

The book cover features a vibrant red background with intricate, repeating white geometric patterns in the corners. The title is centered in a large, white, serif font. A circular orange-yellow inset contains the subtitle in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. The author's name is at the bottom in a white, serif font.

DISCIPLINING  
THE  
DISEASED  
IMAGINATION

Spiritual  
Formation  
*and the*  
Healing of Our  
Hearts

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Undragoning the Imagination*

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon. . . . Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down.

Revelation 12:3–9

I have always loved stories about dragons. Much of my fascination owes to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose legends of Middle-earth tell of dragons like Ancalagon the Black, Glaurung the Golden, and Smaug the Impenetrable. In the tradition of Norse mythology, Tolkien’s dragons are insidious and bewitching, cunning and cruel, living embodiments of the lust for domination and destruction.

We are drawn to stories of dragons because they tell us something true about the world. Indeed, dragons (or something like them) also appear throughout the Bible. They fall into the category of “chaos creatures” and may be found in the depths of the sea, in

the wilderness, or in the heavenly places.<sup>1</sup> Monsters like Leviathan (Job 41:1) represent creation unsubdued—“nature red in tooth and claw”—the danger that lurks in the wild places of the world. As humans seek to steward creation, they do so aware of their vulnerability in the face of these powers. Although originally a part of God’s good creation (since nothing is evil in the beginning), these creatures come to represent evil’s rebellion against God as the story continues. It is not for nothing that the book of Revelation names the devil as the “great dragon” and the “ancient serpent” who “leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9). Dragons remind us that we must reckon with evil.

We are also drawn to stories of dragons because they teach us that dragons can be defeated.<sup>2</sup> In Tolkien’s stories, Smaug is killed by Bard’s arrow, Glaurung is slain by Túrin’s sword, and Ancalagon is cast from the sky by Eärendil. In Scripture, the enormous red dragon is identified primarily to assure us of his defeat. We are promised that despite the power of evil, it is not strong enough to stop God’s work in the world (Rev. 12:8).

Although that is good news, we wonder what it means and what it will take to subdue the dragonish impulses we feel inside us. The way of the dragon is manifest whenever we see our neighbors as obstacles or objects, things to devour or possess.<sup>3</sup> We feel it in our pride and wrath, in our deceit and despair. We find it in the craving for glittering things, the obsession with our own reflections, and the longing to sit atop the pile in the place of God. Who will rescue us from the dragons within?

Think of the incorrigible Eustace Scrubb in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia books. Eustace happens on a dead dragon’s horde and decides to keep it for himself. Falling asleep in the dragon’s cave thinking “greedy dragonish thoughts,” he wakes to realize that he has become a dragon. Because he has been bewitched by diabolical desire, his

1. “Sea monsters” (Gen. 1:21 NRSVue), serpents (Gen. 3:1), spiritual powers in heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). See the BibleProject’s podcast series *Chaos Dragon*. Tim Mackie and John Collings, hosts, *Chaos Dragon*, podcast, episode 1, “Dragons in the Bible,” BibleProject, July 31, 2023, <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/dragons-bible/>.

2. This is a paraphrase of Chesterton, “Red Angel,” 130.

3. As Tolkien writes, “We laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them.” *Tree and Leaf*, 58.

appearance is magically altered to match his dragon-like heart.<sup>4</sup> The dragoning of Eustace offers a powerful image of the danger we are in. We, too, live in a world of dragons, and unless we are vigilant, we, too, may fall asleep in the dragon's lair and be conformed to the "pattern of this world" (Rom. 12:2). Unless we resist with all our might, we, too, may follow the way of the dragon instead of the way of the Lamb.<sup>5</sup>

Can our dragon-sickness be healed? One remedy, Tolkien believed, is to read dragon stories that expose us to the truth. Similarly, Lewis tells us that Eustace might have known better than to fall asleep in a dragon's cave if he had been raised to read "the right books."<sup>6</sup> Both authors held that exercising the imagination with fairy tales might help readers recover their health, training their powers of discernment and cleansing their souls with mythic truth. The point is that there is a vital connection between the stories that shape our imaginations and the kind of beings we become. When we fail to care for our imaginations, stronger medicine is required, an intervention like the undragoning of Eustace. But how do we undragon our imaginations?

### **The Story of This Book: Discipleship as Imaginative Repair**

This question and this book represent a shift in my thinking rooted in misgivings about traditional models of discipleship. Early in my academic journey I was encouraged by a mentor to find a foundational question to orient my vocation, and it didn't take long for me to find it: What does it mean to disciple the imagination? I became convinced that the imagination is at the heart of discipleship: What we imagine must be transfigured and trained by the true and beautiful story found in Scripture. For the last decade I have been trying to understand how the imagination works and how theology can nurture the imagination for cultural discipleship.

4. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 91.

5. This turn of phrase is from Goggin and Strobel, *Way of the Dragon*.

6. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 91.

I am still convinced of the value of my keystone question. But in recent years I have started to wonder whether my research question assumes too much. My working model of discipleship was a training regimen composed of gospel truth and spiritual exercise. This is a common thread in books on spiritual formation: We preach truths and prescribe practices in hopes that both will take root in our hearts.

And yet, many well-intended plans for spiritual growth devolve into information transfer and behavior modification. When they succeed, they reinforce our sense of mastery and control; when they fail, they produce frustration and shame. Something has gone wrong. The failure of these methods to form Christians in the image of Jesus Christ invites us to examine what we have missed along the way.

