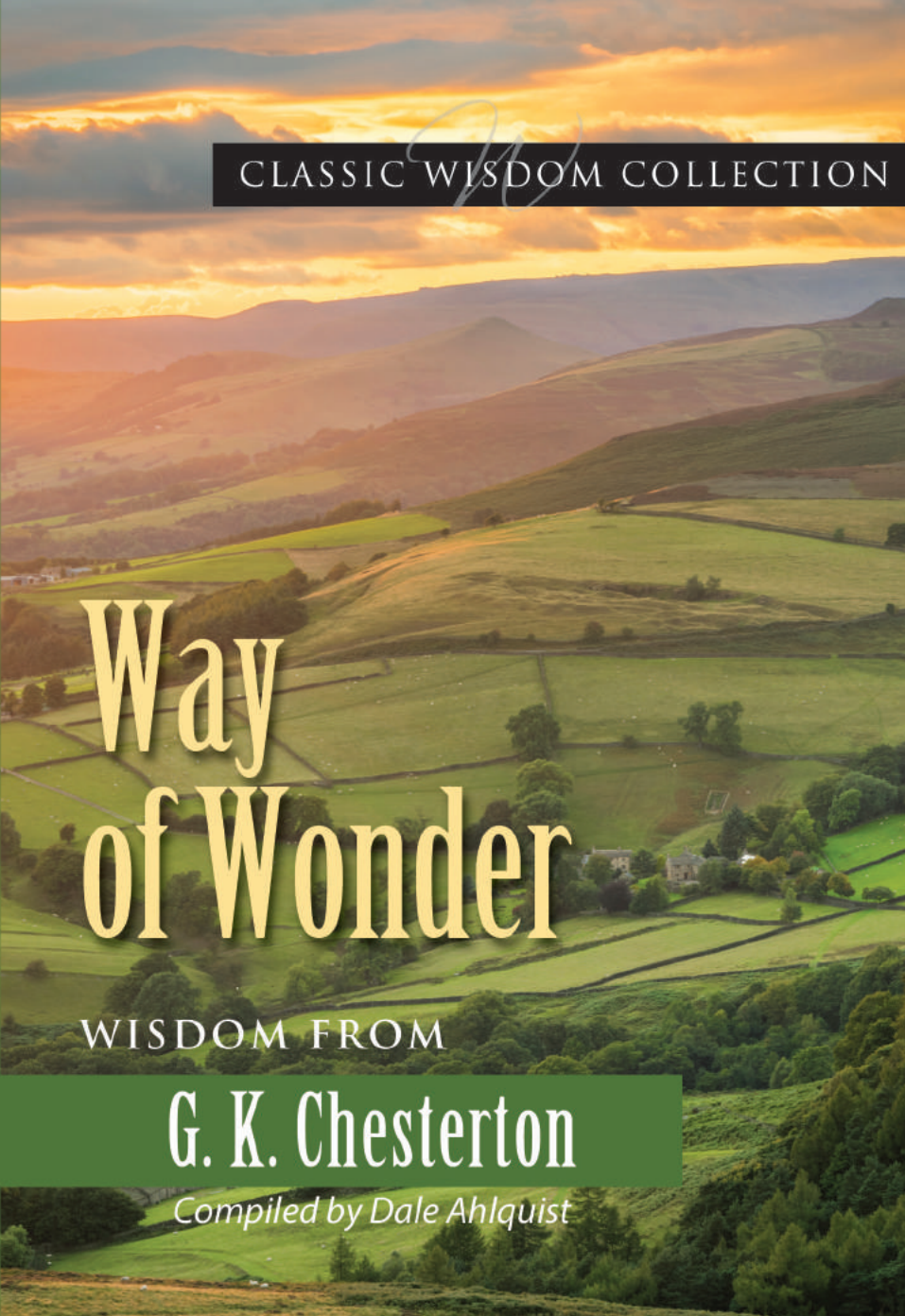
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Way of Wonder
WISDOM FROM
G. K. Chesterton
Compiled by Dale Ahlquist

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Way of Wonder

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Wisdom from G. K. Chesterton

Compiled and with a foreword by Dale Ahlquist

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Foreword

The most famous wise man in history said, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10). Three thousand years later, another wise man added, "But it is not the end." G. K. Chesterton (in his book on Saint Thomas Aquinas) plainly states what Solomon's proverb implies.

