Andrew Wilson is one of my favorite writers. And this book reminds me why. He displays a gift for weaving biblical theology with everyday illustrations that leads me to worship God. In this book, you'll get to know God's Word more deeply. And you'll never look at the world the same way.

—Collin Hansen, editorial director, The Gospel Coalition; host, *Gospelbound* podcast

Reading each chapter, I marveled anew at the kindness of God to instruct his children with such gentle care.

—Jen Wilkin, author, *None Like Him*

Creation was always meant to point beyond itself, and Andrew Wilson shows us the myriad and wonderful ways in which it does. This book is packed with insight and nourishment on every page. I found myself pointed to Christ in so many surprising and fresh ways, and provoked to worship a God of such grace and beauty.

—Sam Allberry, pastor and author

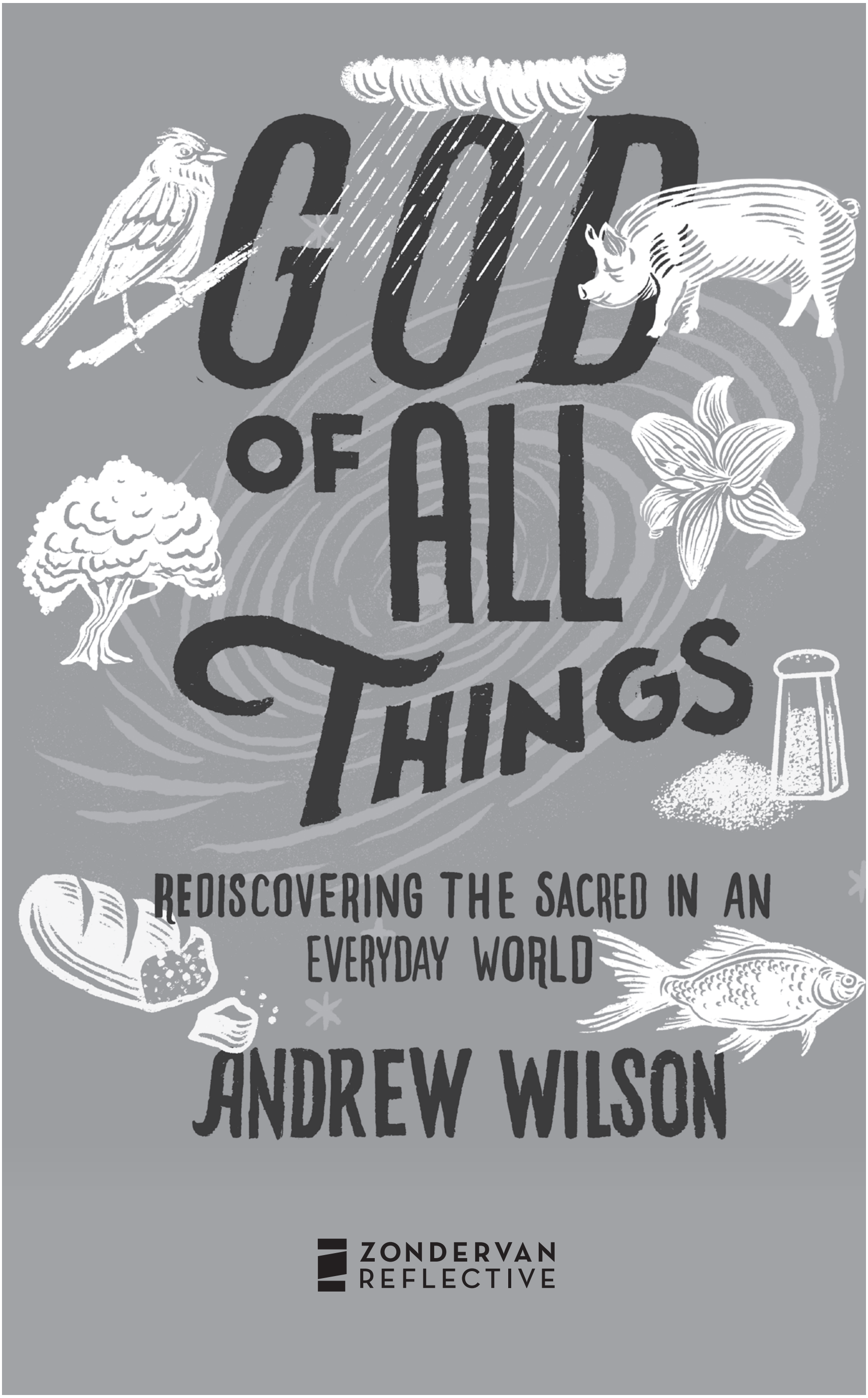
A treasure of a book from Andrew, and one that I didn't want to finish. Seeing God through everything he has made is sheer delight.

