



Excerpt from *Surprised by Paradox*

 INTERVARSITY PRESS

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
ivpress.com
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ISBN 978-0-8308-7092-9 (digital)

ISBN 978-0-8308-4564-4 (print)

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

FOREWORD

Russ Ramsey

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.

MARK 4:26-27

When I was in my early twenties, I discovered the joy of studying theology. I found myself aligning with a large number of other people like me who were discovering a theological framework for understanding God and the world that seemed watertight.

As a young man interested in ministry and theology, I marveled at the way the doctrines I was learning made God, the world, and my place in it fit together like a puzzle. Putting the puzzle together took work, but the promise was that if I kept at it, I would come to see the things of God with a kind of crystal clarity that would make my faith, and my calling, unassailable.

That was half my life ago. I still love studying theology, and I have not abandoned the doctrines that took hold of my heart and mind when I was younger. But many of the ideas about God I assumed would have become crystal clear to me at this point in my life seem to have withdrawn more into the shadows of mystery—remaining ever-present while managing to evade capture. The older I get, the more I discover that certainty can be elusive.

I want to be clear here. I believe in certainty, but I do not believe in comprehensive certainty. Anyone who says they do is either a liar or a fool. We don't know what we don't know. The apostle Paul wrote, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

We know in part.

In terms of the essentials of saving faith, God's word is clear. He gave us Scripture "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). God's word is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15).

And yet, here lies a paradox. Even of the things we're certain about, we only know in part. For example, I know that "Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom 8:34). But please don't ask me to describe that room or recite Christ's prayer. Even my best guess would fall way short.

Seeing through the glass dimly is not a flaw in the system. Rather, it is in keeping with what we know about God. God is glorious. Moses only saw the back part of a passing God, and that while hidden in the cleft of a rock, because if he saw any more, he

would have died (see Ex 33:20-23). Mystery abounds when dealing with God because he is God and we are not. Allowing for paradox does not represent a weakened approach to theological understanding. On the contrary, it allows for a robust theology, one that is filled with the sort of awe that not only regards God as unimaginably wondrous but also awakens in us the same desire Moses had to see him as he is.

Theological understanding should not become a substitute for faith. Studied rightly, theology should lead to awe and wonder. To that end, my friend Jen Pollock Michel has given us a gift. It seems to me that the church has a renewed appetite for wonder, mystery, paradox, and awe, so *Surprised by Paradox* comes at an important time.

As a pastor, I have seen the danger that comes with believing God can be solved like an equation. When we treat him like a system of theological points rather than the glorious Creator of heaven and earth, we end up bending what we think about him to fit the structure we think contains him. The problem with this is that my twenty-year-old understanding of God doesn't fit into the box the God I know now in my forties requires. And I have to believe that if I reach my seventies, my view of him will be different in many ways from what it is today.

I am not talking about abandoning orthodoxy or venturing away from the faith. God forbid. I am talking about venturing deeper in. Today, my understanding of God is informed by suffering, vocational challenges, parental struggles, and a deeper understanding of my own sin that were not in play in my twenties. My questions about God increase in number not because I know less, but because I know more. And as my questions increase, so does my faith, which Scripture esteems as a higher prize than certainty (see 1 Cor 13:13).

Jen describes *Surprised by Paradox* as “a book about faith in its lived-in condition—as it abides complexity rather than resists it.” Surely abiding complexity rather than resisting it is a spiritual discipline. This book is a Biblically grounded, theologically sound guide for honing that skill. I am so glad she wrote it and that you are reading it.

Our culture races to the logical fallacy that says if something doesn't make sense to me, it must not make sense at all. What a tragically small view of the world folded into an even more tragically large view of ourselves. We were made to wonder, to form questions in our hearts that no other human being can answer—questions that belong to a world that transcends what we can comprehend. These questions do not drive us away from God; they draw us near.

Jesus said the seed sprouts and grows, and we know not how. In these pages, Jen Pollock Michel reminds us that though we know not how, the seeds still do sprout and grow. This is God's work. To wonder about such things is to worship. To God be the glory.



INTRODUCTION

A Little Bit of Wondering

Macey was good at cleaning my house. She was also good at proselytizing. She would search articles from the Jehovah's Witness website, then leave her phone on my desk as I worked on drafts of this book. "Read this," she would insist, wagging her finger before leaving to strip beds.