We approach God almost with a retreat. The first step toward the truth is made with such humble and holy reverence that it can only be described with the word "fear." The first encounter with truth is that we are unworthy of it. Our honest words are those of Saint Peter when he suddenly realized who Christ was: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). That is the beginning of wisdom.

But it is not the end.

After we encounter God the Judge and reconcile with him, then we can properly encounter God the Creator. Chesterton says we can, even in a mystical way, be present at the moment of creation "when the foundations of the world are laid, with the morning stars singing together and the sons of God shouting for joy." (*Saint Francis of Assisi*).

The path to this fulfillment, this true joy, is paved by wonder. It is the sense of awe at something that is too good to be true—and yet is true. It is the path to holiness.

The natural response to revelation is wonder. Chesterton, the great writer of detective fiction and creator of the priest-sleuth Father Brown, enjoys the art of revelation, which usually means the startling solution at the conclusion of a mystery tale, or even the startling conclusion at the end of an essay. The surprise ending. But there is another technique in the mystery genre: that of revealing everything at the beginning, starting with what seems to be the perfect crime, one that will be impossible to solve, and then watching how the detective manages to solve it.

We could argue that the story of salvation has been told this way. We begin with the crime in the garden, the Fall that brings about death. It looks like death is going to be the victor. This great crime seems to be completed by an even greater crime, the death of God. But that turns out to be the

solution. The death is a sacrifice. It is not the end, but the beginning. It leads to resurrection and the reward of eternal life. The central truth of our faith is indeed good news to a world mired in death and disobedience. We call those who proclaim this good news, this "gospel," evangelists. The story of salvation, just like the story of creation, is full of wonder.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936) is one of the most fascinating and delightful evangelists of the modern world. He was not a priest, not a preacher, not a member of a religious order. He was a British journalist, writing what he considered to be ephemera, and yet his "throwaway" words are still being read over seventy-five years after he laid down his pen and breathed his last. The words were written by a secular writer for a secular audience, yet new readers continue to be inspired by them, and as a result many of them have found their way to the Catholic Church.

One of the most prolific writers who ever lived, Chesterton was extremely popular in his own day. He wrote dozens of books on all subjects, as well as novels, plays, extensive poetry, and detective fiction. He was primarily a journalist and regularly contributed to both major and minor periodicals throughout his career. In constant demand as a speaker, he went on several lecture tours that took him throughout Europe, twice to America, and once to the Holy

Land. His conversion to Catholicism in 1922 was major news in the literary world, and most of his writing during the last decade of his life focused on the theory and practice of Catholic social teaching. Known for his aphorisms and good humor, he was widely quoted, and his opinions were sought on every topic of the day. The whole world mourned his death at the early age of sixty-two, and Pope Pius XI called him "a gifted defender of the Faith." Oddly, Chesterton went into an almost total eclipse after his death, but his work has begun to enjoy a revival in recent years. There is even a movement to see him canonized.

Chesterton's great challenge was to find a way to write about the ordinary in the world of journalism where only the things that are out of the ordinary are considered news: "I can say abnormal things in modern magazines. It is the normal things that I am not allowed to say" (*A Miscellany of Men*). And for Chesterton, the "ordinary" things are more important: "Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things. Nay, they are more extraordinary" ("The Ethics of Elfland," *Orthodoxy*). And what are the ordinary things? They are the truths that are timeless, the truths that are eternal. "The most interesting ideas are those which the newspapers dismiss as dogmas" (*The Thing*). The fact that he managed to get these dogmas into the newspapers is one of his greatest accomplishments.