Indeed, this book has been borne out of a deep sense of lament at my own failure to be formed, a failure shared by the church more broadly. Why does it seem like so many devout believers have been unable to escape the gravity of more powerful cultural, political, and economic currents? Why are we unable to imagine better futures for ourselves, for our neighbors, and for the places we live? *Are our imaginations too diseased to be disciplined?*

## Setting Out: A Map of the Argument

When I started this book, I told people that I was writing about the imagination and prayer, the “eyes of the heart” and the “cries of the heart.” But this led some to think that I was writing about imaginative prayer practices. Although I consider some of these practices along the way, my primary interest is more foundational. Rather than offering new ways to pray, I’m interested in exploring the pull of “vain imaginings,” the delicate relationship between prayer and perception, and the recovery of the imagination’s proper function.

That is to say, if the imagination is to be disciplined, it must also be healed. Accordingly, I understand discipleship both as an exercise in the healing of diseased imaginations and as training for the active life of love and justice. By focusing on the *imagination*, I am highlighting the way discipleship happens according to the

stories we tell and our sense of what is possible. By focusing on *healing*, I am offering a corrective to models that emphasize habit and discipline.

To be clear, healing and training are not necessarily opposed. But much depends on whether we view discipleship from the perspective of an elite athlete training for a triathlon or an accident survivor relearning to walk. Both kinds of training require discipline and self-denial, but the second kind of training is truer to the Christian account.

Because we're focusing on healing, it will also be helpful to learn from other disciplines oriented in that direction, like psychological science.<sup>7</sup> Tanya Luhrmann's work on prayer has been particularly valuable to me, especially her list of seven "metacognitive" aspects of prayer that contribute to well-being:<sup>8</sup>

- ✦ Detachment: resisting your thoughts
- ✦ Attention: shifting your attention toward something else
- ✦ Absorption: getting caught up in your imagination
- ✦ Attachment: cultivating a positive emotional relationship
- ✦ Catharsis: experiencing intense emotion as healing
- ✦ Narrative: praying to someone with whom you have a history
- ✦ Hope: claiming a better future

In what follows, I explore these themes in light of Scripture and as interpreted by Christian theology, which is itself an imaginative tradition shaped by encounters with God. Each chapter considers one aspect of imaginative discipleship: perception, play, resistance, attention, absorption, attachment, emotion, history, and hope. Corresponding to each theme is a diagnosis of an imaginative disease along with a discussion of how these ailments might be resisted and

7. See the distinction between psychology (the study of human behavior) and psychological science (the empirical mode of inquiry) in Barrett, *Theopsych*, 9.

8. By "metacognitive" Luhrmann means that when we pray, we think about the way we are thinking. I am paraphrasing and rearranging Luhrmann's order to fit my chapter order, which follows an organic narrative of our imaginative engagement with God. Luhrmann, "Prayer as Metacognitive Activity," 314–15.

healed. Each chapter concludes with an orienting prayer that contains the main idea of the chapter; when taken together, they form a longer prayer that captures the larger project.

<b>Imaginative Aspect</b>	<b>Imaginative Disease</b>	<b>Orienting Prayer</b>
		O God who heals my diseases, heal my diseased imagination.
Perception	<i>Idolatry</i>	Open the eyes of my heart. Let me trust your promise when I cannot see.
Play	<i>Hypocrisy</i>	Teach me to pray.
Resistance	<i>Distraction</i>	Turn my eyes from vain imaginings, and fill my life with more of you.
Attention	<i>Inattention</i>	Loving God, you have my attention. Draw my attention to the vulnerable.
Absorption	<i>Self-Deception</i>	Let me be caught up in your story.
Attachment	<i>Control</i>	Help me know that I am safe so that I can be brave.
Emotion	<i>Entitlement</i>	Lord, I seek you. Whether I feel empty or full, help me walk in the way of loyal love.
History	<i>Triumphalism</i>	Help me see what my ancestors saw. As they made faith breathe for me, help me make faith breathe for someone else.
Hope	<i>Cliché</i>	I do not even know how to pray. But your great love is my great hope.

### **Defining Terms: The Diseased Imagination**

Having sketched the general argument, I'd like to say more about my key terms. The *imagination* is the faculty that enables humans to live creatively in God's created world. It allows us to perceive the world but also to play with possibilities that go beyond what is given. This combination of *perception*, *projection*, and *play* allows us to make

something of creation's glorious potentialities (Gen. 1:26–28).<sup>9</sup> The sage puts it this way: “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (Prov. 25:2). This is a delightful picture, in which God has hidden treasures throughout creation, and it is humanity's royal vocation to unearth what is hidden for the good of creation and the glory of God.

We search things out through the imagination, the faculty that moves us to flourish amid possibility. This means that “use your imagination” is not just advice for bored children, nor is imagining something that occurs only privately, inside our heads. What we imagine gets acted out in concrete ways as we live in the world. For us to fulfill our noble charge, we must go out into creation asking, “What if?” What if we poured boiling water over those dried leaves? What if we tried to ride those camels? What if we built a rocket that could take a person to space? What would that be like?<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely because the world is full of possibility that we are always using our imaginations, filling in the gaps so that we can live more securely in the world. The imagination is active when we plan a vacation, rehearse a presentation, or hear a noise late at night. It's engaged when we listen to a story, read a novel, or exercise empathy in relationships. Whenever we imagine, we suspend the actual (what is observably the case) to explore the possible (what might be). And this is a critical point: The goal of the imaginative faculty is *not* to escape reality; it is to grasp reality as firmly as we can. This is true for the most mundane and for the most fantastic exercises of the imagination. Like the “right books,” right imagining helps us recover our sanity, escaping *to* reality rather than from it.

But it is also possible for the imagination to lose its connection to reality. It can begin to construct alternative realities that insulate us from unpleasant truths. When this happens, our imaginative escapes become desertions, leading us to abandon our duties to God and neighbor. More significantly, when the imagination is no longer

9. For fuller accounts, see Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 84–115; Keefe-Perry, *Sense of the Possible*, 25.

10. See Dyrness, “Poised Between Life and Death,” 51–52.

answerable to its creator, its creative capacities become captive to the powers of evil. Evil imagining results in real-world wickedness.

