



Ex Libris
FROM THE WRITINGS OF

G. K. Chesterton

Compiled by Dale Ahlquist

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Introduction

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.



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 renaissance of wonder, a revival of that receptiveness to which poetry and religion appeal.

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

