

imagination
redeemed

GLORIFYING GOD WITH A NEGLECTED PART OF YOUR MIND

Gene Edward Veith Jr. | Matthew P. Ristuccia

“For many, the imagination is synonymous with fantasy and childishness—something to outgrow as we mature. But Veith and Ristuccia have done the church an incredible service in lifting up the critical role of the imagination in the Christian life. Their insights help us realize that it’s only when our imaginations are engaged that we are able to live out our calling faithfully in every arena of life.”

David H. Kim, Executive Director, Center for Faith and Work,
Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; author,
Glimpses of a Greater Glory and *20 and Something*

“Imagination—a gift from God—is not just for daydream or fantasy. It’s critical to objective recall and idea development. A thought-provoking gem, this is a must-read.”

Bob Doll, Chief Equity Strategist and Senior Portfolio Manager,
Nuveen Asset Management

“Defenses of the imagination are somewhat common, but this one combines the perspectives of a literary scholar and a biblical expositor. The result is a unique defense of the imagination. The book is reader friendly, and the defense of the imagination is comprehensive. A particular strength is the demonstration of how the imagination relates to the Bible.”

Leland Ryken, Emeritus Professor of English, Wheaton College

“This is a biblically grounded, down-to-earth, and eminently accessible book. It deserves to be widely read.”

Jeremy S. Begbie, Thomas A. Langford Research Professor of
Theology, Duke University; author, *Resounding Truth: Christian
Wisdom in the World of Music* and *Music Modernity and God*

“Veith and Ristuccia offer practical steps for keeping our imaginations captive to Christ. Veith clearly defines imagination and explains its role in our daily lives, tracing our understanding of imagination through key figures in history. Ristuccia insightfully expository sections of Ezekiel, showing how God engages our imagination to reveal his character and plan of salvation. Reading this book will help you, as it helped me, fulfill the great command to love God with all your mind. I highly recommend it.”

Danielle Sallade, Campus Minister, Princeton Evangelical Fellowship,
Princeton University

“Veith and Ristuccia have teamed up to give us a mind-stretching introduction to imagination from a biblical perspective. As I read this book, I learned things I had never thought about before and was often made to stop, think, and pray.”

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

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Gene Edward Veith Jr.
and Matthew P. Ristuccia

Imagination Redeemed: Glorifying God with a Neglected Part of Your Mind

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Faceout Studio

First printing 2014

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-4183-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-4186-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-4184-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-4185-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Veith, Gene Edward, 1951-

Imagination redeemed : glorifying God with a neglected part of your mind / Gene Edward Veith and Matthew P. Ristuccia.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-4183-4 (tp)

1. Imagination—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Thought and thinking—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BR115.L6V45

2014

233'.5—dc23

2014015322

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To
Jackie,
our daughters, son, sons-in-law,
and our grandchildren

and

To
Karen,
our sons and daughters-in-law,
and our grandchildren.

Without you life would be unimaginable

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Introduction

This book had its genesis when Matthew Ristuccia, pastor of Stone Hill Church of Princeton (formerly Westerly Road Church), gave the Biblical Emphasis Week lectures at my school, Patrick Henry College. He spoke on the book of Ezekiel, showing how it addresses the issues of the imagination. I had never heard that take before. As a literature professor, I was interested, naturally enough, in the imagination, had studied its literary manifestations, and knew about the imaginative biblical meditations that shaped Christian poetry. Matt was providing, for me, the missing links to the Bible and the Christian life. In the course of our subsequent conversations, he referred to John Piper's book *Think*, about "the life of the mind and the love of God"; and to Matthew Elliott's *Feel*, about the proper role of emotions in the Christian's life. Matt saw a gap that begged to be filled, a book he initially entitled *Imagine*. After a while, we resolved to collaborate in writing that book. My part is to write about the imagination as a whole, drawing on what I know about the arts and literature, philosophy and psychology. His part is to show how all of this plays out in the Word of God, specifically in the visions of Ezekiel.

Most writing collaborations involve smoothing out differences of style and trying to make it impossible to tell who wrote which part. That entails dropping first-person references (what "I" did and what happened to "me"), getting rid of our individual voices (since the author is a collective entity), and creating the illusion of single authorship (which isn't even true, as the title page makes clear). We

will experiment with a different approach throughout most of this book. I (Gene) will begin each chapter, exploring the topic from my vantage point, then I will turn it over to Matt. And then the two of us will take it up again with some practical conclusions.