I grew up reading the King James Version of the Bible, and like anyone accustomed to its style, I knew that the translators consistently rendered the imagination with negative associations, consistently speaking of human imaginings as “evil” (Gen. 6:5), “wicked” (Prov. 6:18), and “vain” (Rom. 1:21). These passages highlight human creativity gone awry, the way it goes when we ponder the possibilities of life without God. Detached from its anchor in God, the gift of imagination becomes a curse. It misdirects human imagining toward idolatry and injustice.

Imagining, like idolatry and injustice, happens in community. Groups of people share common histories and hopes and tell stories about the world that are constantly reinforced by everyday life. In every society there are certain things that are taken for granted as “the way things are.” As Walter Brueggemann writes, “The world we take as ‘given’ is a long-established act of imagination that appears to be and claims assent as the only legitimate occupant of the field.”<sup>11</sup> The prophetic hope is not just for individual renewal but so that one day the *nations* will no longer walk “after the imagination of their evil heart” (Jer. 3:17 KJV). To speak of nations sharing a common heart and imagination is to speak of the way that imaginings can lead to ideologies, or to use the biblical word, *idolatries*.

We might say that these idolatries are dragonish enchantments, spells that enslave us to evil powers. Jesus names one of these powers when he says we cannot serve both God and “Mammon” (Matt. 6:24). Most contemporary versions simply render the Aramaic word as “money,” and while this fits, the proper name Mammon evokes an underlying spiritual power. As Andy Crouch writes, Mammon is more than money; it reflects the diabolical desire to “separate power from relationship, abundance from dependence, and being from personhood.”<sup>12</sup> When it captures our imagination, Mammon enchants us with the promise that we can become powerful without becoming vulnerable.

11. Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 13.

12. Crouch, *Life We’re Looking For*, 76. See also McCarragher, *Enchantments of Mammon*.

This brings me to a key term that shifts us from a magical metaphor to a medical one: the *diseased* imagination. I learned this phrase from Willie Jennings, who invokes “diseased social imagination” when describing how Western Christians constructed the category of race and the institution of race-based slavery. Racial hierarchy was an imaginative fabrication; it offered an expansive story to justify the colonization and enslavement of non-white people groups under the guise of improvement and evangelism.<sup>13</sup> Jennings’s analysis is sobering, especially for someone writing a book about *Christian* imagination. It is devastating to read his account of Christian societies imagining, producing, and justifying diabolical practices and institutions. It makes plain how our lust for power and control compels us to embrace the way of dragons, to accept the domination and destruction of others as ordinary, simply “the way things are.”

If slavery seems like a distant example to some readers, let me offer one closer to home. I am a mixed-race, Filipino American man with skin that darkens considerably in the summer months. I grew up in suburban Kansas City, and although I felt different from my peers, I rarely felt unwelcome. In college I became interested in dating a girl who happened to be white, and it was a painful awakening when I heard an argument for racial separation—my separation—on the basis of Scripture for the first time. God made the races, I was told; there must be a reason. So stay in your place.

I would later learn that these lines of interpretation were taken for granted by previous generations, leveraged mostly against Black Americans. I do not for a moment believe that I have borne anything like the burden carried by my Black brothers and sisters. I share my experience to give a personal edge to the diagnosis, to testify to the inability of Christians in the dominant culture to imagine joining their lives with cultures unlike their own.

I do not believe this imaginative failure is exclusive to Christians in general or white Christians in particular. Rather, it represents the enchantments of power and comfort and the way we resist anything that might disrupt our perch at the top of the pile. Dreaming like dragons, we have become unable to imagine anything significantly different

13. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*.

from what we have already seen and known. We must reckon with the severity of the diagnosis before we can be healed, and Dr. Jennings tells us the truth: Christians can suffer from a badly diseased imagination. When the light in us is darkness, how great indeed is the darkness (Matt. 6:23)!

But although the diagnosis is painful, it is also a gift for three reasons. First, if the imagination is diseased, then we know that something foreign has taken it captive. Its creational structure is good and thus is worth our investment, even if its creative directions have gone wrong. Perhaps what has been learned can be unlearned; what has been taken for granted can be called into question. Jennings wants us to ask, Is it really the case that no alternative world can be imagined? He writes in hope that Christians might find resources to offer a better story, one marked by intimacy and belonging, in which abundance and dependence are woven back together.

Second, the diagnosis may make us more hesitant to wallow in shame. This does not mean we have no reason to be ashamed; “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 KJV). There is evil we have done and good we have left undone. But tracing sin to a diseased imagination may lead to a more careful, compassionate, and comprehensive approach. Yes, we have sinned. But we have also spent our lives in toxic ecosystems, consuming poisonous food and drink. Like Eustace, we have not been reading the right books. Enchanted by Mammon and other idols, we no longer see a true image of ourselves, our neighbors, or the place we live. If the imagination is diseased, the humbling truth is that we cannot fix ourselves through sheer willpower. If sin is more like an addiction or an enchantment, if we are slowly turning into dragons, it will not be enough to say, “Stop it.” We must have help from outside ourselves.

Finally, if the imagination is diseased, there is also hope that it could begin to be healed. As Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda, he asks us, “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6). “Praise the Lord,” the psalmist prays, who “heals all your diseases” (Ps. 103:2–3); we can hope that this includes diseases of the imagination. Indeed, our great hope is that God is healing all creation. And so, I have started praying like this: “O God who heals my diseases, heal my diseased imagination.”

## **The Hope: Placing Ourselves Where We Might Be Found**

Imagine that you have lost your glasses. The problem is that the instrument you need to find them is precisely the thing you cannot find. Depending on the strength of your prescription, you may wander around, checking the usual spots for their familiar shape. But if someone with surer vision is nearby, they may be able to find them for you and bring them to you.

