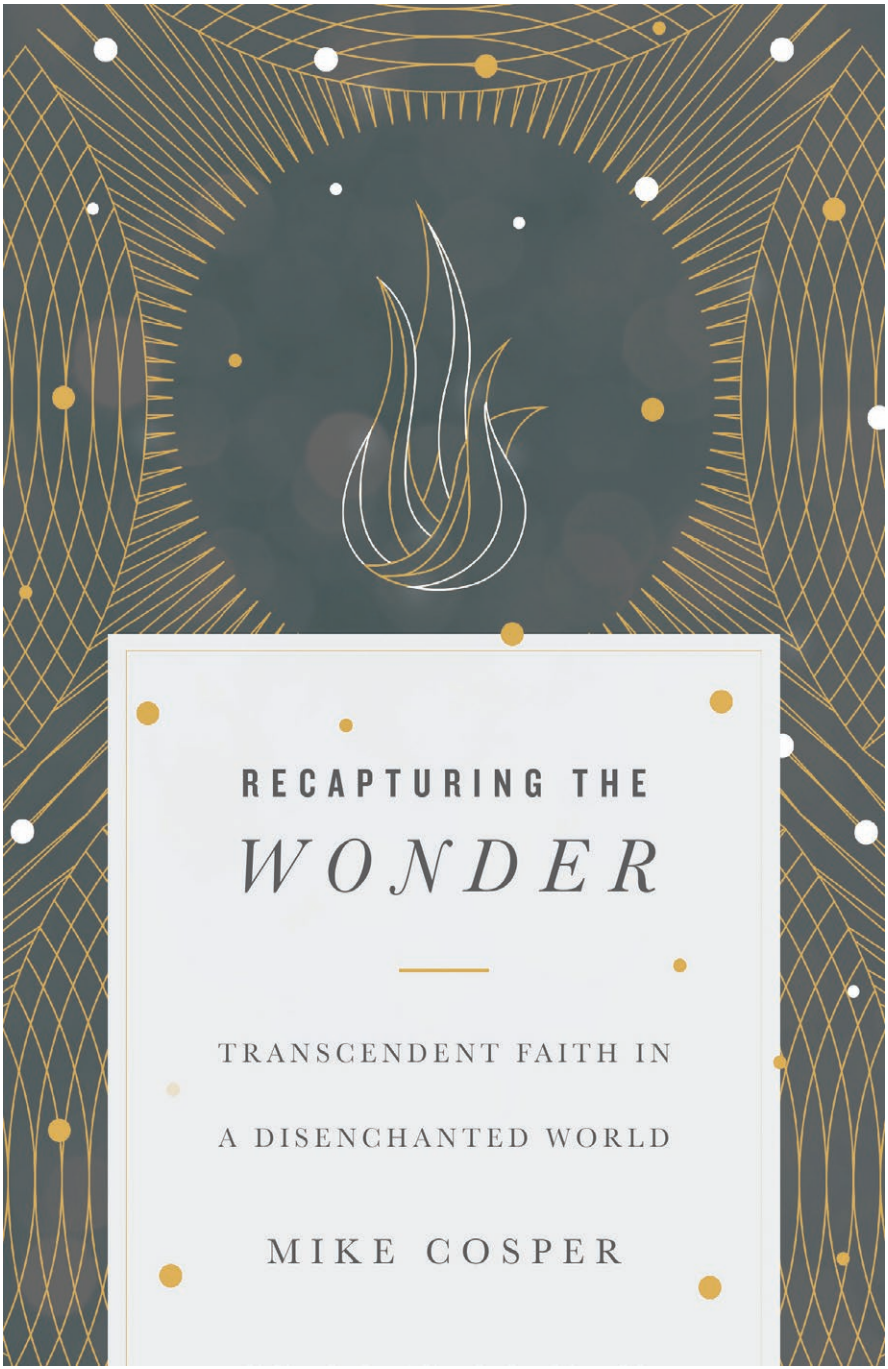

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ONE

Discovering Our Disenchantment

I stumbled upon my disenchantment a few years ago after attending a dedication service at my parents' church. The new, eighty-million-dollar facility was roughly the size of the Death Star, with a parking lot that rivaled Six Flags in pure concrete acreage. There were more volunteers directing traffic and opening doors than most churches have for attendees.

