. One look at that dandelion, and Chesterton woke up to wonder. You could even say that it flipped the wonder switch. "I was full of a new and fiery resolution," said Chesterton, "to write against the Decadents and the Pessimists who ruled the culture of the age."^[17]

“He was talking of a little common flower that everyone sees, few people pick, and even fewer think about,” said Os Guinness.^[18] Evidently, Chesterton felt the same about daisies as he did dandelions. He put his love of flowers into a poem titled “The Daisy”:

*Colossal leagues of powers
Went to make one daisy.
And colossal choirs of angels
Could not give thanks for it.*^[19]

Remember our hypothesis at the outset? Nothing is as simple as it seems. And conversely, everything is more miraculous than we can imagine. There is a name for it: the dandelion principle.

To some people a dandelion might look like a weed, but to others that same plant can be so much more. To an herbalist, it’s a medicine—a way of detoxifying the liver, clearing the skin, and strengthening the eyes. To a painter, it’s a pigment; to a hippie, a crown; a child, a wish. To a butterfly, it’s sustenance; to a bee, a mating bed; to an ant, one point in a vast olfactory atlas.^[20]

One tenet of complexity theory is that the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Outcomes that mystify us are called emergent properties.^[21] And they usually arise at the boundary between order and chaos. They also arise at the border between the natural and supernatural. “There might be Natures piled upon Natures,” said C. S. Lewis, “each Supernatural to that below it.”^[22] Perhaps this is what the apostle Paul was hinting at when he mentioned a mystical third heaven.^[23]

CONSIDER THE BIRDS

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. It contains the beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Golden Rule. Jesus introduced the

law of treasures and the law of measures. There are six counterintuitive commands—love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give the shirt off your back. Last but not least, it includes something akin to Solomon’s proverb “Study the ant.”

“Consider the birds of the sky,” Jesus said. “They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they?”^[24] If I’m reading this right, Jesus was advocating bird-watching. Why? Because birds have something to teach us—in this case, the fact that there is a heavenly Father who cares for us more than we can imagine. The Father is watching out for us in ways that are beyond our paygrade.

Then Jesus tipped His hat to King Solomon: “Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”^[25]

Imagine sitting on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee as the sun begins to set. You’re listening to the Word soothe your soul with His words. There are wood pigeons soaring above you, turtledoves singing, and Armenian gulls dive-bombing for fish. You see Mount Hermon, the tallest peak in Israel, on the far side of the sea. Spread out below you, like a giant picnic blanket, are fields full of wildflowers. There are crown imperials, golden amaryllis, and crimson tulips. There are daisies and dandelions and lilies of the valley.

It’s a sight to behold, but it’s more than that. It’s a two-foot field trip! Just as God took Abram outside the tent and told him to count the stars, Jesus took His disciples on a nature walk and told them to consider the birds and the lilies. Stars, birds, or flowers—nature is God’s show-and-tell.

“[Jesus] went up on a mountainside and sat down.”^[26] This isn’t happenstance. Jesus chose a picturesque place—a natural amphitheater—to deliver His most important message. Why? Why not! What the ear hears is determined by what the eye sees—location, location, location.

There is an old axiom—“Mind over matter”—that traces back to a geologist named Sir Charles Lyell. It first appeared in his 1863 book, *The Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man*. Lyell believed that the evolution of civilization “presents us with a picture of ever-increasing dominion of mind over matter.”^[27] Like the Hebrew concept of kabashing creation, which we already explored, every human creation is conceived in the imagination.

I believe in mind *and* matter, just as I believe in nature *and* nurture. But if you press me, I believe in mind *over* matter. “As [a man] thinketh in his heart,” said Solomon, “so is he.”^[28] Just as words create worlds, thoughts create things. Not only are we thinking beings—*Cogito, ergo sum*—we also have the capacity to think about how we think. That metacognitive capacity is unique to humankind and, in my opinion, nothing short of miraculous.

The greatest mysteries in the universe are not “out there.” They’re “in here.” Where? They’re housed within the three pounds of gray matter contained within the human cranium. “The human brain is the most complex single object in the cosmos,” noted John Lloyd and John Mitchinson in *The Book of General Ignorance*. “It can make more connections than there are positively charged particles in the visible universe.”^[29]

The estimates are ever evolving, but you have at least eighty-six billion neurons that form one hundred trillion connections.^[30] If those neurons were laid out end to end, they would measure more than one hundred thousand miles. That’s enough nerve fibers to circle the earth four times!

A few fun facts for parents? Dr. Harry Chugani likens a baby’s brain to a nuclear reactor. During the first few months, a baby’s brain grows 1 percent per day!^[31] That’s why 60 percent of a baby’s energy is devoted to brain development. It’s estimated that a child’s brain pulsates 225 times faster than the adult brain. During the first few years of life, more than one million new neural connections are made every single second.^[32] Next time your toddler is bouncing off the walls, that might give you a little grace!

I’ve been advocating for two-foot field trips throughout this book, but it’s not the only way to break through manmade ceilings. In a 1984 study

looking at the connection between hospital rooms and patient outcomes, researchers discovered that those with a window view of nature had shorter stays than those who didn't.^[33] "You do not need to leave your room," said Franz Kafka.^[34] All you have to do is employ that metacognitive capacity called imagination. It requires no passport. It has no borders. It speaks every language.

The poet Emily Dickinson lived most of her life as a recluse. She rarely left her bedroom, but her imagination was more expansive than most.

*The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside.*^[35]

Imagination is not just part of the image of God, but it's also the quintessence. As such, it's a superpower unique to humankind. Animals have hoarding instincts, but there is a big difference between storing acorns for winter and building skyscrapers. Humans split atoms and design computers. Humans write poems, compose music, and produce films. It's our God-given imagination that powers everything from rockets to romance. It's imagination that allows us to break through eight-foot ceilings.

ONE WILD AND PRECIOUS LIFE

"Who made the grasshopper?"

That question was posed by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver in her poem "The Summer Day," an ode to grasshoppers in all their glory.

A grasshopper can do a thirty-inch long jump, which is twenty times its body length.^[36] It can also jump three feet high, which would be like you or me leaping over a five-story building in a single bound.^[37]

Using a slow-motion camera, zoologist Graham Hoyle from the University of Glasgow discovered that grasshopper muscles have ten times the power of human muscles. “The only known muscles in the whole animal world that equal this power,” said Hoyle, “are the shell-closing muscles of the clam—but the grasshopper’s muscles work far more rapidly.”^[38] Grasshoppers set the bar when it comes to fast-twitch muscles!

Like jellyfish, grasshoppers aren’t as simple as they seem. They are a testament to God’s creativity. God Himself takes credit for the leaping ability: “Did you make them able to jump like grasshoppers?”^[39]

Like every other creature God has created, grasshoppers sing their own unique song. How? They produce sound by rubbing their hind leg with their forewing, which is called stridulation. They also produce sound via crepitation, which involves popping the membranes between wing veins to make a snapping or clicking noise. Those grasshopper songs serve two primary purposes: finding a mate and protecting their territory.

To the average person, the songs of summer produced by different species of insects are indiscriminate noises. But in reality, each of those songs is as unique as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony or Handel’s *Messiah*.^[40] Like the rest of creation, Jiminy Cricket is singing back to the God who sang him into existence. Maybe that’s why a group of crickets is called an orchestra.

At the end of her ode to grasshoppers, Mary Oliver asked a question worth contemplating: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”^[41]

Can I take a crack at that question?

Start by counting stars. Then consider the lilies. Do a little bird-watching. And while you’re at it, study the ant. If you’re feeling adventurous, climb a tree during a snowstorm. There is no end to the everyday miracles that are all around us. If all else fails, take a long look in the mirror. The reflection you see is the very image of God—the apple of God’s eye!

YOU MATTER

You matter.

You matter more than the birds of the air.

You matter more than the lilies of the field.

You matter more than you can imagine.

I recently read a brilliant book with an intriguing title: *Why Fish Don't Exist*. The author, Lulu Miller, profiles a protégé of Louis Agassiz named David Starr Jordan. It was a mind-bending book, and I loved everything about it with the exception of one statement: “You don’t matter.”^[42]

“What’s the meaning of life?”

That’s the question Miller asked her dad one day as a little girl. His answer? “Nothing.” He told her there is no point, no plan, no purpose. “And don’t believe anyone who tells you there is.” He also told her there is no God and there is no afterlife. “No one is watching you,” he said, “or caring in any way.”

“Never forget,” he emphasized, “as special as you might *feel*, you are no different than an ant. A bit bigger, maybe, but no more significant.” I don’t think that’s the conclusion Solomon had in mind when he said, “Study the ant.”

“You are arguably *less* significant to the planet than an ant,” said Miller’s dad.^[43] With all due respect to Miller and her dad, I’m telling you otherwise! I believe the exact opposite. You matter more than you can imagine! Your name is tattooed on God’s hands.^[44] He knows the number of hairs on your head.^[45] He rejoices over you with singing.^[46] He even collects your tears in His bottle!^[47]

The shortest verse in the Bible says, “Jesus wept.”^[48] It’s only two words, but it speaks volumes. This is the God who weeps when we weep. You matter to God. To say it another way: Every number has a name, every name has a story, and every story matters to God.

IMAGINARIUM OF TEARS

The Danish photographer Maurice Mikkers is the mastermind behind an art project called *Imaginarium of Tears*. It all started when he stubbed his toe and captured his own teardrops. As he viewed his tears under a microscope, his first thought was, *I want to cry again!*^[49] He started cutting onions to make himself cry, but he noticed that the microscopic pattern of the onion tears was very different from the stubbed-toe tears! Wait—what? Mikkers became so obsessed with the microscopic difference between types of tears that he started throwing crying parties with friends!

Tears aren't as simple as they seem.

Surprise, surprise!

If you put tears under a microscope, they look a little like snowflakes—each one different from the next. There are basal tears that lubricate the eyes and reflex tears caused by irritants like onions. There are emotional tears—happy and sad—that have extra ingredients. All tears contain water, lipids, glucose, mucin, lactoferrin, lipocalin, lacritin, immunoglobulins, urea, sodium, and lysozyme. But emotional tears include the stress hormone prolactin and a natural painkiller called leucine enkephalin.^[50]

It's another one of those microscopic miracles that remind us of how fearfully and wonderfully we're made. Whether we're grieving the loss of a loved one or shedding tears of joy, each tear is uniquely precious to God.

In ancient Rome, there were bottles called tear catchers made of ornamental glass. Those who mourned filled those bottles with tears and placed them on tombs as symbols of love. The more tears collected, the more beloved that person was.

The average person produces 1.4 milliliters of tears per day. That adds up to more than ten gallons of tears over a lifetime. That's a pretty big bottle, but each is precious to God Most Nigh! I know that God can sometimes feel a million miles away, but He is only a prayer away. All of us go through dark nights of the soul when we doubt our faith. My advice? Don't just doubt your faith—doubt your doubt. There is an ever-present help in time of need.^[51]

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

A Harvard study conducted in 2020 found that 61 percent of young adults ages eighteen to twenty-five experience serious loneliness.^[52] “Most of us probably think of loneliness as just a bad feeling,” said surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy. “It turns out that loneliness has far greater implications on our health.”^[53]

As modeled by the Trinity, relationship is what we were created for. From the get-go, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”^[54] Without healthy relationships, there are serious side effects. One of them is something C. S. Lewis called “solitary conceit.” The easiest person to deceive is ourselves! We all need people in our lives who speak the truth in love!

Lewis wasn’t particularly fond of most local churches. He considered the hymns to be “fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music.” He felt the same way about the sermons. Then why did Lewis go to church? “I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education,” he said, “and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off.”^[55]

I know many people who have experienced church hurt, and that grieves me. That hurt has been the catalyst for many people to deconstruct their faith. It takes tremendous courage to come back to church when you’ve been hurt by a church, but as I see it, the only other option is solitary conceit. Spirituality is a team sport. Even Jesus had His disciples! That is when and where and how iron sharpens iron. And that is especially true of churches that have ethnic, economic, and political diversity.

The church I have the joy of pastoring—National Community Church—represents more than a hundred nationalities. No ethnic group makes up a majority. To be honest, it’s easier to create community among people who look alike, think alike, and vote alike. But blood is thicker than water, and by blood, I mean the blood of Christ. “Unity amongst dissimilar people,” says my friend David Grizzle, “is irrefutable evidence that God is in the house.”

When you find common ground at the foot of the cross, it allows you to celebrate diversity as evidence of God’s creativity. Our love for Christ

overcomes racial tension, political polarization, and a dozen other things that divide culture. Our goal at National Community is unity in diversity, which Dr. King called beloved community.

No church is perfect. Why? Because you're part of it and so am I. That said, the church is still the bride of Christ and the body of Christ. The church is the manifold wisdom of God.^[56] While we must acknowledge mistakes made in the name of Christ, the church has done more collective good than any organization on earth, and there is no close second. And there is no backup plan. "I will build my church," Jesus said, "and the gates of hell won't prevail against it."

Loneliness is epidemic these days. Even in a crowd, some of us feel so alone. The job of the church is to make people feel seen, heard, and loved by God and by us. The prescription for loneliness hasn't changed since the writer of Hebrews penned these words: "Let us not neglect our meeting together."^[57] There is a supernatural synergy when two people pray together, when a small group gathers, when a congregation worships God corporately. The transformational power of community is one of God's most life-giving miracles—don't miss it.

THE POWER OF TOUCH

One of the most intimate encounters recorded in the Gospels involves a woman with an issue of blood.^[58] She was known by her *issue*, as are many of us. People have a tendency to label us by what they perceive to be wrong with us. My advice? Don't let anyone label you who didn't make you!

Jesus healed her physical ailment, but this story includes two miracles. Jesus healed an even greater hurt—acute loneliness. Because of her physical condition, this woman was considered unclean. That means she wasn't allowed human contact. Can you imagine that kind of quarantine? Not a single hug or other human touch for twelve long years!