Also, the chapters will be organized around the mental exercise that gave us a classic form of Bible meditation and a great deal of Christian literature: the engagement of the imagination, the understanding, and the will—though not in that order. I have written the so-called analysis, addressing the understanding. Matt has written the composition, addressing the imagination through interaction with the Word of God. Each chapter ends with a colloquy, addressing the will so as to motivate you to carry out these truths in your own life, and, as with all classic meditations, with prayer.

1

Imagination: The Mind's Eye

The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.

Ezekiel 1:1

Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in,
Bibles laid open, millions of surprises.

"Sin" (I), George Herbert

From Gene

Imagination is simply the power of the mind to form a mental image, that is, to think in pictures or other sensory representations. The imagination is at work when you use your memory. (What did you have for dinner yesterday? Do you remember what it looked like? How it tasted? You are using your imagination.) You use your imagination when you plan to do something in the future. (What is on your to-do list for tomorrow? What are you going to have to take care of at work? Do you have errands to run? Notice the mental pictures that come to mind.) Imagination lets us relive the past and anticipate the future. And it takes up much of our present. We use our imaginations when we daydream and fantasize, to be sure, but also when we just think about things.

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Reading requires the imagination, which is true whether you are reading a narrative (“It was a dark and stormy night”; “Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin in 1809”; “Two people were killed Saturday night when their car ran out of control and struck a tree”) or an exposition of ideas (“Examples of the economic factors would include the housing market, the automobile industry, and Wall Street”; “Plato explains his philosophy with the analogy of people chained up inside a cave”; “Christ died for sinners”). Notice how much you have been using your imagination just reading this paragraph.

So imagination is this faculty we all have of conjuring up pictures in our minds. That’s all it is. Many treatments of the topic glamorize and mystify the imagination. It is associated with the fine arts and artistic genius. The imagination, we are told, is a matter of creativity. The whole concept is often presented as if it were some special talent held only by a few or perhaps as if it might be cultivated if you work hard enough at it. We ordinary folks are exhorted to “be creative!” and to “use your imagination!” But, failing to measure up to the great poets and inventors, we might reasonably conclude, “I don’t really have much imagination.” But you do! If I say, “Think of a tree,” and you can do that, you have imagination. It is true that artists work with their imaginations and address ours. And since we can imagine things that do not currently exist (think of a tree with blue leaves), it is the faculty behind creativity. These are applications of imagination, as we shall see, but the ability itself is a God-given power of the human mind that is so common, so ordinary, that we take it for granted.

When we think of the human mind, we usually think of the intellect (reason), emotions (feelings), and possibly the will (desires, choices). Those are other mental faculties that we have. I suspect, though, that our conscious minds are occupied far more with our imaginations than with these other faculties. In fact, the imagination often provides the subject matter and the impetus for our reasoning, our feelings, and our choices. Strangely, though, we have tended to

overlook the imagination and the role it plays in our thinking and in our lives.

This is certainly true of Christians, who have done much with epistemology (the study of how we know) and have long debated the role and limits of reason and the will. Actually, Christians of the past had quite a bit to say about the imagination, as we shall see, but it is something of a forgotten category in contemporary Christianity.

Some might say that Christians, or Protestants, or evangelicals are “suspicious of the imagination.” But, again, in the sense that we are using the word, the imagination is not something we can choose to employ. The issue is not whether imagination is good or bad, useful or not, or something we should or should not cultivate. We cannot help but use our imaginations. This is the way God made our minds to function. But it will help us greatly to reflect upon the role and limits and possibilities of the imagination, just as we have with reason and our other mental powers.

One reason Christians may have shied away from emphasizing the imagination is biblical texts like this: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every *imagination* of the thoughts of his heart *was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5 KJV). In this text, the reference is to the human condition that provoked the flood, and so, one might argue, what connection is there? That was then, and this is now. But there are plenty of other biblical warnings about the imagination, including Jeremiah’s caution about “walk[ing] in the imagination of [our] hearts” (Jer. 13:10, and six other places in that book), and Paul’s assessment that sinful human beings have become “vain in their imaginations” (Rom. 1:21 KJV). To be sure, the imagination—like reason, emotions, and the will—is fallen. Our knowledge of God must come from his revelation of himself to us, that is, through his Word, which may in no way be replaced by human reason, emotion, will, or imagination. Imagination is indeed the source of all idolatry (the “graven images” that begin

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with mental images) and all false religions (which we imaginatively construct to evade the true God).