During the service, a "special music" number was sung by an unironically mustachioed man in a suit, a contemporary Christian power ballad with swooning strings and multiple key changes. About midway through the song, a large cross on the back wall began to glow.

To be clear: when I say large, I mean *large*. The eight-thousand-seat auditorium has two balconies, and the distance from the stage to the catwalk above it is probably four stories. The cross spanned most of that height, a simple brown cross on a beige wall.

At first, the glow was subtle—a pale fluorescence around the edges that one might have dismissed as a weird reflection. But

it soon became clear that there was some serious wattage behind it. As the mustachioed man stairstepped keys from the bridge to the final chorus, the light grew brighter and brighter—like, migraine-inducing bright—casting long, stark shadows on the stage.

The song ended and the crowd roared with applause, many wiping tears on their arms as they leapt to their feet and clapped. Eventually, the glow diminished and the house lights came up and the service moved along. All the lights retained a standard, this-worldly brightness for the remainder of the service.

At lunch afterward, between bites of chain-restaurant lasagna, my dad asked, "What did you think?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The cross . . . what did you think? It was pretty bright, right?"

I nodded.

"Do you think," he hesitated, and then said in a lower voice, "Do you think it was *real*?"

I pushed a forkful of overcooked noodles through a grey puddle of alfredo sauce that I regretted ordering. Then I searched his face. "What do you mean?" I repeated.

"The light," Dad said. "It was awfully bright."

"Do you mean, like, was it a miracle?" I asked.

Dad leaned back. "I mean, it probably wasn't," he said. He scooped up a slab of lasagna, grinned, and said, "Right?"

My dad's a civil engineer. When I was a kid, he designed airport runways. He could bore you senseless talking about the different load-bearing capacities of concrete, their response to heat and pressure, which one you'd want to pour in your basement and which is good for dropping a 747 out of the sky onto.

He's highly rational, and though he takes his faith seriously, he's not the type of person who would send cash to televangelists for prayer towels or get in line to be slain by the Spirit. I have seen him tear up once or twice in a church service, but to be fair, I'd guess he's also cried at more than one Pixar movie. He definitely got misty during the last episode of ALF. There's a big difference between being sentimental and superstitious, and yet, here he was, raising the possibility that the glow behind a cross in a multi-million-dollar facility with state-of-the-art audio, video, and lighting was some kind of miracle.

At the time, dad's question seemed so odd, so out of character. But this isn't my dad's story; it's mine. It's the story of how I stumbled upon my own disenchantment. Because what surprised me in retrospect was not that Dad raised the possibility of a miracle in a modern, industrial megachurch service; it was the utter impossibility of such a thing in my mind. Is it stranger to want to read a miracle into a stage effect, or to be a Christian whose gut-level reaction is "That's ridiculous"?

My guess is that most would react as I did: surprised and cynical. There are rational reasons for being cynical about this particular miracle, but it didn't take any thought or reasoning for me (or, in all likelihood, for you) to be skeptical. It was my instinct, my gut reaction. I didn't have to think first and stitch together my reasons for believing the light was ordinary. I *felt* that it was impossible for it to be supernatural and then found evidence to support my suspicions.

I am programmed to expect that the world is what I can see, touch, and measure.

What I stumbled upon, then, was a deeply ingrained posture, a fully-formed attitude toward the world that is suspicious not only of well-timed miracles in the middle of a big production number, but is actually suspicious of any kind of religious experience.

I react to the suggestion of a miracle—or for that matter, any thoughts about God, the spiritual, or the transcendent—with skepticism and cynicism. It is my default setting.[1] I am programmed to expect that the world is what I can see, touch, and measure, and any thought or idea that runs against that expectation is met with resistance. Programming is actually a great way to think about it. I have learned to see the world this way, and I don't have to think about it anymore.

I don't think I'm alone. I believe that most people experience something similar—a subtle-but-strong resistance to faith and a skepticism toward anything that veers toward the supernatural.

This way of seeing the world is what Charles Taylor calls disenchantment.[2] A disenchanted world has been drained of magic, of any supernatural presences, of spirits and God and transcendence. A disenchanted world is a material world, where what you see is what you get.

