

No devil in the details

By [Sarah Hinlicky Wilson](#)

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Learning to read isn't finished by the time you're eight and you know how to sound out the words on the page. It's a practice that grows along with the years. It turns around the old adage from "seeing is believing" to "believing is seeing": it's hard to see something in a written text if you aren't, on some level, already prepared to believe it.

Over the years of reading the Bible, what I've seen—what I've been even capable of noticing—has changed. In early youth I zeroed in on the weird things: nephilim in Genesis, baptism for the dead in 1 Corinthians. Later it was wisdom for living, especially at the end of the epistles. Then it was how the real Bible was different from the Sunday school versions I'd heard. Next was narrative flow and literary structure. (You can tell the last two came to the fore while I was in seminary.) Then it was the startling juxtaposition between radical grace and the hardening of hearts. (Parish ministry.) And on it goes.

When I can read the Bible for what it wants to tell me, rather than what I want it to tell me, a theme keeps floating to the surface, one I would never seek out on my own: the love of *things*. I noticed it first in reading 1 Kings, which [records](#) in loving detail all the flares and fancies of God's new dwelling place: "The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers." "In the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim of olivewood, each ten cubits high." "There were lattices of checker work with wreaths of chain work for the capitals on the tops of the pillars." This love of things is all over Exodus, too, describing priestly garments and the ark of the covenant. It even spills over into Revelation.

Assuming we will be bored by the tedium of lists of things, the lectionary omits Revelation's [loving detail](#) that describes the new heaven and the new earth descending from heaven, with the new Jerusalem dressed up like a bride. But what bride isn't utterly fascinated by all the details of her wedding attire? The specific beauty of the new city is part and parcel of its message:

The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

Even though the old things will have passed away, the new world will not be soberly drab. It will be sparkling and colorful. Eternity will not be dull, for the Lord is not dull. When God is with us, forever and for good, the colors of this world will not pass away into nothingness but will finally be able serve their original and ultimate purpose of glorifying God. Not just people but even things have their place in the divine economy. God is in the details.

*Additional lectionary columns by Wilson appear in the April 20 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*