

DIRTY GLORY

FOREWORD BY
BEAR GRYLLS

GO WHERE YOUR BEST PRAYERS TAKE YOU



REDMOONCHRONICLES#2

PETE GREIG

Dirty Glory is a powerful, personal, and honest story from a prayer warrior I love and admire.

BEAR GRYLLS

Adventurer and chief scout, UK, from the foreword

I must admit that I was skeptical of reviewing a book entitled *Dirty Glory*, but from page one I was captivated by the many fascinating personal stories, the extraordinary answers to prayer, the accounts of historic prayer meetings, and Pete Greig's amazing journey with God. Reading about God's redemptive work in response to the 24/7 prayer movement challenged and summoned me to become a "walking, talking prayer room, a carrier of his presence," and a willing, worthy field hand who falls on her knees digging in and cultivating the soil in order to reap souls—thus the convicting and profound title, *Dirty Glory*.

CYNTHIA HEALD

Author of *Becoming a Woman* Bible study series

This is a story of the remarkable adventure of a group of people who sought the presence of God and said yes to the Holy Spirit. Pete Greig is a master storyteller, but don't be fooled: These are more than stories. They are a living theology because they are the result of a lived theology. Pete lives out of the deep and joyful belief that God is present in his world. This book will surely awaken your heart to love the Father, to join Jesus in his prayer, and to follow the Spirit in his wild and wonderful work. I know, because that is what Pete's life and friendship have done for me.

GLENN PACKIAM

Pastor, New Life Downtown, Colorado Springs; and author of *Discover the Mystery of Faith*, *Lucky*, and *Secondhand Jesus*

Pete Greig is a unique voice in the church, and this is a unique book. His words cut through any unnecessary religiosity but always remain

reverent. Pete argues that the pressing need today is not for greater spiritual activity but for greater spiritual authority—and that the key to this is prayer. Nothing is sanitized here—this is a call to get your hands gloriously dirty in the service of God and to cry out in prayer for the world he so loves.

MATT REDMAN

Songwriter

I have had the privilege of working closely with Pete Greig for a number of years. We've found ourselves leading together all over the world, from churches to palaces to open fields. Time with Pete is always massive amounts of fun, brilliantly inspiring, and deeply profound. *Dirty Glory* is no different. I couldn't put it down. It was like an adrenaline shot in my arm. This book will challenge you to think bigger, risk more, and love recklessly. It's a reminder that we are invited into the adventure of a lifetime: knowing God and making him known.

TIM HUGHES

Songwriter and pioneer of Worship Central

Pete Greig has again shared for us God's dreams for a new monasticism, in the real life story unfolding around the global church. For me, Pete has been one of the huge inspirations in my life of prayer and leadership. For the church, the 24/7 prayer movement is perhaps one of the most important unifying forces under heaven.

REV GRAHAM SINGH

Executive director of Church Planting Canada, and Pasteur of St. James Montreal

How do I weave the adventure of a real friendship with God into my daily life? Pete Greig in *Dirty Glory* captures the wit and grit of normal people swept into some incredible situations just because they prayed. These stories don't offer us a foolproof formula but rather some real-world examples—often entertaining ones—of what might

happen if we joined in. A great read for those who are open to more of God's mystery and mischief in their lives.

TIM DAY

Author of *God Enters Stage Left*

Few people stir my heart and challenge my faith like Pete Greig. In *Red Moon Rising* and now with *Dirty Glory*, Pete steps into my walk with Jesus and calls me to a journey of prayer that is raw and challenges the status quo at every turn. Before I was even through the introduction of *Dirty Glory*, I could feel my heart coming alive to what Jesus calls every believer to. That is a life lived with radical abandonment and childlike faith. A passion to see others experience the real and authentic touch of God in their lives. We were never meant to settle for a safe Christian existence; we were always meant to live on the edge, in the middle of the chaos, lifting up our hearts in prayer. We are to reach out to the broken and destitute. I am so grateful for the voice that Pete has been in my life, calling me out of the mundane and into the radical life of following Jesus and praying as he prayed.