Though Chesterton considered himself to be nothing more than a journalist, his literary achievements far surpass that humble title. But he has not been served well by those who have tried to strictly categorize him as either a literary, or philosophical, or religious figure. He tried to be the representative, the voice of the common man, even if he was himself uncommon. And just as he does not fit well into any neat category, so the categories that I have chosen in order to present a selection from his writings are rather porous if not poor. But they show us, at least, the surprising connection between wonder and virtue.

It is safe to say that Chesterton presents not only classic wisdom, but condensed wisdom—great ideas packed into concise quotations. Though an incredibly prolific writer, he put the "ink" into "succinct." (Bear with me.) The mere taste of Chesterton's wisdom found in this small volume necessarily leaves out the complete meal. Missing is his profound treatment of evil; his magnificent quest for social justice; his original artistic, political, and historical insights; the full extent of his philosophical and theological understanding; and his detective fiction. While the overarching theme of this volume is wonder, Chesterton is one who finds great joy in doing battle, great joy in seeing justice achieved, great joy in solving the riddle. It is heartening to fight evil, to defeat what is wrong, to elevate what is right, and so it seems unfair

to leave that part of Chesterton's message out, especially since his passion for justice filled so many pages of his writing. His compassion is twofold:

> *As we should be genuinely sorry for tramps and paupers who are materially homeless, so we should be sorry for those who are morally homeless, and who suffer a philosophical starvation as deadly as physical starvation.*
>
> Excerpt from *Illustrated London News*,
> November 24, 1934

But what is left out takes nothing away from the passages packed into this small volume. The choices here reflect those parts of the path to holiness that have drawn so many people to Chesterton—especially his wonder, his goodness, and his overflowing joy.

Dale Ahlquist
President, American Chesterton Society

I

Wonder

Really, the things we remember are the things we forget. I mean that when a memory comes back sharply and suddenly, piercing the protection of oblivion, it appears for an instant exactly as it really was. If we think of it often, while its essentials doubtless remain true, it becomes more and more our own memory of the thing rather than the thing remembered. . . . This is the real difficulty about remembering anything: that we have remembered too much—for we have remembered too often. . . .

From this general memory about memory I draw a certain inference. What was wonderful about childhood is that anything in it was a wonder. It was not merely a world

full of miracles; it was a miraculous world. What gives me this shock is almost anything I really recall, not the things I should think most worth recalling. This is where it differs from the other great thrill of the past, all that is connected with first love and the romantic passion; for that, though equally poignant, comes always to a point and is narrow like a rapier piercing the heart. Whereas the other was more like a hundred windows opened on all sides of the head.

—Excerpt from "The Man with the Golden Key," *Autobiography*

It is only the obvious things that are never seen; and a thing is often counted stale merely because men have been staring at it so long without seeing it. There is nothing harder to bring within a small and clear compass than generalizations about history, or even about humanity. But there is one especially evident and yet elusive thing in this matter of happiness. When men pause in the pursuit of happiness, seriously to picture happiness, they have always made what may be called a "primitive "picture. Men rush toward complexity, but they yearn toward simplicity. They try to be kings, but they dream of being shepherds.

—Excerpt from "The Moral of Stevenson," *Robert Louis Stevenson*

The world will never starve for want of wonders, but only for want of wonder.

—Excerpt from "Tremendous Trifles," *Tremendous Trifles*

We all feel the riddle of the earth, with no one to point it out for us.