This is what it is like to disciple the imagination. Most of the time we can't see what we're missing, the ways we've been malformed. We can visit the usual spots, returning to Scripture and prayer, but the best thing would be for someone else to help us see what we've missed. In other words, the process requires a relational encounter, not a more efficient technique. I write this because books on spiritual formation are always in danger of becoming self-help manuals that provide things like the "seven ways to be better at life." I also worry that the psychological lens might result in an overly therapeutic account of prayer, where the goal becomes "feeling better" rather than knowing God. As we will see, if the goal of prayer is simply feeling good, God is not required.

The goal of prayer is communion with the triune God, and this cannot be accomplished by uncovering a better technique. Like any relationship, it involves a mysterious dynamic of knowing and being known, of finding and being found. But unlike in any other relationship, God transcends us in every way; we can know him only as he reveals himself to us. Even as we stretch heart and mind toward the heavens, we must acknowledge God's holiness, align with God's will, and ask for God's action.

Similarly, when discipling the imagination, it is not enough to place beautiful things before our eyes. A person may pass by a painting because they are unwilling to give it their time; a person may yawn at a symphony because it is foreign to their experience; a person may stand before a glorious sunrise and be more interested in their phone. Just as improving a church's music brings change only if the songs take root in people's hearts, so, too, providing better food for the imagination is no guarantee of renewal. The nuances of art may have greater effect on us as we are immersed in them, but we cannot manufacture an

encounter that heals the heart. Beauty cries out for us to *behold*, but we can still miss it, even when it is on our lips or in front of our faces.<sup>14</sup>

For all these reasons, wise teachers have testified that encountering God can be both a skill to cultivate and a gift to receive. This is expressed charmingly in anecdotes like one passed on by spiritual writer Philip Yancey: “A rabbi taught that experiences of God can never be planned or achieved. ‘They are spontaneous moments of grace, almost accidental.’ His student asked, ‘Rabbi, if God-realization is just accidental, why do we work so hard doing all these spiritual practices?’ The rabbi replied, ‘To be as accident-prone as possible.’”<sup>15</sup>

This story expresses the posture I am after in this book. I am not really interested in new techniques, imaginative or otherwise, nor am I interested in abandoning historical practices, despite the ways they have failed. I appreciate Lauren Winner’s description of Christian practices as “good, damaged ways we have to place ourselves somewhere we might be found by God.”<sup>16</sup> Any damage, of course, is on our side, and when we pray, it is always possible that we are perpetuating some cycle of diseased imagining. But when we pray, we also are placing ourselves somewhere we might be found.

Our great hope, and the wonderful news of the gospel, is that while we are still stumbling in the dark, God comes and finds us. He knows the sickness of our hearts and what we are doing to ourselves. Though we are turning into dragons, God moves to rehumanize us after the pattern of Jesus, the true human.

Perhaps it is fitting to close this introduction by returning to the story of Eustace, the boy who turned into a dragon. One of the most beautiful passages in the Narnia stories is when Eustace recounts meeting the great lion Aslan and getting undragoned. Eustace tries to peel the scales off by himself, but no matter how hard he tries, he finds that he is still a dragon. And so he must lie still and submit

14. Judith Wolfe makes this point about images: “Images are never merely transparent to spiritual realities: they work by eliciting imaginative engagement, which always involves both freedom and risk. Images can neither guarantee their authenticity nor secure their interpretation; because they are completed in part by the imagination of their viewers, they are always open to over- or misinterpretation.” “Imagining God,” 106.

15. Yancey, *Prayer*, 106.

16. Winner, *Dangers of Christian Practice*, 137.

himself to Aslan's claws. The lion peels the dragon skin from Eustace, layer by layer, then throws him into the water, signifying a sort of baptismal rebirth. Eustace is undragoned as he embraces a pain that goes "right into his heart," that also ultimately heals it.<sup>17</sup>

Although the healing process is painful—in the Narnia stories and in our world—the amazing thing is that the healer makes sure that the worst of it falls on himself. Despite our failure to see, hear, and feel, the Lion who is also the Lamb (Rev. 5:5–6) shows up all the same. His great act of grace is stronger than the power of dragons, and it is the heart of our hopes to be set free from the way of the dragon. For "by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

But there is no quick fix, no pill to take to heal a diseased imagination. It requires lifelong therapy, the sort that happens in prayer with others who love us and see us, as we turn to the one who can undragon us, who can heal our calloused hearts and open our closed eyes.

17. Lewis, *Dawn Treader*, 109.

## QUESTIONS *for* REFLECTION *and* DISCUSSION

1. What are the most significant differences between the way of the dragon and the way of the Lamb? What do you think of the image of turning into a dragon as a metaphor for our tendency to become conformed to this world (Rom. 12:2)?
2. How have you tended to regard the imagination, in more positive or more negative terms? What do you think is the imagination's role when it comes to spiritual formation? What might it mean to disciple the imagination?
3. What has been your experience with spiritual practices? When have they led to real transformation, and when have they led you to pride and frustration?
4. When you think about the failure to be formed in the image of Christ—in your own life or in the church—what are the areas that most readily come to your mind?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of approaching discipleship as a matter of training and discipline compared with approaching it as a matter of therapy and healing? How can we keep both in mind as we move forward?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*O God who heals my diseases,  
heal my diseased imagination.*



# 1

## THE EYES OF THE HEART

*Imagination and Perception*

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.

Ephesians 1:18

For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.

Matthew 13:15

I went to college in Chicago, and during my second year, I became interested in a woman. One night, we went on a walk—what we called a DTR (“define the relationship”) walk—by Lake Michigan. Impressed by her beauty, I decided to take a risk and compliment her bright green eyes. As we walked, I rehearsed various poetic ways of doing this, but as we faced each other, I opted for the direct approach: “You have beautiful green eyes.” Her reaction was not what

I expected. She tilted her head, confused, as if I had told a joke that missed the mark. The awkwardness was palpable. After a beat or two, she mercifully broke the silence: “My eyes are brown.”