Then, with one touch, this woman was instantaneously healed. Don't underestimate the power of touch as a conduit of healing. We've already explored the miracle of sight and sound, but touch is no less miraculous.

Our sense of touch involves millions of nerves on the surface of our skin that send messages through ninety thousand miles of sensory pathways.^[59] Every square inch of the human body has a different reaction to touch. The soles of your feet are the least sensitive of any part of your body. Of course, that doesn't mean they can't be tickled. Your feet require 250 milligrams of pressure per millimeter to register. Your fingertips take only three milligrams. Your tongue takes two. And the cornea of your eye takes a minuscule two-tenths of a milligram. That's why a speck of dust or stray eyelash can be quite painful.^[60]

In a study initiated by the Touch Research Institute, preemies who were given a fifteen-minute massage three times a day gained 47 percent more weight and were released from the hospital six days sooner than preemies who were simply fed and changed.^[61] There may be more to "the laying on of hands" than we are aware! It has a natural and supernatural effect on us.

The woman with the issue of blood risked everything by crowd-surfing her way to Jesus. Her reward? It wasn't just physical healing. It was relational reconciliation. With one word, Jesus changed her entire identity. This encounter is the only place in the Gospels where He called someone "daughter." Put yourself in this woman's place. Imagine the impact that must have had on her. She was no longer identified by her issue. She was identified as a daughter of God Most High, God Most Nigh.

"We are born into the world," said psychiatrist Curt Thompson, "looking for someone looking for us."^[62] That someone is Jesus! No one knows you better. Even more amazing? No one loves you more!

At His baptism, Jesus heard a voice from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."^[63] If we had better hearing, I think we'd hear the Father saying the same thing over us. You are His beloved son, His beloved daughter.

Let me make one last observation as it relates to the miracle of touch.

You aren't bound by your body—at least, your energy field isn't. It goes by different names, but ancient mystics called it your aura. Artists depicted it as a halo over the head of those considered holy. Scientifically speaking, there is an electromagnetic energy field that radiates several feet from your

body in all directions. That may sound spooky, but remember “spooky action at a distance”?

Did you know that there are monks who can melt snow via meditation? [\[64\]](#) That may sound suspect to the skeptic, but I would actually up the ante. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in us, [\[65\]](#) and it’s that life-giving force that has the supernatural power to heal. Still not convinced?

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured. [\[66\]](#)

Sometimes fact is stranger than fiction!

I’m certainly not suggesting that you buy handkerchiefs from televangelists, but God’s healing power knows no limits. All it takes is one touch!

NO WORDS

In the Gospels, the miracles that Jesus performed often involve physical touch. He touched the eyes of a man born blind. [\[67\]](#) He healed a leper, who was considered ritually unclean, by touching him. [\[68\]](#) He healed many others who were sick by “laying his hands on each one.” [\[69\]](#)

With a single hug, you can heal someone’s broken heart. With an arm around their shoulders, you can let them know they are not alone. With a pat on the back, you can show them you are in their corner.

One of my earliest memories involves a hug. I was at my grandparents’ house in Fridley, Minnesota, where I have many fond memories, but there was one unwritten rule: Don’t play with Grandpa’s fossil collection. Those fossils were off-limits. They were like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and you can call me Adam.

I’ll never forget the feeling of one of those fossils slipping through my five-year-old fingers. When it broke into pieces, so did my heart. It was a

flash flood of emotion. I felt guilt because I had done something I was told not to do. I felt regret because I couldn't undo it. And I felt fear because I had no idea how my grandpa would react.

My grandpa walked into the room and assessed the situation. Then, without saying a word, he walked over, picked me up, and held me tight. He could have disciplined me, and it would have been warranted. Instead, he hugged me. A lack of words has never said so much! Never has a hug had more impact.

My grandpa gave me my first lesson in grace, and it was a masterclass. He showed me what grace looks like and feels like. There are many dimensions, many definitions of grace. Here's mine: Grace is loving people when they least expect it and least deserve it.

Don't underestimate the power of a single touch. A hug has the power to change someone's life like it did mine. There are very few miracles more amazing than touch, and God has put that miracle at our fingertips!

Did you know that a twenty-second hug causes us to secrete oxytocin? [70] So does a six-second kiss. Either way, the so called "love hormone" or "cuddle chemical" has a profound effect on our psychology and physiology. Consisting of just nine amino acids, that tiny peptide is the gorilla glue that results in relational bonding. Not only is it released when a baby is breastfeeding, it also produces testosterone in men. If oxytocin had been created in a lab, it would be considered a miracle drug. The fact that God designed us with an internal pharmacy—no premiums, no less—doesn't make it any less miraculous!

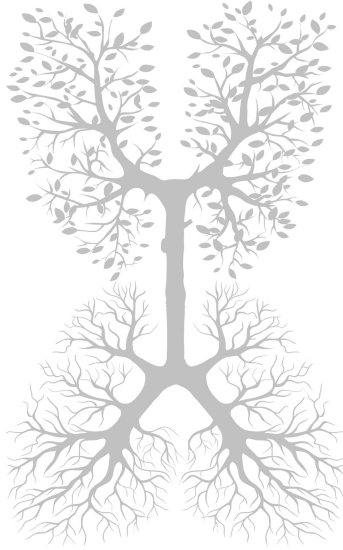
Can I let you in on a little secret? At the end of a hard day, Lora and I hug a little longer. There is something about a heart-filled hug that fills the emotional tank with feel-good oxytocin. And you're never too big or too old to ask for one!

In the infamous words of Tommy Boy, "Brothers gotta hug!"

Hug it out!

PART THREE

GOD MOST GOOD



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IN 1816, A French physician named Rene Laennec felt awkward putting his ear on the chest of a female patient to listen to her heart. What did he do? He rolled up a paper tube and discovered that it amplified the sound. Laennec called it a stethoscope, and it has been worn by medical professionals ever since.^[1]

Just as the telescope and microscope are used to see the invisible, a stethoscope is used to hear the inaudible. It amplifies the sound of the heart beating, the lungs breathing, and even the stomach digesting. It reveals what's *really* happening inside the human body.

Do me a favor? Put your fingers over both ears. What you hear is a miracle—the sound of your blood circulating. Now take your pulse. What you feel is a miracle—the echo of your heart beating. One more? Close your eyes, and touch the tip of your nose with your index finger. It seems simple enough, but even AI can't pull that off like you do!

In part 1, we looked at the stars through a telescope. God is bigger than big—God Most High. In part 2, we looked at the lily under a microscope. God is closer than close—God Most Nigh. God is transcendent and immanent—but is God good? Spoiler alert: God is gooder than good—He is God Most Good. In part 3, we'll chase some butterflies. Is there anything more mysterious or miraculous than a caterpillar turning into a butterfly inside a chrysalis?

Every miracle I've detailed so far—be it a single cell or a single drop of water—is a manifestation of God's goodness called common grace. Of course, there is nothing common about common grace!

The goodness of God finds expression in many ways. As New Testament scholar Stephen R. Turley said, "Truth, goodness, and beauty are

cosmic values that communicate divine meaning to the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic capacities of the human soul.”^[2]

All truth is God’s truth.

All beauty is God’s beauty.

All goodness is God’s goodness.

An attribute of God isn’t something God *does*; rather, it’s something God *is*. God doesn’t just love; God *is* love. I have a theory: *To know God is to love God*. This may sound like circular reasoning, but if you don’t love God, it’s because you don’t really know God. Those who reject God are rejecting a false conception of who God is—a God who is less than good. My advice? Go ahead and reject those false beliefs, which lead to false narratives. In the pages that follow, I want to deconstruct and reconstruct the goodness of God. What you’ll discover is a God who is *Tov* with a capital *T*.

Speaking of his own deconstruction, Eric Metaxas said this: “Everything I had rejected about God was actually not God.” What was he rejecting? “It was just dead religion. It was people who go to church but did not show the love of Jesus...people who don’t practice what they preach, people who are indifferent to the poor and suffering.... I had rejected that, but guess what? Jesus had also rejected that.”^[3]

On July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon that ranks as one of the most famous in American history. It’s credited with catalyzing the Great Awakening. You’ve probably heard the title a time or two: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire; he is of purer Eyes.^[4]

I know Jonathan Edwards lived during a very different day and age, but dang! God is holy, no doubt. But this sounds like a scare tactic. As much as

I respect Edwards, I disagree with the tone and tenor of that paragraph. That is *not* the heart of God toward you. Yes, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”^[5] I’m a sinner in need of a savior! But it’s God’s *kindness* that leads us to repentance.^[6] God’s goodness is long-suffering. In other words, God never gives up on us! It’s not in His nature. He is the God of second chances.

Does God get angry? Absolutely!

These six things the LORD hates,
Yes, seven are an abomination to Him:
A proud look,
A lying tongue,
Hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that are swift in running to evil,
A false witness who speaks lies,
And one who sows discord among brethren.^[7]

God hates those things, but the question is, Why? God hates those things because He loves us and is deeply invested in our flourishing!

Remember our ancient error?

In the beginning, God created us in His image. We’ve been creating God in our image ever since. We project our pain and prejudice onto God. We see God through the lens of our history, personality, and ethnicity, not to mention several hundred cognitive biases. The result is the inverse of Jonathan Edwards’s sermon: *God in the hands of angry sinners*.

I know plenty of people—I’m sure you do, too—who were beaten over the head by self-proclaimed Christians who were less loving than the God they professed to follow. “I like your Christ,” said Mahatma Gandhi. “I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”^[8]

Remember the Last Supper? It’s one of the most intimate, most authentic moments in the Gospels. In Western culture, we sit in chairs around the table. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, they reclined against

one another. “One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him.”^[9] Who is the disciple Jesus loved? You gotta love this. It’s the guy writing this gospel—John! Other translations are more explicit about the posture John took. The KJV says John was leaning against the bosom of Jesus, while the NASB says he was reclining on His chest. The common thread in all these translations is that John literally heard the heartbeat of Jesus.

The goal of part 3 is to hear God’s heart.

The goal is to become a man, a woman, after God’s own heart.

Does your heart break for the things that break the heart of God?

Does your heart beat for the things that cause God’s heart to skip a beat?

When horses travel in a herd, their heartbeats sync. Evidently, their synced heartbeats help the herd sense danger. Incredibly intuitive creatures, horses can also sense the emotional state of their rider! And this “in sync” phenomenon is seen in a number of other animal species. Birds of a feather don’t just flock together; they synchronize the flapping of wings. Even fireflies flash together.

This physiological phenomenon is seen in humans as well. When couples cuddle, their heartbeats sync. They also sync when people listen to the same story.^[10]

What’s *really* happening when we worship?

What’s *really* happening when we pray?

What’s *really* happening when we get into God’s Word?

I would argue that there is a supernatural synchronization. We are harmonizing with heaven. We are keeping in step with the Spirit. Our hearts and minds sync with the heart and mind of Christ.

Remember the little boy who drew a picture of God? For better or for worse, accurate or inaccurate, each of us is drawing a picture of God all the time. If that image is off, we relate to God for the wrong reasons. The last thing God wants is a fear-based relationship. Yes, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.^[11] But in Scripture, the fear of God is an expression of awe, not intimidation! The fear of God is wonder for which there are no words. You could even call it the wonder switch.

The greatest miracles aren't telescopic or microscopic. The greatest miracles are manifestations of God's goodness! "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."^[12]

There is a dialogue in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* that captures the goodness of God in a down-to-earth way. Susan and Lucy are apprehensive about meeting Aslan. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion," says Susan. Mrs. Beaver replies, "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" says Lucy.

"Safe?" says Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."^[13]

God is good, all the time.

All the time, God is good.

It's time to rediscover God Most Good.

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GOOD GOD

Stephen Wilkes is the legendary photographer responsible for a series of shoots called *Day to Night*. He has beautifully captured cityscapes like the canals of Venice and landscapes like El Capitan in Yosemite. He has taken iconic photographs of epic events like the Tour de France and holy places like the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

“Photography can be described as the recording of a single moment frozen within a fraction of time,” said Wilkes. “But what if you could capture more than one moment in a photograph? What if a photograph could actually collapse time, compressing the best moments of the day... into one single image?”^[1]

That would be *tov*, would it not?

Each of the six days of creation are composite pictures.

For the record, the brain processes print on a page at about fifty bits per second,^[2] but it processes pictures sixty thousand times faster!^[3] The darkroom we call the visual cortex can process a picture in 13 milliseconds flat.^[4] So a picture is *not* worth a thousand words. It’s more like sixty thousand words, but who’s counting! That’s certainly true of Stephen Wilkes’s composite photographs.

When Wilkes sets up for a shoot, he perches himself high enough to get a bird’s-eye view but low enough to capture what he calls “little moments, little vignettes.”^[5] It takes many months of post-production in a darkroom where Wilkes works his magic, stitching together thousands of photographs to form a time-lapse composite image. “Einstein described time as a fabric,”

said Wilkes. “I take that fabric and flatten it, compress it into [a] single plane.”^[6]

This is a rabbit trail, but what if Stephen Wilkes had been commissioned to capture the six days of creation? Imagine what that would look like! When we exit the spacetime continuum, maybe God will show us a composite picture. Better yet, an instant replay! Or maybe we’ll experience it firsthand when God re-creates a new heaven and a new earth!^[7]

What does any of this have to do with God Most Good?

The Bible is a big book. Actually, it’s sixty-six books written in three languages on three continents over fifteen hundred years. There are more than forty human authors from every walk of life—farmers and fishermen, poets and prophets, a doctor, tax collector, and prime minister. It was written in prison cells and palace courts and wilderness caves. It covers the gamut of human experience. There is comedy and tragedy, history and mystery, romance and action-adventure. There are musicals called the Psalms, a game of thrones called Kings and Chronicles, and a romance called the Song of Songs.