It's not a world entirely without God or a world without religion. Rather, it's a world where God and religion are superfluous. You can believe whatever you want so long as you don't expect it to affect your everyday experience. Believe whatever you want about God or the afterlife, but trust in science and technology to explain everything about the real world.

We didn't choose to think and feel this way. It's simply the world of ideas we inhabit, a thousand stories told and repeated about how the world works. Christians and non-Christians alike are disenchanted because we're all immersed in a world that presents a material understanding of reality as the plausible and grown-up way of thinking. Even people from faith traditions more open to mystery or miraculous works of the Spirit will experience this to

some degree or another. It's the way the Western world frames its ideas.

Perhaps to best understand disenchantment, we can look at its opposite, the "enchanted" world of a few centuries ago. In that world, men and women saw themselves as spiritual creatures, vulnerable to blessings and curses, to angels and demons, and subject to the god or gods who made and oversaw the world. This enchanted world was part of a Cosmos,[3] an orderly creation full of meaning, a place with a purposeful origin and a clear destination, guaranteed by the god or gods who made it and rule over it. At the same time, this Cosmos is full of mystery, a place where our knowledge has its limits and an unseen spiritual realm is constantly at work, shaping our everyday experience.

In disenchantment, we no longer live in a Cosmos; we live in a universe, a cold, hostile place whose existence is a big accident, where humanity is temporarily animated "stuff" that's ultimately meaningless and destined for the trash heap.

Bravery in this disenchanted world means facing the emptiness head-on. Comedian Louis CK described this on Conan O'Brien's late night talk show. Louis was talking about why he wouldn't let his kids have cell phones, which led him to talk about his own sense of emptiness:

> What the phones are taking away is the ability to just sit there. That's being a person. Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty, forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and that you're alone. It's down there.
>
> And sometimes when things clear away, you're not watching anything, you're in your car, and you start going, "Oh no, here

> it comes. That I'm alone." It starts to visit on you. Just this sadness. Life is tremendously sad, just by being in it. . . .
>
> That's why we text and drive. I look around, pretty much 100 percent of the people driving are texting. And they're killing, everybody's murdering each other with their cars. But people are willing to risk taking a life and ruining their own because they don't want to be alone for a second because it's so hard.[4]

In a disenchanted world, solitude is terrifying. We are alone. The universe is "empty, forever empty." Louis and others like him argue that facing that emptiness is the right thing to do. Accept the cold, harsh reality of the real world.

Louis makes explicit a vision of the world that shapes us whether we know it or not. Our culture rehearses stories, ideas, and dialogues that shame us away from any kind of belief in transcendence. Charles Taylor calls these "disciplines of disenchantment." "We regularly . . . accuse each other of 'magical' thinking, of indulging in 'myth,' of giving way to 'fantasy'; we say that X isn't living in our century, that Y has 'mediaeval' mind, while Z, whom we admire, is way ahead of her time."[5]

These disciplines prime us to respond to the world much like Pavlov primed his dog to salivate at the sound of a ringing bell. When we are regularly shamed away from thoughts that venture near spirituality and transcendence, we learn to avoid it altogether, even in our thoughts. We develop a resistance to thoughts that would carry us outside of the world of the visible, measurable, or scientifically verifiable.

Philosopher and social theorist Hannah Arendt says this way of seeing the universe began with Galileo, who revealed that the

Earth (and humanity) wasn't the center of the universe.[6] His discovery called into question the story we'd been telling about who we were and what kind of world we lived in. If the earth wasn't at the center of the universe, did it still make sense to imagine all of history as a divine drama, unfolded by God for his glory and our good? Were we actually just one story of many, one planet of many, adrift in a meaningless cosmic sea?

At the same time, the universe revealed itself to be more vast, more hostile, and more empty than we'd previously imagined. It also revealed itself to be more knowable than we'd imagined, yielding its secrets as we developed the technology to unlock them—the telescope, the microscope, the atomic bomb, the Hadron collider. Technology has given us the sense that everything within the universe can be made to appear to our senses and harnessed for our purposes.[7] It may be meaningless, but it can be comprehended and mastered.

