

What people are saying about ...

GodStories

“Andrew Wilson helps us grasp more of God’s character and his greatness, guiding us in God’s wisdom to lead our lives to his glory. This is a fascinating book that makes the Bible and its author both accessible and vibrantly alive—if you want to know God better, I thoroughly recommend it.”

Mike Pilavachi, founder of Soul Survivor

“Andrew Wilson is a remarkably gifted writer and Bible teacher with a solid understanding of Christian theology, and in *GodStories* he repeatedly uses fascinating examples from contemporary science, business, history, cinema, and just plain ordinary life to bring the entire scope of the Bible’s teaching to life in refreshing new ways.”

Wayne Grudem, PhD, research professor of theology
and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary

“Stories are the language of humanity and the primary language of Scripture. But somewhere in our attempts to distill only the principles, we’ve lost the narrative art so prevalent among God’s people for thousands of years. Andrew Wilson is bringing it back. With insight grounded in orthodoxy and the manner of a friend over coffee, Andrew arrests our attention and captures our imagination.

Perfect as a primer and rich as a reminder, *GodStories* will make you fall in love with the living Word all over again.”

Glenn Packiam, author of *Secondhand Jesus*,
associate pastor at New Life Church

“Andrew Wilson has a gift for telling stories of the Bible in a way that brings fresh perspective, while staying right in tune with the heart of God. It reminds you of the power of God’s story as a whole, and empowers you to tell that story as you live out yours.”

Travis Taylor, songwriter/recording artist, director of
worship at Calvary Church of Pacific Palisades, California

GOD*STORIES

Explorations in the
Gospel of God

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ANDREW WILSON

GODSTORIES

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Contents

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Acknowledgments	11
Prologue	15
Act One: Creation and Fall	
Creation Through Christ	26
The Image of God	30
The Blueprint	34
<i>Coffee Break: Stop and Study</i>	38
God and the Walk	40
Shame Removed	44
Authority Regained	47
<i>Coffee Break: Pause and Pray</i>	51
The Rainbow	53
The City and the Tower	57
Act Two: Israel and History	
The Story Beneath the Story	62
<i>Coffee Break: Wait and Worship</i>	66
God's Mission	68
Mount Moriah	72
The Seed	76
<i>Coffee Break: Read and Reflect</i>	81
The Passover	83
The Curtain	86
The Day of Atonement	90
<i>Coffee Break: Pause and Pray</i>	94
The Ark of the Covenant	96
The Temple	101

Act Three: Poets and Prophets

Suffering's Answer	108
<i>Coffee Break: Wait and Worship</i>	113
The Shadow of the Cross	115
Sins Forgiven	119
Reality Check	123
The Arm of Yahweh	127
A New Spirit	130
<i>Coffee Break: Read and Reflect</i>	134
A New Covenant	136
The Stone and the Son	140
The Spirit Poured Out	145
<i>Coffee Break: Stop and Study</i>	150

Act Four: Jesus and Rescue

Concerning His Son	154
The Kingdom of God Is at Hand	158
Regeneration	162
Christ Crucified	166
The Blood of Jesus	170
The Third Day	174
<i>Coffee Break: Pause and Pray</i>	178
Jesus Is Lord	180
Justification by Faith	184
Christus Victor	189
<i>Coffee Break: Stop and Study</i>	193
The Cup	195
Everyone Who Calls	199
The End of the Law	203

Reconciliation	207
<i>Coffee Break: Read and Reflect</i>	211
Imputed Righteousness	213
Penal Substitution	217
Redemption	221
<i>Coffee Break: Wait and Worship</i>	225
In Christ	227
The Avalanche of Grace	231
Our Great High Priest	235
<i>Coffee Break: Wait and Worship</i>	239
Act Five: Restoration and Hope	
Repentance and Baptism	242
The Battle for Beauty	247
Sanctification	251
Our Citizenship Is in Heaven	255
Creation Set Free	259
<i>Coffee Break: Read and Reflect</i>	263
Meaning Reinstated	265
The Resurrection from the Dead	269
The Fall of Babylon	273
The Last Enemy	277
<i>Coffee Break: Wait and Worship</i>	281
The Wedding	284
Face to Face	288
The Gospel of God	292
Appendix: A Word about Postmodernism	296

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PROLOGUE

.....