—Terry Virgo, founder, *Newfrontiers*

What a wonderful book! *God of All Things* caught my attention from the start, reminding me that all God's works—and I do mean all—proclaim his glory. From rainbows to donkeys to everyday tools, the things of this life really do reveal the God of life. This book is a delightful primer in learning how to truly see things for what they are.

—Hannah Anderson, author, *Turning of Days: Lessons from Nature, Season, and Spirit*

GOD
OF ALL
THINGS



GOD OF ALL THINGS

REDISCOVERING THE SACRED IN AN EVERYDAY WORLD

ANDREW WILSON

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For Andy and Janet Johnston,
who taught me how to be a pastor
and showed me how to preach from things

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FOREWORD

W*hen is a building more than a building?*

As I was reading the book you now hold, I found my mind returning to the church of my childhood. I spent many Sunday mornings in the sanctuary of the First United Methodist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas. Small towns in Texas are unexpected places to stumble on grandeur, but the wealthy oil barons of the early twentieth century left behind a few architectural gems. First Methodist was modeled on the design of a gothic cathedral, its soaring sanctuary wreathed in stained glass and carvings, with a massive rose window filling the chancel.

Since I am now a full-time Bible teacher, I would like to tell you I always paid rapt attention to the Sunday sermon. But the truth is my attention often wandered—to the windows, the carvings, and the items tucked into the pew rack in front of me. There, next to the hymnal and the attendance folio, was a small booklet titled "Eye Gate: Sermons in Symbols," written by Eleanor M. Robbins. The booklet was filled with explanations of the images that surrounded me in glass and stone and wood, each carefully chosen to teach a truth about God.

So while I often failed to listen carefully to the sermon, I nevertheless learned that the peaked windows and arches of the sanctuary were meant to resemble hands folded in prayer. I learned that the seven steps from the nave to the altar symbolized the seven attributes of the Lamb written in Revelation 5. The rose window contained six doves to represent the gifts of the Spirit prophesied in Isaiah 11:1–2. There were pomegranates and lilies, stars and flames, thorns and chalices and clovers, each image or item echoing a biblical truth. The light fixtures were designed to look like censers, representing the prayers of the saints rising to God. Worked into the front of the pulpit was an intertwined monogram of the Greek letters alpha and omega. The entire building was preaching the Word of God in symbol, all without uttering a word.

When is a rose window more than a rose window?

In the tradition of the medieval gothic architects of Europe, the architects of First United Methodist Church constructed a building not just to dazzle the eyes but also to teach. Deliberately and masterfully, they designed a space that repeated the words of Scripture in memorable ways through stone and glass and wood. Any passing visitor to the church, Christian or not, would be moved to wonder by the beauty of the space they had designed. But those who recognized its symbols would be moved to worship and remembrance.

The Bible, too, is the work of an architect, though we sometimes forget this. Through the pens of human authors, that divine architect has filled our sacred text with carefully chosen imagery. Many readers have remarked on the Bible's poetry or its historical narratives, but those with an eye for its imagery will be moved to worship and remembrance. Each of the authors of the sixty-six books of the Bible shares something in common with those cathedral builders: a commitment to teach through repetition what is true about God in memorable ways.

When is a mountain more than a mountain? When is a garden more than a garden?

We live in a time when our education systems often fail to teach us how to properly read literature—with an eye for authorial intent. We approach a book assuming that it is our job to assign it meaning, asking, "What does this book mean *to me*?" But the work of the reader, properly understood, is not to assign their own personal meaning to a text but to uncover the meaning the author intended to convey. No author sits down to write without first considering how and what they wish to communicate—the architectural design behind what they are writing. No author puts pen to paper or fingers to keyboard without first asking, "How can I help my reader arrive at a proper understanding of my message?"