—Excerpt from *William Blake*

Men, looking suddenly at spring flowers, have a poignant sense of being at once intoxicated and unsatisfied; a feeling only to be expressed in the words, "What is it all about?" What is that shining mystery which is called the beauty of the world? Who did it—why did they do it—what are they going to do next—what shall I do about it—what does it mean? What demanded explanation was not the process of vegetation but his interest in the process. It was not so much the question of a certain system in the world as of a certain spell laid upon him; and it may be noted that travelers and missionaries all report that in barbaric tribes the

minimum of religion is always a belief in the charm or witchcraft of certain creatures or things. It was not the opening of the flowers the man wanted explained, but the opening of his own heart when he saw them. Religion did not begin in botany, but in psychology and aesthetics. The soul is satisfied, the soul only can be satisfied, by something involving a person or a story. Any explanation is good enough for grass, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven.[1] But only one explanation is good enough for the beauty of grass. It is the explanation that springs to the lips of every good savage, of every good poet, and, I may add, of every good theologian. It is a God.

Then comes that next great leap of the liberated soul which the scientists cannot comprehend. The fascination of the flowers, when once it has touched the soul, demands a story and a person. The flowers were but a few hints that there *was* a story; and now the story has begun. For the soul cares . . . for the story of the spring—because it is a detective story.

A child does not look at the lustrous lattice-work of the frost, and say, "This can only be explained on the hypothesis that a man called Jack Frost does it with his finger." He feels that such feathery exactitude suggests the finger of somebody: and as he is not allowed, in the best regulated modern families, to say it is the finger of God; he says it is Jack Frost. The process which remains perfectly direct and prompt is

the passage from the idea of beauty to the idea of personality: art cries out for an artist. It is plainly impossible that so standard a work as the universe should remain anonymous.

But when the child has thought of Jack Frost, he thinks more of Jack Frost than of the frost itself. The pattern only excites; but the person satisfies. By the end of the business, the child has begun to feel that Jack Frost has rather honored the windows by drawing on them at all. He is superior to windows, superior even to winter; he is what no dead things can be—he is in a story. As these children think about winter, so have all the children of men always thought about autumn and spring. If all this beauty meant purpose, the purpose took the first place; if not the beauty was hardly even beautiful. If the flowers meant a god, they were flung at the feet of the god. If they did not mean a god, they were flung away.

—Excerpt from *Daily News*, April 13, 1912

Unless the sky is beautiful, nothing is beautiful. Unless the background of all things is good, it is no substitute to make the foreground better.

—Excerpt from *New Witness*, October 12, 1916

A man's soul is as full of voices as a forest; there are ten thousand tongues there like all the tongues of the trees: fancies, follies, memories, madnesses, mysterious fears, and more mysterious hopes. All the settlement and sane government of life consists in coming to the conclusion that some of those voices have authority and others not. You may have an impulse to fight your enemy or an impulse to run away from him; a reason to serve your country or a reason to betray it; a good idea for making sweets or a better idea for poisoning them. The only test I know by which to judge one argument or inspiration from another is ultimately this: that all the noble necessities of man talk the language of eternity. When man is doing the three or four things that he was sent on this earth to do, then he speaks like one who shall live for ever. . . . There are in life certain immortal moments, moments that have authority.

—Excerpt from *Illustrated London News*, July 2, 1910

At present the trend of the skeptical world is toward mere emancipation, accumulation, and enjoyment. Everyone is asking why they may not have this, why they should not do that. But anyone who knows the alphabet of man knows that happiness does not work like this, that a little goes a long way, that contrast counts for much—that people

enjoy most the unexpected pleasure, the edges and the beginnings of things. In two words, we know that joy greatly depends on wonder; and we know that wonder partly depends on rarity.

—Excerpt from *Daily News,* March 2, 1907

The aim of life is appreciation; there is no sense in not appreciating things; and there is no sense in having more of them if you have less appreciation of them.

—Excerpt from "The God with the Golden Key," *Autobiography*

We should always endeavor to wonder at the permanent thing, not at the mere exception. We should be startled by the sun, and not by the eclipse. We should wonder less at the earthquake, and wonder more at the earth.

