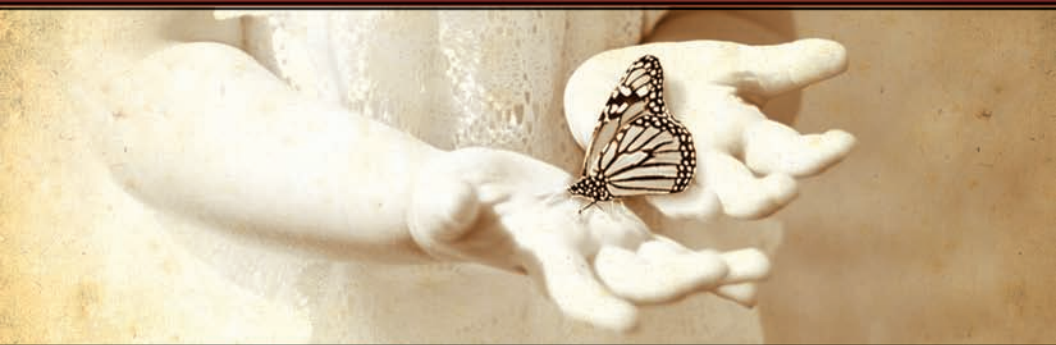


THE
CALL
TO
WONDER

Loving God Like a Child



R. C. SPROUL JR.

“Jesus said, ‘Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.’ In a gentle but searching way, R. C. Sproul Jr. helps us understand what Jesus was saying and what it should mean to us today. *The Call to Wonder* is a delightful, yet thought-provoking work. I highly commend it.”

JERRY BRIDGES

author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*

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WONDER

Loving God like a Child

R. C. SPROUL JR.



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To Shannon Sproul,

Princess Happy.

Daddy loves you.

And Jesus loves you

Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction *xi*

1. Surprised by God 3
2. The Marks of Innocence 15
3. The Call to Trust 27
4. The Call to Wonder 49
5. The Call to Please 69
6. The Call to Our Father 89
7. The Call to Maturity 107
8. The Call to Joy 131
9. The Call to God's Presence 155

About the Author 173

Acknowledgments

IN MANY WAYS this book is born out of childbearing. That is, I want to give to others the lessons I have learned from my eight children. Thanks, then, must begin with my dear wife. While my children show me wonder, my wife *is* a wonder. Thanks are due in turn to each of my children, each of them a joy in our lives.

Not all of my teachers, however, have been children. Thanks are due as well to two of my college professors, Dr. Andrew Hoffercker and Dr. James Dixon. These two men patiently taught this once coldhearted Presbyterian rationalist that the heart of the Christian faith is a changed heart, that sound thinking must move from our minds to our hearts and then out our fingers.

Older still were the teachers to whom my teachers introduced me. Gilbert Keith Chesterton and Clive Staples Lewis continue to inform and inspire me. Each, in their own way, responded to the mechanistic worldview of modernism/naturalism not with cold, abstract arguments but with living

words grounded in the living Word. When cynicism comes knocking on my door, I know that reading either of these two great men will send it on its way.

Thanks are due as well to my colleagues for helping to carry a difficult load, and to my students at Reformation Bible College for their zeal.

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Finally, the soundtrack for this book was provided by Palestrina and Pachelbel, the Wintons and Sara Watkins, and Andrew Peterson and Nathan Clark George.

R. C. Sproul Jr.

Thanksgiving Day 2011

Introduction

THIS JUST WASN'T supposed to happen. I tend to be more a thinker than a feeler. And so on that morning, I was taken completely by surprise to find myself crying uncontrollably. Had you asked me that morning, no doubt I could have given you a careful lecture on competing views of just what happens when we come to the Lord's Table. Yet on this day, none of that mattered.

I hadn't been invited to explain anything. I was instead invited to come and participate. We all were. The pastor had reminded us of what Jesus told His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed. And then, row by row, we came forward to kneel and to receive the bread and the wine. My newlywed wife and I walked forward and knelt. The pastor moved along the row, just like normal. This time, however, it was obvious to me that he did not come alone.

Let me explain. I did not have a peculiarly potent sense of my own sin. I didn't see in my mind's eye with special clarity the nails piercing the hands of Jesus. And yet, I began to cry

uncontrollably. My body began to shake. It wasn't that this was the first time that Jesus had come to visit us at His own feast, Communion. It was, however, the first time His Spirit had removed the scales from my eyes. Jesus was there with me. It had to be Him. How else could I have, all at once, a razor-sharp dread mitigated by the very lightness of joy? How else could I taste such a crescendo of joy multiplied by the heaviness of dread?