BANNING LIEBSCHER

Pastor and founder of Jesus Culture



DIRTY GLORY

GO WHERE YOUR BEST PRAYERS TAKE YOU

• • • • • **RED MOON CHRONICLES #2** • • • • •

PETE GREIG

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People often ask me what's happening with 24-7 these days, and whether that whole crazy, non-stop prayer thing is finally running out of steam.

Well, we spent the first few years expecting it to slow down and sometimes secretly hoping that it might stop altogether so that we could get on with the things we'd been doing before it kicked off. But that first unsuspecting prayer room has self-seeded into the lives of more than 2 million people, in more than 12,000 locations, most denominations, and more than half the nations on earth. Along the way, to my constant surprise, churches have experienced renewal, new ministries have been born, radical young firebrands have been propelled out of prayer rooms to fight injustice, journalists (from *Rolling Stone* to *Reader's Digest*) have taken note, and countless people have encountered Jesus—many for the first time. All accidentally. All because of prayer.

We only started praying because we had nowhere else to go. But then, when we did, we somehow stumbled into a story worth telling. I began recounting our adventures in *Red Moon Rising*. But that, as it turned out, was just the beginning of the journey. That was before a terrifying encounter set me down four thousand miles from home on Christmas Day in a forgotten graveyard at a place they call Blue Camp 20.

Here, then, is the next chapter of our story . . .

Rebe

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FOREWORD

BEAR GRYLLES

I was about sixteen when I remember praying one of my first real prayers. I didn't grow up going to church, but I'd always had faith. Then my godfather, who was like a second dad to me, died, and I was devastated. I remember climbing a tree and saying a very simple prayer: "If you're there, will you please be beside me. Be my friend." That was the start of something that has grown to become the backbone of my life.

Six years later, when my parachute ripped and I fell thousands of feet to earth, you'd better believe I was crying out to God—you don't get many atheists in a situation like that! And maybe my prayers were answered, because the surgeon later said I came "within a whisker" of total paralysis.

Eighteen months later, as I stood on top of Everest mesmerised by the incredible curvature of the earth from the top of the world's highest mountain, it was just natural to feel, "Wow, God, you made all this?" I guess that is worship. And what a privilege to climb mountains with the One who made them.

My Christian faith has so often been a quiet backbone to our life as a family and through my work. When I took President Obama into the Alaskan wilderness for an episode of *Running Wild*, it was a special moment to finish the adventure by praying together. Out in the wild

you discover pretty quickly that even the most famous, extraordinary people are asking the same questions and looking for the same things in life as all the rest of us. It was another president—Abraham Lincoln—who once confessed, “I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go.” Smart and humble man.

I probably don’t go to church as much as I should, but I do start every day on my knees, praying by my bed, asking God for strength and wisdom for the day ahead. That is the grounding for my day. Christianity isn’t about religion. It’s about a real relationship with God—being held, being forgiven, finding joy, finding home. And at the heart of that kind of relationship is the conversation we call prayer: asking God for help when life is tough, thanking him for the good things, and trying to listen out for that still, small voice of his guidance.

Although I know that prayer is important, I don’t find it particularly easy. I am pretty impatient and struggle to sit still for long. That’s one of the reasons I love this book. My friend Pete Greig has written it to inspire and help ordinary, “dirty” people like me find a bit more of God’s glory. *Dirty Glory* is a powerful, personal, and honest story about life’s most important adventure. It comes from the heart and from the hand of a prayer warrior whom I love and admire.

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*I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD,
the deeds for which he is to be praised,
according to all the LORD has done for us.*

ISAIAH 63:7

I found myself travelling around England with Justin Welby in the week prior to his enthronement as 105th Archbishop of Canterbury. Wherever he stopped, crowds converged for a day of prayer at the local cathedral. And quite by chance, the final day of this tour was to be in Chichester, the picturesque Roman city where the 24-7 prayer movement had begun more than a decade earlier. It was to be a particularly poignant day.

The local police clearly hadn't expected anything more than a few old ladies with interesting hats, but the crowds outside Chichester Cathedral that day were large enough to stop the traffic. We were surprised too. Kneeling on a cold stone floor in a Gothic barn beside a man in a long black dress is hardly a compelling prospect. And yet thousands of normal-looking people—only a few of them with interesting hats—had turned up, just as they had at previous locations, merely to pray.