She forgave me and later married me anyway (thanks be to God). But something my wife learned about me that evening is that I have deuteranomaly, more popularly known as red-green color blindness. I’d known this about myself for a long time, having consistently failed the dot eye exams when I was young. When I went away to college, I was worried enough about it that I had my older sister make me a chart that matched my shirts to my ties. And yet, in that moment, nothing seemed clearer to me than the color of her eyes. Could I really be mistaken about something so important, something that seemed so plain to me?

My guess is that you know someone whose vision is color divergent (and that they could tell you some stories about it!). But all of us, even those of us who have more color-typical vision, see the world in a way that is far more limited than we like to admit.

### **Different Sorts of Seeing: The Eyes of the Heart**

In his book *An Immense World*, science writer Ed Yong offers a mesmerizing exploration of how various animals sense the world. Since each species possesses distinctive sensory equipment—think of a dog’s nostrils or a sea otter’s whiskers—creatures in the same physical space might have completely different experiences. There is a lovely word for this unique sensory bubble that each creature inhabits: *Umwelt*. It captures the way a snake navigates with its tongue, the way a dolphin uses echolocation to scan its environment, or the way seabirds have access to a “secret topography . . . invisible to the eye but evident to the nose.”<sup>1</sup>

Yong writes to help readers imagine what it might be like to sense the world the way that other animals do. This is no easy task, he writes, because “the ultimate feats of understanding—working out what it’s like to be a bat, or an elephant, or a spider—always require

1. Yong, *Immense World*, 41.

... ‘an informed imaginative leap.’” In our attempts to understand, “our intuitions will be our biggest liabilities, and our imaginations will be our greatest asset.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, if we simply follow our intuitions, and fail to stretch our imaginations, we may also fail to appreciate just how much is going on in the immense world around us.

It makes me wonder, as I walk through this world of wonders, What do I miss? What am I not sensing? I often think of the counsel in the book of Proverbs: “Do not be wise in your own eyes” (Prov. 3:7). The biblical writers often talk about vision in this metaphorical way. They say you have eyes in your *head*, but you also have the eyes of your *heart*. Recall the way that Paul prays for the Ephesians: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Eph. 1:18–19).

*Eyes of your heart* is a complex metaphor. For the biblical writers, the heart is more than a physical organ that beats; it thinks, feels, remembers, desires, discerns, and chooses.<sup>3</sup> The heart represents the control center for our whole life, what makes us tick. To say that a heart has eyes implies a sort of seeing that goes beyond our intuitions, beyond the way things seem. Yong notes how humans tend to give priority to the visual.<sup>4</sup> We say, “Ah, now I see!” to express understanding; we have to “see it to believe it.” But the sensory abilities of animals (as well as humans who lack sight) show us that it is possible to have a secure grasp of one’s world *without* seeing. In the same way, the heart senses things that cannot simply be seen. With every power at our disposal, we reach out in search of a clear path forward. Finding our way, however, is not so simple.

### Prone to Wander: Why We Walk in Circles

Imagine that you are standing in a field. You are blindfolded, and the challenge is to walk in as straight a line as possible. How long could

2. Yong, *Immense World*, 13.

3. Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, under “heart.”

4. Yong, *Immense World*, 11.

you walk in a straight line before going off course? One experiment tested this, challenging participants to walk in a straight line while blindfolded. What they found was that when people couldn't see, they ended up walking in surprisingly small circles. In a second experiment, they removed the blindfolds and asked participants to walk as straight as possible over various terrains for several hours while they were tracked by GPS. Once again, people tended to move in circles without realizing it, especially if it was a cloudy day.<sup>5</sup> It is sobering that hikers are often found within a mile, if not a hundred meters, from where they got lost. Or that during blizzards people are unable to navigate a path home from their backyards.

Why is this the case? Why do people have this remarkable tendency to walk in circles? Researchers argue that people walk in circles because small deviations—little mistakes in the brain—add up until a straight path has been curved into a circle. People are pushed off the straight path not by any sudden turns but by a thousand small steps in the wrong direction.

The research finding also rings true when it comes to finding our way in general. When our vision is unclear, we tend to walk in circles, passing the time without making significant progress. It is a matter not of sudden turns but of a long process of diversion, a thousand small decisions in the wrong direction. Knowing how the human heart is prone to wander, Solomon prayed for a wise and discerning heart, one able “to distinguish between right and wrong” (1 Kings 3:9). We are similarly enjoined to guard our hearts “with all diligence,” for everything we do flows from it (Prov. 4:23 KJV).

The problem is that from the first pages of our story, we have failed to guard our hearts and have instead become wise in our own eyes. Scripture tells the story of the human spiral of sin, in which turning away from the wisdom of God leads to doing whatever seems right in our own eyes (Judg. 21:25). We may think doing as we see fit sounds like freedom. But to the biblical writers this is a delusion: What we desire is what is destroying us.

Scripture shows how a life without limits leads to spiritual slavery, life at the mercy of misdirected desires. This is the diagnosis Jesus offers

5. Souman et al., “Walking Straight into Circles.”

in his most famous sermon: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt. 6:22–23).

When Jesus says this, he is talking about our habit of storing up treasures on earth, our attempts to serve both God and Mammon. This divided allegiance leaves us discontent and unsatisfied, always grasping for more. The larger point is that our use of wealth shows the health—or the sickness—of our hearts. The things we treasure take hold of our hearts, further shaping what we see as desirable. And that means that unhealthy eyes do more than leave us in the dark; they also let the darkness in.