The Bible is a big book, but what’s the big idea? Read the Bible from cover to cover, and you arrive at one inevitable, undeniable, incontrovertible truth—God is God, and we’re not. Someday all of us will bow before the throne of God. Newsflash: I won’t be sitting on it, and neither will you.

There are many ways to cliffnote Scripture. My spiritual father, Dick Foth, does it with four phrases: God left His place, He came to our place, He took our place, then He invites us back to His place. You can cliffnote the covenants—the Adamic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic—all the way to the New Covenant, which was signed, sealed, and delivered at Calvary’s cross. You can cliffnote defining moments. At Bethlehem, He is God *with* us. At Calvary, He is God *as* us. At the empty tomb, He is God *for* us. At Pentecost, He is God *in* us.

Regardless of how you summarize Scripture, the plotline is a progressive revelation. From Genesis to Revelation, it’s a composite picture

of a good God. It's a time-lapse revelation of God's heart toward humankind. In a word? God is *Tov* with a capital *T*.

INTERNAL REPRESENTATION

Like Stephen Wilkes in his darkroom, each of us is stitching together a composite picture of who God is. If that image is off, everything else will be off. Maybe that's why the Enemy's original tactic was calling into question the goodness of God!^[8] The importance of this internal image can't be overstated, as A. W. Tozer aptly observed:

The most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.^[9]

One dimension of the image of God is our metacognitive capacity—the ability to think about how we think. That is what enables us to repent. It's the Greek word *metanoia*, which means “change of mind.” It's a paradigm shift. Part of that metacognitive capacity is the ability to imagine, and that includes God. The technical term is *internal representation*.

The first time we see something, our brain doesn't have a name for it. It doesn't even have a category. Our brain takes a mental snapshot, and then we shake it like a Polaroid picture. Thus begins the process of re-presenting the external world to our internal self. It usually starts with faces called Mom and Dad. It includes experiences that are internalized as memories. We also internalize our external environment. When toddlers start crawling, they create a map of their home that functions like GPS. They internalize the location of all stairs and outlets, especially the ones that haven't been childproofed.

That ability to internalize external reality is pretty miraculous, is it not? It's one of a million little miracles that we tend to take for granted.

This innate ability called internal representation is creatively and comically depicted in the Pixar film *Inside Out*. When the main character, Riley, goes to sleep each night, her daily memories are transported from headquarters to a labyrinth-looking library that stores long-term memory. Some are forgotten while others become core memories that profoundly shape her personality. As fantastical as that film is, and it's one of my favorites, memory and emotion are even more miraculous than the movie depicts. Your brain's ability to access memories in mere milliseconds, then leverage them to navigate any and every situation you find yourself in, is beyond amazing.

The greatest athletes in the world aren't just physically gifted, they have cultivated the capacity to visualize a route or routine or race. Bob Bowman, coach of the twenty-three-time gold medalist Michael Phelps, had a mantra: "Watch the videotape." He wasn't referring to a Blockbuster VHS tape. He trained Michael Phelps to do a mental rehearsal before every race.

In the 2008 Olympics, Phelps was swimming in the two-hundred-meter butterfly final. Racing against the best of the best, Phelps felt his goggles dislodge when he dove into the pool. Even though he was unable to see underwater, he didn't panic, because he had counted the strokes during his visualization of the race. Not only did he win a gold medal, but he also set a new world record.^[10] He was doing what all of us do as babies, just a little bit better. All right—a lot better!

Over your lifetime, you will internally represent hundreds of faces called friends. You will internally represent thousands of moments called memories. Most importantly, you will internally represent Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therein lies the challenge: We have a natural tendency to create God in *our* image. But when we filter our theology through our histories, personalities, ethnicities, and idiosyncrasies, it's called idolatry. That's when we've got to deconstruct and reconstruct our internal image of who God is.

FIRST WORD

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture paints a composite picture of who God is. One of the common mistakes we make, our ancient error, is making God in our image. How? We cut and paste the character of God, leaving us with a caricature of God. That's when and why we go back to the drawing board called Scripture.

There are as many as 967 names for God in Scripture.^[11] They include Jehovah Rapha—God our Healer; Jehovah Jireh—God our Provider; Jehovah Shalom—God our Peace; Jehovah Tsidkenu—God our Righteousness; and Jehovah Nissi—God our Banner.^[12] He is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.^[13] He is the Ancient of Days.^[14] He is the Alpha and the Omega.^[15]

One dimension of spiritual growth is getting to know the names of God, which reveal the character of God. With each new name, we hallow His name a little more. But it's not just knowing those names that transforms us, it's trying them on for size.

The priestly blessing is a powerful pronouncement: “The LORD bless you and keep you.” But it's the postscript that packs the punch: “They will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”^[16] How do you put a name on someone? It's the same word used to describe putting on clothes or putting a ring on someone's finger.

When we put our faith in Christ, God does more than forgive and forget our sin. The righteousness of Christ is transferred to our account.^[17] How much of it? All of it. God puts His name—Jehovah Tsidkenu—on us! You, my friend, are the righteousness of Christ.

When God healed my lungs after forty years with severe asthma, He put His name—Jehovah Rapha—on me. How does National Community Church own \$85 million worth of real estate debt-free? Jehovah Jireh put His name on this church, through the generosity of people who put that name on themselves!

I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE

At the burning bush, God revealed Himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM.”^[18] I’ve never introduced myself that way. Have you? What does that even mean? One clue is the verb tense used in Hebrew.

In English, we have three tenses related to time—past, present, and future. In Hebrew, there are two tenses. The perfect tense is used of completed action. The imperfect tense is used of incomplete action. The name of God—Ehyeh—is in the imperfect tense. A literal translation is not “I am who I am” but rather “I will be who I will be.”

The character of God is immutable—He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is *Tov* forever and for always. It doesn’t get any gooder than God. But it’s almost like God was saying, “There aren’t enough names in the universe to encapsulate all that I am or all that I will be.”

Many of us, myself included, have a tendency to read the Old Testament as a collection of stories about heroes of the faith. We study the lives of Abraham and Esther and Moses, and we hack their habits. There are lots of lessons to be learned, no doubt. But each of those actors serves as an archetype—a supporting actor that points to the Lead Actor. Each of their lives is a subplot in a much bigger, much better metanarrative. “There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story,” said Sally Lloyd-Jones. “Every story in the Bible whispers His name.”^[19]

What name? The name above all names! The name at which every knee will bow! What is the big idea of this big book called the Bible? The short answer is Jesus. The gospel of John picks up where Moses left off with seven “I Am” statements.

I am the Bread of Life.

I am the Light of the World.

I am the Door.

I am the Vine.

I am the Good Shepherd.

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.^[20]

“Jesus is the dictionary,” said Eugene Peterson, “in which we look up the meaning of words.”^[21] Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”^[22] Jesus is the embodiment of grace and truth.^[23] Jesus is the definition of all that is good in the world.

Jesus is the answer to every question.

Jesus is the solution to every problem.

Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise.

Nothing is more miraculous or mysterious than the moment of conception. Of course, the immaculate conception is in a category by itself. There is no miracle more important, because it makes all the other miracles possible. The Incarnation is where heaven invaded earth. The Incarnation is when eternity invaded time. This is how Jesus was revealed as the Son of Man and the Son of God.

The terrifying assertion [is] that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.^[24]

Jesus was fully God and fully man. Well, which is it? Yes! The theological term is *hypostatic union*. The Son of God was born a baby—God in diapers. Jesus had to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic like the rest of us. That’s how our High Priest is able to empathize with us. He was tempted like us. He suffered like us.^[25] In fact, He suffered *for* us.

SECOND ADAM

Many years ago, I attended the Story Seminar in New York City with legendary screenwriter Robert McKee. Last time I checked, his students have won more than seventy Academy Awards and two hundred Emmy Awards. We spent two days talking about story structure—text and subtext, setup and payoff, conflict and resolution.

In narratology, an inciting incident is the starting point in a plotline. It's the action that changes the trajectory of the story. To call the Incarnation an inciting incident is an understatement. The same goes for the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Tim Keller may have said it best: "Everything points to Jesus."[\[26\]](#)

If the Old Testament is the setup, then Jesus is the payoff. Every hero in the Old Testament is a foreshadowing of and finds fulfillment in the person of Jesus. Jesus isn't just the Second Adam.[\[27\]](#) Jesus is also Second Abraham, Second Moses, Second David, and Second Solomon. He is the Second Joseph, Second Joshua, and Second Jonah. Tim Keller's friend and mentor Edmund Clowney said it this way: "Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden, a much tougher garden, and whose obedience is imputed to us."[\[28\]](#)

In the Western world, we tend to think of history as linear. By default, we read the Bible the same way. But the Bible is an Eastern book where reality is duality. Time isn't just linear, it's circular. Almost every human problem, propensity, and potentiality can be reverse engineered back to our source code—Genesis 1, 2, and 3. And almost every promise points forward to Revelation 21 and 22 when history will come full circle. First Adam was cut off from the tree of life, but the tree of life reappears on either side of the river that flows from the throne of God. Ironically, we have access to that tree of life by virtue of what Second Adam accomplished hanging on a tree of death. Even the crown of thorns is symbolic of Jesus breaking the curse.[\[29\]](#)

It's no coincidence that Jesus faced the same three temptations in the wilderness that First Adam did in the Garden of Eden—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life."[\[30\]](#) First Adam failed the test, while Second Adam passed it with flying colors. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent bruised Adam's heel. At the cross, the Son of Man crushed the serpent's head. In the Garden of Eden, sin and death entered the algorithm of life via the curse. At Calvary's cross, the curse was broken and the cup of blessing was bestowed. The Garden of Gethsemane is the second Eden. The cross, a symbol of death, is our tree of life.

ORIGINAL BLESSING

When I was a kid, we played a game with my grandma called hide the thimble. My grandma would hide one of her sewing thimbles in her house, and the grandkids would try to find it. This is what we did for fun before video games!

As we searched the house, my grandma would give verbal cues. If we were getting farther away from the thimble, she would say, “Colder, colder.” If we were getting closer to the thimble, she would say, “Warmer, warmer.” When we were so close we could almost touch it, my grandma would raise the pitch of her voice and say, “Hotter, hotter.”

Life is like a game of hide the thimble, and the thimble is the goodness of God. If you feel like a sinner in the hands of an angry God, I think you’re getting “colder, colder.” If God not only loves you but actually likes you—if God is smiling from ear to ear with arms wide open—I think you’re getting “warmer, warmer.” Again, it’s His *kindness* that leads us to repentance.^[31]

Original blessing predates original sin, and that sequence isn’t insignificant. The very first thing God did after creating humankind in His image was bless them. That is who God is. That is what God does. Blessing is God’s most ancient instinct. Maybe that’s why blessing is our deepest longing.

From Genesis to Revelation, the metanarrative of Scripture is one blessing after another. God established a covenant of blessing with Abraham. God commanded Aaron to pronounce a priestly blessing on the people twice a day. Even the New Covenant was inaugurated with the cup of blessing. In some church traditions, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is called the second blessing. And that brings us back to what Eugene Peterson said. If “Jesus is the dictionary in which we look up the meaning of words,” *blessing* is embodied by Jesus Himself. It’s from the superabundance of His grace that we have received blessing upon blessing. That’s how we go from glory to glory.^[32]

ORIGINAL DOUBT

Blessing is your birthright.

Maybe that's why the Enemy has been undermining the goodness of God since the beginning of time. Before original sin, there was original doubt. The serpent planted a seed of doubt in Eve's heart and mind. What was it? It was a false narrative that God was withholding good. How? By keeping the tree of the knowledge of good and evil off-limits.

The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"^[33]

God did *not* say that they must not eat from *any* tree. But that's just like the enemy of our souls, isn't it? His tactics haven't changed since the Garden of Eden. The serpent is trying to make God seem less good. It's a subtle insinuation, but he wants us to second-guess the goodness of God. Why is this so significant? If we doubt the goodness of God, the rest of our theology is a house of cards.

He misquoted God: "You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden." This is a classic case of cognitive distortion. It comes in lots of shapes and sizes, but catastrophizing, overgeneralizing, and dualizing are some of the most common. The Enemy rarely engages in frontal assaults, because they are too obvious. He tries to sneak in the side door called doubt. How? By exaggerating irrational thought patterns. If you buy the lie, those false narratives become false identities, false securities, and false ideologies.

Remember what the angels declared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem? "Glory to God in the highest." Yes, but what else? "Peace on earth."^[34] Yes, but what else? Don't miss the significance of this next declaration: "Goodwill toward men."^[35]

God's will is goodwill.

God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect.^[36]

Steve Foster is a former major league pitcher. When he was called up to the big leagues, his first game was against the Montreal Expos. Foster had never been out of the country, so he was a little confused when the customs agent asked if he had anything to declare. If you've ever been through customs, you know that question is par for the course. But it is a little strange if you've never heard it before, right? Foster declared, "I'm proud to be an American?" Evidently, that was the wrong answer, because the agent had him detained.

Can I make a few declarations?

Taste and see that the Lord is *good*.^[37]

No *good* thing will God withhold from those who walk uprightly with Him.^[38]

He who began a *good* work will carry it to completion.^[39]

He is working all things together for *good*.^[40]

You will see the *goodness* of God in the land of the living.^[41]

What the enemy meant for evil, God meant for *good*.^[42]

FALSE IDENTITY

In the kingdom of God, identity isn't achieved. Identity is received. It's part of a package deal that was purchased at Calvary's cross. In Christ, you are a new creation. You are the image of God. You are the apple of God's eye. You are God's workmanship. You are more than a conqueror. False humility is believing anything less, anything else. It doesn't glorify God. In fact, it discounts what Christ accomplished on the cross! Don't let anyone label you who didn't make you. If you do, those false labels turn into false narratives, false identities, and false idols.