When it was time for us to return to our seats, my wife, puzzled and more than a little afraid, pulled me up and led me back. The service came to an end, and once we began our drive home, she cautiously asked what had happened. I barely heard her. The experience had ended, but rather than leaving me satisfied, it left me hungry for more of God's tangible presence in my life. I wanted to go back to those moments.

I came to learn in the coming years that I couldn't summon these experiences. The Spirit of God is not at my beck and call but rather blows where He will. But I did have that experience again, and then again a few months later. There was no timetable, no way to tell if or when those occurrences of clarity would ever happen again. I could only treasure each one as a signpost that God was powerfully with me, loving and guiding me.

As the years progressed, our family grew, and eventually I planted a church. Now I found myself on the other side of the Communion railing. That was not all that had changed, however. Our little church met in a run-down building. We

had no choir, no organ, no heavenly descants being sung. But what I discovered is that God does not reveal Himself only in the trappings of a church service.

It was another ordinary Sunday. I was up front serving the congregation in taking Communion. Having reminded them of Jesus' words on the night He was betrayed, I began to serve my own family. I leaned toward my beloved wife and whispered to her, "The body of Christ, broken for you," and broke down right there. I fell to my knees, the tears began to run, and I hugged her neck, feeling the very arms of Jesus around us both. I managed to move on to my firstborn, Darby. And again there we were, with Jesus right beside us. She felt my desperate hug but was not afraid. She, too, knew that Jesus was there. I turned to my firstborn son, Campbell, who was already crying. As I hugged him, I reminded him that Jesus would never leave him, no matter what battles He might lead us into. Next was Shannon, wondering what all the fuss was about. Her confusion over my response wasn't because she couldn't sense Jesus' presence, but because she feels His presence more fully than I ever will, and does so every day.

Delaney, my inscrutable child, was next in line. From birth she has carried in her eyes a calm that was only beginning to blossom into a gentle and quiet spirit. As I held her and managed to get my voice under control enough to tell her in a fierce whisper, "Jesus loves you, sweetheart, and so does Daddy," she replied serenely, "I know, Daddy."

Next was Erin Claire, the comedienne in the family, whose laughter highlights a haunting sadness in her eyes.

She had, of course, been witnessing this strange event. She knew it was a solemn occasion, and tears began to well in her eyes. “Jesus is here, darling. Right here with us,” I told her.

Next was Maili, tiny little Maili. I had to be careful not to squeeze her into nothing. I felt her arms around my neck, and she, too, began to cry. Not from fear, not from sadness, but like Jesus outside the tomb of Lazarus, from empathy. Reilly, barely four, was next. I lifted him over the Communion railing as he wrapped his legs around me. “My son, my son,” I said, looking into his eyes. “Do not be afraid, but remember that your daddy loves you, your mommy loves you, and Jesus loves you now and forever.” Baby Donovan I picked up also. He dozed through the whole thing, sleeping like a baby. But Jesus blessed him as well.

I had not expected that I would on that day once more be blessed to experience in such an unmistakable way the presence of Christ at His Table. What I swiftly came to understand, however, was not that I needed to find a way to explain to my children what was happening to Daddy so they wouldn’t be afraid. Instead I learned that I was to learn from them, that they understood better than I did that He was, indeed, with us. When Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3), He wasn’t suggesting that our standards are too high and that these little ones can make it over the hump. He was instead telling us that our standards are too low, and that the little ones are far ahead of us.

If you're anything like me, this is one of the hardest lessons to learn. I'm much quicker to assume that my study of Scripture in my office will draw me closer to God and His Kingdom than will spending time in the backyard playing with my kids. Jesus clearly said that may not be the case. And I can't help thinking that one of my most profound experiences of His presence was with my children as we knelt before Him in worship. None of this means that I don't spend serious time studying Scripture and theology. But it does mean that now I take time to stop and watch my kids, noting the things they do that align with Scripture. This book is the result of those times when I paid attention. I sense that as I've contemplated what Jesus meant in His statement above, I have grown better attuned to God's presence in my ordinary, errand-filled days.

My prayer is that this book will encourage you to stop and pay attention as well. My hope is you'll recover the childlike virtues you may have lost and that you'll respond to His call to *become like little children*.

R. C. Sproul Jr.



SURPRISED BY GOD

[Jesus said,] “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

MATTHEW 18:3

DO YOU LIKE SURPRISES? If so, then consider this: God is full of them. And often these God-initiated surprises come in small packages: in the actions and words of children.

The story of the life and ministry of Jesus contains a steady stream of these surprises, twists in the tale, and corrections to our adult thinking that has drifted in the wrong direction.