### **The Imaginative Disease of *Idolatry*: Deluding Our Hearts**

This imaginative ailment goes far beyond a simple misperception, unlike my red-green color blindness. Our hearts can be deceived, trained to cling to things that kill. Consider the way the prophet Isaiah describes a man who has fashioned a god from a block of wood. Half the wood he uses to make a fire; the other half he worships, saying, “Save me! You are my god!” (Isa. 44:17). His problem, Isaiah says, is that “a deluded heart misleads him,” so that he can no longer recognize reality. He cannot say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?” (44:20). The idol maker’s problem is in his heart before it is in his hands: He is unable to see the way the idol is deluding and destroying him.

Drawing from Isaiah, Jesus connects dullness of heart to the idols that hold us captive: “For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them” (Matt. 13:15). His diagnosis taps into a key biblical theme: You begin to take on the character of what you treasure.

In a detailed exposition of this theme, biblical scholar G. K. Beale points to the paradigmatic example of idolatry in the Old Testament: the incident of the golden calf. In the story Moses has gone higher

up the mountain to receive the terms and conditions of the covenant. While he is away, the people throw a party in honor of “an idol cast in the shape of a calf.” Aaron presents the idol to the people, saying, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Exod. 32:4).

Beale notes that as the passage continues, we read that the people have been “quick to turn away” (Exod. 32:8), are “stiff-necked” (32:9), and are “running wild” (32:25). All three descriptions are cattle metaphors used of animals that have refused to be guided, left the fold, and wandered away. In a brilliant bit of literary art, the people who are worshiping a golden calf are characterized as wandering calves. The lesson is that you begin to *look like* whatever it is you *look to*.<sup>6</sup>

Another description of this dynamic is found in Psalm 115:

But their idols are silver and gold,  
made by human hands.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
eyes, but cannot see.  
They have ears, but cannot hear,  
noses, but cannot smell.  
They have hands, but cannot feel,  
feet, but cannot walk,  
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.  
Those who make them will be like them,  
and so will all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:4–8)

The idols in view are the work of skilled artisans who have used their imaginations to fashion images imitating living things, with faces, eyes, and ears. But these features are a lie; the idols have no life in them. So, too, “those who make them will be like them.” And just as idols of wood and stone have carved features that fail to function, so, too, a hardened heart leads to sensory failure. Within the psalm we find a prophetic warning: Be careful, or your eyes may fail to see. Your ears may fail to hear. Your mouth may fail to praise or pray. If you entrust your heart to steel and stone, it will become steely and stony.

6. Beale, *What We Worship*, 76–86.

In contemporary times, can we relate to the idea of steel and stone idols? Perhaps we can. A few years ago, Chief Justice John Roberts remarked that if alien researchers studied humans, they would conclude that our smartphones were part of our bodies.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, I wonder what these researchers would conclude about human religion after observing the way we stare into our screens. I think that the report would go something like this: “Each human carries around their own beautiful idol, which they cannot live without, with which they commune as soon as they wake, on which they gaze lovingly throughout the day, and which they use to soothe their anxieties.” The confession of sin from the Book of Common Prayer takes on new meaning in this context: “We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.”

Yet no matter how much we follow and cling to our devices, a liquid crystal display is no substitute for the way a friend’s face lights up when they see us. I can imagine a contemporary psalmist saying something like this: “Our idols can detect our faces, but they cannot really recognize us.” No matter how hard we try, our devices cannot make us feel seen or known. But if we aren’t careful, the tools we’ve programmed will begin to program us. If we look to machines to simulate life, it may not be long before we begin to feel like machines ourselves, like users who feel used, pushed and prodded by greater powers, with hearts that feel dull and dead.

### **Left to Our Own Devices: Imagining the Absence of God**

This dynamic shows how the things we make, make us. Another way to say this is that the things we imagine, design, and build set new limits for our intuitions, what we take for granted, what we believe to be a matter of common sense. Our dependence on technology (the work of our hands) makes it more difficult to pay attention to what we cannot see.

Indeed, Joseph Minich argues that technology primes us to experience the *invisibility* of God as the *absence* of God. Believers

7. Riley v. California, 573 U.S. 273 (2014).

have long insisted that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18) and have spoken of “the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) who dwells “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16). But in a technological age, God’s transcendent hiddenness produces the intuition that God probably is not there. Of course, plenty of people continue to believe under these conditions. But even believers feel the haunting power of the idea that since we cannot see God, God may not exist. This intuition is reinforced, Minich argues, not so much by atheist pundits but by the way we are technologically conditioned to feel that what is most real, what really matters, is what we can grasp, what we can immediately manipulate and control.<sup>8</sup>

I am reminded of a line from a story by George MacDonald that warns that a person may so doubt what he cannot see that he comes at length to “believe in nothing but his dinner: to be sure of a thing is to have it between his teeth.”<sup>9</sup> What do I believe? Only in the phone that is in my hand, only in the money that is in my pocket, only in the food that is in my mouth.

Let me be clear: Technology itself is not the problem. Technology is good at performing tasks, but it cannot tell us the true story of the whole world. Technology offers what all potential idols offer: an alternative source of security. This alternative source reengineers our relationship to reality, and with it *what we are able to see*. Unbelief is an intuition that makes sense in a technological age, but it is also an intuition that results from a diminished imagination, in which human-made products narrow the parameters of what is possible.