—Excerpt from *Illustrated London News*, October 21, 1905

All our educational experiments are in the wrong direction. They are concerned with turning children, not only

into men, but into modern men; whereas modern men need nothing so much as to be made a little more like children. The whole object of real education is a renascence of wonder, a revival of that receptiveness to which poetry and religion appeal.

—Excerpt from *New Witness*, October 28, 1921

A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door.

—Excerpt from "The Ethics of Elfland," *Orthodoxy*

And I know that clouds are alive and cling
    And the dusty path is rough
But I know that the least grain of dust
    Has never been praised enough.

—Excerpt from the poem "The Fanatic," 1920

We can only take a sample of the universe, and that sample, even if it be a handful of dust (which is also a beautiful

substance), will always assert the magic of itself and hint of the magic of all things.

—Excerpt from "Paints in a Paint-box," *The Coloured Lands*

Existence is still a strange thing to me, and as a stranger, I give it welcome.

—Excerpt from "The God with the Golden Key," *Autobiography*

There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject; the only thing that can exist is an uninterested person.

—Excerpt from "On Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Making the World Small," *Heretics*

Saint Francis . . . was above all things a great giver, and he cared chiefly for the best kind of giving which is called thanksgiving. If another great man wrote a grammar of assent, he may well be said to have written a grammar of acceptance—a grammar of gratitude. He understood down to its very depths the theory of thanks; and its depths are a

bottomless abyss. He knew that the praise of God stands on its strongest ground when it stands on nothing. He knew that we can best measure the towering miracle of the mere fact of existence if we realize that but for some strange mercy we should not even exist.

—Excerpt from "The Testament of Saint Francis," *Saint Francis of Assisi*

The test of all happiness is gratitude. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings two marvelous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?

—Excerpt from "The Ethics of Elfland," *Orthodoxy*

The point of the story of Satan is not that he revolted against being in hell, but that he revolted against being in heaven. The point about Adam is not that he was discontented with the conditions of the earth, but that he was discontented with the conditions of the earthly paradise.

—Excerpt from *New York American*, December 15, 1932

The sky is astonishing everywhere and should alone keep all men from materialism or indifference.

—Excerpt from "The Return of the Romans," *The Resurrection of Rome*

It is, after all, a precious and wonderful privilege to exist at all. . . . We must praise God for creating us out of nothing.

—Excerpt from "A History of Half-Truths," *Where All Roads Lead*

In the ultimate and universal sense I am astonished at the lack of astonishment.

—Excerpt from *New Witness*, January 25, 1917

The function of imagination is not to make strange things settled so much as to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders.

—Excerpt from "A Defence of China Shepherdesses," *The Defendant*

The universe is a single jewel, and while it is a natural can't to talk of a jewel as peerless and priceless, of this jewel it is literally true. This cosmos is indeed without peer and without price: for there cannot be another one.

—Excerpt from "The Ethics of Elfland," *Orthodoxy*

What makes a real religion mystical is that it claims (truly or falsely) to be hiding a beauty that is more beautiful than any that we know, or perhaps an evil that is more evil. This gives another sort of intensity to common things, suggesting something that is redder than red, or more white than white.

—Excerpt from *Illustrated London News*, February 17, 1923

It is a strange thing that many truly spiritual men have actually spent some hours in speculating upon the precise location of the Garden of Eden. Most probably we are in Eden still. It is only our eyes that have changed.

—Excerpt from the Introduction, *The Defendant*

Can you not see that fairy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward, but that this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible? Folklore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming.

—Excerpt from "The Dragon's Grandmother," *Tremendous Trifles*

It is vain to learn to enjoy sport, or to enjoy art, or to enjoy festivity, if we have not learned the fundamental function: how to enjoy enjoyment.

—Excerpt from *Columbia*, October, 1924

There are no dreary sights; only dreary sightseers.