This mastery, though, is a bit of an illusion as well. The accumulated body of scientific knowledge can tell us all about the canvas, oils, and minerals that combine to make a work of art, but they cannot tell us why it takes our breath away.

Modern knowledge involves breaking things down into component parts. As philosopher Michel Foucault argues in *The Birth of the Clinic*, nowhere is this more disturbingly clear than in modern medicine, which came not out of the development of knowledge about the health and thriving of human bodies but out of the study of dead bodies, exhumed, dissected, and evaluated.

It is undeniable that this kind of knowledge has value. But Arendt's point—and many others have joined her—is to call into question whether this kind of knowledge is the only way of knowing something and, moreover, whether it's the best way of knowing something.

Dallas Willard once wrote that while you will not find him apart from his body, the surest way to never find him would be to tear his body open looking for him. There is a mysterious wholeness about a person. Whatever you might know about their biochemistry, anatomy, psychology, and biography cannot account for who they are and what being with them feels like. Likewise, the total knowledge of how fusion makes stars burn, how light travels through the solar system, and how the gases in our atmosphere refract and bend that light is less wonderful than beholding a sunset. A food chemist who can tell you all about what a strawberry is—how it grows, what its chemical makeup is, why the tongue tells the brain it's sweet—somehow knows less than a child who has actually tasted one. And wouldn't we all agree that the child's knowledge is superior? More useful? Or at the very least, more conducive to a good life?

The average grandma can't tell you much about amino acids and protein chains, but hours at the stove have taught her not to salt the tomato sauce until it's reduced. She can tell by the way a pork chop resists pressure from a spatula whether or not it's done, and she knows that the acidity of limes can cut the heat in a curry. Do you want her or the chemist making your dinner?

What we're talking about is the difference between knowing—a category we might use to describe abstracted knowledge like the kind that leads to success on tests and money on *Jeopardy!*—and know-how—a kind of knowing that's more integrated with life, or better put, more integrated with the body. It is a lived-in knowing and an experienced knowing.

The Bible is treated like any other object in a disenchanted world. Our common approach is to study it, and by *study* we mean

something akin to the study of science or the study of language. The Bible is anatomized, broken into its component parts. To really understand it, we must understand first-century Judaism, the original languages, and the systematic theologies, which are the frame across which we can spread it.

This ends up polarizing the church's approach to the Bible. On the one hand, some feel no need to preserve the Bible as inerrant or infallible, and so the Bible is picked apart, what's true sorted from what's false according to the currents of cultural whim. This approach, taken by everyone from Thomas Jefferson to the Jesus Seminar to the current revisionism around sexuality, tells us that Scripture comes from an ignorant social context, which allows critics to separate socially acceptable Biblical ideas—humanism, pacifism, benevolence, and mercy—from those that are now unacceptable, such as belief in the supernatural or sexual ethics.

On the other hand, some try to squeeze the Bible through the lenses of disenchantment in another way. Here, the authority of the Bible is maintained, but the Bible must act like any other modern text—like a textbook or the instruction book that comes with a cordless drill. This demands a rigid literalism and leads to attitudes like *30 Rock*'s Kenneth Parcel, who said his favorite subject in school was science, where they studied the Old Testament. Kenneth is a good fundamentalist, and as James K. A. Smith puts it, "No one is more modern than a fundamentalist."[8]

The important thing to note is that the approach of liberals and fundamentalists is much the same. The text has no life of its own. It isn't a living whole—a breathing, fiery creature full of mystery, something to be approached with care and humility; it's a subject to be mastered, a corpse to be dissected. It's placed on a steel table and subjected to a thousand acts of violence. It is split into its component parts, footnoted for historicity, and commented on

from every angle. In effect, it becomes hedged behind high walls of specialized knowledge, and most Christians—unless they've spent many hours in classes or in inductive Bible studies—are as frightened to talk about what a text might mean as they are to answer a question in a math or science class. Better to save it for the experts and leave it untouched.

If by chance they have applied themselves to many hours of study, they become (as Professor Snape once described Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter*) an "insufferable know-it-all." They have a frightening certainty. The text has been mastered, the questions all answered. Their Bible has no mysteries; it is all knowable now.