Who could possibly have foreseen any of this ten years earlier, when we had begun our quest just down the road, in a pop-up prayer space in a faceless warehouse on a dead-end street at the edge of town? Back then the cathedral authorities had viewed us suspiciously as the lunatic fringe: fire-breathing zealots, radicalised youngsters taking it all a bit too seriously. But a decade of non-stop prayer in more than half the nations on earth had carried us a mile and a half across town, from that first

peripheral prayer room cocooned in clumsy graffiti to this fan-vaulted temple, built a millennium ago, at the geographical and psychological centre of the city.

Attempting to walk through the crowd outside the cathedral, Justin Welby paused by a Costa Coffee delivery van. Its driver was sitting in his cabin, helplessly adrift in a sea of pilgrims. “Saving the Nation from Bad Coffee” boasted the slogan immediately above the new archbishop’s head.

Wherever we stopped on our Prayer Tour, we began the day by sharing a hearty breakfast with the local bishop. Justin Welby would always make a powerful speech, between mouthfuls of porridge, about his three great priorities. The primary objective, he would say, is *a renewal of prayer and the religious life*, and he would then point out that there has never, to the best of his knowledge, been a revival in the church that did not begin with a renewal of prayer. His second priority, he would continue, is *reconciliation*, because relationships are broken at every level in society: within families, between nations, and even in the church. We

“Without prayer there will be no renewal of the church, and without a renewal of the church, there is very little hope for the world.”

—JUSTIN WELBY

would all nod at this, of course—the bishop, the dean, the canons, and me. And then the archbishop would progress to his third priority: *evangelism*, because the nation needs the good news of Jesus. “We’re not just the Rotary Club with a pointy roof,” he would say, munching his toast and fixing a beady eye on the local hier-

archy. “That’s why prayer must come first. Without prayer there will be no renewal of the church, and without a renewal of the church, there is very little hope for the world.”

It was quite a moment. For a decade members of the 24-7 movement had been scurrying around back-street clubs, independent coffee shops, and university campuses, banging a drum for “prayer, mission, and justice.” We aren’t used to palaces and pontiffs. Men in dresses tended, in our world, to be transvestite clubbers in Ibiza, not venerable

clerics presiding over ancient ecclesiastical institutions. And yet here I was with the leader of the third largest denomination on earth as he declared prayer, mission, and justice to be his top three aims. It was a head-mash. I nearly shouted “Amen, brother!” and “Hallelujah!”—but that’s not the sort of thing you do over breakfast in a bishop’s palace with a man who is about to be enthroned as the leader of 80 million people.

Arresting Thunderbolts

Of course, the archbishop was right. The Bible teaches that prayer is the most powerful transformational force in the lives of individuals, churches, and even nations. Whenever and wherever God’s people truly rediscover their purpose, their peculiarity, and their power, they do so through prayer. And the result of any such renewal, if it truly is a renewal of the Spirit, is first that the church is revived and then that the prevailing culture is rewired for the glory of God. There isn’t a single example of a transformational Christian renewal that did not begin in prayer.

Church attendance may be declining throughout much of the Western world, but the proportion of the population that prays has remained consistently high,¹ with 75 to 97 per cent of Americans claiming to do so at least once per week, and 57 per cent praying daily.² In Britain, a government survey of beliefs discovered that a quarter of those who describe themselves as “nonreligious” still “take part in some spiritual activity each month, typically prayer.”³ We have often been surprised at the number of non-Christians who don’t want to be preached at, yet still want to be prayed for. Prayer, it seems, is bigger than the church—a wide-open space for missional connection with a post-Christian culture that

Prayer, it seems, is bigger than the church—a wide-open space for missional connection with a post-Christian culture that remains surprisingly spiritually open.

remains surprisingly spiritually open. But this is not a new phenomenon. Christ's first apostles prioritised prayer before all other leadership tasks, in spite of the demands of spectacular church growth (see Acts 6:4). They understood that their calling, as the renewed people of God, was to be "a house of prayer for all nations," a theme we shall explore throughout this book. Christians today, who disagree about so many important things, tend to agree about the absolute priority of Christ's call to be a people dedicated wholeheartedly to prayer.