If we lack a discerning eye, one carefully attuned to the author's intent, we arrive at the text disadvantaged. And this is especially tragic when we are reading the most important literature ever penned—the Word of God. We read its words and come away with a plain meaning or a personal meaning, but we miss the deeper meaning. We are like a casual visitor to the cathedral, awed by its architectural grandeur, but unaware of the symbols the architect has carefully chosen to draw us in to worship and remembrance. Our eyes are untrained. We fail to see as we ought.

This book is an "eye gate." When is a mountain more than a mountain? When are gardens, trees, wind, animals, or even musical instruments more than the objects themselves? When they are intended to draw us deeper into understanding, when the one who created them uses them to teach those he loves. The Bible's literary architecture far surpasses the splendor of any cathedral. It employs consistent themes and images chiseled across sixty-six books by forty different authors spanning 1500 years. The resulting work is nothing short of staggering and worthy of a lifetime of study. Learning its layered language draws us more deeply into worship. And its words and images are not a secret formula or a magic decoder ring for understanding the Bible. They are simple learning tools, employed deliberately and given graciously to us by God, that the words of his book might settle deeply into our souls.

Knowing that the citizens of Wichita Falls, Texas, might never visit the grand gothic cathedrals of Europe, Eleanor M. Robbins lovingly preserved their architectural legacy for a new generation of the faithful. In *God of All Things*, Andrew Wilson has done much the same for you. Here is an invitation to see what generations of believers before us saw, to enter the sacred space of the Scriptures and lift up our eyes. Reading each chapter, I marveled anew at the kindness of God to instruct his children with such gentle care. Lovingly and eloquently, Andrew unfolds for us the blueprints, and gestures to the details. He extends to us an invitation to worship and to remember, and to receive the benediction for all whom the Spirit enlivens: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see."

—**Jen Wilkin,** AUTHOR AND BIBLE TEACHER

INTRODUCTION

THE THINGS OF GOD

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
—PSALM 104:24

God didn't have to create a material world. He could have made an entirely spiritual universe, with no matter or physical laws. He could have made the angels and quit while he was ahead. He could have decided to make nothing at all and carry on rejoicing in the fellowship of the Trinity for all eternity.

But instead he made a universe filled with things. Objects. Stuff. Planets, weather, colors, animals, vegetables, minerals. People, complete with noses and kidneys and bodily fluids. It is curious: an immaterial and entirely spiritual God created a thoroughly material and physical world. Perhaps it should surprise us more than it does.

So why did God make *things*? Have you ever wondered that? You're reading Scripture and enjoying its spirituality when suddenly there's an extended section on hair or locusts or water. It jolts. You are struck by the strange physicality of the text. Somehow it feels as though material like this ought not to be in the Bible. So why is it?

We could answer that question a number of ways. One is to picture God like a fountain, bubbling up with so much joy that it overflows into the creation of the world.[1] God does not create because he has to or because he lacks anything. He creates because his delight in being God is so abundant and bountiful that it spills out into a universe of wonders.

Another is to see the physical world as a display case of God's multicolored wisdom. This is the explanation in Psalm 104, one of Scripture's most beautiful songs. God's marvelous intelligence and creativity become visible to us in the things he has made. The psalmist, without access to encyclopedias or the internet, already had a whole bunch of examples in mind: valleys, lions, storks, wine, rock badgers, oil. The more of creation we discover—tropical fish, triceratops, Iguazu Falls, wallabies, coffee—the more our amazement of God's wisdom increases. "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps. 104:24).

Created things teach us practical wisdom as well. Ants show us the power of diligence, even if we feel small or insignificant: "Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise" (Prov. 6:6). We can learn about sexual fidelity from hot coals, about making money from the flight of eagles, about handling anger from churning butter (Prov. 6:27–29; 23:4–5; 30:33). The growth of a tiny mustard seed into a huge bush is an illustration of the power of faith (Matt. 17:20). Jesus' teaching is full of things—sheep, birds, flowers, coins, seeds, trees, fields, salt, light, feet, rain, the sunrise—which instruct us how to live, simply by being there. Watch and learn.