What remains after this treatment is an abstraction. For disenchanted Christians, the Bible is the source of knowledge about God, the gospel, and the spiritual life. Nothing is sacred but the Bible, but of course, by that we don't mean *this* Bible or *that* Bible. We don't mean any *actual* Bible in existence—because what was sacred and God-breathed was the Bible in its original manuscripts, and we don't possess any of those.

What remains is not the Word of God but the *idea* of the Bible: an abstract, theoretical Bible that is perfect and perfectly out-of-reach for any and all of us. As a result, we are necessarily thrown into a posture of suspicion about everything we encounter in the spiritual life—every text, every sermon, every person's testimony. We must ask, "Does it fit?" Does it fit into the schema we've adopted that frames our thinking about the Bible? Are we *certain* that we're right?

This way of knowing breeds fear in two ways. On the one hand, we fear attacks from the outside, from unbelievers, on the Bible's reliability. On the other, we're afraid of ourselves, worried that we might not know enough or worse, that we might believe the wrong

idea. This fear causes us to double-down on our disenchanted approach to the Bible, coming back with a scalpel to dissect it again and to look for the evidence that supports the Bible's historicity and our beliefs about it. This is a quest for certainty.

To be sure, these things matter immensely. We need to know we can trust the Bible, and we need to feel confident that we believe the right things about it. But in many ways, I fear that many Christians are stuck there and that the Bible is never more than an object for analysis for them, as opposed to it being the voice of the Beloved. We can master it like the periodic table of elements or the statistics of the New York Yankees while keeping it divorced from real life.

If the Bible *is* the voice of the Beloved, then there must be a way of reading it that connects with us as whole people, just as knowing and being known in a relationship is a whole-person enterprise. There must be ways of reading and engaging Scripture that strike us at the level of our emotions, our imagination, and our bodies.

To return to the food and cooking metaphor, there's a way of talking about food that leaves us ignorant of its flavors. With Scripture, we need to find pathways that enable us to taste and see that the Lord is good, to borrow a phrase.

We hunger for that kind of know-how, for a relationship with Scripture that leads to something deeper than head knowledge. We long for wonder, and we long for communion with God, but we're so terrified of getting something wrong that we either avoid Scripture altogether or treat it as a cold, dead abstraction, unable to connect it to real life.

In *Hunting the Divine Fox,* Robert Farrar Capon—a writer and Episcopal priest—argued that this kind of dry, scholarly abstraction

is a great way to miss the point of a text. Describing Genesis 1, he wrote:

> In the old days, when theologians were less uptight about their respectability in the eyes of biblical critics, the odd, majestic plural of that fateful "Let us make" [in Genesis 1:26] was always taken as one of the Old Testament evidences for the doctrine of the Trinity. Nowadays you lose your union card if you do things like that, but I still think it's nice. . . . What's nice about that "us" is precisely its oddness. It's the kind of mysteriously gratuitous detail that's so much fun to come across in the work of a master craftsman. . . .
>
> See? You need to play with Scripture or else you get it all wrong. Deriving the doctrine of the Trinity from the "us" is nothing more than a little bit of baroque ornamentation: it's legitimate as long as you keep things in balance. . . . You may not know exactly why it's there, but you feel it's trying to tell you something, trying to elicit some kind of response from you.

He invites us to an approach that is

> perfectly serious and perfectly silly at the same time. Which is just great. It's like making love; you can laugh while you do it. As a matter of fact, if you don't, at least sometimes, you're probably a terrible lover. Watch out for Biblical commentators, therefore, who sound as if they're holding a sex manual in the other hand.[9]

Lovemaking might be the perfect way to think about the problem with disenchanted readings of the Bible. Lovers might study technique, but they never mistake it for the "point" of lovemaking. They're after something deeper, something more akin to communion. They surrender to one another. They want to encounter

the *person*, and the great gift that lovers can give to one another is their undivided attention and presence.

Failing that, we feel cold, distant, lonesome, and used.