It was in the fourth century that John Chrysostom wrote an effusive hymn acknowledging prayer to be "the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings":

The potency of prayer hath subdued the strength of fire, it hath bridled the rage of lions . . . extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, . . . rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt.⁴

It is tempting to downgrade Chrysostom's rhetoric. Our own experiences of prayer probably fall a little short of "extinguishing wars" and "arresting the thunderbolt." Yet every one of his examples has been drawn directly from the Bible. It was Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who "subdued the strength of fire." It was Daniel who "bridled the rage of lions." It was Moses, Joshua, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah who harnessed prayer to "extinguish wars." And so on.

Prayer, Mission, and Justice

Of course, prayer alone won't get the job done. There is a gritty pragmatism to most of the great biblical prayer warriors. Daniel prayed diligently three times every day, but he also made astute political choices. Moses raised his hands in protracted intercession against the Amalekite army, but all the while Joshua was wielding his sword in the

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valley below. The great abolitionist William Wilberforce urged against “neglecting God in the secret place of prayer,” but in fact he spent most of his life writing letters, making speeches in the Houses of Parliament, and building a consensus against slavery.

There’s a lovely old Russian proverb: “Pray to God but continue to row for the shore.” Prayer must outwork itself in action, and so this book is about more than prayer and presence. It is also about mission and justice. It is about the *saying* of prayers, for sure, but also about the *becoming* of prayers in a thousand practical ways.



Ever since that first prayer room in Chichester went viral, we’ve been Forrest Gumping our way around the world, praying through 9/11 and the financial crash, the war on terror, presidential elections, and the rise of Taylor Swift. Having never intended to start a movement, we don’t feel particularly responsible to maintain it. To this day we don’t advertise or try to persuade anyone to start prayer rooms or Boiler Rooms.⁵ People just seem to want to do these things, and so we try to help them. We have become a little more organised and efficient over the years, but there still isn’t any kind of plan for marketing or global domination.

For more than fifteen years we have lived in a fairly constant state of bewilderment at the places God takes us, the surprising new things the movement becomes. I am aware, therefore, as I sit down to write this book, that my part of the 24-7 story is merely one perspective, a fraction of the whole. Just last night I was told by a publisher that the impetus to start her new business had come from a divine commission received in a prayer room. A nationally renowned professor of psychology recently told me that many of his most formative experiences have taken place in prayer rooms. One of my best friends confessed that he only finally found the courage to marry his beautiful girlfriend after a succession of prayer vigils, wrestling with God until he finally overcame his terror of commitment. God is weaving a million stories together, creating a narrative far bigger than us all.

This book cannot possibly, therefore, be *the* 24-7 Prayer story. It is just my experience of the thing, woven in with that of three particular friends: Brian Heasley, the Irish ex-con who pioneered our work on the Mediterranean island of Ibiza; Kelly Tietsort, who moved from the buckle of the American Bible Belt to work with prostitutes in a walled city run by the Mexican mafia; and Jon Petersen, who grew up in Japan, raised his family in the red-light district of Amsterdam, and now lives at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Denver, Colorado. I am indebted to them for allowing me to share their remarkable stories alongside mine.



Dirty Glory is a sequel to my earlier book *Red Moon Rising*, but I have tried to write it for new readers, too. It explores four overarching themes:

1. *Incarnation*. As its title implies, *Dirty Glory* is a celebration of the Incarnation, the “Word made flesh.” That’s why there are so many stories of God’s glory working in unlikely places, through ordinary, dirty people like you and me. It is, I hope, a message of grace for us all.
2. *The presence paradigm*. The presence paradigm, unpacked in this book, is an exciting way of viewing the message of the Bible and the purpose of life itself through the lens of God’s primary desire for friendship, family, and partnership. It shapes the way we pray, the way we preach the gospel, and the way we seek to love the poor.
3. *The house of prayer*. This book also explores what it really means to be a “house of prayer for all nations” (Isaiah 56:7), perhaps one of the most important, most misappropriated phrases in the Bible. Why is the house of prayer such a priority for Isaiah, for Jesus, and for us today? You’ll find that each section of *Dirty Glory* explores a different facet of this theme.