When Jesus entered the world, who was the first to express joy over His arrival?

It wasn't the religious leaders or the prophets Simeon or Anna.

It wasn't the shepherds or the wise men.

No, the very first expression of joy was from a baby so

young that he had not even been born. John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb as Jesus, likewise *in utero*, drew near.

A baby in utero. A child.

What a surprise! The great embodiment of the Kingdom of God coming to this earth in human form is appreciated first by a child.

From that point forward, the great Kingdom of the Son of God, Emmanuel—God with us—was expressed within the context of humility rather than in the context of earthly royal glory most of us would expect for God's Son.

Jesus was born in a stable in the backwater of Palestine. Think about it: Jesus—God's only Son—did not draw His first breath in a royal palace surrounded by the splendor that matched His stature. No, His first breath was likely filled with the odors of sheep and cows.

Too many of us adults don't fully grasp the shocking nature of what God's Word says about the living God. We read right over Bible passages that really should stop us in our tracks. Frankly, that temptation is greatest for those of us who have read Scripture many times. We are the ones—the grown-up ones—who tend to tame the God of surprises by explaining away what Scripture clearly says about this living God.

I remember when I succumbed to this temptation. I was at school, preparing for the ministry. My Old Testament professor took the opportunity to teach me a profound lesson that took a while to sink in. I don't remember what prompted his question, but I remember the question clearly. He asked, "R. C., does God have a strong right arm?"

I must confess that I was badly insulted. I wasn't a recent convert. I had read the Scriptures and knew that God is Spirit and doesn't have a body. "Of course not," I replied.

Patiently my professor said, "R. C., the Bible says that God has a strong right arm." I was still a touch insulted, but things were looking up. I thought I understood what the professor was trying to do. He was asking me this simple question so I could give a brief lecture on anthropomorphic language to the rest of the class. I was glad to know that he knew he could count on me to deliver the goods. Perhaps he needed a few minutes' reprieve from teaching and so had handed the ball to one of his most capable students.

"Well, yes, Professor, the Bible does refer to God's strong right arm. But we understand that the Bible frequently uses anthropomorphic language. That is, people sometimes describe God in terms of human qualities that don't rightly belong to Him to help us understand what He really is. The Bible, after all, also says that God's eyes roam to and fro across the earth. What God is telling us is that He is omniscient, that He knows all things. It would be the grossest kind of mistake to think that God's eyes are sitting atop some giant pair of legs and running across the globe like a hamster on a wheel. When the Bible tells us that God has a strong right arm, what it is really saying, speaking as it first did to primitive people, is that God has the quality of omnipotence. He has all power."

I assumed that would settle the matter. Surely the professor would thank me for explaining the concept of God's limitless power so well. Instead, he simply said again, "R. C.,

the Bible says that God has a strong right arm.” The bell rang, signaling the end of that day’s class, and I wandered off confused as to what his point could possibly have been.

Years later, God graciously helped me understand what that professor had been trying to impress on me. It is true enough that God is omnipotent. He has all power. There is no power of which He is not the ultimate source. Nothing could ever overpower Him. *Omnipotent*, though, is not the distilled essence of “strong right arm.” We do not take the earthy, primitive language of the words *strong right arm* and get closer to the truth by translating it “omnipotent.” We actually end up further from the truth. If we were honest, *omnipotent* could simply be a setting on a potency meter, the top line on the ring-the-bell game at the carnival. It tells us how much power God has. If power were illustrated by a pie chart, God would fill it all. What is missing in *omnipotent*, however, that is expressed clearly in *strong right arm* is the idea of purpose and direction. A force could conceivably be omnipotent. It takes a person—no, it takes a *Father*—to have a strong right arm. *Strong right arm* suggests not just how much strength is there but also how that strength functions: it protects, provides, and comforts. Rather than make the strength abstract, as I was foolishly doing in class years before, the phrase *strong right arm* expresses the fact that God the Father is a person. In my so-called sophistication I was not clarifying the message of God but rather diminishing it. I wasn’t showing myself to be wiser than my spiritual ancestors. I was showing myself to be a fool.

God is not a nice and reasonable God, one we can tame at will. He doesn't fit into our preconceived notions. As I have learned, we need to stop trying to domesticate the God we are supposed to be worshiping. Instead, we need to understand better the full implications of God's actions and words in Scripture. God does what we don't expect. That's His nature. As C. S. Lewis told us, He is, after all, "not a tame lion."