Furthermore, we must “walk” by the Word of God; that is, we must live according to God’s revelation in Scripture rather than by our own reasonings, feelings, choices, or imaginings. Jesus himself warns us about murdering and committing adultery in our heart (Matt. 5: 21–30). Imaginary fantasies about illicit sex or about harming someone are sinful, even if they are never acted upon. This is because they disclose and aggravate a sinful heart.

But just because the imagination can be the source of idolatry and other sins is no reason to ignore it. That the imagination can be used for evil means that Christians dare not ignore it. We must discipline, disciple, and sanctify our imaginations. We are to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), and that must include the thoughts we imagine. This can be done, above all, by saturating our imaginations with the Word of God. The Bible directly addresses the imagination in its narratives, descriptions, and vivid language.

Notice how your imagination is working as you read these passages, taken nearly at random:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1–2)

Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps. 1:1-4)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matt. 13:1-9)

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Just reading those passages fills our minds with mental images of light and darkness, trees planted by streams of water, great crowds, a boat anchored by the shore, a sower in the fields, noisy gongs and clanging cymbals, what it would be like to give away everything including one's life at the stake, and the personal associations we each have with love. The Bible also gives directives for how we can use our imaginations in a holy way. For example, when the apostle

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Paul enjoins us to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15), he is calling for an act of imagination known as “empathy,” imaginatively identifying with other human beings to the point of feeling their emotions.

In practice, the different faculties of our minds work together seamlessly, and the imagination plays an important role in integrating our ideas and our feelings, the outer world and our inmost selves. Imagination bridges the rational powers and the emotional center of our being.

Indeed, God reaches us by connecting to our imaginations. And appealing to the imagination is a way we can reach others. C. S. Lewis tells about how God worked not simply through his intellect but also through his imagination to bring him to faith. T. S. Eliot struggled with the fragmentation of the intellect and the emotions, which he found to be characteristic of the modern age. He found wholeness in the Christian imagination, in works of Christian literature that would eventually lead to his conversion. When God captures our imagination, he captures the rest of our mind, including our understanding and our will.

Developing a Christian imagination can play an important role in our spiritual growth. A godly imagination can help us meditate on the Word of God, pray with fervency, cultivate a corporate culture of grace, and grow through personal sanctification (recognizing sin’s inventions, fighting temptation, putting off the old and putting on the new, loving our neighbors). When we read the Bible with our imaginations fully engaged, the biblical truths become personal. And a sanctified imagination can help us direct our choices and set plans toward a Christ-centered future.

To become conscious of the imagination and to reflect on its powers and uses is to be filled with gratitude for an astonishing gift of God, a reflection of the mind of God himself whose creativity went so far as to make us according to his image and his imagination.

From Matt

Ezekiel and the Imagination

An Unexpected Encounter

My first experience with Ezekiel goes back to my pre-Christian days. At the request of my parents, who were distraught with my late-adolescent mutinies, I postponed entrance to university and spent a gap year in England attending a “public school,” the British equivalent of an American prep school. It was there, in the tiny, two-desk study that I shared with a roommate from Iran, that I opened a Bible for the first time in my life.

I had heard of the Bible many times before, but I had never thought it was important enough to read. To be honest, I thought it was dangerous: “ancient literature, the kind of thing too many people have died over. Don’t go there.” But God used common grace to his advantage and mine. You see, I had a keen interest in English literature and recently had become intrigued with a curious seventeenth-century book called *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. “Odd,” I commented to myself when I saw the title, “what on earth does progress have to do with a pilgrim?” I wish I could say that I then immersed myself in the text, but, alas, I was much more captured by the yellow cover of the Penguin Books edition: a spiral maze, various people walking, the so-called Celestial City at the center. “Cool.” Next to it on the library stack was a different edition, one that contained marginal glosses unlike anything I had ever seen, peculiar notations such as “Is. 64:6.”

“What does “Is. 64:6 mean?” I later asked my roommate. He was studying for his A-level exam in English literature, so I figured he should know. And he did.