4. *The life of prayer.* Perhaps inevitably, the most important topic explored in this book is prayer itself. Drawing on the lessons we've learned through fifteen years of continual intercession, these stories have been compiled in order, I hope, to *equip* and *inspire* you in prayer.

It is disheartening to observe how rarely anyone teaches thoughtfully about prayer, in spite of the fact that it features, in one way or another, on almost every page of the Bible, and that it was the one area in which the disciples explicitly asked Jesus for training.

You probably remember that embarrassing occasion when the disciples prayed for a boy afflicted by terrible epileptic seizures, but it didn't work. Presumably he suffered a seizure right there in front of them as they were praying—how else could they have known that he hadn't been healed? It would have been a humiliating moment for the disciples, and heartbreaking for the boy and his dad. But then Jesus returned from the Mount of Transfiguration and healed the son immediately, explaining to his red-faced followers that “this kind can come out only by prayer” (Mark 9:29). It's easy to imagine their indignation. What did he think they'd been doing out there? Hadn't they been praying too? Didn't their prayers count?

In this dramatic encounter we see that some people's prayers at certain times can be more powerful than others. Not all prayers carry the same weight. We may recoil from such an apparent grading of intercession, and yet we know this difference to be true in our own experience. Who hasn't found their faith levels heightened after a particular time of spiritual retreat or blessing? Who doesn't know at least one faithful old saint whose whispered prayers can shift things that entire stadia of young zealots can merely tickle?

We are living at a remarkable time of vast, global mobilisation in the realm of intercession. Prayer initiatives proliferate in the West and especially in the developing world. Crowds gather in auditoriums or online, just to pray. At such a time it is important to remember that God's hand

is not overpowered by a certain critical mass. Revival is not awaiting one more stadium rally, or one million more hours of intercession, or—dare I say it?—one more 24-7 prayer room. The pressing need in an age like our own, when so many people are praying so much, is not for greater *activity* but for greater spiritual *authority*.

It is urgently important that we learn to partner with God in prayer, yet our pulpits and platforms remain predominantly silent about how to pray and why. Contemporary seekers are therefore still coming to Jesus with that ancient request: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

That is why—if our mission to this culture is to be more than a marketing campaign; if our acts of Christian mercy are to be anything more than well-meaning social work; if our churches are to be something other than religious clubs; if our voice is to ring out with the authority of prophetic dissonance in contemporary culture; if miracles are to multiply; if the gospel is to be preached “with signs following” (Mark 16:20, KJV); if the kingdom of God is truly to be “not a matter of talk but of power” (1 Corinthians 4:20); if our faith is to be a real, deepening, conversational relationship with the living God—we must discover how to pray.

My other reason for telling these stories is to inspire you to seek God with renewed passion. *Knowing how* to pray is less important than *wanting* to do it. My aim, therefore, is to recount our experiences in such a way as to remind you that prayer works and that it is worth it in the end. That’s why I set out to describe the first five years of the 24-7 journey in *Red Moon Rising*, which has had such an unexpected impact. But our thinking has inevitably moved on since I wrote that book, and so have the stories of answered prayer which have, if anything, been even more amazing than those we experienced during those first five years. We have often been left shaking our heads in utter wonder at the miraculous ways God answers prayer.

But if this is a glory story, it is a peculiar kind of glory, mostly touching down in broken places and messed-up people who rarely

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feel as spiritual as the story makes them sound. I've tried to be honest, therefore, about the wonder of the journey as we've prayed non-stop since the start of this century, but also about the struggles, the simple, bare-knuckle questions with which we have often been forced to wrestle.

And so I'm here now, pulling up a chair, grinning like a maniac, saying, "You'll never believe what's been happening." And I'm planning to keep right on yarning at you, telling you tales, throwing you thoughts, until eventually you beg me to stop. Until you throw up your hands and cry, "OK, OK! I get the point. I hear you, Pete. Quit talking about it and let's start doing it. Cut out the middleman! Let's pray!"

God my Father,

you love us too much to leave us as we are;

Jesus my Lord,

you live to intercede for us;

Holy Spirit,

you are praying for us now with groans beyond talking;

so lead us out onto the wild frontiers of faith.