To put it another way, are believers imagining God’s presence, or are unbelievers imagining God’s absence? It is clear that believers also wrestle with God’s hiddenness, yet most continue to believe and practice their faith. This suggests that when God feels distant or unreal, there are multiple possible interpretations. One of them is that the problem is on our side of things: that we have wandered far from home, that we have closed our eyes. To insist that the experience of God’s absence is evidence of God’s nonexistence is to slam the door on both belief and imagination, refusing any possibility

8. Minich, *Bulwarks of Belief*, 102.

9. MacDonald, *Princess and Curdie*, 22.

beyond what we can see. As Minich writes, “Perhaps . . . atheism is not bravery after all, but capitulation. Perhaps it is an intellectual, spiritual, and psychological failure to endure.”<sup>10</sup>

The word *perhaps* is important because it suggests that there is another way to see things. *Perhaps* invites us to hit pause on our intuitions and to imagine a larger story. This, according to Brueggemann, is the heart of prophetic imagination, “the capacity to host a world, other than the one that is in front of us. Such an act of hosting an alternative world is inherently subversive, as it serves to question and override the world in front of us that we too easily take as given.”<sup>11</sup> Seeing an alternative world requires a stronger imagination because in our present state, our intuitions—rooted in what we sense and see—are leading us in the wrong direction.

Let me stop for a moment to sum up the argument thus far. We have been trying to understand what has gone wrong with the eyes of our hearts. The prophetic diagnosis is idolatry: We have given our allegiance to things that cannot bring us to life, and so our hearts have become calloused, leading us to close our eyes. We now feel like we are really on our own, that we belong to ourselves, that we alone should decide what we should be doing. We build systems and machines that reflect our desire for mastery and control and then begin to resemble the things we have built. The final result, on both an individual and a societal level, is a diseased imagination. We cannot imagine how life could be substantively different from how it is now or how God could be transformatively present. All we can imagine is more of the same.

### **Longing for a Better World: Recovering from the Spell**

Where do we go from here? The scriptural prescription for idolatry is to turn from our idols and worship the living God (1 Thess. 1:9). But the powers that hold sway make it difficult to turn. Paul tells the Corinthians that the dragon—“the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4)—has a tight grip on human hearts. Enchanted by evil, we need the strongest spell that can be found to set us free.

10. Minich, *Bulwarks of Belief*, 249.

11. Brueggemann, “End of Imagination?”

My favorite scene in C. S. Lewis's Narnia books is found in *The Silver Chair*. In the story, the heroes descend underground in search of a lost prince and are taken captive by a seductive and evil sorceress. By a magical powder in the fire and the power of her voice, she enchants them to believe that the surface world and all they have known are *just their imaginations*. There is no Overland, no sun, no great lion Aslan; these are creative embellishments on things they have seen in her "real" world. She tells them it is time to cease their childish fantasies. Her underground kingdom is all that there is.

The powerful spell is nearly successful, thwarted only by the brave action of Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle, who is able to resist the enchantment because of the stronger story that runs in his blood. As he stomps on her fire, his speech captures the longing that lives at the heart of human imagining. Perhaps we have only dreamed all this up, he says. Perhaps the Overland, the sun, and the great lion are just the musings of childish minds. If that is the case, "the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones." Indeed, it would hardly be a waste to spend one's life searching for something beyond the walls of the witch's world—if her dull, underground "black pit of a kingdom" is really all that there is.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, one of the things that keeps many believing in God in the face of much evidence to the contrary is the *horror of the alternative*: a world without intrinsic meaning, in which beauty, love, and justice have no objective ground. We dreamers want to believe in God even if there is no God to believe in; like Puddleglum, we believe the other option—life underground—feels unlivable.

But the conviction that reality is cold and impersonal does not mean that what we imagine beyond the dullness is truly there. A world without God might be ugly, but that is not evidence that God exists—perhaps the world is simply ugly. To put it another way, that Puddleglum can imagine a world better than the witch's world does not mean that such a world exists. Puddleglum admits as much: He merely *hopes* there is an Overland and is willing to spend his life looking for it. But if he is mistaken, then there is a sense of futility to his quest. Readers know that he is *not* mistaken. There really is an

12. Lewis, *Silver Chair*, 184.

Overland in Narnia; there really is a sun, an Aslan. Thus, Puddleglum is right to hope for a better world. But can Christians say the same about the kingdom of God? Can we know that our faith is more than wish fulfillment, that our prayers are more than fantasies to help us survive the harshness of reality?

### **Divine Intervention: Food for the Imagination**

The Christian response to this question is that God speaks. And he has spoken most clearly and concretely through his Son (Heb. 1:1–2). When we read Scripture, we experience a story that can reconfigure our imagination, renewing our sense of what is, what was, and what could be because of God’s great love. In the big story of Scripture, and supremely in Jesus Christ, we get a glimpse of God’s heart and intention for the healing of creation.

To recall the example from earlier in the chapter, imagining a different world is a bit like imagining what it would be like to be a bat. It requires a leap of imagination. Leaps of imagination take a concerted effort, but we are not asked to conjure this alternative world from nothing. We are not stepping into complete darkness, where we cannot see; we are stepping into a shared story, onto a path that others have walked before us.

Christians believe that a leap of imagination is possible because God has already leaped across the chasm toward us. As Paul continues telling the Corinthians, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

*What heals the eyes of the heart, ultimately, is an encounter with holiness*—or better, many encounters with holiness over the course of a life, many spirited spells to disenchant our dragon-sickness. Such encounters will not always be pleasant; holiness disrupts as it disenchants. That we are not “undone” owes only to the atoning love that meets us in the encounter (Isa. 6:5 KJV). Resisting evil’s enchantment can occur only as we continually open our hearts to something outside ourselves: God’s gift. Glad receptivity matters more than raw creativity, because imagining an alternative world is less like a

courageous achievement and more like falling in love. When we fall in love, the mere presence of the one we love reconfigures the world, what matters, and what is worthy of our attention.

Though imaginative healing is a gift, it requires work, exercise, and discipline. But it is important to remember that healing the imagination begins with responding to what God has already done, not with coming up with something new. The food for which our imagination hungers has already been offered to us in Christ. Here is the work and world made possible by Jesus: Take, eat, remember, and believe.