“Oh, ‘Is. 64:6’ is a reference to some passage in the Bible.”

“Oh, okay.” I pretended that I understood, although I didn’t. But

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in that moment, the idea birthed full-term in my mind: “Matthew, if you’re serious about English lit, you should really read the Bible.”

I attempted to do so a few days later. Still having no idea what “Is. 64:6” meant, and all the while intrigued by what the Bible might contain, while I was alone in the study mixing up some instant coffee, I noticed *The Holy Bible* on the shelf above my roommate’s desk. I decided I would take a look. I opened to the table of contents and found there a long list of unusual names. I recognized Genesis, to be sure, but names such as Numbers (what on earth is that about—ancient Hebrew arithmetic?) and Judges (key moments in jurisprudence?) sounded strange, almost cultish. They put me off.

But then I noticed something with which I was familiar: Ezekiel.

“Oh,” I said to myself, “that must be the same Ezekiel who ‘saw da wheel.’” Years before, during my junior high years, I had sung in a community choir, and one of our favorite songs was the spiritual, “Ezekiel saw da wheel, way up in da middle of de air.” It was lively, it had great parts, and the words had stuck with me.

So I turned to Ezekiel on page 643 and began to read. But phrases such as “son of Buzi” and “living creatures” and “the gleaming of beryl” and “wheel within a wheel” bewildered me. I had no idea what was going on, and the more I read, the more jumbled I became. “Well, that’s it for the Bible,” I commented. “I’ve given it a try, and it makes no sense. It’s not worth the bother.”

Such providential irony! Today Ezekiel is among my favorite books in the divine canon. And I am just one in a long line of people who have studied and preached and loved what this eccentric prophet has bequeathed to us. Take John Calvin; he was in the midst of preaching an in-depth series (did Calvin ever preach a lite series?) on Ezekiel when he died. A few centuries later, the great American Puritan Cotton Mather turned to Ezekiel 24 in order to shape his thoughts for what would be one of his most moving sermons, “The Loss of a Desirable Relative, Lamented and Improved,” given at the

funeral of his beloved wife. And then there's Charles Spurgeon, the "prince of preachers." In the course of his decades of ministry, he preached at least ten sermons on Ezekiel 36 alone! Titles include "The Stony Heart Removed" and "Come from the Four Winds, O Breath." During 1859, a year when some would argue he was at his peak, Spurgeon preached three times from Ezekiel: in January on chapter 36, in May on chapter 36 again, and in July on chapter 16.

The question has to be asked, however, when was the last time a typical American evangelical heard a sermon on Ezekiel? In so many ways, like the other prophets, he seems a universe apart from us and our times. And to make matters worse, he is so odd. On the one hand, especially as the later chapters of his book show, his thinking and heart ran deep with grace. If we met him today, we would call him profoundly gospel centered. Think Billy Graham for that side of him. But then add to the Billy Graham piece a full cup of Adrian Monk, the famous detective of recent television fame who is obsessive-compulsive about all the details of life—much like Ezekiel as he describes the intricacies of his wheels within wheels (chap. 1). To Monk and Graham, pour in some of the social activism of a dissident artist like Ai Weiwei. Ezekiel's street drama of laying siege to an engraved stone fits that bill. But still that is not enough, for to it all one must finally slice in some Beethoven: the gifted, tortured, silent soul. Read Ezekiel 3:15.

Very few people would find that mixture of personalities at all appetizing, either in the seventh century BC or today. Ezekiel was indeed odd, as the facts of his life make plain. He spent half of his life in Jerusalem (from birth to around age twenty-five) and half in Babylon (to his death, somewhere around age fifty): a third-culture type, we might call him today. Shortly after he was commissioned as a prophet at age thirty, he was struck dumb, unable to speak for about five years apart from prophetic oracles. Aphasia is how it might be described medically; the biblical text says that God caused

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Ezekiel's tongue to cling to the roof of his mouth so that he was mute and unable to reprove the house of Israel, which was not listening anyway and was therefore in rebellion (see Ezek. 3:26). Twice in his Babylonian life he had some sort of out-of-body experience in which he was transported to Jerusalem (Ezek. 8:3; 40:1); for a year and a half he laid siege to a brick (think a large stone block); sometime in his thirties he was forbidden by God to mourn publicly the death of his wife. Strange stuff this, even for a prophet—the kind of stuff that makes for eerie reading. Imagine what it would have been like if you had lived three houses down the street. “Here he comes, that lunatic from another world.”