If, on some level, we're doubtful of the presence of an actual God in our actual world, it's no wonder that we might confuse abstracted, technical knowledge of the Bible with a spiritual life. How often have you encountered someone whose knowledge of the Bible is encyclopedic but whose presence is harsh, dark, or miserable? How often do you hear clichéd stories about Christians with all the right answers that stiff waiters on tips, are horrible to their spouses or neighbors, and who you wouldn't trust with your dog?

The unchanged lives of Christians who have tremendous knowledge of the Bible highlight two of the great consequences of our disenchantment. We think knowledge of the Bible is all that matters, so we fail to attend to our character, our soul, and our relationships. Our way of living the Christian life leaves all of these things unchanged.

We need a way of thinking about the Scriptures that allows us to come to it as whole persons—who think, feel, and imagine—and find nourishment on all levels. We need to preserve the Bible's character as personal speech exchanged between the Lover and the Beloved. The voice that rings from the Bible is the voice of the one we long to hear from, long to know, long to find our rest in.

A while back, my wife and I spent an evening at a cabin in the woods celebrating a friend's birthday with several other couples. I woke early the next morning to go for a run on a trail that led through the woods to a pond on the other side of a rocky hill. It

was a cold fall morning, and the path was covered in leaves and dense fog.

As I ran, I saw something on the ground that looked like pulled taffy, parallel ribbons and threads, curled, white, and translucent. I stopped to pick up a piece of it and was astonished at its lightness. I turned and looked back down the path and noticed more of it along the edges of the path and up the hillside into the woods, tangled in vines and leaves.

Looking back at the piece in my hand, it reminded me of the geometry of conch shells. It was beautiful. I picked up another piece and crushed it in my hand. It immediately became a fine powder.

I went back to the cabin and brought a few friends out to the woods to see them. We were all mystified. It felt like we were in the opening scene of a science fiction movie: aliens had landed in the night and left these ghostly shells as the only evidence of their presence.

But in the age of smartphones and Google, it didn't take long to get an explanation. They're called frost flowers, and they appear in the late fall and early winter. As the air temperature drops below freezing, plant stems contract, squeezing sap and water out into the air, forming ribbons of crystal. It's relatively rare, but perfectly explainable.

And yet, I don't believe this explanation is sufficient. While we might be able to trace the physics of frost flowers, does that account for their beauty or for the way they captivated us that morning? Is it better to describe them as one more meaningless thing in a meaningless universe, or as the gesture of an artist?

Is it possible that the truth of the world isn't something we can test and measure?

There's a line in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where Indy tells a group of

students, "Archeology is the search for fact, not truth. If it's truth you're looking for, Dr. Tyree's philosophy class is right down the hall." I wonder if we wouldn't benefit a little from this distinction, too. If we think of facts as those measurable, verifiable ways of seeing the world, and if we think of truth as the bigger narrative that makes sense of them and ties them together, then we might say that Western culture has been consumed with the quest for facts for the last few hundred years but has lost sight of the truth along the way. Is it possible that the truth of the world isn't something we can test and measure? Is it possible that there are layers of our experience that lie beyond our physical senses, layers that reveal themselves in the way our hearts ache when we see beautiful things, or in the powerful love and burdening we feel at the birth of a child, or even in the darkness we sense when sorrows strike?

Is it possible that we dwell in a Cosmos, not a universe, and that a moment like this one—when beauty stops us in our tracks—is an encounter with something more than frozen water and sap, something more like a love letter?

Maybe the facts of frost flowers don't tell us the truth of frost flowers.

Our faith is uniquely challenged today, but it's false to think that a challenged faith is unique. The Scriptures tell a story of countercultural faith, and they always have. Where we are challenged by a disenchanted milieu, previous generations sought God down the street from temples to sex goddesses and across the river from the Pantheon, or had to uncover the gospel in an era of Christendom when the church's political power obscured its spiritual power. In all times and places, the good news has been challenged by counterfeits and competitors.

In our age, we need to know whether there's someone on the other end of the line when we pray. We need to know whether that person is a superfluous, disinterested deity or a loving Father whose eye is on the sparrow, who is acquainted with suffering and grief, who rejoices over us with singing. And while not all Christians have lived with our particularly modern doubts, many of them are as old as humanity. *What kind of God is this? How can I know him? Can he answer the questions about life and meaning that simmer just under the surface of my thoughts?*

Our world offers answers to these questions. Louis CK's comments are one example: be brave, face the void of meaninglessness. That approach hums in the background of our lives and whether we like it or not, shapes our experience of faith.