Here's an example of what I mean when I say we're tempted to domesticate God. Suppose you were an angel watching the tragedy in Eden unfold. You had witnessed the spectacular glory of the creation of the universe. You leaned forward to witness the shaping of Adam and God breathing into him the breath of life. You cried at the beauty of Adam and Eve walking hand in hand in the Garden, only to be even more deeply moved when God joined them in the cool of the evening. Then you watched, your heart in your throat, as the serpent spoke to the woman. You mourned as the juice of the forbidden fruit ran down Eve's chin and then Adam's. You covered your eyes lest you should see the savage destruction when God descended again into the Garden to punish those who had dared to disobey His simple command to not eat of one tree. And then you heard this: "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

There was no thundering.

There was no volcanic eruption.

There was, instead, a promise, compassion, and hope.

As surprised as you might have been, I suspect confusion would have trumped your surprise. What could God possibly mean that the Seed of the woman would have His heel bruised? As you pondered how God could possibly bring good from this great tragedy, would it ever have occurred to you that the Son of God might become human, take on flesh, and be born of a virgin? Would you ever have come up with the notion that He would take His people's sins on His shoulders? Would you have thought it would be accomplished through the horrors of the Crucifixion? Would you have suspected the wrath of God the Father for sinners like Adam and Eve might be poured out on His Son?

God surprises us. Why? Because, as Isaiah says, God's ways aren't even close to ours:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

ISAIAH 55:8-9

The Bible's premiere illustration of how different God's thoughts are from the thoughts of average people is the interaction between Jesus and His disciples in Matthew 18.

Knowing that He would soon face the agony of the Crucifixion and that His disciples' mettle would be tested in the coming days, Jesus began to prepare them for what

was coming. First, He revealed His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Then He again warned His followers of what was coming: He would be betrayed, and He would die; but He would also rise again.

After all these amazing revelations, the disciples ask, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” (Matthew 18:1, NLT).

Think about it: Jesus is talking about His coming suffering and humiliation. He is already in an intense battle with the religious power brokers of His day. He is feeling the weight of the cross He must soon bear, already tasting the bitterness of the cup He must drink, and the disciples are asking Him about their chances of promotion when the Kingdom comes! That takes some nerve.

And what does Jesus do? He answers their question. But in doing so, Jesus takes the opportunity to turn the disciples’ world right side up. Remember, Jesus isn’t talking to His enemies. He isn’t talking to the crowds. He is talking to His *followers*. And even His own followers see the world and the coming Kingdom from the wrong perspective.

So Jesus calls a little child to Himself and sets that child in the middle of the disciples and says, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2-3).

We might be tempted to paraphrase Jesus this way: “You want to know who will be greatest? Well, let’s see here. First, it won’t be any of the grand and glorious among the Roman nobility. Nor will it be the rich and powerful among the

scribes and Pharisees.” Perhaps at this point the disciples’ hearts begin to beat a little more quickly. They are still in the running. “The envelope, please. Yes, the winner of the title Greatest in the Kingdom goes to this little child.”

Such a paraphrase would be shocking enough. It certainly would have been strikingly humbling. But that’s not

“The envelope, please. Yes, the winner of the title Greatest in the Kingdom goes to this little child.”

what Jesus said. He didn’t say that the biggest mansions in the Kingdom will belong to those like children. He didn’t say that the ones who are most like children will get to sit at

the head table at the marriage feast of the Lamb. The message was far more radical. “If you aren’t like this child, you’re not even invited. You won’t make it past the door. Forget about medals, laurels, and gold-covered thrones. Unless you acquire the perspective, the mind-set, the heart of a child, you will be in the outer darkness: not crying like a baby but weeping and gnashing your teeth.”

Too many of us—I have been guilty of this as well—try to analyze what Jesus is saying and dissect it the way scientists do a specimen they are studying. We take the words of Jesus and run them through our study tools. We check what this scholar thought and what that learned man had to say. We look up key words and how the Greeks used them. We check our cross-references and our systematic theology texts, all in a vain attempt to make the text stop meaning what it is actually saying. Because if it means what it says, it suggests

that our knowledge of what this scholar thought and what that learned man said and our ability to wield various Bible study power tools are not just useless but might very easily get in the way. If it means what it says, we would be better off being children. If it means what it says, we are in danger of missing out. If it means what it says, we are going to have to give up either the Kingdom of God or our pride. And both of those things mean so much to us.