For Paul in Romans 1, creation reveals God's invisible power and divine nature. Few of us can stand in front of the Grand Canyon or see a high-definition picture of the Horsehead Nebula without wanting to praise somebody or something for the majesty of what is before us. Some of us will suppress that urge. But those of us who don't and allow the song of gratitude to swell within us like a storm will find ourselves concluding all sorts of things about our Maker. The God of the Sahara must be vast, boundless, and expansive. The God of quarks must have an unimaginable eye for detail. The God of wombats must have a sense of humor. Everything in creation has theological implications, and one of the joys of being human is figuring out what they are.

What all of these answers have in common is the fact that creation points beyond itself. Things exist not for their own sakes but to draw us back to God. In Augustine's image, the gifts of God in creation are like a boat which takes us back to our homeland: a means of transport which we can (and should) celebrate but never mistake for the destination itself.[2] C. S. Lewis talks about following the sunbeams back to the sun so that we enjoy not just the object of goodness but the source of good.[3] Creation preaches to us. The things of God reveal the God of things.

Sometimes we look at things upside down on this point. Theologians point out (rightly) that the language used for God in Scripture is often anthropomorphic, and we should not take it literally. (God does not literally have a mighty arm, the nations are not literally under his feet, sacrifices do not literally reach his nostrils, and so on.) But this is only half the story, and in some ways the less important half.

It might be more helpful to say that the world is theomorphic: things take the form they do because they are created to reveal God. We describe God as "the Rock" not just because rocks exist and they provide a good picture of safety and stability. Rocks exist because God is the Rock: the Rock of our salvation, the Rock who provides water in the desert, the Rock whose work is perfect and all his ways are just. When we flip things around like this, we get a very different picture of the purpose of creation, of physical stuff, of things. Ever since the beginning, the surface of this planet has been covered with rocks, and every one of them has been preaching a message of the faithfulness, security, and steadfastness of God. "For their rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves" (Deut. 32:31).

This book is an attempt to listen to messages like that. Some chapters offer an exposition of creation, a meditation on who God is, as revealed through specific things. Others consider what a particular thing represents in Scripture and ask what we can learn from it. Others do a bit of both. As you read them, my hope is that you will get a deeper understanding not just of Scripture but of the world you live in, and ultimately of the God who made it all. (I love the idea that you might be walking down the street one day, see one of the things that we consider in this book, and get jolted out of your daydream into wonder and worship.) The book asks questions like, What does the existence of honey tell us about God or about what he has done in Jesus Christ? What are we supposed to learn from the fact that he created pigs, flowers, donkeys, fruit, and earthquakes? Might there even be significance in things that human beings have made: pots, trumpets, tools, cities? After all, "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1 NIV).

Come and see.

PART 1

OLD TESTAMENT

CHAPTER 1

DUST

THE IMAGE OF GOD

> *Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from*
> *the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath*
> *of life, and the man became a living creature.*
>
> —GENESIS 2:7

Dust goes unnoticed, for the most part. It surrounds us all the time, but unless we work in construction, we hardly ever see it. When we do, it is usually because we are trying to get rid of it: hoovering, dusting, sweeping, cleaning behind the fridge, or whatever. I notice it when we first turn the heating on each winter, because everyone starts sneezing. I notice it when the children touch the television screen, leaving a small handprint of black in a sea of a gray powder. I notice it when I go into a shed, lift up a sheet or tarpaulin, and watch the shafts of sunlight illuminate a cloud of fine particles which rise, billow, dance, and eventually settle. Otherwise, although I am continually touching and breathing a cocktail of hairs, pollens, fibers, soil, mites, and skin cells, I try not to think about it.

Dust speaks to us of decay. It comes about through the decomposition of other things, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral. Dust in a home tells us that our cells have died recently. On a building site, it tells us that something has been knocked down or destroyed. When it dominates the landscape, it tells us that plants cannot grow here because the soil is too shallow or the rain too infrequent. Ghost towns and postapocalyptic movies are covered in it, highlighting the loss not just of creatures or structures but of civilization itself. When the greens and browns of life have been and gone, we get the beige of death.

And God says to us, you are made of that.