Several years ago in northern Nigeria, Emily was strung up on a tree and left for dead because she had epilepsy.¹ Her tribal village had no idea what epilepsy was, let alone how to cope with it, so they tied her up and left her there, waiting for her to die from starvation or exposure. Just before she did, Daniel arrived with a small team to preach the gospel and plant a church. Horrified, he immediately cut down the young girl from the tree and put her under a doctor's care. Then he and his team began explaining the gospel to the villagers.

Daniel has paid a price for his zeal. He, his wife, and his children have experienced pretty much every suffering you can have for preaching the good news: robbery, rape, physical beatings, death threats, the lot. But that hasn't stopped him. In fact, from the little I have seen, his sufferings have increased his determination to establish churches and train leaders.

But as people in the village started responding to the gospel, Daniel and his team were able to plant a small church, and then build a school to educate the children. Daniel understood GodStories, you see. He had gone to the village in the first place because he knew the GodStory of world mission. He knew that he would face serious persecution for preaching the gospel, but he knew the GodStory of Christ's suffering and was prepared to share it. When he got there, he preached GodStories about the gospel of God concerning his Son,

victory over demons, and the death of death. He started bringing health care and education to the community because he knew GodStories about God's kingdom, man in his image, and the renewal of creation. I've had the privilege of seeing the results firsthand: There is a thriving church in the village, nearly two hundred children at school every day (their English grammar is better than mine!), and Emily is still alive. Because of Daniel's conviction that the gospel story is amazing, hope has conquered despair in that community.

And he certainly won't stop preaching GodStories. Maybe it's because he knows how they all end.

The Greatest Story Ever Told

The point of this book is to convince *you* that the gospel is amazing. It's aimed at anyone who wants to understand the good news of what God has done: teenagers, caretakers, businesspeople, full-time mothers, artists. Knowing the gospel is the foundation for worship and mission, so the only thing we're going to do in this book is explore the beautiful, triumphant, often-heartbreaking, and always-glorious stories that make up the gospel of God. I call them GodStories.

It's a funny word, and you won't find it in the dictionary. But my guess is that the idea of looking at a gospel through *stories* will excite lots of people. Perhaps you see theology as a rabbit warren of concepts without narratives, a series of points and principles and theories that take all the best bits (like characters and plot twists and heroism) out of the Bible and leave behind a slightly incredible result, like eating cereal without milk or playing Scrabble without vowels. To you, the fact that this book is made up of stories—and,

far more importantly, the fact that God's gospel is made up largely of stories—should be encouraging. It will certainly increase your enjoyment of theology.

You see, just as we have one God in three persons and one church made up of many people, so in Scripture we have one gospel made up of many stories. We have one gospel, for sure: a single, unifying, big story about God and creation, man and sin, Jesus and rescue. But we also have many different ways of telling that big story because it is too large for us to grasp all at once. Even the quick summaries in the Bible itself—“your God reigns,” “the kingdom of God is near,” “God raised Jesus from the dead,” and “Christ died for our sins”—give different angles on the one big story. So seeing the many GodStories in the one gospel does not reduce that gospel in glory or splendor. Quite the opposite—it dramatically increases it.

This is true of all sorts of big stories, not just the gospel. Imagine that, instead of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien decided to simplify things into a sentence: “Frodo and Sam left the Shire with the ring, faced a number of setbacks, and finally destroyed it in Mount Doom to save Middle-earth.” His summary would, in one sense, tell the same story, but it would be dramatically reduced in power and impact, and would probably not have sold millions of copies and been turned into three blockbuster films. *The Lord of the Rings* is about two hobbits and a ring, but it is also about the flight of the elves, the destruction of the forests, the corruption of humankind, the battles for Rohan and Gondor, the return of the king, and the influence the ring has on all of them. So when we read all those other stories, it adds to our understanding of the plot with Frodo and the ring, because it shows us the significance of the main story through

its impact on all the others. The same is true of the gospel. But the process is far more important, for three reasons.