If nothing else, consider this book in your hands an urgent call to move past all these off-putting details and become familiar with a major prophet whose writings have for centuries blessed the people of God. In particular, consider it an invitation to become familiar with four sections of Ezekiel's book that are the peak of his achievement. Four times in his prophetic ministry, Ezekiel was granted “visions from God.” His call to prophetic ministry at age thirty was given in the afterglow of the first vision (Ezek. 1:4–28), one in which he saw “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (v. 28). The second, given over a year later at age thirty-one, shocked him with detailed scenes of detestable idolatry, images typical of the abominations being committed in the Jerusalem temple. No wonder, as that vision also revealed, the glory of the Lord was departing—not only from the temple itself but from the most holy city (Ezekiel 8–11). The third vision, the shortest of the four, came after the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar's armies; Ezekiel was most likely in his forties. In its fourteen verses, God displayed the supernatural power of his breath (or Spirit) to raise back to life a valley of human bodies that had decayed to nothing more than piles of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14). The last vision brought Ezekiel, now age fifty, back to Jerusalem, where he saw a new and marvelously altered temple.

From its midst a river spilled out to the east, growing deeper and wider, carrying life and healing in its flow (Ezekiel 40–48).

These visions are not easy to read or understand. And when you place them alongside the other pieces of Ezekiel's book that are peculiar in their own right—things such as forceful condemnations of nations long ago departed, or dramatic enactments performed by Ezekiel in public view—when you pile all these together, you have amassed a mountain of obstacles that stands between you and a meaningful engagement with the Ezekiel text.

The obstacles are real. In fact, for decades every time I neared the end of Jeremiah in my “through the Bible in a year” reading plan, a dread would descend upon me. I knew that Lamentations was next, a set of dirges that could darken even a Florida sky. And after that, as I knew only too well, loomed Ezekiel. Year after year I could barely make it through the book. And my dislike so intensified over time that at a certain point I felt I was dishonoring the Lord.

“Heavenly Father, this is your Bible, not mine,” I would pray. “It is wrong for me to be so negative about one of longest books on your Old Testament read list. It is wrong for me to label it as at best tedious and at worst objectionable.” I adapted the prayer at the close of Lamentations (5:21) as an annual cry before starting Ezekiel: “Living God, turn me to Ezekiel so that Ezekiel may turn to me. Open me up to this book so that this book may be opened to me.”

God replied. A little answer here, a smaller one there, some insights from an ESV Study Bible,¹ a parenthetical reference to some Ezekiel passage in a book I happened to be reading—over a period of four years God turned my heart. Ezekiel opened up to me. In fact, so complete was the turning that I could hardly wait to get there in my annual Bible reading.

The book of Ezekiel is probably the most underrated book in all of Scripture. For the reasons we have mentioned above along with 153 others, Christians today simply do not read it, know it, or rec-

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ognize how much they need it. Consider, then, two reasons why the evangelical church needs Ezekiel.

Unimaginable Connections

The first reason we need Ezekiel has to do with the otherwise unimaginable connections between his prophecy and our present cultural moment. Ezekiel tells us right up front that he is writing his prophecy outside the land of Israel. “I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal,” he says (Ezek. 1:1) as he prepares us for the first of his visions. His statement is rather like Dorothy Gale’s when, dazed by the Technicolor of Oz, she says to her dog, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Kansas and Oz: Jerusalem and Babylon. To be carried out of the one and dropped into the other is to have every sort of category undone.

For Ezekiel, it all began in 597 BC, at age twenty-five, some five years before his opening vision. Along with several thousand other Jews, he was dragged out of his home, chained to his neighbors, and forced to march one thousand miles to the east. There, in a slave ghetto outside the city of Babylon along one of the city’s water sources, the Chebar Canal, he was reduced to making bricks, undoubtedly for one of Nebuchadnezzar’s fabulous building projects. Do not think of Ezekiel’s bricks as the standard reddish-brown variety used today. They were probably like our construction blocks—large, heavy, and rough.