"If we are spending half our day consuming the world's narratives about who we are, what we want, and how to love," said Jessica Hooten Wilson, "then we are being formed by an idolatrous imagination."^[43]

All our identity issues, in my opinion, are fundamental misunderstandings of who God is. Guilt issues are an underestimation of God's grace. Control issues are a misinterpretation of God's sovereignty.

Pride issues are a miscalculation of God's greatness. Trust issues are a misapprehension of God's goodness.

That last lie—that the goodness of God can't be trusted—is the first lie. “There is a basic truth about framing,” said George Lakoff. “If you accept the other guy's frame, you lose.”^[44] The serpent was messing with Eve's mind by framing God in a negative light. He was questioning God's original intent. He was intimating that God was holding out on her when nothing could be further from the truth.

What was *really* happening in the Garden of Eden? The Enemy was trying to make God seem less good than He really is. He tried to make the will of God seem more difficult, more prohibitive than it really is. Fact check: There are three hundred thousand edible plant species in the world, ^[45] and only one of them was off-limits. Adam and Eve had access to 299,999 varieties of plants. If my math is correct, they could eat from a different plant every single day for 821 years. But the Enemy shifted their focus to the one tree—the *only tree*—that was off-limits.

We tend to complain about what's wrong rather than celebrate what's right. That's one by-product of our negativity bias, which is part of the fallout from the curse. It's part and parcel of original doubt. We can find something wrong with anything!

That reminds me of the guy who was playing a game of fetch with his dog. He threw a stick into a lake, and his dog retrieved it by running right across the surface of the water. He thought he was losing his mind, so he invited a friend to walk with him. When he threw the stick into the lake, the dog did it all over again. The man said to his friend, “Do you notice anything unusual about my dog?” His friend said, “Yes, I do. Your dog can't swim!”

We get bent out of shape by one tree that is off-limits in the most glorious garden ever planted. This reveals something about human nature in general and sin nature in particular: *We want what we can't have*. The technical term is *covetousness*, but that's the tip of the iceberg. Original doubt is a scarcity mindset. Original doubt is a negativity bias. We get bent

out of shape by what's wrong, even if it represents 0.0003 percent of the whole.

Are you focused on forbidden fruit?

Or are you focused on the goodness of God?

“That God is good,” said A. W. Tozer, “is taught or implied on every page of the Bible and must be received as an article of faith as impregnable as the throne of God.”[\[46\]](#)

“The ultimate question,” said C. S. Lewis, “is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of Scriptures is to prevail when they conflict.” Evidently, Lewis placed precedence on the goodness of God. “The doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two.”[\[47\]](#)

What Lewis was saying is this: If we believe God to be anything other than good, we're reading Scripture wrong. We're projecting our imperfections onto God and reading our human shortcomings into Scripture. It's not just God's power or love or grace that is beyond comprehension. God is gooder than good—His goodness is beyond what we can ask or imagine!

LIFE LIE

When I went to graduate school, I had already taken a ton of theology, so I decided to carb load psychology. I was introduced to the likes of B. F. Skinner and behaviorism, Viktor Frankl and logotherapy, William Glasser and positive addiction. That's where I discovered Dr. Murray Bowen and the concept of cultivating non-anxious curiosity about everyone and everything. I dipped my toes in cognitive behavioral therapy as well as neurolinguistic programming. I dabbled in personality theory and cybernetics. But of all the psychological systems we studied, those from Carl Jung and Alfred Adler were considered as co-favorites, each finishing in a first-place tie.

“The world will ask you who you are,” said Carl Jung, “and if you don't know, the world will tell you.” He also said, “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”[\[48\]](#)

Jung believed that the greatest problems in life are insoluble, which sounds depressing. But this single sentence was a game changer for me: “The greatest problems can never be solved, but only outgrown.”^[49]

It was Alfred Adler who purportedly said, “It’s easier to fight for one’s principles than it is to live up to them.” Ouch! Another saying often attributed to Adler? “The only normal person is the one you don’t know very well.” I find that both funny and true! But there is one concept coined by Adler—the life lie—that is life changing!

The life lie is our guiding fiction—it’s the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. For better or for worse, you are the narrator of your story. If you want to change your life, you have to change your story! The life lie is a false belief that we build our lives around, and it’s a form of self-sabotage. It’s the excuse we give ourselves to evade responsibility. This false belief turns into a false narrative that turns into a false identity that turns into a false reality.

Moses is a classic case study.

When God called him to deliver Israel out of Egypt, Moses revealed one of his life lies. “I have never been eloquent,” he said. “I am slow of speech.”^[50] That is the excuse Moses gave himself to evade responsibility. You gotta love God’s response: “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”^[51]

What is your life lie? Is there an excuse you’ve been giving God? Giving others? Giving yourself? If you’re looking for an excuse, you will always find one!

Here’s the irony of this story: Moses was bilingual, which was a pretty big deal back then. And Acts 7:22 makes this retrospective observation: “Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech.” Well, which was it? Was Moses slow of speech or powerful in speech?

Like many of us, Moses was way more aware of his weaknesses than his strengths. It’s a function of the negativity bias that wormed its way into the Garden of Eden. The negativity bias is so pervasive that Moses thought he was *bad* at something he was actually *good* at. The life lie skews our self-

image by removing the image of God from the equation. And if you leave God out of the equation, good luck!

One of the names given to the enemy of your soul is the father of lies. I want to be very careful not to give him more credit than he deserves. Lucifer is a fallen angel, which means he is a created being. He isn't omniscient or omnipotent—not even close. He plays mind games, but he can't read your mind. He doesn't know your future, but you know his! Part of why I bring this up is that one of our original lies is this: *The devil made me do it*. With all due respect, no, he didn't. The Enemy can't make your choices for you!

Having said that, we shouldn't be unaware of the devil's schemes.^[52] The good news? We've got game film on the Enemy going all the way back to the Garden of Eden—and his tactics haven't changed. He usually doesn't propagate bald-faced lies. He peddles half-truths. He plants seeds of doubt. He shifts our focus to forbidden fruit. If you let those lies take root, you start living the wrong story.

THE GOOD LIFE

What is the good life? It's an age-old question, and it's defined in lots of ways. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claimed that the highest good was a life of virtue.^[53] What are those virtues? I'd argue for the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.^[54]

The good life is all that is good and true and beautiful. It's good food. It's good friends. It's good art. It's good times. It's good games. It's good movies. It's good music. It's good conversation.

However you define the good life, every good thing on God's green earth is a gift from a good God. The good life starts with good news called the gospel. Every other good thing is consecrated with thanksgiving. That is how we take things for gratitude rather than taking things for granted.

Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.^[55]

The inherent goodness of God's creation was underscored by the apostle Paul, but it must be consecrated by gratitude. That brings us back to something G. K. Chesterton said, a central tenet of his theology. "The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild."^[56]

THEODICY

There is a concept in theology called theodicy. In all my advocating for the goodness of God, I would be remiss if I sidestepped one of the primary reasons people lose faith. If God is good, why do bad things happen to good people? If God is all-powerful, why is there pain and suffering in the world? There are no easy answers to those questions, but free will is the free radical in the algorithm of life.

There are skeptics who see suffering as an argument against the existence of God, but I see suffering as an apologetic for the existence of evil. That might sound like reverse psychology, and I suppose it is. It reminds me of something C. S. Lewis once said: "If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning."^[57]

Life is unfair; then we die. I know that sounds awfully depressing, but followers of Jesus don't believe in happily ever after. We believe in something bigger and better—happily *forever* after. The only way to reconcile bad things happening to good people is by adding eternity to the equation.

There is no denying the existence of evil, but there is a God who gives "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."^[58] I don't want to minimize the pain and suffering you've endured, but God is bigger and better than the bad things that have

happened to you. I wish this wasn't the case, but grief has increased my capacity for joy. Pain and suffering are the crucible where meaning is found and forged. "Behind every beautiful thing," said Bob Dylan, "there's been some kind of pain."^[59]

Is there anything more gruesome than the cross of Christ? Is there any greater injustice? Anything more evil? The cross is the lowlight of human history—the Creator crucified by His creation. But there is nothing more beautiful. And it's by His stripes that we are healed.^[60]

"The Incarnation is the divine means of transfiguring the world into greater beauty," said Aidan Nichols, "precisely by redeeming the divine image in man from the deformity of sin."^[61]

The greatest miracle in the Gospels isn't walking on water or raising the dead. It's something Jesus said from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."^[62] How do you pray that over the soldiers who just mocked you, flogged you, and nailed you to the cross? Only by the grace of God.

KISS THE WAVE

When my wife, Lora, got her first cancer diagnosis in 2017, she read a poem that posed a question: "What have you come to teach me?" That's a difficult question to ask of cancer, but what other choice do you have? In the words of John Piper, "Don't waste your cancer."^[63] I'm no oncologist, but I credit much of Lora's recovery to her learning posture. As Charles Spurgeon is purported to have said, "I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages."^[64]

Is it all right if I get in our business a little bit?

When we face a problem, our predominant prayer is to ask God to change our *circumstances*. I have no doubt that God can do that, but sometimes the circumstances we ask God to change are the very circumstances God is using to change us!

Most of our prayers revolve around personal comfort. Or is that just me? We pray as if God's ultimate goal is our convenience. News flash: God is

more committed to your long-term growth than your short-term comfort. The question is, Are you? Tell me the last time you were uncomfortable, and I'll tell you the last time you grew! I'm not suggesting you pray for problems. Problems will present themselves sooner or later. Prayer is first and foremost a posture. We don't take things sitting down. We fight our battles on our knees!

Our primary prayer is to ask God to change our circumstances, but if that doesn't work, our secondary prayer is to ask God to change *others*. After all, that is so much easier than changing ourselves!

I need to remember that maybe, just maybe, God wants to change *me*! In the words of an old spiritual, "Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."^[65]

Our biggest problems are never external; they are always internal. The good life isn't zero gravity—the absence of pain and suffering. It's the presence of meaning that redeems our pain. That battle is won or lost in the mind.

All of us are guilty of affective forecasting. It's the phenomenon whereby we misjudge what will make us happy. It's wanting the wrong thing for the right reason or the right thing for the wrong reason. I sometimes refer to it as the when/then syndrome.

When I go to college, then life will be good.

When I graduate from college, then life will be good.

When I get a job, then life will be good.

When I get a promotion, then life will be good.

When I get married, then life will be good.

When we have kids, then life will be good.

When our kids are out of diapers, then life will be good.

You can play that game your entire life, but the grass isn't greener on the other side. You have to enjoy every age, every stage! If you're waiting for some combination of circumstances to change your life, it's a mirage. My advice? Enjoy the journey!

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

“In the midst of hate,” said the Nobel Prize–winning philosopher Albert Camus, “I found there was, within me, an invincible love. In the midst of tears, I found there was within me an invincible smile. In the midst of chaos, I found there was, within me, an invincible calm.”^[66]

I’m struck by the idea of an “invincible smile.” It reminds me of someone I recently met who was recovering from Bell’s palsy. Her facial muscles were paralyzed, so the best she could muster was a half smile. When she said, “I’m trying to get my smile back,” I felt the immediate conviction of the Holy Spirit. Why? I had full use of my forty-three facial muscles,^[67] but I wasn’t stewarding them by smiling like I could or should.

You have a superpower and it’s called your smile. A simple smile has a physiological and sociological effect. First of all, your face tells your body how to feel. When you turn a frown upside down, it flips the switch that controls the parasympathetic nervous system. Along with lowering blood pressure and increasing immunity, smiling makes you more attractive and approachable. A genuine smile sends a positive subconscious message to everybody you encounter.

Are you open to a little experiment? Try wearing a smile on your face—at home, at work, at the gym—and see how people respond to you. I try wearing a smile while traveling, especially in airports, because that is often when and where I get irritated. Wearing a smile and helping people put their luggage into overhead bins has resulted in more than a few divine appointments. When training for a bike century, I smile when my quads start cramping. I can’t prove this, but I feel like I’m able to endure the pain a little bit longer! I even smile while recording audiobooks. No one can see that smile, but they can hear it in the tone of my voice.

“No matter how hard the world pushes against me,” said Albert Camus, “there’s something stronger—something better, pushing right back.”^[68] Camus was a professing atheist, so I’m not entirely sure where he drew strength. But for me, it’s the Holy Spirit.

In the beginning, the Holy Spirit was hovering over the chaos. It’s a prophetic picture of *to*v. It reveals three things about the Almighty—God is

bigger than big, closer than close, and gooder than good. How so? God exists *outside* the chaos. No matter how big the problem, God is bigger still. The Holy Spirit is hovering as close as close can be. Remember *paniym*? The problem may be imminent, but God is immanent.... And forgive my English, but God is gooder than anything that goes wrong.

Tov brings order out of chaos.

Tov gives beauty for ashes.

Tov operates in the opposite spirit.

In his letter from a Birmingham jail cell, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said,

The early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.^[69]

Are you a thermometer, or are you a *thermostat*?

When you walk into a room, does the anxiety level go *up* or *down*?

Are you being *conformed* to the world around you?

Or are you being *transformed* by the Spirit of God within you?

What percentage of your actions and reactions are a *regurgitation* of the news media or social media?

What percentage are a *revelation* you're getting from God's Word?

Are you being tossed to and fro by *trending hashtags*?

Or are you *shifting the atmosphere* with faith, hope, and love?

"When we are no longer able to change a situation," said Viktor Frankl, "we are challenged to change ourselves."^[70] That is easier said than done, but the man who said it survived a Nazi concentration camp. Frankl believed that suffering ceases to be suffering when it finds a higher purpose. Then it becomes redemptive suffering because it serves a higher purpose.