All of us do this, of course, because we are sinners, just like the disciples were. This is why I have been working hard over the years to introduce people to what I call “The R. C. Sproul Jr. Principle of Hermeneutics”—in other words, my principle for interpreting the Bible. As you know, there are sound and important rules for how we do this. For instance, we are called to interpret the Bible literally, that is, in terms of its various literary structures. We do not read historical narratives the same way we read poetry. We do not read parables the same way we read historical narratives. All that’s pretty basic. The R. C. Sproul Jr. Principle of Hermeneutics is pretty simple: when you are reading your Bible and come across people (like the disciples, for example) doing something really stupid, do not say to yourself, “How could they be so stupid?” Instead, ask yourself, *How am I stupid just like them?* (Note: This principle is named after me because I’ve learned how stupid I can be.) There is really nothing new under the sun. All of us should expect that the kinds of sins that plagued people in the Bible likely plague us as well. And

none is more common than the problem of pride, which often produces stupidity.

Wisdom, the Bible tells us, begins as we fear God (see Proverbs 9:10). Fearing God begins when we believe what He says. When He speaks, we shouldn't seek to wiggle out from under His Word. We shouldn't analyze away the clarity of what He has said. And so it is in Matthew 18. God in Christ tells us that if we are not like children, we will not even see the Kingdom of God. That simply means we had better learn to be like children. We'd better not study how this

text can't mean what it actually says. Instead, we'd better study how we can submit to what it means. In the pages to come we will seek to do just that, to consider what childlike faith looks like; to see how, by the power of God's Spirit, we can cultivate the spirit of a child.

The R. C. Sproul Jr. Principle of Hermeneutics is pretty simple: when you are reading your Bible and come across people (like the disciples, for example) doing something really stupid, do not say to yourself, "How could they be so stupid?" Instead, ask yourself, How am I stupid just like them?

Take a long, hard look at the young children in your life—maybe your son or your daughter,

maybe your grandson or your granddaughter, a nephew or a niece. Or maybe they're the children who run past you at the mall or in the halls at church.

What does it look like to have a heart that imitates theirs?
What is Jesus asking of us?

Let's find out.



About the Author

R. C. SPROUL JR. served for eleven years as editor-in-chief of *abletalk* magazine. In 1996 he began Highlands Ministries and planted Saint Peter Presbyterian Church in southwestern Virginia. He is editor of *Every Thought Captive* magazine, a teaching fellow at Ligonier Ministries, and a visiting faculty member of Ligonier Academy of Biblical and Theological Studies. He and his wife, Denise, live in Orlando, Florida, with their eight children.



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ABOUT LIGONIER MINISTRIES

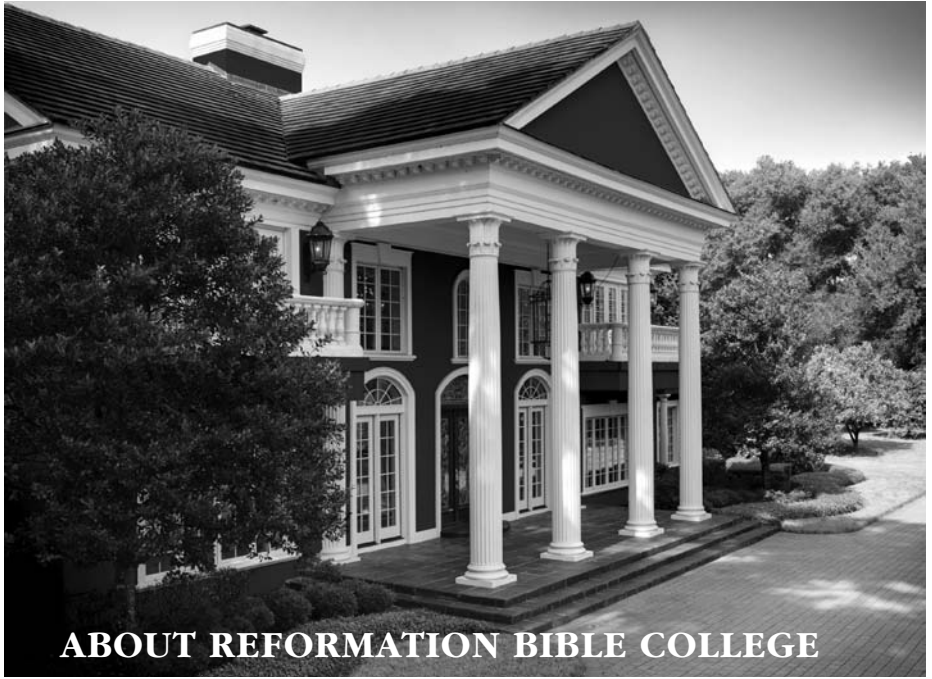
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Dr. R. C. Sproul Jr. is associate professor of philosophy and apologetics for Reformation Bible College (RBC) located near Orlando, Florida.

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