GodStories and the Glory of God

The first and biggest reason we must read these stories is because the glory of God is at stake. This is vital. If the Bible is stuffed full of GodStories but we tell only one of them, we lose much of the depth and wonder of the gospel, and that diminishes our view of God, just as it would diminish my view of Gordon Ramsay's cooking if I ate only his steamed vegetables.

If, for example, we saw the gospel simply as a story of personal salvation, we would limit its scope enormously and rob God of the praise that is due to him. Such a view would miss out on the salvation of a corporate people and would find very little place for the history of Israel, which so much of the Bible is about. It would marginalize God's faithfulness to his covenant and his multicolored wisdom in the church. And it would ignore the fact that Scripture speaks of the whole of creation, not just human souls, being made new. So reducing the gospel to only a story of personal salvation is like playing "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the recorder. The melody might be the same, but much of the music's power is lost, and the brilliance of the composer is missed.

Yet, as with music, God's excellence is shown not just in creating new story lines, but in fusing them together so that they enhance one another. Queen brings two melodies together to form a harmony, but Yahweh weaves dozens of GodStories—Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and many others—into one another so intricately that when Jesus finally arrives on the scene, you want to

stand amazed and applaud with excitement. Composers frequently write notes that clash with one another to present an unusual sound, but God allows entire plotlines to clash for generations and then get explained with a twist you would never have predicted (a servant king, for instance). Queen leaves their final chord sequence unresolved for several seconds, but God leaves Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 unresolved for several centuries before uniting them at the cross with unimaginable power and beauty. So to grasp more of the glory of God, we need to appreciate the range and depth of the gospel by studying as many of its component stories as possible. More than anything else, the reason for writing a book full of GodStories is to remind us how astonishing and faithful and glorious and worthy of worship is the God who wrote them.

This could not be more important. If God's glory is infinite, and my concept of him is not, then I never stop needing an increased understanding of his greatness. Furthermore, that greatness is many-sided, like a massive mountain; there is nowhere in creation I could stand and see the whole of Mount Kilimanjaro at once, far less the glory of Yahweh. So I need there to be a whole host of pictures to reveal different angles of what he has done and how it fits together. Fortunately, by his grace, this is exactly the sort of Bible he has inspired.

Scripture contains something to inspire worship in everyone. To the philosopher, there are GodStories of riddles and revelation, inquiry and truth. To the historian, there is an array of events covering thousands of years and numerous civilizations. To the architect, there are descriptions of temples being established and cities being rebuilt. To the artist, there are GodStories of beauty triumphing over ugliness,

order over chaos, new creation over stagnation. For the romantic, there is a tale of a complicated relationship with a wonderful man that ends happily ever after; for the action-film fanatic, a story of a hero rescuing the love of his life and saving the world against impossible odds.² There are genealogies for the tribesmen, visions for the mystics, and arguments for the intellectuals. And displaying his glory in every one of these GodStories is Yahweh, the I AM, the maker of heaven and earth and the rescuer of all things. Reading all of these stories will give us a bigger and better view of him.

GodStories and the Rescue of People

The second reason that we need to know these GodStories is because people's eternal destinies are at stake. After all, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16), and preaching the gospel remains one of the highest callings of every Christian. Without the gospel, people cannot be saved. So it is vital that we know what the gospel actually is and how to communicate it in ways people understand.

Everyone agrees with that sentence, I'm sure. But read it again, because it is more difficult than it sounds: It is vital to know what the gospel is and how to communicate it in ways people understand. Many churches are great at half of this but neglect the other half. Some churches know the gospel inside out but put a lot of religious or cultural baggage on it, and are therefore not very effective at communicating it to a pluralist and largely pagan culture. On the other hand, there are churches who have gotten very good at using culture to communicate the gospel but have in the process lost sight of what they were supposed to be communicating. To be effective

missionaries to our culture, we need to have fixed theology and flexible culture—strong on what the gospel is, but communicating it without adding religious clutter to it—or, more eloquently, “reaching out without selling out.”³

Paul is a great model. No one could accuse Paul of not knowing the gospel or of being scared to preach it. The scars on his back and welts on his face from being stoned and flogged would see to that. Yet he used a wide range of GodStories to communicate the gospel, depending on his setting.