I recently heard the testimony of a pastor who got pneumonia eighteen times in a three-year span. He was bedridden for much of that time, and the

doctors were mystified by the root cause. The turning point wasn't a doctor's diagnosis, it was finding meaning in the middle of it. That pastor heard the still small voice of the Spirit: "You only know 50 percent of Me. You know the power of My resurrection. Welcome to My suffering."^[71]

I'm not suggesting that God is the cause of our suffering. That's a misattribution. The cause is the *curse*! We were born on a battlefield between good and evil, which means we get caught in the crossfire. You have to forgive reality for what it is. "The difference between the good life and the bad life," said Carl Jung, "is how well you walk through the fire."^[72] It takes more than willpower to get through tough times—it takes *whypower*. We think pain and suffering will *steal* our joy, but it can actually *steel* our joy. There's a dimension of joy that is deeper and richer and stronger on the far side of suffering—it's a joy the world can't give and the world can't take away. Whoever said that time heals all wounds was lying. Only eternity can do that. You don't get over grief, but you can get through it. In my experience, grief creates capacity for joy. How is that possible? There is a God who gives beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

"Life is never made unbearable by circumstances," said Frankl, "but only by lack of meaning."^[73] Meaning is one of the great mysteries of life. It's also one of a million little miracles. The more meaning you find, the more miraculous life becomes.

CHASING BUTTERFLIES

The Bureau of Applied Botany was housed in a grand, three-story building just off St. Isaac's Square in Leningrad.^[1] The brainchild of a Russian biologist named Nikolai Vavilov, the bureau's mission was to protect the world's food supply by collecting seeds. Born in 1887, Vavilov was witness to droughts and diseases that devastated the Russian people. So at an early age, he became obsessed with ending famine. His legacy was the world's first seed bank.

"Clad in an Indiana Jones-style fedora and sporting a black mustache, he took collecting trips to five different continents."^[2] Vavilov would lead 115 expeditions to sixty-four countries and collect more than 380,000 seed samples. "Some seeds were dull-coated while others glistened like jewels," noted one historian. They came in every texture, and they "exuded nearly every fragrance imaginable to a perfume chemist."^[3]

There is a sad ending to the story, but that doesn't lessen the legacy left by Vavilov. When Nazi Germany invaded Russia, the scientists at the seed bank were as committed as the invading army. They chose to protect those seeds like they were priceless pieces of art. Many of those scientists died of starvation, refusing to eat the seeds that could have saved them!

What happened to Nikolai Vavilov? He publicly opposed the Communist regime and paid the ultimate price. Vavilov was arrested by the Politburo, his materials and manuscripts were destroyed, and he was sentenced to prison, where he died in 1943. His sentence was vacated posthumously in 1955, and Vavilov was once again hailed as a hero of Soviet science.

Why did those scientists protect those seeds to the death? It gave their lives, and their deaths, meaning. They saw those seeds for what they were—a million little miracles. Their appraisal of those seeds should prompt a reappraisal on our part.

One of God's smallest yet most amazing miracles is the seed. We take seeds for granted unless we're defending a seed bank to the death. Or we run out of an ingredient—cumin, cardamon, or sesame seeds—that a recipe calls for. Seeds are the spice of life, and they add up to more than a million little miracles.

A single seed—like a single cell, a single drop of water, a single grain of sand—isn't as simple as it seems. Pick a seed, any seed. It's more miraculous than we can imagine.

WATERMELON

In 1925, William Jennings Bryan played the role of prosecutor in the infamous Scopes trial. He was a former congressman and secretary of state who ran for president three times. Later in life, Bryan taught a Bible study and wrote religious books. Somewhere along the way, his curiosity was piqued by the mystery and majesty of the watermelon seed.

I have observed the power of the watermelon seed. It has the power of drawing from the ground and through itself 200,000 times its weight. When you can tell me how it takes this material and out of it colors an outside surface beyond the imitation of art, and then forms inside of it a white rind and within that again a red heart, thickly inlaid with black seeds, each one of which in turn is capable of drawing through itself 200,000 times its weight—when you can explain to me the mystery of the watermelon, you can ask me to explain the mystery of God.^[4]

If I showed you the little black seed that watermelons come from but you didn't know what it was, you would never believe what it could turn

into. Am I right? If that's not a miracle, I'm not sure what is. Add a little mint, feta, and balsamic glaze, and God is good.

William Jennings Bryan saw the seed for what it was—a mystery and miracle of God. And the same could be said of pumpkin seeds, poppy seeds, sesame seeds, and sunflower seeds. Why am I singing the praises of simple seeds? Because those seeds—and the process that allows for reproduction—sustain human life as we know it. Without them, we would not and could not survive.

We read right over verses of Scripture that should cause us to audibly gasp in amazement. Just as hundreds of years of history are condensed in the genealogies, millions of species of plants are rooted in one verse. Not unlike the composite pictures taken by Stephen Wilkes, this single verse of Scripture represents every species of seed:

God said, “Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit.”[\[5\]](#)

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Not so fast. Just as four words—“Let there be light”—are still creating galaxies at the edge of the universe, these words—“Let the land sprout with vegetation”—are still bearing fruit. Of all God's inventions, the simple seed is one of the most miraculous.

TASTES GOOD

In 1717, an English horticulturist named Thomas Fairchild was the first person to cross-pollinate a hybrid plant when he crossbred sweet william with a carnation. Science has synthesized some pretty amazing seeds since then, but it has yet to create a seed *ex nihilo*. Only the God of science can do that.

When God stepped back at the end of day three and saw that it was good, it also tasted good. There are only five taste qualities—sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and savory—but the combinations are endless.

When I married into my wife's family, I was introduced to some new foods. One of my favorites is a German cookie called a springerle. Bite into one of those cookies, and a licorice taste explodes in your mouth. The taste comes from the seed of anise, a flowering plant grown in the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia. That seed makes it into my gratitude journal right around Christmas every year!

Nikolai Vavilov inspired quite a few seed banks around the world. The most populous may be the Millennium Seed Bank with more than 2.4 billion seeds from sixty thousand species.^[6] Every one of those seeds is a miracle unto itself, and all of them trace back to the third day of creation. Each is a unique expression of God's goodness. What do we do with those seeds? We steward them like Vavilov, but we also enjoy them like *Chef's Table*.

"God is the good," said Hildegard of Bingen, "and all things which proceed from Him are good."^[7] That said, they must be consecrated by thanksgiving. That's how we glorify God. And when we parse our praise that way, we enjoy those good things even more.

Vanilla is one of the most popular and populous spices in the world, so it's easy to take that flavor and fragrance for granted, but plain vanilla is anything but plain. It was once a rare luxury. Less than two hundred years ago, the world produced less than two thousand vanilla beans! It was a twelve-year-old slave named Edmond Albius, on Réunion island in the Indian Ocean, who discovered the secret to pollinating vanilla plants.^[8] From a single vine on that island, a billion-dollar industry was born. I, for one, am grateful for vanilla milkshakes, vanilla wafers, vanilla lattes, and vanilla-scented candles!

Remember what the Talmud said? If we enjoy something but fail to give thanks, it's as if we've stolen it from God. All of us have stolen some seeds from God's seed bank, have we not? How do we course correct? Take a two-foot field trip to your spice rack and start praising God for the seasonings that flavor your food. Or the next time you enjoy a delicious meal, praise God for each of the ingredients. Go ahead and give your

compliments to the chef, but throw in a thank you to the Creator for the raw materials that made the meal possible!

SONIC SUCCULENTS

In 2019, Adrienne Adar created a rather unique artistic exhibition—*Sonic Succulents: Plant Sounds and Vibrations*—at Brooklyn Botanic Garden.^[9] Sound plays a crucial role in plant development, as evidenced by a wide variety of fascinating studies. Remember Bach and the “sonic bloom” his music causes? Other studies have shown that negative words cause plants to languish, while positive words cause them to flourish.^[10]

Even more amazing? Like animals, plants sing ultrasonic and infrasonic songs. Not only does the band Korn make music; so does corn. I know—that was corny.

The origin of Adar’s exhibition was a microphone in a cornfield that captured the crackling sound of corn growing. That’s not unlike the underwater microphone that captured the songs sung by humpback whales. “It can be a little bit meditational,” said Adar.^[11] And that was the point: to remind people that plants are living organisms too. Like animals, they are capable of communicating in some amazing ways.

Auditory cues can delay tomato ripening, help mustard plants survive a drought, and catalyze a growth spurt in cucumbers.^[12] When certain flowering plants hear the buzz of a bee, they somehow know to make their nectar sweeter.^[13] According to a team of scientists at Tel Aviv University, some plants emit a high-frequency distress signal in response to environmental stress.^[14]

Many decades ago, a pair of ecologists placed hundreds of webworms and other caterpillars on the branches of willow trees to see how they would respond. The trees began producing chemicals that made their leaves unappetizing and indigestible to deter the insects. That, in itself, is pretty amazing. Even more amazing? Healthy trees of the same species began producing the same chemicals up to forty-four yards away!^[15] It’s called

plant eavesdropping, and scientists have observed this behavior in more than thirty plant species.

Should any of this surprise us? I don't think so. "The hills are alive with the sound of music!"^[16] The plant kingdom is part of this symphony called creation and it never stops singing.

THE JESUS PRAYER

In the nineteenth century, a Russian mystic was challenged by his spiritual mentor to pray the Jesus Prayer six thousand times a day: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" The name "Lord Jesus Christ" was inhaled, while the phrase "have mercy on me" was exhaled. There was something about that prayer that woke him up to a million little miracles.

Everything around me appeared wondrous to me and inspired me with love for and gratitude to God. People, trees, plants, and animals—I felt a kinship with them all and discovered how each bore the seal of the Name of Jesus Christ.^[17]

That echoes the cry of Celtic Christians, who placed an emphasis on down-to-earth spirituality. They refused to compartmentalize sacred and secular. Saint Patrick once blessed a river and prayed for people to catch more fish.^[18]

Is that kind of prayer even allowed? Jesus once cursed a barren fig tree, so there's that. And Joshua asked God to make the sun stand still, so there's that too. According to a catechism attributed to Saint Ninian of Whithorn, the outcome of all study should be "to perceive the eternal word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal and every man and woman."^[19]

I've experienced some holy moments in church, at the altar. I go to the altar almost every time it's open. That said, I've experienced just as many holy moments at the beach, in the mountains, and under the stars. You can't raft the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon without worshipping.

You can't hike the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu without praising. Most recently, we spent a few days with friends at Little Rocky Pond in Maine. Under the cover of night, we laid down on paddleboards and counted stars like Abram. It was a thin place. It was an open heaven. It was a two-foot field trip.

SUPER GENERATION

I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis named New Hope. We spent our summer days playing kick the can and capture the flag until my mom rang the dinner bell. Yes, a dinner bell. That's how old I am. For those who aren't familiar, the dinner bell is the precursor to the smartphone. I also remember grabbing my butterfly net and chasing butterflies for hours on end.

Our neighborhood was bordered by two cemeteries, which sounds awfully morbid, but they doubled as playgrounds. We played Wiffle ball in one and chased butterflies in the other. Was this legal? I have no idea, but I don't think it made anyone roll over in their grave.

Minnesota is the land of ten thousand lakes. Actually, it's more like 11,842, but who's counting?^[20] Minnesota is also home to a unique plant called milkweed. Standing six feet tall, milkweed is filled with silklike parachutes that are six times more buoyant than cork and five times warmer than wool. During World War II, its floss was used to fill life jackets. Milkweed contains chemicals called cardiac glycosides, which cause heart damage. It's toxic to humans, but it's Ruth's Chris Steak House to monarch butterflies. In fact, it's the only plant that monarch caterpillars eat.^[21] That is also where they lay their eggs. To the monarch butterfly, the milkweed is a miracle.

No milkweed, no monarch.

Maybe, just maybe, that's why God made them.

The monarch butterfly is unique because it's the only species of butterfly known to migrate like birds do. They spend the summer months in places like New Hope, Minnesota, where the temperatures are temperate. Then they migrate to Mexico when the weather turns cold. What I find

fascinating is that it takes four generations of monarchs to make that annual migration.

It takes three generations of monarchs to make the three-thousand-mile journey north. It takes one generation, known as a super generation, to make the migration south by catching the thermal currents that are a mile high. The average lifespan of a monarch butterfly is only two to six weeks, except for the super generation, which can live for more than eight months. That's why the super generation is also known as the Methuselah generation.

This annual migration raises so many questions for me. Why do the monarchs do this in the first place? And how do they know where to go? "Scientists believe they use cues like magnetism and sunlight to navigate directionally, but the rest is still a mystery."^[22] Whether traveling north or south, none of those monarchs have been where they are going! Yet somehow they know where they belong.

Do you need to know any of that to live a long, happy life? No, you do not. But it's one of the mysteries and miracles of nature that make life a little more meaningful. At least for a guy who grew up chasing butterflies until his mom rang the dinner bell.

SIMPLE PLEASURES

God's greatest gifts are immaterial—spiritual rather than physical. It's the feeling of unconditional forgiveness or unmerited favor. It's joy unspeakable. It's a peace that passes understanding. It's the imagination that is part of the image of God. It's simple pleasures, not expensive toys. It's "raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens."^[23]

It's chasing butterflies, not catching them, that brings joy. It's wild and free. It's happy and holy. The journey is the destination, if you enjoy the journey. I can imagine Adam and Eve, butterfly nets in hand, romping around Eden. What fun they must have had, and what joy that must have brought to the heart of a good God who delights in His playfellows.

Counting stars, considering lilies, and chasing butterflies aren't that different. Each one is an expression of *tov*. Each one is a way of worshipping our Creator. Each one is intricately and infinitely tied to the purpose of life. Why did God create butterflies? Perhaps it's for no more noble purpose than play, so kids have something beautiful to chase. If that seems like too much of a stretch, consider this soliloquy of King Solomon:

I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.^[24]

The Hebrew word translated “delight” means “laugh” or “play.” Take your pick! Either way, God is anything but the cosmic killjoy that some make Him out to be. He never stops laughing. He never stops singing. He never stops playing. One translation of that verse says, “Ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in his world.”^[25]

Solomon's ode to playfulness reminds me of Richard Feynman, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist. Feynman was intellectually gifted, no doubt. “But his real superpowers were curiosity and playfulness,” said Stephen Dubner. “He wanted to know how everything worked.” What kinds of things? “Bubbles, rainbows; ocean waves and brain waves.” Anything else? “He had a long parade of deep obsessions: Mayan hieroglyphics, the behavior of ants, playing the bongos!”^[26]

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

At 5:12 A.M. on April 18, 1906, Atlas shrugged. An earthquake registering 7.9 on the Richter scale leveled the city of San Francisco in forty-seven seconds flat. Beyond the loss of human life, one of the casualties was a cabinet of curiosities owned by the legendary taxonomist David Starr Jordan.