It doesn't sound very encouraging. Dust evokes decay, decomposition, and death, in Scripture as much as for us, which means that at least part of what it is to be dust people is that we will one day be dead people. When humanity falls, choosing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ahead of the tree of life, the curse upon us—"for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19)—is clearly a reference to mortality. In a world where people pursue the elixir of life as enthusiastically as ever, whether in the form of cryogenics, transhumanism, genome editing, or any other death-denying fad, the Bible makes the certainty of dying as clear as it can be: "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). We came from the soil, and one day we will again be part of it.

People sometimes talk as if Christians believe in immortality and secular materialists don't. The reality is almost the opposite. The certainty of death is integral to Christianity—our future revolves around not immortality but resurrection—while those most eager to postpone or even escape death are usually those with no resurrection hope whatsoever. Early churches met in catacombs, surrounded by corpses. To this day, churches have graveyards and are filled with memorials and crypts for the faithful dead. Our message centers on the one who died and was raised, not someone who carried on living indefinitely in suspended animation. Our sacraments are graphically morbid: we bury people in water, eat a broken body, and drink blood. So as the rich world spends good money trying to avoid (or at least to avoid thinking about) death, part of the mission of the church is to remind them of the obvious. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Surprisingly, though, the first time we are described as being created from dust, it has nothing to do with death. It has to do with life. "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). Humans have not sinned at this point. The tree of life is still available to us. Yet the writer insists that we are created from the dust of the ground. What does this mean?

Partly, it is a way of saying that we are part of the physical creation: we are made of matter, of stuff. We are created to bear the image of God, who is spiritual and invisible, so it is important that we have tangible bodies that occupy space. We are not angels or disembodied spirits; we are built from atoms and molecules, carbon and oxygen.

But it is also a way of highlighting our supernatural, God-breathed origins. In some of the Egyptian and Akkadian creation stories, humans are described as made out of clay, which you can kind of imagine: most of us, with a bit of practice, could form clay into something that looks pretty much like a person. But you could never do that with dust. The most complex shape I could make out of dust would be a pile, and even then it would be instantly scattered by a gust of wind. What causes a bunch of particles to come together into a human being is not any property inherent in the bunch of particles; it is nothing less than the breath of the Lord, which animates the dust and causes it to become a living soul. Without the breath of God, we are nothing more than a pile on the floor. With it, we are bearers of the divine image.

That very realistic description of a human—the dust of the ground plus the breath of the Lord, physical and spiritual, body and soul—is actually a source of great comfort in Scripture. For good theological reasons, a Christian understanding of humanity places a strong emphasis on the image of God, and the essential dignity and grandeur that it confers to all people. We are kings, priests, ambassadors, rulers, made for a little while lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor (Ps. 8:5), and that has crucial implications for the way we treat one another.

But alongside that (vital) emphasis on dignity, there is also an appropriate humility that comes from remembering that "I . . . am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27) and that "he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). Knowing that we come from the ground keeps us grounded; the Latin word *humus*, which means "soil" or "earth," gives us the words humility and human.[4] And there is such reassurance in knowing that God, in his compassion and fatherly kindness, sees us not only as princes, expected to rule the world, but also as dust and ashes, expected to fail sometimes and cry out for rescue. As Hannah sang so beautifully, one of his favorite hobbies is lifting people from the dust and ashes—marginal, broken, poor, and needy people like her, and indeed like me—and seating us with the princes (1 Sam. 2:8).

We are dust, and to dust we shall return. We may find it liberating, unsettling, or terrifying, but it is true nonetheless: one day the cells that compose us will be swirling in the autumn leaves, wedged between sofa cushions, and hidden behind radiators. The same is true of all the world's most powerful and influential people. As with Ozymandias in Shelley's famous poem, their apparently invincible empires will finally turn to dust. So will we.

But only for a while. Ultimately, as Daniel saw, "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). Dry bones in a death valley will be filled with divine breath and raised to life (Ezek. 37:1–12). In Adam we are all dust people, and we decompose accordingly, but in Christ we then rise to become heavenly people for whom dust and decay, mortality and corruptibility, are things of the past. Paul, describing the resurrection to people who couldn't quite believe it, explains that "just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). Our future, Paul says, will be modeled not on the man who came out of the soil but on the man who came out of the tomb.