This also means that if anyone finds themselves imagining an alternative world, searching for a better city, or longing for a better country (Heb. 11:10–16), it must be because God has first moved to instill that hunger in their heart. As Aslan tells Jill in *The Silver Chair*, “You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.”<sup>13</sup> Lewis points to this hope further when making his well-known argument from desire: “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. . . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>14</sup>

To believe that there is food—“true bread from heaven” (John 6:32)—that can satisfy our imagination’s deepest hunger is the theological virtue of hope. Christians believe that a day is coming when we will find that other world we have been seeking, not because we have escaped this one but because the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15). Our hope is that one day things will truly be on earth as it is in heaven. Faith, finally, will be sight.

### **Hearing and Seeing: Moving Forward in Faith**

In the meantime, we wait and hope, for “hope that is seen is not hope” (Rom. 8:24 KJV). As we learned from Yong’s animal explorations, if sight misleads us, we can be aided by other senses. It is helpful to remember that “faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17); indeed, the

13. Lewis, *Silver Chair*, 23.

14. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136.

most important command given to ancient Israel was not to see but to hear (“Hear, O Israel”; Deut. 6:4).

To be clear, I don’t think it is helpful to pit hearing against seeing, as if one were more reliable than the other. Throughout the biblical story, God manifests his presence in ways that can be both seen and heard: in fire and clouds (Exod. 13:21), in thunder and lightning (Ps. 29:7–8), in dreams and visions for the prophets (Isa. 6:1–2; Dan. 7:9–10), in personal appearances to our ancestors Abraham, Jacob, and Job. The apostle John opens his first letter with the claim that in Jesus’s body, John himself has heard, seen, and touched “the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). All human senses can help us relate rightly to reality.

Yet given our cultural preference for what we can *see*, relying on what we can *hear* can both humble and help us, especially if our eyes have led us astray. Indeed, the psalmist puts the two senses together when he prays for the ability to see something in a written text: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps. 119:18). Even if we have no clear sense of the way forward, we can still rely on the promises and precepts of God to help us take the next step.

A beautiful illustration of this is found in John Bunyan’s classic allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. In the story, Christian journeys through the valley of the shadow of death, a dangerous place full of pits and quicksand. Listen to the description:

The pathway was also extremely narrow here. . . . He went on like this, and I heard him sigh bitterly; for besides the dangers mentioned above, the pathway was so dark here that often, when he lifted up his foot to go forward, he did not know where or upon what he would set it down next. . . . After Christian had traveled in this sad condition for a considerable time, he thought he heard the voice of a man as if it were going before him, saying, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”<sup>15</sup>

In the story, hearing another in the valley gives Christian hope for three reasons. First, hearing the voice lets him know that someone else is in the valley with him. Second, if God is with that person,

15. Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, 84–86.

then perhaps God will be with Christian as well. Third, maybe if he keeps walking, he can meet this person who is speaking and have companionship.

Christian faith is an imaginative tradition, a shared way of encountering the world in light of God's Word. In the Scriptures we are heartened to hear the voices of pilgrims who are further along on the path, who offer us their companionship, challenge, and comfort. More significantly, when we read and listen to the Scriptures, we hear the voice of our elder brother Jesus and the voice of our loving Father. We may feel as if we have been left in the dark, but the steady voice of the Spirit in the pages of Scripture assures us that we are not alone and that there is always a step forward that we can take in obedience and trust. As we petition God for the things we need, we also pray to surrender to his will.<sup>16</sup>

I have found this simple counsel from MacDonald to be immensely helpful: "Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, *Do it*, or once abstained because he said, *Do not do it*."<sup>17</sup> When I wake up in the morning, I often think about a verse: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:15). It reminds me that seeing does not always lead to believing and that hearing can also lead to hardening. I can neither change the past nor control the future. But today, if I hear his voice, will I harden my heart?

Until we are ready to obey, our hearts will grow dull, and our eyes will grow dim. But as we move in response to his Word, we may begin to see. With every step, we move toward the light or away from it: "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble" (Prov. 4:18–19 ESV).

But the hope of those who live in the dark is not in their own resourcefulness or responsiveness. It is in God's loving pursuit. There's

16. As John Stott writes, "Every true prayer is a variation on the theme 'Your will be done.'" *Letters of John*, 185.

17. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 294 (emphasis added).

a line from the sixteenth-century Belgic Confession that expresses this beautifully: “We believe that our good God . . . seeing that Adam and Eve had plunged themselves in this manner into both physical and spiritual death and made themselves completely miserable, set out to find them, though they, trembling all over, were fleeing from God.”<sup>18</sup>

*God sets out to find us.* My great hope is that in the midst of my own self-absorption, Scripture will continually tell me the good news about Someone Else, who makes atonement for my evil and clothes me in his beauty. I hear the announcement that he died for my sins, rose again from the dead, and now reigns as Lord, setting me free from the horror of being eternally wrapped up in myself. This gospel has the power to melt hearts of stone, to break hearts open with beauty, to tune hearts to sing his praise. Today, if you hear his voice, may his love melt your heart and open your eyes.

18. Belgic Confession, article 17.

## QUESTIONS *for* REFLECTION *and* DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever experienced an epiphany or paradigm shift or had an experience where you realized just how limited your perspective was?
2. What do you think about the connection between the imagination and idolatry? In what ways have you seen yourself or those around you beginning to take on the characteristics of the things you revere?
3. What does it mean to say that unbelief is as much about the imagination as it is about the intellect? Do you agree with this assessment? If true, how would it change the way Christians approach apologetics and witness?
4. How would you answer the objection that Christian faith is a matter of wish fulfillment, imagining as real something that Christians wish were true?
5. How do you understand the relationship between the verbal and the visual, hearing God's Word and seeing God's world?

## CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, open the eyes of my heart.  
Let me trust your promise when I cannot see.*