To the Jews in Damascus, he proved that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9:22). To the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, he preached forgiveness of sins and freedom from the law through Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 13:16–41). To the pagans in Lystra, he spoke of the creator God who showed his presence by giving them crops and good weather (Acts 14:14–17). To the pagans in Athens, he proclaimed an independent God who did not need serving and who would one day judge the world (Acts 17:22–31). To King Agrippa and Festus, he shared his personal testimony (Acts 26:1–23). So, although we know from Romans that Paul was utterly convinced of justification by faith, redemption, and being in Christ, we know from Acts that these weren’t always the GodStories he started with or stuck to when preaching to unbelievers. Others, equally true, were often more appropriate to his audience.

In none of this are we saying the gospel needs to change. That would be a terrible mistake because it puts the desires of man above the desires of God, which is idolatry. What we are saying is that there are numerous GodStories in Scripture, and it might be that the best way of saving some of God’s image-bearers is to start our preaching

with a slightly different GodStory than the ones we are used to. The main planks of the gospel—a loving God, fallen humanity, rescue through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and so on—will never alter. But how we nail the planks together might.

GodStories and the Health of the Church

The third and final reason for writing *GodStories* is partly a product of the first two: The health of the church is on the line. At one level, this is obvious: If the church isn't worshipping God properly or reaching the world with the gospel, then it is a waste of space and time. There is more to it than that, however. Again and again in the pages of the New Testament, we find writers contending for the gospel because they care about the church.

To the Galatians, Paul reinforces GodStories about being justified by faith apart from the law, and about Jews and Gentiles being one in Christ.⁴ The Corinthians, on the other hand, seem to understand that, but need a strong reminder about Christ being crucified, their sanctification, and the bodily resurrection. First John focuses on the incarnation GodStory more than others. Hebrews tells us about the priesthood of Jesus and the superiority of Christ to the major Jewish symbols. In none of these cases is evangelism the point. Instead, a failure to understand these various GodStories leads to division and sexual immorality and false teaching and backsliding, respectively. So the health of the church depends on understanding the fullness of the gospel.

The gospel is not just for guest meetings or open airs, as you would think to hear us sometimes, but for the people of God. The outstanding explanation of the gospel in Romans, remember, was

written to Christians; Paul tells Timothy to preach the word to his church until he's blue in the face (2 Tim. 4:2); and Paul's aim to visit the capital of the world was generated by a desire to preach the gospel among the church there (Rom. 1:15). If preaching the gospel to the church means simply reiterating the call to repent and be saved every week, then it is no wonder that so many preachers (and listeners) struggle. But if it means explaining to the church the full extent and scope of the GodStories in Scripture, then you could preach for a lifetime and never repeat yourself.

Thank God that there are so many to go round. If you're in an introverted community of mature Christians, you can study the mission of God. If you love seeing people saved but you aren't quite sure what to do with them when they are, you can look at freedom from sin. Frustrated artists can look at God's beauty; frustrated activists, his justice. If you don't get the Old Testament, then you can look under every verse and every rock until you find Christ. If you get only the Old Testament, then see how all of God's promises are now *yes* and *amen*. Whoever you are, wherever you're reading this, you can find a GodStory that will expand your view of God and revel in it. Then you can experience the joy of sharing it, in a culturally appropriate way, with someone who doesn't know it yet. The world has nothing in comparison.

So we need to know and preach and live the gospel. The good news that shines through all the GodStories will bring us closer into worship, push us further into mission, and draw us closer into community—facedown, flat out, all in. This book is just an introduction to a few of them. But they might change your life all the same.

GodStories usually do.

Endnotes

1. The names of the people in this story have been changed.
2. Adapted from David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2005), 15.
3. This phrase is the subtitle of Mark Driscoll's excellent book on the subject, *The Radical Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).
4. If, that is, we recognize that Galatians might tell more than one GodStory at once, rather than (as sometimes happens) playing them off against each other. For an excellent explanation of how we can and should embrace both these GodStories together, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

ACT ONE
CREATION AND FALL
.....