As a boy, David Jordan loved taking two-foot field trips. He was so mesmerized by the stars in the sky that he learned all their names. Then he took them as his middle name and added an extra *r*. David Starr Jordan would eventually trade his telescope for a microscope and, over many decades, discover one-fifth of all fish species known to humankind.

When a new species is discovered, that first specimen is called a holotype. Jordan's makeshift museum was full of them. They were carefully preserved and stored and labeled. But on the morning of the great San Francisco earthquake, all that research was destroyed in a matter of moments.

Hundreds of jars shattered against the floor. His fish specimens were mutilated by broken glass and fallen shelves. But worst of all were the *names*. Those carefully placed tin tags had been launched at random all over the ground. In some terrible act of Genesis in reverse, his thousands of meticulously named fish had transformed back into a heaping mass of the unknown.^[27]

That scene is reminiscent of a similar misfortune that befell Thomas Edison. On the night of December 10, 1914, he watched helplessly as ten buildings in his research compound burned to the ground. That chemical fire destroyed much of his lifework, including many one-of-a-kind prototypes. How did Edison respond? "Thank goodness all our mistakes were burned up," said the indefatigable inventor. "Now we can start fresh again."^[28]

I'm not sure that's how I would respond if I saw my lifework engulfed in flames or destroyed by an earthquake. But people like Thomas Edison and David Starr Jordan aren't easily defeated by setbacks. With the help of colleagues who kept his specimens wet, Jordan used a sewing needle to restitch name tags to his fish.

Are you familiar with the orchid and the dandelion theory? Dr. Thomas Boyce, professor emeritus of pediatrics and psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, has studied stress for four decades. Like an

orchid, which needs an ideal environment to thrive, some children are more sensitive to their circumstances than others. Then there are children who seem to flourish against all odds. Dr. Boyce calls them dandelions because of their resiliency in the face of adversity.^[29]

I think it's safe to say, Thomas Edison and David Starr Jordan were dandelions!

Remember Louis Agassiz?

A statue of Agassiz toppled over in that San Francisco earthquake, and Agassiz ended up upside down with his head in the cement. Why was that statue there in the first place? It was commissioned by one of his star pupils, David Starr Jordan.

An aging Louis Agassiz and a young David Starr Jordan met on Penikese Island off the coast of Massachusetts. That is where Agassiz founded the Anderson School of Natural History.

Fieldwork, for Agassiz, was an affair of the senses. It meant delighting in the present moment: the things we see, the sounds we hear, the air we feel, and the surfaces we touch. It meant passing on such delight to others, his students.^[30]

Few students delighted in nature more than David Starr Jordan, and that takes us all the way back to the beginning. When we delight in nature, we are doing what God Himself did. It's *to* all over again. It's one way we find our way back to Eden, which means "delight" in Hebrew.

PINK FAIRY ARMADILLO

Remember Stephen Wilkes? The photographer who creates composite pictures from thousands of snapshots? My personal favorite is a watering hole in Serengeti National Park that was shot from a crocodile blind eighteen feet in the air. "It was biblical," said Wilkes. "We saw, for 26 hours, all these competitive species share a single resource called water."^[31]

That image might be as close as we'll come to one of my favorite moments in all of Scripture—the Genesis moment when Adam named the animals. How it happened is anyone's guess, but I hear Tarzan's jungle call. And it must have taken quite some time. Of course, they had all the time in the world.

The LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.^[32]

This feels so playful, doesn't it? It's like a grand game of pin the tail on the donkey! I know God is omniscient, but it's almost like He was waiting with bated breath to see what Adam would name each animal. Remember what Sir Francis Bacon said? The earth is God's playground, and we are God's playfellows.

This is that.

One of my favorite animal names is *Wunderpus photogenicus*. Its first name means “miracle” in German. Its last name is a testament to the unique pattern of each octopus, which functions like a fingerprint. As it ages, the pattern becomes more and more elaborate. And like a chameleon, the *Wunderpus photogenicus* can camouflage itself by blending in with its environment or mimicking venomous animals.^[33]

Are we having fun yet?

I wouldn't be surprised if that is an actual question God asked Adam after many days of naming animals. Just as God formed Leviathan to frolic, each animal is a unique testament to God's creativity and goodness. How so? They inspire awe. They provide food. Some of them even make great pets. On that note, I believe there will be animals in heaven. Why would there not be? When I get home from work at the end of the day, our little cockapoo wags her entire body as a welcome home. I'm not sure that qualifies as a miracle, but it makes me feel like one! I believe that pet therapy is a form of play therapy! Besides, the prophet Isaiah said, “The

wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion.”^[34]

That’ll be a sight to see, won’t it?

Like a zoo without cages!

NAMING RIGHTS

If we aren’t careful, we can read right over the responsibility given to us to name things. It was our very first job, after gardening, and this is the first mention. God is inviting us into His world, quite literally. When God gave Adam the privilege of naming the animals, it set the stage for naming anything and everything.

In Judaism, naming is a sacred responsibility. Just as God puts His name on us, we put names on the rest of creation. We give names to hurricanes, in alphabetical order. We give names to supergalaxies and subatomic particles. We name everything from pathogens and the elements on the periodic table to cognitive biases and the neuroanatomical structures in the brain that cause them. You name it—we name it.

Naming is a privilege and it has prophetic power. Names have the power to unlock our true identity, our true destiny. But there is one thing God reserves the right to name. What is it? You!

Your parents gave you a name, but biblically speaking, that name is a placeholder. Your true name won’t be revealed until you cross the spacetime continuum and enter a dimension called heaven. That is when God will present you with a white stone that has your name on it.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.^[35]

I can’t wait to sample some of that manna, but the more mysterious miracle is the revelation of our real name. There is something so intimate

about this. When we hear that name for the first time, it will make perfect sense. What will? Everything! *Ah, that's who I am. Makes sense now!* Our life will flash before our eyes like a composite picture, and it'll be like looking in an Almighty mirror. We'll finally see as we are seen!

The privilege of naming us is reserved by God Himself, but everything else is up for grabs. Naming is part of co-creating with God. But what does that have to do with a million little miracles? There is an old chorus: "Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God hath done."^[36] One way to count your blessings is by naming miracles—from the smallest of seeds to the largest of galaxies and everything in between. Whoever names the most miracles wins the gratitude game!

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LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

On March 31, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was in the nation's capital preaching what would be his last sermon. Four days later, Dr. King was gunned down at a Memphis motel. His text that Sunday was this: "Behold, I make all things new."^[1] The title of his message? "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution."^[2]

Dr. King recited a short story by Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle." Rip fell into a deep sleep and didn't wake up until twenty years later! That much of the story you probably remember, but Dr. King highlighted something that is easily overlooked. When Rip Van Winkle went to sleep, America was an outpost of the British Empire and George III was king of England. When Rip woke up, he saw a portrait of a different George—George Washington, president of the newly formed United States of America. In the words of Dr. King, "He knew not who he was."^[3] Rip Van Winkle had slept through a revolution!

"While he was peacefully snoring up in the mountain," said Dr. King, "a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it." Rip Van Winkle is an allegorical warning to those who would sleep through their one wild and precious life. "Many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change," said Dr. King, "and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."^[4]

Permission to speak frankly? We chuckle at the thought of someone sleeping through a revolution, but most people miss out on a million little

miracles because they sleepwalk their way through life. Inattentional blindness gets the best of them. It's time to wake up and live eyes wide open!

What's *really* happening when what's happening is happening?

The short answer is a million little miracles!

"Awake, awake!" said the prophet Isaiah.^[5] The apostle Paul echoed that alarm: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead."^[6] From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is a wake-up call. Wake up to what? Wake up to wonder. Wake up to beauty. Wake up to mystery. Wake up to a million little miracles.

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung had a phrase carved over the front door of his home—"Bidden or unbidden, God is present."^[7] God isn't just present; God is omnipresent. All that's absent is awareness. "Surely the LORD is in this place," said Jacob, "and I was not aware of it."^[8]

When did we fall asleep?

Where is it that we became unaware?

Why is it that we miss out on miracles?

How did our wonder switch flip to the off position?

The answer to those questions is rather ironic. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the Enemy promised that their eyes would be opened. It was the original lie. The reality? They became blind to all that is good and true and beautiful. It's like the wonder switch was turned off for the first time. Instead of retaining childlike wonder, they lost their innocence. The curse resulted in negative self-consciousness. They became aware of their own nakedness and so consumed with covering it that they stopped noticing the miracles that were all around them.

THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

"If I know the origin of a man," said Helmut Thielicke, "then I know his secret."^[9]

Nearly every human problem, propensity, and potentiality can be reverse engineered back to Genesis 1, 2, and 3. The book of Genesis is our source code. As such, it contains the secret mysteries of life and love and a million little miracles. Anything less than a full accounting of what went wrong in Eden is “cheap apologetics.”^[10]

“If I want to know who I really am and what God intended me to be,” said Thielicke, “I must go back behind the lost paradise, I must look to the morning of creation and try to hear the first words that God spoke to me and my father Adam.”^[11] What are those first words? Original blessing followed by our original commission.

Some of us have heard the origin story called Eden so many times that we can’t see the forest for the trees. It’s a cognitive bias called the curse of knowledge. Once you know, you know and you can’t unknow! And the more you know, the harder it is to remember what it was like to not know. I’m certainly not arguing that ignorance is bliss, but the curse of knowledge often equates to the loss of wonder. We no longer see with Eden eyes.

“The purpose of science is not to cure us of our sense of mystery and wonder,” said Robert Sapolsky, “but to constantly reinvent and reinvigorate it.”^[12] Science can deny the existence of God and still make amazing discoveries. But that kind of science often has harmful side effects. Keeping God out of science is as nonsensical as keeping God out of politics. But what about separation of church and state? Exactly! It’s separation *of* not *from*. For the record, democracy without morality doesn’t work. In my opinion, the divorce between science and spirituality doesn’t work either. It sucks the meaning and mystery and miracles out of life. What are you left with? Life sucks, pardon my French. In my opinion, science that denies the existence of God is not good science. That kind of science is smoke and mirrors! The epitome of arrogance, with all due respect, is denying the existence of one’s Creator.

Back to the Garden of Eden.

There were thousands of fruit trees in that garden. Adam and Eve could eat almonds, apples, apricots, and avocados until the cows came home.

There were fig trees, grapefruit trees, and peach trees. There was probably even a partridge in a pear tree!

My point? There were thousands of trees to enjoy—each one a miracle in its own right. Yet somehow the Enemy was successful in shifting their focus to the one and only tree that was off-limits. The Enemy’s oldest trick is a tactic called forbidden fruit. Instead of enjoying a million little miracles, we get bent out of shape by one thing that isn’t ours.

This is how the negativity bias enters the equation of human emotion. This is when and where and why we start playing the shame game, blame game, and fame game. Spoiler alert: The only way to win any of those games is to *not* play!

THE SHAME GAME

When our oldest was a toddler, we had a dinner party at our house. I don’t remember who was there or what we ate. What I do remember is Parker running through the family room yelling, “Captain Underpants!” Sure enough, that is all he was wearing!

I don’t remember this, but when I was three years old, my parents were giving me a bath. I’m not sure what got into me, but I got out of the tub, ran out of the house, and streaked down the block stark naked. I guess the apple didn’t fall far from the tree of knowledge!

At some point, we stop doing this, and that’s a good thing! But we don’t just hide our physical nakedness, we hide the hopes and fears of all the years!^[13] Slowly but surely, wonder is displaced by shame.

There is nothing wrong with feeling guilty because of what we’ve done wrong. That’s called the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and it’s evidence of a conscience. Just as pain is an indicator of a physical problem, guilt is often an indicator of a spiritual problem. Shame is a very different animal. It’s feeling bad about *who we are*. It’s a negative feedback loop—*I’m not good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, or strong enough*. You can fill in the blank with a dozen other deficiencies.

Guilt says, “I made a mistake.”

Shame says, "I am a mistake."

I rebuke that, in Jesus's name!

All of us have shame scripts and shame triggers. It's anything that makes us feel unworthy, unwanted, or unloved. How do we overwrite those shame scripts? The same way we rewrite any negative narrative. Scripture is our script-cure! That's more than a play on words. It's the only way to win the shame game.

Shame says, "I am a mistake."

God says, "You are My workmanship."

Shame says, "I am unworthy."

God says, "You are worth the cross."

Shame says, "I am not enough."

God says, "You can do all things through Christ, who strengthens you."

Shame says, "I am an accident."

God says, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made."

Shame says, "I am unlovable."

God says, "You are My beloved."

Shame says, "I am insignificant."

God says, "You are the apple of My eye."

If you play the shame game, it inevitably leads to the blame game. Do you remember the excuse Adam gave God after eating the forbidden fruit? "The woman You put here made me do it." Nice try! Here's a word to the wise: Blaming it on the woman is the wrong answer every time! What was Eve's excuse? She coined the classic "The devil made me do it." Really? That's not much better than Adam!

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked.^[14]

Have you ever had a nightmare where you're naked in public? This is where it originates. What did Adam and Eve do? They tried hiding from the All-Seeing Eye, which would be pretty funny if it weren't so sad. We have been playing hide-and-seek ever since!