So get all your hoovering done now. The new creation will be dust free.

CHAPTER

2

EARTHQUAKES

THE GLORY OF GOD

> *Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the* L*ORD* *had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.*
>
> —EXODUS 19:18

Appearances of God are often accompanied by earthquakes. Mountains tremble. The rocks split. People quiver in fear, building foundations rattle, and the land rumbles. When the earth is visited by its King, it shakes. Why?

The most frightening example is probably the first one, when God descends on Mount Sinai in fire. Moses has done his best to prepare the Israelites, but they are nonetheless terrified when, on the morning of the third day, the apparently ordinary mountain beside which they are camping appears to be on fire, shrouded in smoke, covered in a thick cloud out of which thunder and lightning are issuing forth and, with a deafening trumpet blast, getting louder and louder. "The whole mountain trembled greatly" (Ex. 19:18). So did the Israelites (v. 16); they were so frightened that despite having just been promised that they were God's treasured possession and were destined to be kings and priests on earth, they stood far away in terror, refused to approach God, and insisted that Moses speak to him instead (20:18–19). The writer wants us to see the connection, so he uses the same word *(charad)* for the quaking of the earth and the quivering of the people. As the psalmist would write many centuries later, the glory of the Lord makes the people tremble and the earth quake (Ps. 99:1). Earthquakes are associated with the fear of God.

The exodus generation, however, is notoriously forgetful. A while later, a group of the people who were at Sinai that day decide that Moses is too big for his boots and challenge his leadership. "Why . . . do you exalt [yourself] above the assembly of the Lord?" (Num. 16:3). Moses responds with a simple test: if you guys all die a natural death, then that will prove that I haven't been sent by God, but if the earth suddenly splits open and swallows you up, then it will show that you have despised the Lord (vv. 28–30). We know this is not going to end well. Sure enough, "as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up" (vv. 31–32). This is not just an Old Testament thing; there is a very similar sequence in the last book of Scripture, where a massive earthquake splits the world, and the rulers of the earth ask the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:12–17). Earthquakes are associated with the judgment of God.

In several passages, they also represent divine speech. As Ezekiel is commissioned for his prophetic ministry to Judah, he hears "the voice of a great earthquake: 'Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place!'" (Ezek. 3:12). Psalm 29, perhaps the richest meditation on the voice of God in the entire Bible, describes it as thunderous, powerful, majestic, and glorious and then compares it to an earthquake: "The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh" (Ps. 29:8). If we were describing it today, we might compare God's voice to the noise of an airplane breaking the sound barrier, or a rocket launch: a thunderous, booming, awe-inspiring roar which drowns out all other noise with its voluminous authority. When God speaks in Scripture, he sounds like thunder, like an earthquake, like a rushing wind or a mighty waterfall, which is why it is so surprising when Elijah hears God speak not in a hurricane or an earthquake or a fire but in a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11–13). Earthquakes are associated with the voice of God.

So far, so obvious. You can see why the shaking of the earth would make people scared and make them think of divine judgment, and why it would be used to illustrate the power of God's word. But I think earthquakes represent something deeper than that, something which stands behind the fear, the judgment, and the mighty voice. Earthquakes are associated with the glory of God.

You can see the link in a number of texts. When the seraphim make their magnificent proclamation of divine glory—"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:3)—the temple shakes to its very foundations. When Haggai describes the filling of the temple with glory, it is accompanied by an international earthquake (Hag. 2:7). The psalms connect the glory of God and the shaking of the earth (Ps. 97:4–6; 104:31–32). Again, it is worth asking: why?

To answer, we need to know what the Hebrews meant by "glory." If you hear the word glory in English, the chances are that you think of triumph, beauty, and splendor, which is what the Romans meant by *gloria*. But the Hebrew word for glory, *chabod*, was slightly different. It derived from the word for heavy or weighty, a connection which Paul makes when he talks about the "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). Glory, in a sense, is heaviness. Gravitas. So when the ark of God was captured by the Philistines, this was described as the "glory" *(chabod)* departing from Israel, and then immediately afterward we hear that the hand of God was "heavy" *(chabed)* upon the Philistines, afflicting them with tumors and breaking their gods in pieces. To speak of God's glory, in biblical terms, is not just to speak of his splendor and beauty (though that too) but also to speak of how weighty, heavy, and substantial he is.