And they were probably like some other construction blocks, the bricks that Ezekiel’s ancestors were forced to make in Egypt alongside a different water source under the cruel whip of a different foreign oppressor. If the accumulated sighs of Ezekiel’s fellow exiles recorded in his prophecy are any indication (e.g., Ezek. 33:10), it was not just the destitution, relentless work, hastily built homes, and meager meals that plagued the Jewish people in Babylon. Even deeper was the sense of spiritual despair.

“We were supposed to be the people of the Lord, Yahweh, I AM. He triumphed over Pharaoh and released us from our slavery. So why on God’s earth are we here by a Babylonian canal, in bondage under a new Pharaoh, making bricks from mud, living our lives in fear?” Such would have been the whispers of the exiles as they shared with each other their accumulated disbelief, cynicism, and despair (see Ezek. 37:11).

Their situation was previously unimaginable, and it would not be the last time that God’s people would find themselves in a similar predicament. In fact, it is this ancient and unimaginable turn of events that connects Ezekiel’s prophecy to our cultural moment in the West. Evangelicals in America are facing increasingly unbelievable changes on every front, from curtailments of religious liberty to the redefinition of marriage. Whatever one’s political bent, it is hard to believe that a short while ago, in the year 2000, George W. Bush was elected president as a man who claimed an evangelical faith, was openly pro-life, and had campaigned on a platform of “compassionate conservatism.” It was a time when Michael Lindsay, now president of Gordon College, could write a book entitled *Faith in the Halls of Power* in which he examined the influence of evangelical Christians at the elite levels of politics, education, the media, and business. How outdated it sounds today! Though superbly researched and written, the former bestseller now sits in Amazon’s bargain basement. Yesterday’s insiders are today’s outsiders, at both the highest levels of cultural influence and down in the streets of the everyday. How times have changed!

Marginalized. Vilified. Laughed at. Misunderstood. Those are the adjectives that many of God’s people would choose to describe the sea change, the attitudes they face at work, in school, around town, and across the street. And while we could debate the extent to which the adjectives are accurate to the reality, they are accurate as to the mood—one exactly the same as the cries of Ezekiel’s fellow exiles:

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“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off” (Ezek. 37:11).

How God responded to these cries back in 592 BC, and in particular what the sovereign Lord did with Ezekiel in Babylon, lie behind the second reason why we need Ezekiel today.

Renewed Imaginations

The second reason we need Ezekiel is for divine renewal of that deepest part of our souls, what Christians have traditionally called “imagination.” In response to the exiles’ cries of despair, God sovereignly moved into Ezekiel’s life and gave him, as Ezekiel says, “visions of God” (Ezek. 1:1). Visions. Not an oracle or a burden or a “thus saith the Lord,” but visions, things seen—things that, whether “external to Ezekiel’s mind or not” (to paraphrase the apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2), would otherwise not have been seen. That is what makes for a biblical vision: apart from God’s intervention, it would never have been seen. But God intervened and caught Ezekiel by the imagination, and he saw visions.

Notice that he saw *visions*, plural. The text clearly assigns the plural noun to the opening vision of the wheels within wheels, a vision which, textually speaking, is a carefully constructed single unit of heightened prose and as such a single prophetic experience. The plural noun is Ezekiel’s way of communicating the intensity and enormity of the vision. At least for the prophet, it was overwhelming, as were the other three.

So why did God use visions instead of oracles, heightened experience instead of cadenced poetry? The simplest answer is, he did so in order to restore hope. In order to renew and reform the faith of his people in exile, the covenant-loyal God seized Ezekiel by the imagination. Yahweh captured the mind of the son of Buzi with an overpowering, unmediated, sensory presentation of dense truth about (as we shall see) the still-sovereign majesty of the God of Abraham, even

though Abraham's descendants were captives in a foreign land. I AM bypassed the rational powers of Ezekiel's mind and went directly for his imagination.

It would be unfair for me to imply that Ezekiel did not have his share of oracles, that is, disclosures of truth that worked through the prophet's reason and verbal capacities. He did, and in all of them (for instance, chaps. 7, 13, 14), what the prophet said is what God said. But with this opening vision, which towers over the rest of the book, what the prophet saw is what God wanted to say, but God said it in visions, in moving images, in real-time video splices of the divine person and authority.