CHILDLIKENESS

Gordon MacKenzie served as creative paradox at Hallmark Cards for many years. I love that job title almost as much as the title of his book, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*. His portfolio was to challenge corporate normalcy.

As a side hustle, MacKenzie did creativity workshops with elementary-age children. His goal was to help them discover their inner artist, which wasn't hard in kindergarten. When asked if there were any artists in the room, every kid would wave their hand in the air. By the second grade, only half the hands went up. By the time they were sixth graders? Only one or two kids would self-consciously raise their hands.

"Every school I visited," said MacKenzie, "was participating in the suppression of creative genius." It wasn't intentional, and this isn't a knock on teachers. Honestly, some churches do the same thing. "Genius is an innocent casualty in society's efforts to train children away from natural-born foolishness."

"From cradle to grave," said MacKenzie, "the pressure is on: Be Normal." Can I go on the record? *Normal* is overrated. "There was a time—perhaps when you were very young—when you had at least a fleeting notion of your own genius and were just waiting for some authority figure to come along and validate it for you. But none ever came."^[15]

Enter Jesus!

Jesus releases the inner child in all of us! He went so far as to say, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."^[16] That is one of the most kaleidoscopic statements in all of Scripture, but right at the heart, it's a call to childlike wonder, childlike curiosity, childlike playfulness.

Sir John Kirk, a nineteenth-century British naturalist, once said that if he had his way, there would always be a child positioned in the heart of London—somewhere near Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's Cathedral. No one should be allowed to contest a seat in Parliament, said Sir John Kirk, until they had spent a full day with that child and passed an examination in the child's novel methods of thought, feeling, and expression.

That's kind of genius, is it not?

The United Kingdom doesn't have any such ordinance that I'm aware of, but the kingdom of God does. Childlikeness and Christlikeness are two sides of the same coin. To become like Jesus is to become like a little child. It's a second childhood. It's seeing life through children's eyes all over again.

Repentance doesn't just result in forgiveness. By faith, it flips the wonder switch back to the *on* position! We start seeing everyone and everything as wonderful. What about things that are wrong and ugly? We see the reality of those things, too, but we also see everyone and everything as redeemable.

GOOD EYE

Joseph Merrick was born on August 5, 1862, in Leicester, England. It's difficult to diagnose someone who predates modern medicine, but few people have suffered from more physical deformities and abnormalities. All ten of his fingers were stubs. His head was twice the circumference it should have been. His disfigured mouth made his speech nearly unintelligible. His right arm was twice the size of his left arm, and his legs barely supported his body weight.

In nineteenth-century England, there was a perverse yet popular form of entertainment known as human novelty exhibitions. Joseph Merrick was the headliner in one of these exhibitions. Posters pronounced him half man, half elephant. People paid a shilling to see the human freak show, then shrieked in horror at the sight of him.

Imagine producing that reaction everywhere you went?

After being admitted to a London hospital, an unsuspecting orderly dropped his tray of food the first time she saw him. Though it took some time for the hospital staff to see him as human, Merrick piqued the curiosity of a surgeon named Dr. Frederick Treves.

In a carefully orchestrated experiment, the good doctor arranged to have a woman walk into Merrick's room, smile at him, wish him a good morning, and shake his hand.

“The effect upon poor Merrick was not quite what I had expected,” said Dr. Treves. “As he let go her hand, he bent his head on his knees and sobbed until I thought he would never cease.” That single smile was the turning point of his life. It unlocked the little boy within. “He told me afterwards that this was the first woman who had ever smiled at him, and the first woman, in the whole of his life, who had shaken hands with him.”^[17]

Remember Albert Camus and the invincible smile? This is that. One smile can change the trajectory of someone’s life, including yours! And I might add, some of you need to look in the mirror and smile at *yourself*.

Over time, Dr. Treves found Joseph Merrick to be more intelligent and articulate than he would have ever imagined. Merrick had a holy curiosity that encompassed all of life. Dr. Treves managed to smuggle him into private boxes of London theaters to watch plays and listen to operas. He took him on field trips to the countryside, where Merrick loved listening to songbirds, chasing rabbits, and picking wildflowers.

Toward the end of his short life, Merrick’s common refrain was this: “I am happy every hour of the day.”^[18] Dr. Treves eulogized the infamous Elephant Man with these words: “I have never heard him complain.”^[19]

Never heard him complain?

After a lifetime of trauma, how is that even possible?

Happy every hour of the day?

Despite all his physical deformities, Joseph Merrick had a *tov* eye! “The eye is the lamp of the body,” Jesus said. “If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.”^[20]

IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger introduced a concept called *Geworfenheit*. In English, it translates as “thrownness.” None of us chooses when or where we are born. We don’t choose our family of origin or a thousand other things. We do, however, choose our response to the

challenges life throws at us. “Your destiny can’t be changed,” said Heidegger, “but it can be challenged.”^[21]

Life has a way of knocking us down and kicking dirt in our face. There is no denying that. Meanwhile, the Enemy adds insult to injury. That said, you can flip the script. There is no denying beauty and truth and goodness either. It’s a wonderful life, if you want it to be.

The Academy Award-winning film by Roberto Benigni, *Life Is Beautiful*, tells the story of a Jewish father who shields his son from the horrors of a concentration camp by employing imagination. He turns that horrific experience into a game by telling his son that he can earn points by doing what the guards tell him to do and he will lose points if he cries or complains. He tells his son that whoever gets to a thousand points wins a tank.^[22]

The movie is fiction, but the moral is not. It’s our outlook on life that will determine the outcome of our life—outlook makes us or breaks us in situations like that. “Despair is suffering without meaning,” said Viktor Frankl.^[23] “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”^[24]

You are response-able. For what? For everything! Even in the face of pure evil, we have within us the capacity for good. In spite of all that is wrong, we can do what is right. It’s the miracle of free will.

“If you’re going through hell,” said Winston Churchill, “keep going!”^[25] While you’re at it, give God the sacrifice of praise! How? Sometimes it’s as simple as smiling in difficult circumstances. It’s listening to songbirds, chasing rabbits, and picking wildflowers like Joseph Merrick. It’s giving your one and only raspberry to a friend who needs it more than you. You can’t control your circumstances, but you can challenge them by worshipping your way through them. That is the invincible calm, the invincible love, that Albert Camus alluded to.

Worship is childlike wonder.

Worship is counting stars, considering lilies, and chasing butterflies.

Worship is becoming less self-conscious and more God-conscious.

Worship is giving God your full attention and your full affection.

Worship is waking up to a million little miracles.

“The goodness of God is not a magic wand that we wave over a problem to see it fixed,” said Bill Johnson. “It is the context in which we do life. Everything we see and experience is defined by that one prevailing reality: God is good.”^[26]

We praise God for common grace and saving grace.

We praise God for natural revelation and special revelation.

We praise God on good days and bad days.

Why do we praise Him? Because He is holy, holy, holy. Because He is worthy, worthy, worthy. We praise Him because He is God Most High, God Most Nigh, and God Most Good. We praise Him because that is the purpose of life.

DOXOLOGY

J. I. Packer earned his PhD from Oxford University, where he studied under C. S. Lewis. He served as general editor of the English Standard Version of the Bible. He wrote more than fifty books including the all-time classic *Knowing God*. He taught theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, for almost four decades. I share his curriculum vitae because it helps pack this punch. “The purpose of theology,” said J. I. Packer, “is doxology.”

Theology is the study of God.

Doxology is the worship of God.

As we near the end of our pilgrimage, I hope God has gotten bigger and bigger, closer and closer, and gooder and gooder. I hope your spiritual eyes have been opened to a million little miracles. But the goal isn't knowledge. Theology that doesn't lead to doxology results in idolatry.

Fun fact? J. I. Packer began every class by singing the doxology! That ritual served as a reminder that it's all *from* God and it's all *for* God. What if we started or ended every day that way? Give it a try and see if it doesn't feel *tov*!

Once we sing a song thirty times, we no longer think about the lyrics. The danger of that is this: We give God lip service. We learn *how* and forget *why*. When we go through the motions, it's empty worship. Maybe that's why the psalmist said over and over, "Sing a new song."[\[27\]](#)

"You Samaritans worship what you do not know," Jesus said to the woman at the well. That is the epitome of empty worship. "True worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth."[\[28\]](#) How do we worship in truth? We cultivate holy curiosity that keeps seeking, asking, and knocking. Instead of taking things for granted, we take them for gratitude.

FIRST SONG

Our exploration of a million little miracles started with a single cell and incredible odds. Not long after winning that race, you were introduced to the musical rhythm of your mother's heartbeat. That was your first song, your first dance. "Inside the womb," said Daniel Levitin, "surrounded by amniotic fluid, the fetus hears sounds."[\[29\]](#)

Music is to the soul what vitamins are to the body. If your sound diet is deficient, the side effect is meaninglessness. Remember the monks who experienced a strange malaise because they reduced the number of Gregorian chants? Music lifts the spirit, focuses the mind, and alters the mood. "Music is transcendent," said Robert Jourdain, "For a few moments it makes us larger than we really are, and the world more orderly than it really is."[\[30\]](#)

The music of your life began with a heartbeat. From the moment you acquired the ability to process sound in your mother's womb—sometime during the second trimester of your development—the steady thump of her beating heart permeated your developing body and brain, imprinting its rhythm over and over, millions of times before your birth.[\[31\]](#)

Just as a mother's heartbeat is imprinted on her unborn baby, worship is hardwired into the human soul. You can't *not* worship! Why? Because the heartbeat of God is imprinted on each of us. We were made by God, for God.

"Before we make music," said Joachim-Ernst Berendt, "music makes us."^[32] When we worship, we aren't just singing. We are *singing back* to the God who rejoices over us with singing, the God who sings songs of deliverance all around us all the time.^[33] When we worship, we are harmonizing with heaven. We are in sync with the angels, elders, living creatures, and cloud of witnesses from every nation, tribe, people, and language, who never stop worshipping.

That's what's *really* happening when we worship!

WALKMAN

In 1979, Sony introduced the TPS-L2—the original Walkman. If you own a pair of AirPods, the Walkman seems somewhat antiquated, but that Walkman revolutionized the world. How so? It allowed listeners to create their own radio station, so to speak. Pop in a cassette, hit play, and the Walkman put you in your own world. If your life is a movie, the Walkman allowed you to create your own personalized soundtrack.

Remember the playlists I have for writing and running? I also have a worship playlist. I put songs on repeat because it helps them sink into my soul. Some of those songs have gotten me through some tough times! For better or for worse, consciously and subconsciously, music has a profound impact on mood. It can cause a crescendo or decrescendo of emotion.

During a live episode of the *Radiolab* podcast, "Mixtapes to the Moon," producers pulled off a rather ingenious experiment. Everyone in the audience put on headphones while watching a very ordinary video clip of a shopping mall from the 1970s. The sixty-second video opened with an indoor water fountain, then panned to shoppers on an escalator. When the unremarkable video finished, the producers asked participants to remove their headphones and share what they felt.

The emotional reactions were all over the map—ranging from fear to boredom to loneliness. The participants were a little confused by the emotional reaction of others until they discovered that the video was set to different soundtracks. “These different tracks,” said the producers, “totally warped how people experienced the mall.”^[34]

How did the Jewish people make the arduous journey to Jerusalem for three pilgrimage feasts before planes, trains, and automobiles? How did David survive as a fugitive, hiding out in the Cave of Adullam? How did Paul and Silas endure false imprisonment?

Those are very different situations, but the common denominator is music. All of them put on their Walkman and started worshipping. Jewish pilgrims sang the fifteen psalms called Song of Ascents—it was their *Lion King* soundtrack. David wrote songs and sang them while fleeing Saul. The sheet music is lost, but we still have the lyrics—psalms 34, 57, and 132. If I were Paul and Silas, I probably would have fallen asleep well before midnight. What were they doing? Tapping their toes and making music!

Who is the loudest voice in your life?

Is it the loudest voice?

Or it is the still small voice of the Holy Spirit?

Is the loudest voice those who shame and blame?

Or is it the One who rejoices over you with singing?

ALTARS OR IDOLS

There are two verses that represent two defining moments in the life of King Saul. “Saul built an altar to the LORD; it was the first time he had done this.”^[35] So far so good. Saul was giving credit where credit was due, but that changed in less than one chapter. “Saul went to the town of Carmel to set up a monument to himself.”^[36]

Are you building altars to God?

Or are you building monuments to yourself?

The choice is yours, but it’s one or the other!

I might sound like a broken record, but whatever you don't turn into praise turns into pride. Whatever you don't put on the altar turns into an idol. There is a very fine line between altars and idols, but it turns into a wide divide!

Why did Saul start building monuments to himself? He was listening to the wrong song! "Saul has slain his thousands," sang the women of Israel, "and David his tens of thousands."^[37] He let those lyrics get in his spirit. He let his injured ego get the best of him. The net result? He tried to kill his greatest asset, his greatest ally. That's what happens when we have an unhealed hurt—hurt people hurt people.

The imagination either builds altars or builds idols. If you worship self by setting up monuments, your world gets smaller and smaller and smaller. Eventually, the only thing that fits in your tiny little universe is *you*. If you worship God by building altars, your world gets bigger and bigger and bigger. True worship is the portal that opens the door to a million little miracles! And you can worship Him in a million ways!

"When I run," said Olympic gold medalist Eric Liddell, "I feel His pleasure."^[38] For Liddell, running was *tov*. For Brother Lawrence, *tov* was doing dishes.^[39] That's how he practiced the presence of God. For George Washington Carver, it was dissecting the peanut. And I have to say, chocolate peanut butter—be it candy or cake—is definitely *tov*!

When I write, I don't just type on a keyboard. I worship God with the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. That means this book is *tov*. So is every other art form, when done for the applause of nail-scarred hands.