May this book sow a little mischief in our lives.

May these simple stories wake us up,

May they rub salt on our lips and defibrillate our hearts.

*May our desire for your presence begin to erupt beyond the
predilections of current circumstance.*

May the frameworks of normality begin to feel intolerable.

*Compel us to wonder again, inspire us to innovate, provoke us to rage
against injustice.*

*Pete Greig
Guildford
Pentecost, 2016*

1

PUNK MESSIAH

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory . . .

JOHN 1:14

God's story from beginning to end describes glory getting dirty and dirt getting blessed. The Creator made humanity out of the dust, and if on that day we left a little dirt behind in the creases of his hands, it was surely a sign of things to come.

When God made us again, he came first to a teenage girl, and then to unwashed shepherds and later to pagan astrologers. God spoke the gospel as a dirty word into a religious culture. "The Word," we are told by John at the start of his Gospel, became "flesh." The Latin used here is *caro*, from which we get "carnivore," "incarnation," "carnival," and even "carnal."¹ God became a lump of meat, a street circus, a man like every man.

John is messing with our minds. He knew perfectly well that this opening salvo was a shocking, seemingly blasphemous way to start his Gospel. Like Malcolm McLaren, Alexander McQueen, or Quentin Tarantino, he is grabbing attention, insisting upon an audience, demanding a response. "In the beginning," he says, echoing the opening line of the Bible, lulling us all into a false sense of religious security.

At this point, I imagine John pausing mischievously, just long enough for every son of Abraham to fill in the blank incorrectly.

“In the beginning,” he continues, “was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It’s the familiar creation narrative outrageously remixed, featuring a mysterious new aspect of the divinity named, like some kind of superhero in a Marvel comic, *The Word*.

And yet for John’s Greek readers—the vast majority of Christians by the time the Gospel was written²—the Word was not a new concept at all. For them this was the familiar *Logos* of domestic philosophy, that divine animating principle pervading the cosmos. The bewildering thing for their ears would have been John’s emphatic conflation of this pagan Greek notion of divinity with the Creator God of Jewish monotheism: “The Word,” he says unambiguously, “was God.”

And so, in just these first thirty words of his Gospel, John has effectively both affirmed and alienated his entire audience, Greek and Jew alike. And then, like a prizefighter in the ring, while we are all still reeling from this first theological onslaught, John lands his body blow: “The Word,” he says, “became *flesh*.”

It’s a breathtaking statement, equally appalling for the Jews, who had an elaborate set of 613 rules to help segregate holiness from worldliness, and for the Greeks, who despised the flesh with its malodorous suppurations and embarrassing, base instincts. “The Word became flesh.” Imagine the intake of breath, the furrowed brows, the wives looking at their husbands silently asking, “Did he just say what I think he said?” and the husbands glancing towards their elders wondering, “Is this OK?” It’s punk-rock theology. It’s a screaming “hello.”

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and we have seen his glory.” One scholar says that this is “possibly the greatest single verse in the New Testament and certainly the sentence for which John wrote his gospel.”³ God’s infinite glory has moved, as Eugene Peterson says, “into the neighbourhood” (John 1:14, MSG). He has affirmed our humanity fully. He has identified with us completely, both in our joy and in our pain.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” explains the apostle Paul. The Word didn’t just pretend to become flesh. He wasn’t

fraternising with humanity from a morally superior plane. Jesus *became* sin for us, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the staggering message of Christ’s incarnation: God’s glory became dirt so that we—the scum of the earth—might become the very glory of God.

This then is our creed. We believe in the blasphemous glory of Immanuel; “infinity dwindled to infancy,” as the poet once said.⁴ We believe in omnipotence surrendering to incontinence, the name above every other name rumoured to be illegitimate. We believe that God’s eternal Word once squealed like a baby and, when eventually he learned to speak, it was with a regional accent. The Creator of the cosmos made tables, and presumably he made them badly at first. The Holy One of Israel got dirt in the creases of his hands.