Macey, a housekeeper I'd hired from a Craigslist ad, had been studying six years to be baptized as a Jehovah's Witness, a movement that began with a small group of Bible students living near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the end of the nineteenth century when they undertook "a systematic analysis of the Bible." Comparing the doctrines taught by evangelical churches with the teachings of Scripture, they purportedly found great incongruity. "They began publishing their learning in books, newspapers, and the journal that is now called *The Watchtower—Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*."¹

It was these systematic teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses that Macey liked to share with me in long stretches of the afternoon. "I love Jehovah," she would exclaim as my thoughts drifted impatiently to the work that both of us were neglecting. I couldn't help

believing her. But one afternoon burned with unusual intensity, even if Macey was hard of hearing and our communication halting. We scribbled furiously on Post-it Notes. We opened heavy tomes from my bookshelves. We parsed out meanings of Hebrew and Greek words.

Yet on this afternoon and every other, theology was a suburban cul-de-sac to circle endlessly. We never managed to get anywhere. In these afternoon conversations, Macey dogged me with difficult questions, and to be honest, despite having the résumé I do, I was short on answers.

As I began to understand it, the crusade for “orthodoxy” by the Jehovah’s Witnesses had been a campaign to eliminate all the paradoxes of the Christian faith.

The paradox of the three-in-one God.

The paradox of the incarnation.

The paradox of grace.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses seemed to have tidied faith like one might have straightened a drawer. They had tamed the roaring lion of doctrinal complexity by injuring one of its legs. Jesus was God—but not as fully god as Jehovah. (The Holy Spirit was simply an impersonal force of God’s will.) God loved his people—but his people were still expected to prove themselves loveable. As Macey held her faith up for view, I saw right angles, straight lines, closed circles. It was the geometry of certainty, defended by proof.

“Mysteries,” I wanted to call these paradoxes, even if the explanation felt a little like drawing my theological tail between my legs. Macey surely counted a mysterious faith to be an unreliable one.

She had neat rows, taut threads, and knotted ends. I had tangles.

It’s the tangles that are the concern of this book—the places of

paradox in Christian faith, where we are obliged to uphold truths “logically at variance with one another.”² My interest is in the crooked lines, the irregular shapes, the open circles—which is to say, not the proofs but the problems. Admittedly, the tangles are for many of us a source of confusion, fear, or chagrin. Whether when we find ourselves in conversation with a Jehovah’s Witness or a person with no claim to religious faith, as evangelicals we’d much rather offer certainties to the world than questions. It’s from our bastion of impregnable dogma that we feel safest.



In its best light, religious faith in Toronto, where I live, is considered a quaint artifact from earlier generations, much like the lace doilies our grandmothers used to adorn their furniture. Those doilies were never of much use, even if they were once considered beautiful. In its worst light, religious faith in Toronto is thought primitive and bigoted, the violent weapon of dogmatism in an enlightened, tolerant world. I expect the tangles to do damage to people like my agnostic Jewish friend, Shane, who has been reading the book of Numbers. I wonder, Will he feel, as Macey does, that the paradoxes of faith make a reasonable case for dismissing it? I wonder about my own responsibility for straightening the tangles for people like Ruben and Olga, my Russian neighbors across the street whose first understanding of Christ’s resurrection came over a glass of wine in our kitchen. To my friends and my neighbors, I want to confidently make a defense of my hope when people ask; I’m just no longer sure that hope holds the same shape as certitude. Can’t I sometimes say, “I don’t know,” or, “I’m not sure”?

I certainly grew up in a tradition with a lot of faith in the Bible to predict and answer every question. In the Southern Baptist churches I attended throughout my childhood, our pastors bent over their wooden pulpits with fervor, Sunday after Sunday, leaning on one hand to feverishly gesticulate with the other. The sermons

The Bible was to be trusted for its encyclopedic knowledge; doubt signaled the failure to have read and understood it. Believers always needed more certainty, not less.

were alliterated, every point as solid as the brass plate we passed during the offering. We tightened the belt of faith with Scriptures we memorized; we brandished the sword of truth with brazen self-assurance. I grew to love the Bible in those pews, grew hungry for every word that precedes from the mouth of God, grew up confidently believing that if bushes burned, God would surely tell us how and why. The Bible was to be trusted for its encyclopedic knowledge; doubt signaled the failure to have read and understood it.

