



Through Muddy Lenses

by Dale Fincher

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I strummed my guitar beside the breezy shoreline, watching the sunset wash into the sea, when a man sat down beside me at the picnic table. He quietly listened to the music. His brown hair was disheveled and his clothes tattered. He appeared older than he was. "I have liver disease," he volunteered. "Comes from living life in the fast lane. I'll probably die soon." Then came the brief history of his life, one of living without the expectation of God's forgiveness. "Why should He forgive me for something I've done to myself?" he asked. "It's not His fault that I'm like this." He staggered down to the waves, squeezed his cigarette, and pointed at the sea. "Where's God?" he asked.

Sometimes we ask questions too big for our brains. God isn't somewhere beyond the clouds, lost behind the stars. The truth is that God is so big, that He's so much around us, that we've grown used to Him and lost our eyes to see Him. I shared with my new acquaintance that if we see the sunset with the right

eyes, we might catch a glimpse of what God is trying to show us.

Life depends on right perspectives. I could witness a thousand sunsets, and I have, and ignore the message, which I have, if I don't look at it rightly. Through the imagination, however, I can see beyond burning gasses and into the burning mysteries of color and light. I see Cause and effect, I stir with delightful emotions, and I express humility in knowing that the One who holds the sun, holds me too.

When God made man in His image, He filled him with earmarks of His own imaginative genius. He gifted him with an imagination like His own to build kingdoms, paint pictures, sing songs, en flesh words, and wonder at His masterpieces. The imagination is ethereal. Like sunbeams, it cannot be fisted, but it warms the world and illumines the darkness. If we shine it rightly, it will aid us to love the Lord our God more fully, to see Him more rightly, and worship Him more fervently.

We didn't unearth a new truth on that beach. The truth was there long before God made seashells. "Blessed," said Jesus in His momentous Sermon.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Two questions unfold. First, what is purity of heart? Dorothy L. Sayers, mystery writer and Christian apologist, said that purity of heart is “single-mindedness.” Soren Kierkegaard said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” I won’t argue with their insights, except to say that “purity of heart” is more than mere sincerity of mind and will. The word “pure” in Greek means “to be free, spiritually, from pollution and guilt.” Jesus said we would find this purity through His Word (John 15:3).

Second, how does one see God? The bush burned with God’s presence, but Moses only saw fire. When in the crag Moses caught a glimpse of God’s back and glowed for over a month. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, the disciples were taught how to live in the body, as earth dwellers, and the “blessed” rewards fitted for them. Surely Jesus wasn’t merely speaking of celestial experiences when He spoke of “seeing God.”

In “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis described these longings for God as the yearnings we feel when we look at beauty. But he warns us that beauty is only a hint of our real desire. “It is only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we

have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.” Though we do see something profound through the images of nature, we decipher the scents, echoes, and news by specific criteria.

A roommate of mine from college once believed that the only book one should read was the Bible, and the only music one should sing was the hymns. When I communicated to him that God speaks through our imagination, he denied it for fear of sounding like a Pantheist. I reminded him that Pantheism claimed that God was in and part of all things, whereas in Christian terms, God communicates through things, each being a fingerprint He uses to declare His personhood and nearness. “So what I’m understanding,” he said, “is that I can enjoy general revelation once I understand special revelation.” He summed up with one sentence what I fumbled over for three hours.

Here is the criterion: the Scriptures decode God’s world of artistry around us. The Word and wonder work in tandem. It is as if God looses us in His cosmic art gallery with handfuls of maps (His Word) and a virtual tour guide (His Spirit) to interpret His images. Neglecting special revelation would be like

looking at the stars through the muddy lenses of a telescope.

The word “imagination” is used much throughout the Scriptures. “For the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth,” (Gen 8:21), “when they knew God they glorified Him not as God . . . but became vain in their imaginations,” (Rom 1:21), “let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart,” (Zech 7:10). The Hebrew and Greek languages use several different words for imagination, translated as “obstinate,” “creating new ideas,” “meditate,” “image” and so on. Also, the same word for imagination in Luke 1:51, “he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,” is used in Matthew 22:37, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” God doesn’t condemn imaginative thinking; He condemns using the imagination for evil (cf. 2 Cor 10:5). As good things become evil when used improperly, we must filter our imagination through the Truth.

Our business of viewing the world with the imagination is to find God’s fingerprints in truth, justice, and order: to find Cosmos in the chaos, not Chaos in the chaos. The humdrum begins when we

lose our imaginative eyes and forget that we are supernaturally created for a world of purpose, love, and worship.

Putting the imagination to practice helps us understand a living reality, as my brief experience on a dairy farm.

“Hey, get up! It’s time to go,” my friend said, poking his head into the guestroom.

“Leave me alone. It’s four in the morning.” I put my pillow over my head.

“Come on,” he persisted, “they are waiting.”

We padded through thick farm air and entered the barn. One hundred-fifty dispassionate cows turned, glassy eyed, and udder-filled. The barn smelled of heat and muck. Lashed by tails, my friend crisscrossed from cow to cow. As he milked, we discussed an array of things (anything to take the mind off the cows), the best being Coleridge’s poem, *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. What place has imagination and classic literature on a dairy farm? What use is it to farmers milking disinterested creatures before breakfast? The lessons of that old

poem rang true for us that day. Being an arrogant, Captain-of-your-own-soul was of graver consequence than all the greedy wealth found under the good omen of the Albatross. Milking cows is a profound humility, and the faithful farmer towers above those who think themselves tall. Perhaps an Albatross was quietly perched above the barn as we were shuffling in it.

I watched my friend work. He's a struggling youth missionary in dairy country, Pennsylvania, loving teens through his cow-ish labor, and finding something eternal in the mundane. He treads through the dung of cows to bring the truth of the dung of sin to a generation of young people ignorant of the Truth. His imagination was sparked to see God through the routine of a daily chore.

If used rightly, the imagination can bring comfort and illumination in distressing hours. If used wrongly, it can bring destruction to others and to ourselves. It should be teamed with God's Word to interpret His fingerprints in the mundane, miraculous, and historical. For if "seeing God" is decoding the colors of the world through His Word, I suggest that avoiding His Words brings our scope of

the world to chaos, and leaves us cross-eyed.

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