With Ezekiel and the later prophets, the incidence of visions over oracles increases somewhat over that of the earlier prophets. But what is especially noteworthy is how the intensity and abnormality of the visions increase. "Increase" is poor word choice; you could say, the intensity and abnormality "leapfrog." They take an order-of-magnitude jump. The visions of the later prophets, with Ezekiel chief among them, have a bizarre, unnatural, surreal quality. Compare Ezekiel's opening vision of God in chapter 1 to Isaiah's opening vision in the sixth chapter of his book. Here are just a few of the striking contrasts:

Isaiah's Vision (Isaiah 6)	Ezekiel's Vision (Ezekiel 1)
It is set in the temple of the holy city, Jerusalem.	It is set on the plains outside the unholy city, Babylon.
God is high and lifted up; he towers over the temple.	God, gleaming as incandescent metal and flame, appears in human form; he is seated on a sapphire throne above a crystal dome.
God is worshiped by fiery angels called "seraphim."	God is worshiped by unnatural creatures, composites of animal, bird, and human. They are called "cherubim."

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Isaiah's Vision (Isaiah 6)	Ezekiel's Vision (Ezekiel 1)
God is stationary; the edge of his robe fills the temple.	God is moving; he is seated on some sort of royal sedan chair.
Recognizable implements of worship appear in the vision: an altar, coals, tongs.	Unrecognizable wheels within wheels take center stage, moving wherever the Spirit directs.

When you compare the two, you cannot help but conclude that they belong in different categories. In terms of the canon of Scripture, Ezekiel definitely has more in common with the book of Revelation than with Isaiah. In fact, the heavenly throne scene in Revelation 4 and 5 parallels Ezekiel's opening vision. And while it would be unwarranted to classify Ezekiel as apocalyptic like Revelation, it is not too far a stretch to see him as the father of apocalyptic.

So strange are Ezekiel's visions that some scholars have post-diagnosed him as a psychological misfit, as someone suffering from a serious psychological disorder. The problem with that approach is that apart from his four visions, the prophet displays a remarkable presence of mind, impeccable rational capacities, and acute powers of observation. Yes, he can sometimes border on the obsessive. Take, for instance, his fixation with describing again and again how the wheels within the wheels rolled in sync with the living creatures (Ezek. 1:15-21). But that sort of over-the-top detailing could simply result from the limits of ancient Hebrew to express what were apparently remarkable wheels.

All in all, it is better to connect the bizarre quality of his visions with the dystopic situation in which he and his contemporaries found themselves. I do not think we can overestimate the impact upon Ezekiel and his contemporaries of the repeated exiles to Babylon, the destruction of the Holy City, and the razing of the Jerusalem temple by pagan armies. Bear with my impossible illustration, but the combined effect of all that would be as if the most outrageous conjectures of the

Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins were proven true, and the New Testament's documents were therefore unreliable. Our faith would be shaken to the core, and we would find ourselves to be, in the words of the apostle Paul, the most pitiful of all people (1 Cor. 15:17–19).

It is hard to imagine a more difficult faith crisis for Old Testament people of God than what Ezekiel and his fellow exiles faced. The combined loss of hope and assurance of divine presence were overwhelming. God's people were in desperate need for something bigger than an oracle. Their thoughts had wandered too far astray to be called back by prophetic logic alone. Instead, they needed to see what they could not see: God's loyal providence. Short of that, they needed to hear someone who himself had seen what they could not see. They needed to hear about the rumbling of the divine chariot rolling across the Babylonian plain. They needed to have one of their own, who had himself been captured, capture their minds with a vision of Yahweh's immense, infinite, unbounded sovereignty—his vast, as I like to call it.

So the Lord went after Ezekiel's imagination, and through him the exiles'. And he did that for strong reason—because human imagination is powerful. It runs deeper than logic and reason—you could almost say that it runs behind them—connecting our rational powers to the emotional and volitional centers of our souls. If you capture someone's imagination, you capture his mind, heart, and will. Do you want a practical demonstration of the validity of that statement? Consider how quickly children identify with the characters in Disney movies. They want to be like them, dress like them, act like them, and sing like them. My wife and I remember one long drive from Princeton to Cape Cod. One of the little girls in the car, a guest, insisted that I play *The Little Mermaid* over and over because she thought she was Ariel. Her imagination was definitely captured; my driving skills were terribly at risk!