Now consider: what happens when something glorious, heavy, and weighty descends upon something lighter, flimsier, and less substantial? Displacement. The heavy thing shunts the lighter thing to one side, and the lighter thing has to move—or quake or even tremble—to make space for the heavy thing, whether it wants to or not. If I jump into a pool, I cause a small waterquake. If I drop a giant block of gold onto a frozen pond, I cause an icequake. The weighty substance displaces the flimsy one, and the flimsy one shakes, gives way, and is forced to reorient itself around the weight of glory.

So what happens when the glory of God, the divine *chabod*, descends upon Mount Sinai or the Jerusalem temple or anywhere on earth? An earthquake. God displaces that which is trivial and ephemeral, and forces the earth to reorient itself around him. The earth trembles and quivers in response to the arrival of a far more glorious and substantial reality. The Lord reigns! Let the peoples tremble! Let the earth quake!

The same thing happens when God descends upon people. It is not just that Mount Sinai trembles, as we have seen; the people of Israel do as well. It is not just the temple that shakes in Isaiah's vision; Isaiah himself is undone by the *chabod* and cries out, "Woe is me! For I am lost" (Isa. 6:5). When people encounter the true God, they experience a selfquake. That's one way you can tell if you've met Israel's God or simply a figment of your imagination. A made-up God will leave your world undisturbed, conveniently aligning with your priorities without displacing anything, because ultimately you are more glorious than it is. The real God, however, will land in the middle of your life like an elephant crashing through the ceiling, displacing your sin, changing all your priorities, and forcing you to reorient yourself around the weight of glory.

Yet earthquakes are also associated with the gospel of God. The two most important and hope-filled events in the history of the world, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, were both accompanied by earthquakes. When the King of the earth died, the earth shook and the rocks split (Matt. 27:51). When he rose on the morning of the third day, the same thing happened again (28:2). Both earthquakes prompted fear in those who were there, and in different ways manifested the judgment, the voice, and the glory of God. But they showed more than that. They showed that the Lord was not just greater and weightier and more glorious than the earth, or than the self, but more substantial than the two mightiest and fiercest enemies we have: sin and death. The Prince of Glory died and caused a sinquake. The King of Glory rose and caused a deathquake. The heavy depths of the unshakable Savior crashed into the lightweight shallows of the enemy and displaced him forever, along with all of his minions.

When the King of the earth descends, everything on earth—the people, the mountains, the temple, the principalities and powers, even death itself—is shaken. “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28).

CHAPTER

3

PIGS

THE WELCOME OF GOD

> *"The pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you."*
>
> —LEVITICUS 11:7–8 NIV

I like to call it the pig paradox. On the one hand, no animal is dirtier, smellier, or uglier than a pig. The unfortunate combination of snouts and snorts makes them deeply unattractive. They roll around in mud and eat their own feces. They have become a byword for mess ("her room is a pigsty"), infidelity ("he is such a pig"), ignorance ("pearls before swine"), disaster ("a pig's ear of it"), overeating ("greedy as a pig"), and unappealing facial features ("pig-nosed," "piggy-eyed"). When they are clustered together, you can smell them from miles away; I once had a night's sleep in Yorkshire ruined by the stench from a nearby hog farm. More than a billion people avoid eating or touching them, on religious grounds, considering them filthy and untouchable. You can see why.

On the other hand, they taste sensational. Pork belly, pancetta, honey-glazed gammon, prosciutto, nduja sausage, crackling, ham, barbecued ribs, salami, trotters, hog roast: it is hard to believe that such a wide range of cuts and flavors could come from the same animal. And that is before mentioning the smell of sizzling bacon, which is surely the most delicious aroma there is (with apologies to coffee, fresh bread, and baked cookies). Bizarrely, if you were to create a smell spectrum, from the vilest stench to the most enticing aroma, pigs would find themselves at both ends of it, depending on whether it was before or after they died. How can something that smells so bad when it is alive smell so great when it isn't? How can death transform something from filthy and untouchable to aromatic and delightful? Hold that thought for a moment.