Here is our God—the Sovereign who “emptied himself out into the nature of a man,” as one popular first-century hymn put it (see Philippians 2:7). The Omniscience who “learned obedience,” as the book of Hebrews says (5:8). The King born in a barn. The Christ whose first official miracle took place at a party involving the conversion of more than a hundred gallons of water into really decent wine. Two thousand years on, and some religious people are still trying to turn it back again. And of course it was these same people who accused him at the time of partying too hard. Rumours followed him all the days of his life, and he did little enough to make them go away.

Perfect Dirt

You probably remember the story about Jesus asking a Samaritan woman with a dubious reputation for a drink (as if he didn’t know how that would look). And how he recruited zealots, harlots, fishermen, despised tax-collectors, and Sons of Thunder. And how he enjoyed a perfumed foot-rub at a respectable dinner party. One scholar says of the woman in this particular encounter, “Her actions would have been regarded (at least by men) as erotic. Letting her hair down in this setting would

have been on a par with appearing topless in public. It is no wonder that Simon [the host] entertains serious reservations about Jesus' status as a holy man."⁵ Jesus made himself unclean again and again, touching the untouchables: lepers, menstruating women, and even corpses. He got down on his knees and washed between the toes of men who'd been walking dusty roads in sandals behind donkeys.

And while the dirt lingered in the creases of his hands, he accused those whose hands were clean of sin. Did you hear the one about the whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27)? Or about the dutiful son who despised the prodigal brother staggering home penniless and covered in pig (Luke 15:30)? Or the story about the dirty low-life tax-collector whose snivelling apologies were heard by God while the precise intercessions of a righteous Pharisee merely bounced off the ceiling (Luke 18:9-14)? The Word told dirty stories, and the stories told the Word.

Offended, they washed their hands of him—Pontius Pilate, the Chief Priest, even Simon Peter—and they hung him out to die: a cursed cadaver, a carpenter pinned to clumsy carpentry in the flies of that Middle Eastern sun. Eventually it was extinguished: the sun and the Son. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Glory gone the way of all flesh.

But the dirt could not contain him for long. Three days later the sun rose and the Son rose. And now that he could do anything, go anywhere, what would he do and where would he go? Out of the whole realm of creation, the entire populace of humanity, Jesus chose to appear first to a woman. A woman in a chauvinistic culture that refused to teach women the Torah and discounted their testimony in a court of law. Mary Magdalene was a colourful woman, a woman with a questionable reputation from whom seven demons had been cast. It was the biggest moment of her life. And yet at first, embarrassingly, she mistook the resurrected Jesus for an ordinary gardener, a man with the earth ingrained in the creases of his hands at the start of a working day. Yet he had chosen her quite deliberately, another Mary for another birth, another Eve in another garden, to be his first apostle.⁶ This, too, is offensive to some to this day.

Yes, we believe in the Word made flesh who dwelt among us as a kind of prayer and sends us out to speak the “Amen” in every dark corner of his creation. He handpicks dim-witted people like us: “the foolish things of the world to shame the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27). Bewildered by grace we go wherever he sends us, eat whatever is put before us, kneel in the gutter, make the unlikeliest locations places of prayer. We participate fervidly in a morally ambiguous world, carrying the knowledge of his glory “in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

And so, with angels, archangels, and that great company of gnarly old saints, we believe that someday soon this whole dirty world will finally be filled with the knowledge of God’s glory. He will breathe once more into the dust of the earth. And on that day, every knee will bow. Every blaspheming tongue will cry, “Oh my God!” Every hand will be raised in surrender. And he will choose the ones with dirt in the creases of their hands, just as he always did. Flesh will become Word, and dwell with him in glory.



SELAH

Although the word *selah* occurs seventy-four times in the Hebrew Bible, no one really knows exactly what it means. Featuring mostly in the Psalms, it may have been a note to the choirmaster marking a change of verse, rhythm, or melody. *Selah* probably meant “pause.”

But there’s more to it than that. Its Hebrew root seems to be the word *calah*, meaning “to hang” or “to weigh.” *Selah* may also, therefore, have been a reminder to the worshippers to weigh the words they had just sung or heard.

At the end of every chapter of this book you will find an invitation to *selah*—to pause and to weigh the words you have just read. Not to rush ahead to the next chapter, but to stop and reflect. It’s a reminder to be still, so that this book about prayer can become your own living conversation with God.