Believers always needed more certainty, not less.

Yet even as a sixteen-year-old, new to the daily practice of reading Scripture, I remember diving into the book of Revelation and surfacing from its murky waters with more curiosities than certainties. I was one of the lonely ones who turned the pages of Scriptures and turned up more wondering. I did not come to the easy compliance that others in my church seemed to muster, which is one way of saying that I saw less acquiescence in biblical faith and far more audacity.

In the pages of Scripture I found Abraham, who seemed to wonder irreverently about God's promises: "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my

house is Eliezer of Damascus?” I met Jacob, who tried striking a bargain with God at Bethel: “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.” I encountered Moses, who doubted his ability to fulfill God’s call and tried refusing the divine commission. “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” I met Naomi, who blamed the Lord for her misfortunes: “I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.” I found Hannah, whose desperate prayers mimicked drunkenness: “Give to your servant a son.”

In Scripture, I saw paradoxical qualities of faith that weren’t commended to me from the pulpit: wondering, resisting, interrogating. In holy writ, I saw faith riddled with fallibility and fear. I saw the heroes of Scripture as emphatically human, getting a lot wrong even as they tried mustering some praise.

I started to wonder if tangles—and tangled faith—were less exception and more rule.



The Atlantic recently published a compilation of studies titled “Awesomeness Is Everything.” In each of the studies, experts measured the effects of awe. As psychologists have described it, awe is “the experience of encountering something so vast—in size, skill, beauty, intensity, etc.—that we struggle to comprehend it and may even adjust our world to accommodate it.”³ Awe is our slack-jawed response to natural phenomena like waterfalls and childbirth. To feel awe is to confirm a beautiful, wild universe, a world we neither made nor control.

According to these scientific studies, when we feel awe, there are two characteristic effects. For the more agnostic among us, awe nurtures the belief “in evolution as an orderly versus random process.” We may not credit a Creator for the beauty and bigness of natural phenomena, but neither will we dismiss them as completely accidental. For all the wildness of the world, we reckon it to be purposefully so. For those of us inclined to religious belief, awe nurtures our certainty about God. When we experience magnificence, it confirms our belief in a Maker. We understand nothing more purposeful than the divine hand carving out the mountains and crafting the human body.

The religious and irreligious alike experience awe. One looks more like worship, of course, but both are characterized, as the studies conclude, by the appetite for imposing order. In other words, in the world today we accept awesomeness, but we want it tamed. There is only so much mystery we can tolerate, only so much smallness we can assume.

To trace it historically, the appetite for order is a craving we’ve inherited from our Enlightenment fathers. Before the “flat” world of mystery had yet to be ironically flattened by modern hubris, the world was once considered to be an enchanted world, inhabited and acted on by invisible, spiritual forces.⁴ As we were vulnerable to those forces (the boundary between the world and the self being porous and penetrable), we were never completely safe apart from the counterdefense that was God, mysteriously and materially present in the communion Host. Fear made heresy impossible—a menace to whole communities.

Then came Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, even the Reformation: the “sacramental tapestry” of the world—

this idea that the world could show us something of the transcendent, even God himself—was cut.⁵ Mystery was expelled from the universe, and we were left with a “visible, measurable, and scientifically verifiable world,” ready to be sliced open and splayed out.⁶ Even the sacraments came to be understood differently: we met God not in the physical wafer and wine, but in the *representation* of his body and blood. Modernity gave us more certainty than uncertainty—or at the very least certainty *in* certainty. We’ve come to an unassailable confidence that mystery, by dint of inquiry and scientific effort, can be wrestled and pinned down and made to cry uncle. We are no longer victims of the unknowable: we are masters of our own understanding. The great modern lie is one of infinite human autonomy and control.

This shift of modernity—from an embrace of mystery to a rejection of it—has undoubtedly affected our approach to faith. Though the Bible has not changed, our reading of it has. It’s confidence we now prize in life with God; uncertainty we resist. We don’t accommodate mystery as well as our ancient and medieval forbearers, especially in theology. “Theology has suffered—among evangelicals as well as elsewhere—from an undue desire for clarity and control,” writes theologian Hans Boersma.⁷ We like our truth catalogued and ordered and systematized.