The human imagination is where meaning is made, where a vision for life is set, where mind and heart and will converge. It is

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simultaneously the most strategic and the most forgotten part of the human soul when it comes to Christian discipleship. So Gene and I believe this book is a strategic write, a Christian call to affirm the role of the forgotten part of your mind, your imagination. We do so with the prayer that, as a result, the living God would take our souls captive into the same faith and courage that were Ezekiel's. And, in particular, that he would take us captive into a vivid realization of God (the vision of Ezekiel 1), sin (the vision of Ezekiel 8), hope (the vision of Ezekiel 37), and grace (the vision of Ezekiel 47).

Colloquy

At the beginning of this chapter, we described the imagination as the God-given power of mind to think in pictures, to form a mental image of something not present. We further stated that every one of us uses our imagination day in and day out, in the ordinary stuff of life's flow, whether or not its output would be identified by others as "creative" or "novel" or "imaginative." But as important as they are to this book, these ideas are in service to its bigger points, that we were given this imaginative faculty of mind to glorify God, and it therefore must be redeemed.

When the redeeming God began the first of his two major redemptive moves in biblical history, the exodus, he "saw" the plight of his people in Egypt and thereby "knew" their need for redemption (Ex. 2:25). Similarly for us today, allowing the Lord God to see and know our imaginative capability for what it is constitutes the first step toward *imagination redeemed*. The goal, therefore, of the five colloquy sections of our book is, in prayerful presence before the living God, to develop a fuller personal awareness of our imaginations. For us, that means a number of practical things:

- We want you to recognize that imagination is pervasive in your life.

- We want you to discover where your imagination has both captured faithfully and distorted miserably the glory of God himself.
- We want you to trace out other patterns by which your imagination has been spoiled by sin and captured by the old Adamic self.
- We want to offer you hope and help on how, in and through the risen Christ, the imagination of the “old self” can be displaced by developing and “putting on” the imagination of the “new self” (see Eph. 4:17–24).

As a place to start, consider imagination as a river that runs through all your thinking. Obviously, when you are daydreaming and night dreaming, your imagination is in full flow. But as was stated at the beginning of this chapter, you rely on imagination constantly, not just occasionally. For starters, consider the prevalence of memory. Whenever your mind recalls a face or event or place from the past, it is your imagination at work.² The same can be said about things present and things to come. And when we talk of things past, present, and future, we are talking about virtually everything. Your imagination runs through your soul's mental life all the time. To make the point, spend a minute or two thinking through (imagining) these questions:

- What is one of your earliest memories? Bring it to mind. What scene do you see? What faces? Do you hear any words? What are they? What feelings do you feel?
- Picture in your mind the closest intersection to your home. What do you see and hear? Is there a traffic light? Is the intersection busy? Are the turns sharp and difficult?
- Imagine (with apologies to Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) the scene at your funeral. Who is there? What songs are sung? What texts are read? Is a sermon preached?

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About what and by whom? What is said about you? And how does all this make you feel today?

Let's take this imagination audit a step further. Draw to mind something that you have been worrying about recently. What is it? How does imagination play a part in it, specifically, what possible scene in the future do you envision as the reason for your worry? And speaking about the future, what are you looking forward to? What picture do you attach to it? As I, Matt, write this, I am sitting in my home in Princeton with mounds of snow outside. It is the winter of 2014, and every third day over the past two weeks we have had bitter cold storms pile snow upon snow upon snow. My heart is at once filled with pain and joy: pain at the thought (picture) of taking shovel in hand once again to clear the driveway, joy at knowing (picturing) that, Lord willing, during the first week of August I will be kneeling on the sand of the Jersey Shore scooping out a tunnel with my granddaughter, Eden.

The point of this exercise is not to develop some sort of New Age consciousness. It is instead to become a better steward of the imaginative capacity that God has given to you. And a major piece of that stewardship is to identify the pervasiveness of imagination in the big and little of your soul's daily flow.

Oh, Lord, we are truly fearfully and wonderfully made. Thank you for this power you have given us to imagine. We offer our imaginations to you as a living sacrifice. Help us to discern how we misuse this gift, how it is fallen, how we indulge in sinful and idolatrous imaginings. We ask that you redeem our imaginations and make them holy. Bless the venture of reading this book. Please use it, by the power of your Word, for our good and for your glory. In the name of Jesus, who has redeemed every facet of our lives by his blood, we pray. Amen.

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