—Excerpt from "The Romance of the Marshes,"
Alarms and Discursions

I do not think there is anyone who takes quite such a fierce pleasure in things being themselves as I do. The startling wetness of water excites and intoxicates me: the

fieriness of fire, the steeliness of steel, the unutterable muddiness of mud.

—Excerpt from a letter postmarked July 8, 1899,
to his fiancée, Frances

The mystic is not a man who reverences large things so much as a man who reverences small ones, who reduces himself to a point, without parts or magnitude, so that to him the grass is really a forest and the grasshopper, a dragon. Little things please great minds.

—Excerpt from *The Speaker*, December 15, 1900

The two facts which attract almost every normal person to children are, first, that they are very serious, and, secondly, that they are in consequence very happy. They are jolly with the completeness which is possible only in the absence of humor. The most unfathomable schools and sages have never attained to the gravity which dwells in the eyes of a baby of three months old. It is the gravity of astonishment at the universe, and astonishment at the universe is not mysticism, but a transcendent common sense. The fascination

of children lies in this: that with each of them all things are remade, and the universe is put again upon its trial. As we walk the streets and see below us those delightful bulbous heads—three times too big for the body—which mark these human mushrooms, we ought always primarily to remember that within every one of these heads there is a new universe, as new as it was on the seventh day of creation. In each of those orbs there is a new system of stars, new grass, new cities, a new sea.

There is always in the healthy mind an obscure prompting that religion teaches us rather to dig than to climb; that if we could once understand the common clay of earth we should understand everything. Similarly, we have the sentiment that if we could destroy custom at a blow and see the stars as a child sees them, we should need no other apocalypse. This is the great truth which has always lain at the back of baby-worship, and which will support it to the end. Maturity, with its endless energies and aspirations, may easily be convinced that it will find new things to appreciate; but it will never be convinced, at bottom, that it has properly appreciated what it has got. We may scale the heavens and find new stars innumerable, but there is still the new star we have not found—that on which we were born.

But the influence of children goes further than its first trifling effort of remaking heaven and earth. It forces us

actually to remodel our conduct in accordance with this revolutionary theory of the marvelousness of all things.

—Excerpt from "In Defence of Baby Worship," *The Defendant*

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are—incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously—real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially *unthanking*. For he who has realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our rumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude. That light of the positive is the business of the poets because they see all things in the light of it more than do other men. Chaucer was a child of light and not merely of twilight, the mere red twilight of one passing dawn of revolution, or the grey twilight of one dying day of social decline. He was the immediate heir of something like what Catholics call the Primitive Revelation; that glimpse that was given of the world when God saw that it was good. And so long as the artist gives us glimpses of

that, it matters nothing that they are fragmentary or even trivial; whether it be in the mere fact that a medieval court poet could appreciate a daisy, or that he could write, in a sort of flash of blinding moonshine, of the lover who "slept no more than does the nightingale."[2] These things belong to the same world of wonder as the primary wonder at the very existence of the world; higher than any common pros and cons, or likes and dislikes, however legitimate. Creation was the greatest of all Revolutions. It was for that, as the ancient poet said, that the morning stars sang together; and the most modern poets, like the medieval poets, may descend very far from that height of realization and stray and stumble and seem distraught; but we shall know them for the Sons of God, when they are still shouting for joy. This is something much more mystical and absolute than any modern thing that is called optimism; for it is only rarely that we realize, like a vision of the heavens filled with a chorus of giants, the primeval duty of Praise.

—Excerpt from "The Greatness of Chaucer," *Chaucer*

We are the children of light, and [yet] it is we who sit in darkness.

—Excerpt from "A Defence of Patriotism," *The Defendant*

No, it is not that the world is rubbish and that we throw it away. It is exactly when the whole world of stars is a jewel, like the jewels we have lost, that we remember the price. And we look up as you say, in this dim thicket and see the price, which was the death of God.

—Excerpt from "The Tower of Treason,"
The Man Who Knew Too Much