The Enlightenment’s turn toward rationality makes us chafe in places of paradox. How can two seemingly contradictory principles be simultaneously true? It’s one reason we will work so persistently to unknot the tangles. It’s not simply that Macey or Shane reject a mysterious, paradoxical faith: I too can be made to disbelieve when I’m asked to abide complexity, dissonance, and contradiction in order to hold things in tension. We don’t like faith acting like predicament.

Though we might acknowledge God as standing at the thunderous, tempestuous center of faith, we also want the waters still and glassy around him. But it is an old sin seduced by an old lie that we can be like God, perfectly knowing as he knows.

Paradox has promise for forming humility in us all.

A book about paradox is a book about spiritual posture: the posture of kneeling under God's great big sky and admitting that mystery is inherent to the nature of God. As soon as we think we have God figured out, we will have ceased to worship him as he is. God, in his very being, is inscrutable and unsearchable. We do not approach God with the powers of logic, and should we try, we're sure to stumble over the rock that is the crucified Christ. Mystery is inherent to the nature of the gospel, whose wisdom confounds more than assists. God's project of salvation, in sending a suffering Servant to wash the feet of the world in his very blood, is foolishness to the world. Even faith—biblical faith—leaves us with a great deal of partial understanding. As the apostle Paul has written, faith is like seeing through a glass darkly. Just because we walk by faith doesn't mean the room is always flooded with light.

It was the fiery spectacle of paradox that halted Moses as he trailed the goats up the mountain of God. "Behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed." Here, on the most ordinary of days, Moses discovered a mystery flaming up: a bush alight and yet alive. *Behold*. The biblical word *behold* is vernacular for "Stop! Pay attention! Pause! Consider!" I think about how a twenty-first-century Moses might have hurried past, how he might have proven disinterested, distracted, crossing the street to pull a buzzing phone from his pocket. I think of how the story would have gone differently had Moses failed wonder, had he resisted the compulsion,

inner and quiet, to draw closer. But he didn't. And for the first time, as he neared paradox, he heard the voice of God calling his name. "Moses, Moses!" The divine encounter was a thrill—and then he was perilously warned against coming too close. "The place on which you are standing is holy ground." Life-changing encounters with God can begin with something as unremarkable as this: the unheroic decision to turn aside and pay paradox a little bit of attention.

There's a whole lot of promise in a little bit of wondering.

When a bush is alight and yet alive, that's the very place for removing our shoes. There's a whole lot of promise in a little bit of wondering.



It was, paradoxically, the tangles of Christian faith that provided its strongest apologetic to G. K. Chesterton, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British writer and thinker. In his book *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton explains that Christianity's ability to maintain paradox provided convincing proof of its reliability. Chesterton believed not in spite of mystery—but because of it.

Chesterton recalled the contradictory arguments he often heard leveled against Christianity. It wasn't, for example, that Christianity was always charged with being too pessimistic; it was also criticized for being too hopeful. Some people faulted Christianity for being too meek; others faulted it for being too bold. "No sooner had my indignation died down at its angular and aggressive squareness than I was called up again to notice and condemn its enervating [debilitating] and sensual roundness."⁸ If Christianity was consistently attacked, Chesterton noticed curiously that it was always

attacked for inconsistent reasons. This was cause for his own little bit of wondering.

It might have been, reasoned Chesterton, that critics faulted Christianity in the same way that a short man finds another man too tall or a tall man finds another man too short. In that case, it would have been easiest to defend Christian faith as a kind of compromise, “sensible and [standing] in the middle.”⁹ But as far as Chesterton could see, Christianity did not always moderate contradictions. Often, it maintained them. It affirmed the utter depravity of human beings and hope in their redemption at the same time. It preached death and resurrection in the same breath. With this and many other examples, Christianity was not to be deemed the man of average height: it was the paradox of the short man and the tall man standing upright in the same body.

As Chesterton began to discover, the emotionally satisfying part of Christianity wasn't just its linear logic; it was also its hospitality to paradox—that its facts were often its mysteries. That in both doctrine and ethic, Christianity had the capacity for affirming contradiction. According to Chesterton, we're not made to be the kind of people always painting a black and white world in dreary shades of gray—or, as Chesterton more precisely put it, a red and white world painted in ruined hues of pink. We want a saturated world of paradox, which is to say we want “the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy.” A credible witness, then, is not only one that tidies drawers; it's also content to, at times, leave the drawers mussed up.