CREATION THROUGH CHRIST

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. —Colossians 1:16-17

Creation tells us GodStories every day, if only we have eyes to look for them. The heavens tell us about glory, the stars about sustaining power, the sun and moon about God's otherness than us. Human bodies tell us about how careful and wonderful God's design is, and numerous creatures display his wisdom. From the moment Genesis announces "In the beginning, God created ..." there is a GodStory, even though we do not hear about human beings for another twenty-six verses. It's a GodStory about the supremacy of the One by whom and for whom everything was created, and in whom all things hold together.

Studying the size of the heavens, as David and Isaiah urge us to, leads us to consider the incomparable size and power of almighty God. It's well worth doing.¹ But in this narrative, we're going to do the opposite of that. We're going to study some of the smaller things in creation to see if we can get more insight into the One who created them.

Start with Earth. Relative to space, Earth is pretty small. The northern lights on Jupiter, which is a tiny fraction of the size of any star, are bigger than our entire planet. But relative to Earth, everything we might otherwise think of as huge is actually tiny. We tend to think of mountains and ocean trenches as being enormous—giant ridges on Earth’s surface that must mean the planet is shaped like an old cannonball, with massive bumps and craters everywhere. However, as big as these mountain ranges and ocean trenches are compared to us, they are tiny compared to Earth. In fact, relative to its size, Earth is smoother than a billiard ball, even with the Andes Mountains and the Java Trench.

But on the surface of this rather small planet, all around its relatively small mountain ranges and forests, are billions of creatures which are so tiny that the vast majority of them cannot be seen with the naked eye. In the top inch of forest soil, there are 340 different animals under the area covered by my footprint. That means that when I go for a one-mile walk, I tread on approximately six hundred thousand creatures, none of which I ever see.² These animals tell me a GodStory about the care and providence of almighty God. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29).

These tiny creatures are the tip of the iceberg, though. You probably know about cells, for example. Your entire body is made up of them, and there are over one hundred million of them in the human eye alone. Bacteria cells are so minuscule that they carpet your body at all times without you ever realizing; when you wash your hands, you scrub around five million of them off your hands and into the sink.³ “All things were created . . . visible and invisible.”

It doesn't stop there. Cells are themselves made up of even smaller entities which we have only started to understand quite recently. The intestinal bacterium, which is small for a cell (about 0.0001cm wide), has inside it twenty thousand ribosomes, which are basically miniature chemical factories that produce protein molecules for the cell to use. Molecules are so small that you have to use quite ridiculous analogies to visualize them. For instance, if you placed a water molecule next to an orange, the size difference would be similar to placing a pea next to Earth. Beneath them, molecules are themselves composed of atoms, which are even more unimaginably small. Why and how did God make things as small as that? Because of, and by, the hero of our creation GodStory, Jesus. "All things were created through him and for him."

When you get inside the atom, things become a little bit confusing, since there is a lot of dispute about what is in there. Chemists are agreed on electrons, neutrons, and protons, but there appear to be even smaller particles within each of these, like leptons and quarks (as a frame of reference, a hydrogen atom is reckoned to weigh about two thousand times the mass of a lepton). Whilst these almost infinitesimal particles are being theorized about—we have to theorize, you see, because even with electron microscopes, they are too small for us to see them—there remains huge debate about how they constitute matter at all, and what knits them together. In scientific terms, it's a mystery. But theologically, the answer is simple: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Creation points to the supremacy of Christ. The heavens declare his glory, the earth his wisdom, the cell his providence, and the lepton his inconceivable attention to detail. And he loves it:

When [Yahweh] marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman ... rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man. (Prov. 8:29–31)⁴

Endnotes

1. Readers eager to grasp the glory of God in the size of creation might be interested to view Mike Gilbert's superb video at www.GodStoriesBook.com.
2. There are an average of 1,356 living creatures in one foot of forest soil, my footprint is about one quarter of one square foot, and one mile is about 1,750 paces. The former statistic is from Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine, 1974), 94.
3. Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 18–19.
4. In Proverbs, of course, this passage is spoken by wisdom, so it might seem strange to attribute it to Jesus. But it is widely accepted that one of the main points of John 1 (not to mention Colossians 1) is that Jesus *is* the wisdom of God, the master workman by whom all things were made.