"I now consider what I do in the studio to be theological work," said artist Makoto Fujimura. And by "theological," I'm sure he meant doxological too! "I imagine my water-based paint to possess the tears of Christ."^[40]

"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time," said Thomas Merton.^[41] It's true, isn't it? Whether it's letters or notes or colors, there is something about artistic expression that inhales and exhales the presence of God. Artists make "dangerous forays into God's future,"

said N. T. Wright, “returning to show an often disbelieving world.”^[42] The same could be said of any act of imagination.

My point? Every act of art is a miracle! And it doesn’t have to be Handel’s *Messiah* or the *Mona Lisa*! My dog, as cute as she is, doesn’t make art. She makes a mess! Only image bearers can exercise imagination! That makes us walking, talking miracles.

“When I painted something as a child,” said Fujimura, “I felt as if an electrical charge were going through me.”^[43] That feeling goes by lots of names. Anders Ericsson called it peak performance. It’s operating at optimal levels of physical and mental capacity, tapping our full potential. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called it a flow state.^[44] Time slows down, your senses are heightened, and you are fully immersed in whatever it is you are doing—hiking or biking, baking or painting.

“Too many Christians today, brought up on the penny plain prose favoured by Rome and even more by the Reformers, have half-formed imaginations,” said Ian Bradley. “All too often we dismiss the poets and artists in our midst as mere doodlers and dreamers and fail to appreciate that they may be the priests who are interceding for us and articulating our deepest thoughts and concerns to God.”^[45]

There is nothing you have—time, talent, or treasure—that isn’t a gift from Almighty God. Worship is giving it back to God by giving it all you’ve got. “If a man is called to be a street sweeper,” said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘There lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’ ”^[46]

“The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on his shoes,” said Martin Luther, “but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.”^[47]

PROPHECY YOUR PRAISE

In the spring of 1992, the capital city of Bosnia was besieged by the Yugoslav People's Army. The Siege of Sarajevo would last 1,425 days. On May 27, innocent civilians were standing in a breadline when a bombshell exploded. The blast killed twenty-two people, leaving a crater in the center of the city.

Moments after the blast, a man named Vedran Smailović ran to the scene, but he wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't a medic. He wasn't a firefighter. He wasn't a soldier. Smailović was the principal cellist in the Sarajevo Opera. For most of us, the story ends there.

We surrender faith to fear.

We surrender hope to hate.

We let what we can't do keep us from doing what we can.

The day after that disaster, Smailović put on his tuxedo, grabbed his cello, climbed into the crater, sat down on a scorched chair, and played Adagio in G Minor by Albinoni. For twenty-two days, one day for each victim, the Cellist of Sarajevo made music in craters, in cemeteries, in bombed-out buildings. All the while, the city of Sarajevo was under siege by shells and by snipers. Why risk your life to make music? In the words of Vedran Smailović, "My weapon is my cello."[\[48\]](#)

Even in the midst of tragedy, there is beauty.

Even in the midst of pain and suffering, there is mystery.

Even in the midst of death and destruction, there are a million little miracles.

In the ninth century B.C., King Jehoshaphat was surrounded by enemy armies. "We are powerless against this mighty army that is about to attack us."[\[49\]](#) Jehoshaphat confronted the brutal facts, but he did so with unwavering faith. He prayed a prayer that I have borrowed in many a crisis:

We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.[\[50\]](#)

Life is a roller coaster. If you ride it long enough, there will be high highs and low lows. How do you handle those highs and lows? You worship your way through them. When things are going great, give God praise. When it feels like your life is falling apart at the seams, give God the sacrifice of praise. When it's *hardest* to praise God, that is the *highest* praise. That is when you have to prophesy your praise.

"It is easy to stand around a bombed-out crater and talk about the crater," said Sara Groves, "how it got there, who's to blame for it, and all its particulars." It's true, isn't it? "It is much harder to step past the edge of it, down into the middle, and say or make or do something generative."^[51]

As those who follow Jesus, we climb into craters left by pain and suffering with hope and healing. We climb into craters left by injustice and lift our voices for the voiceless. We climb into craters left by cancel culture and offer an extra measure of grace.

Let me make a distinction between two kinds of praise.

Past-tense praise is thanking God *after* He does it. This is when we sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." Future-tense praise is thanking God *before* He does it. This is how we prophesy our praise!

July 23, 2000, could have been—probably should have been—the last day of my life. After emergency surgery for ruptured intestines, I spent two days on a respirator, fighting for my life. I lost twenty-five pounds in a week, and that initiated the hardest year of my life. I could have prophesied my pain by complaining, but I made a conscious choice to prophesy my praise.

As I was recovering from surgery, I heard a song by Darrell Evans. These lines got in my spirit: "I'm trading my sickness; I'm trading my pain; I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord."^[52] I put that song on repeat. I must have sung it 437 times!

I take far less for granted after a near-death experience! I'll never forget my first night at home after many days in the hospital. I remember tucking my kids into bed and watching them sleep. What a miracle! I remember waking up next to my wife and thanking God for sleeping beauty. What a

miracle! I remember eating non-hospital food for the first time in a long time. What a miracle!

I have no idea what hardships you've had to endure, and I would never make light of them. I know people who have been to hell and back. I have a friend, Kevin Ramsby, who was stabbed thirty-seven times during an armed robbery and lived to tell about it. But even in the worst of situations, we have a choice to make. We can choose to get bitter or get better. Kevin has more than four feet of scars on his body, but he made a choice to forgive the man who almost killed him. In fact, he befriended him. In my book, that's a miracle!

Just as our words create worlds, so does worship. Worship creates an alternate reality called wonder. It might not change your circumstances, but that isn't the ultimate goal. It will change *you*!

I hope that you take fewer things for granted and more things for gratitude. And I hope that it doesn't take a near-death experience! I pray that holy curiosity has been conceived in your spirit. I pray that the wonder switch has been flipped to the *on* position.

MIRACLES ON MIRACLES

We've arrived at the end of this book, but it's just the beginning. When it comes to a million little miracles, we've barely scratched the surface. In the words of the song that inspired the title of this book,

*I've got miracles on miracles
A million little miracles.*^[53]

When I was in graduate school, I picked up a copy of *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, a book about the miraculous nature of the human body by Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey.^[54] I would have quit seminary and gone to med school, but that would have meant taking the MCAT. So I opted for a doctor of ministry degree rather than doctor of medicine, for which we should all be thankful.

Like the professor of immunology at the University of Chicago who inspired my love of hemoglobin, that book birthed a holy curiosity for human anatomy, biology, and neurology. I would never see myself or others the same way. “Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars,” said Saint Augustine, “and they pass by themselves without wondering.”^[55]

You, my friend, are nothing short of a miracle. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!

Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.^[56]

The prophet Isaiah likened the difference between our thoughts and God’s thoughts to the distance from one side of the universe to the other.^[57] The psalmist likened God’s thoughts toward us to sand, which seems simplistic. But by now, you know nothing is as simple as it seems. Everything is more miraculous than we can imagine, and that includes sand.

THE MYSTERY OF ALCHEMY

A single grain of sand.

It seems like a strange way to end this book. I bet you’ve planted a beach umbrella in the sand more than once. Maybe even built a sandcastle or two. It’s one of life’s simple pleasures, but sand is so much more than beaches and sandcastles! It’s a miracle called silicon dioxide.^[58]

Remember the San Francisco earthquake that destroyed much of David Starr Jordan's lifework? Almost the entire city was flattened, except for one building at the corner of Mission and Thirteenth Streets. It was a half-finished warehouse owned by Bekins Van and Storage. That building survived because it was made with a relatively new material called reinforced concrete, and sand is the key ingredient. The domino effect is that building codes started requiring concrete.

More than a century later, we harvest fifty billion tons of sand each year to be used in construction projects all around the world.^[59] "Measured by the number of lives it touches," said Vince Beiser, "concrete is easily the most important man-made material ever invented."^[60] Simply put, sand is to cities what cells are to the human body. The streets we drive on and the buildings we work in are made of sand. So are the windows we look through and the mirrors we look in.

How is that even possible?

When silicon dioxide is heated above five hundred degrees Fahrenheit, then cooled, strange and mysterious things happen. It rearranges itself into a new substance that suspends itself between liquid and solid forms.^[61] Those superheated grains of sand turn into glass—both the kind that we look through and the kind that we look in. It's the mystery of alchemy.

In 1291, the city of Venice sent its glassmakers to Murano, the Isle of Glass. It was there that those alchemists worked their magic, creating a clear glass called *cristallo*. They didn't understand the subatomic transformation that was happening, but it was more revolutionary than they realized. They created curved pieces of glass called magnifying glasses that monks used to magnify the text of Scripture. The ripple effect was telescopes and microscopes that would allow us to witness never-before-seen miracles.

Those alchemists couldn't have imagined microscopic threads of glass called fiber-optic cables that would crisscross the planet, forming a world wide web. The helmets we wear, the airplanes we fly in, and the surfboards we ride are made of fiberglass, which is made from sand.

Even the microchips in our smartphones are made from high-purity silica sand.

“We live in it, travel on it, communicate with it, and surround ourselves with it.” We even use it as a figure of speech. “We draw lines in it, build castles in it, hide our heads in it,” said Beiser.^[62] Life itself is measured by grains of sand in an hourglass.

How is it that the most complicated technology can be made from something as simple as sand? In the same way a little black seed turns into a watermelon, I suppose. Whether we’re counting stars, considering lilies, or chasing butterflies, there is a God to thank for His many splended gifts. He hung the stars, formed the flowers, and created the caterpillars.

The earth is God’s sandbox, and we are His playfellows. Next time you’re sitting on a beach, praise God for a million little miracles between your toes. Praise Him while driving on roads and walking on sidewalks. Praise Him while talking on your phone or surfing the internet. Praise Him while looking out windows and looking in mirrors.

This soliloquy on sand may seem like an overstatement, but sand is one of those everyday miracles we take for granted. The way you steward a miracle is by believing God for bigger and better miracles, but it starts with appreciating the miracles that stare you in the face. That, of course, includes the mirror that reflects the image of God in you.

Every grain of sand is one of a million little miracles that we can either take for granted or take for gratitude. The choice is yours! “Some are Born to sweet delight,” said the poet William Blake. “Some are Born to Endless Night.”^[63] Even so, the choice is yours!

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*^[64]

Life is beautiful, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder! My advice? Go outside, look up, and count the stars. I bet you wake up to wonder!

Can we take one final field trip?

Teddy Roosevelt had a naturalist friend named William Beebe with whom he shared a love of astronomy. When Beebe visited the president, they had a nighttime ritual. They would go outside and locate a spot of misty light near the Great Square of Pegasus in the fourth quadrant of the northern hemisphere. Then one of them would recite the following: “That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It is 750,000 light-years away. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun.” Then Roosevelt would grin and say to his friend, “Now I think we are small enough! Let’s go to bed.”^[65]

I hope you feel smaller at the end of this book, but I hope your God is bigger and closer and gooder than He was when you began. I hope you feel seen, heard, and loved by Almighty God. His thoughts toward you outnumber all the sand on all the seashores on earth.

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EPILOGUE

NOSTALGIA FOR GOD

A hundred years ago, a pair of English ornithologists took baby birds from their mother's nest on the island of Skokholm off the coast of Wales. They tagged those birds with transponders and transported them to various places far from home. They then released them to see if they could find their way home.

One bird was flown by airplane to Venice. Despite a distance of more than a thousand miles and the fact that this species of bird wasn't indigenous to the region, the bird found its way back home by a path it had never flown in just over 341 hours!

Take that, GPS.

That experiment was repeated with even greater distances. Two birds were transported by train in a closed box to London, then flown by airplane to Boston. Only one of the birds survived that trip. The lone survivor, bird No. AX6587, flew all the way across the Atlantic Ocean and found its way back to its mother's nest in twelve days and twelve hours!^[1]

Pretty impressive, right? Even ornithologists are amazed by this built-in capacity called the homing instinct. It's the innate ability within certain animals to find their way home across great distances despite unfamiliar terrain. Loggerhead sea turtles may swim as far as twelve thousand miles from the beach where they were born, yet somehow they find their way back to their birthplace. Sockeye salmon swim nine hundred miles upstream, gaining 6,500 feet in elevation, to spawn the next generation in the very stream where they hatched.^[2]

How these animals find their way home is a mystery, but there are a few theories. One is geomagnetic imprinting. Another is olfactory cues. Either way, it's nothing short of miraculous. Like the homing instincts in animals, is it possible that God apple tagged us in the Garden of Eden? Deep down, we know from whence we came. Our deepest longing is this holy homesickness to find our way back to Eden, where we once walked with God.

“You have made us for yourself,” said Saint Augustine, “and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”^[3] C. S. Lewis likened it to an unfulfilled longing: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”^[4] Pope Francis called it “nostalgia for God.”^[5]

“I knew now,” said G. K. Chesterton, “why I could feel homesick at home.”^[6] It's because this world isn't our home. There is a longing for Eden in all of us that is fulfilled only by the second Eden, which the Bible calls heaven. And it's not a place—it's a Person—that we long for. It's the Creator who formed us in His image.

What do we do with that nostalgia for God? I don't think we go back to old understandings of who God is—the flannelgraph god. Instead, we rediscover the God who is bigger than big, closer than close, and gooder than good. Remember the question that inspired this book?

What's *really* happening when what's happening is happening?

We may think we're seeking God, but God is the one seeking us. And He doesn't do this passively or passive-aggressively. He pursues us with more pathos than we've ever experienced. The psalmist said in no uncertain terms,

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life.^[7]

In 1890, Francis Thompson penned a poem titled “The Hound of Heaven”:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind.

Good news?

Those strong Feet...followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbéd pace.^[8]

The goodness of God has been pursuing you since the day you won that swim meet, and it will pursue you until the day you die. Perhaps it's time to return the favor! Seek the God who is seeking you. As you do, I pray that you rediscover the God who is bigger than big, closer than close, and gooder than good.

Keep counting stars.

Keep considering lilies.

Keep chasing butterflies.

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