Pigs, under the law of Moses, were off-limits to Israel. Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy command that they are not to be eaten or touched, and although various reasons have been suggested for this (their smell, their habits, the danger of eating them uncooked), the reason given in the law is simply that they have divided hoofs, have cloven feet, and do not chew the cud. It can look a bit arbitrary to us, but God simply declares that some animals are clean and some animals aren't: cows, sheep, pigeons, goats, and scaly fish are fine, but camels, shellfish, snakes, birds of prey, and animals with paws are not.[5] And the most detestable of unclean animals—the ones Isaiah mentions to show just how depraved people can be, even to the point of eating swine flesh (Isa. 65:4; 66:17)—are pigs. As gentiles, by nature unclean and separated from Israel ourselves, we can feel a certain sympathy for them.

That is not where the similarity between pigs and gentiles stops. The first person who ever preached the gospel to gentiles was the apostle Peter, and he did so only because he saw a vision of a sheet full of unclean animals (Acts 10:9–16)—a vision in which, we may assume, pigs played a starring role—and heard a voice telling him to eat them, since "what God has made clean, do not call common" (v. 15). Non-Jewish people like me got baptized only because Peter saw a bunch of pigs and other unclean animals, and then saw a bunch of gentiles, and then saw the resemblance. "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation," he explained to the gentiles who had invited him over for a visit, "but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean" (v. 28). That's a nice way of putting it. Even Peter, not always the most diplomatic of the apostles, had the good manners not to mention that his hosts were the equivalent of a sheet full of pigs, scallops, and snakes.

The result of that vision was extraordinary. By the end of Acts 10, the first ever handful of gentiles had been baptized in water and filled with the Spirit and were speaking in tongues and praising God (vv. 44–48). Now there are upward of two billion of us: formerly unclean, cloven-footed, cud-chewing gentiles who have been washed from our dirt and purified from our sins and now offer ourselves as fragrant offerings to the God who makes common things clean. It is the pig paradox again. Death—in our case, the death of Christ—has taken that which was filthy and untouchable, and made us aromatic and delightful by the grace of God.

The most famous pig-related incident in Scripture is the moment when Jesus delivers a demon-oppressed man, only to send the demons into a herd of two thousand pigs, who all promptly charge down a cliff and drown in the sea. You can read it in Mark 5:1–20, and it's just as bizarre as it sounds. Generations of interpreters, seeking to make sense of a baffling story, have found all kinds of tenuous principles in the passage, such as one person is worth more than two thousand pigs, you should always ask a demon's name before casting it out, and so on.

But when we bear in mind what pigs and gentiles have in common in Jewish thought, we start to see ourselves in this poor, broken, demonized man. He is unclean, impure, an outsider, surrounded by pigs, and unable to access the presence or the people of God. As gentiles, so were we. He lives among the tombs, with death all around him, naked and ashamed, without hope and without God. So did we. He is oppressed by the powers of darkness, crying out in pain and harming himself, beyond the reach of any human power. So were we.

Then he meets Jesus. The Savior not only sets him free from the devil's tyranny but humiliates his enemies (and ours) by driving them, and all the uncleanness and impurity they represent, down the cliff and into the sea. The man is restored to his right mind and clothed in new garments. He is visibly transformed by the encounter, such that those who have known him before come to fear the power of Jesus. He is desperate to follow his new Master and Savior. As the story closes, he is given a new mission:

to return to his community and “tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). The pigs have died, but in their death the man has found new life and has been thoroughly delivered from the powers that oppressed him and the uncleanness that tainted him. So have we. Like the prodigal son, we stumble toward our father, desperate for more than pig pods and reeking of swine, and we are as surprised as anyone when he hugs us, kisses us, and dresses us in a fresh set of clothes before inviting us in to a feast.

In Christ, pigs become bacon. It’s the welcome of God. Those whom you wouldn’t have wanted in the garden, for all their stinking and snorting and snuffling, experience death and find themselves welcomed into the kitchen for everybody to savor. Stench dies, impurity is washed away, and we who were once unclean become a pleasing, crispy, tasty, aromatic offering to God. Therefore “what God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15).