This too is paradoxical: that while as believers, we feel obliged to comb through tangles, both for ourselves and for the doubters we love, we also cherish the rich complexity of our faith and its frequent refusal to be bargained into aphorism and geometric proof.

It is paradoxical that on the one hand, listicles will sell books—and that on the other, we will yet long for truths that can't be squeezed onto billboards.

It's a mystery that we can be the kind of people insistent on seeing—and a people contented with a good degree of dark.

The psalmist described best our peacemaking with paradox when he compared us to children weaned of the appetite for answers:

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.

There is strange rest we find in the bosom of God, even in the arms of paradox.

There might have been any number of ways I could have examined paradox for the purposes of this book. I took the only route that made sense: I examined the Scriptures. In the following pages, I have paused in four places where Scripture has given me pause:¹⁰ at the incarnation, at the kingdom of God, at grace, and at lament. Each of these themes in Scripture is a rock to be turned over, a bush to be examined. They require us to abandon the polarities of *either* and *or* and embrace instead the dissonance of *and*. They lend themselves to certainty—and also to curiosity. They are foundational to our creeds—and yet fundamental mysteries.

The incarnation, for example, begs us to ask questions like, How can a spiritual life be so bodily? And how can dastardly human beings be meant for such glory? The kingdom inspires niggling curiosities like, How can God's work of redemption be as virulent

and vulnerable as a seed? How can kingdom people, eyes fixed on eternity, also lead such worldly lives? Grace, as another example of paradox, forces us to confront the perplexing nature of God, that he is both severe and loving; the gospel cannot be reduced to saccharine sentiments. And finally, lament teaches us the paradoxical way of grieving hope. How is it that beating our fists against the chest of God can be an act of great faith? I've been caught wondering. I hope you will too.

I haven't systematically treated any of these themes, which is to say that I have not subjected them to the modern exegetical trauma described by Mike Cospers, whereby we make the Bible "a subject to be mastered, a corpse to be dissected [and] placed on a steel table and subjected to a thousand acts of violence . . . split into its component parts, footnoted for historicity and commented on from every angle."¹¹ As I've walked through the (sometimes dark) woods of God's Word, I haven't played the role of expert botanist but that of amateur hiker. I've wandered. I've let myself stumble over complexities. I've followed the footpaths of my own questions. When I've bent down for a closer look, it's been to puzzle over the unobvious, the seemingly contradictory, the mysterious, even the inflammatory. In other words, I haven't cataloged the entire forest, but I've noticed a few of its spectacular species.

Initially, at least, it seemed I had turned up these four themes—incarnation, kingdom, grace, and lament—like rabbits out of a hat. They were curiosities to me, although they didn't suggest a coherent interest. Only later did I realize that these four themes weren't haphazard choices but a way in which to trace the entire story of the gospel: from the birth of Jesus (the incarnation) to his public ministry (the announcement of the kingdom) to his crucifixion

(the expression of divine grace), and finally, to his resurrection and ascent (the hope of humanity's lament). In all of this wondering, I've discovered how the gospel is a four-act surprise. It's a mystery, not just in its parts, but also in its whole.

This is the argument of the apostle Paul, of course, who calls out the scandals of the gospel's mystery in his many letters: "I do not want you to be unaware of this *mystery* . . . a partial hardening [that] has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25); "Behold! I tell you a *mystery*. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51); "This *mystery* is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6); "This *mystery* is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32); "To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this *mystery*, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27); "Great indeed, we confess, is the *mystery* of godliness: [Christ] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim 3:16). The gospel, as enfleshed mystery, has strong enough arms to hold slippery things, fitful things. The story of God itself won't be buckled down and made to sit still.

This is a book about faith in its lived-in condition—as it abides complexity rather than resists it. It warns against fear and hurry, bidding us to quietly, humbly attend to the rustling leaves of divine movement, just as Moses attended to the burning bush and Samuel attended to the voice of God: "Speak, for your servant hears."

When we're surprised by paradox, we might keep still just long enough to know that he is God.

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