In contrast, the prophet Jeremiah calls us to consider an "ancient path." When he spoke those words, Israel had abandoned their God, and Jeremiah was inviting them to come home:

> Thus says the Lord:
> "Stand by the roads, and look,
> and ask for the ancient paths,
> where the good way is; and walk in it,
> and find rest for your souls." (Jer 6:16)

The prophet invites us to consider a path that is profoundly countercultural. We live in an age obsessed with the new: new gadgets, new experiences, new sexual horizons—the list goes on and on. We think, *The last iPhone didn't satisfy my aching heart, but maybe this one will.* And that logic gets applied equally to consumer goods, jobs, and marriages.

Yet the prophet calls us to an ancient path. No need for innovation—to move forward we must look backward. To find the path we must "stand by the roads, and look." It's a call to stillness—to

stand rather than to continue our aimless wandering, to resist the momentum of our chaotic world and look, think, consider where we're going and why. Hannah Arendt once wrote that we need to "think what we are doing," saying that the problem of our modern age is thoughtlessness. We live busy lives, and our thoughtlessness allows us to continue to be carried along in the currents of an unreflective culture. Arendt's thoughts echo Jeremiah's—stop, look, think, *pay attention.*

To embrace this invitation requires two things. First, we must understand that we already have a way of life. It's not enough to say the world is disenchanted; we must also acknowledge that *we* are disenchanted, and that we did it to ourselves. We have embraced ways of living—habits, practices, and stories that we're often unaware of—that prime us for disbelief and doubt. Our way of life presupposes that God is superfluous, and when we try to live as if he weren't, we discover a deep internal dissonance. Understanding what those habits and practices are and how they work on us is the first step.

The second step is embracing a different story and, with it, a different set of habits and practices. Here, we can begin to talk about what the church has historically called spiritual disciplines. But here we encounter difficulty again. At their best, the disciplines (such as prayer, Scripture reading, and fasting) are a way of life, habits that allow us to in-habit a reality. But that's not how the disciplines are usually discussed. Instead, there's an awful lot of finger-wagging, "have-you-read-your-Bible-today" spirituality, where the disciplines are part of a moral checklist that keeps God from being angry with us.

To see the disciplines in this way is not only to confuse their purpose, it's to confuse the gospel itself, which begins with the well-established fact that God is no longer angry with us. If we fail

to understand the gospel, then the disciplines become a means to an end—a way of trying to earn God's attention and favor. But if our starting place with God is the radical grace extended through Jesus, then the spiritual disciplines are invitations, not obligations—ways of being with God, not appeasing him.

Jeremiah's words help us here too. We're not called first to act but to cease. Stand and look: the work that so much of our lives are spent frantically trying to accomplish—self-justifying spiritual work, a hunger to earn the approval of others, our own internal moralistic standards—has already been finished. Stop struggling to earn approval. All is accomplished in Jesus.

If we fail to understand the gospel, then the disciplines become a means to an end—a way of trying to earn God's attention and favor.

Once we accept that finished work, we'll find an ancient path that allows us to walk more and more deeply into the remade world of God's kingdom. As we take up ancient practices like prayer, Scripture reading, and fasting, we will see the way they confront our disenchanted way of knowing the world. The kingdom is an enchanted place, and by God's grace, we can experience the kingdom's mystery and wonder throughout our lives.

In her gorgeous memoir, *H Is for Hawk*, Helen Macdonald tells the story of raising a goshawk after the death of her father. It's a story of grief, loss, and—in a way—resurrection as she works to teach this feral and powerful creature to fly and hunt with her. On one of her early (and failed) attempts to fly the hawk, she joins her friend Stuart in the English countryside. Disappointed that the hawk won't fly, they walk back through a field toward their cars:

Stuart stops dead.

"Stuart?"

"Look!" he says. "Look at that!"

"What?" I say, turning and shading my eyes. "I can't see anything."

"Look toward the sun."

"I am!"

"Look *down*!"

Then I see it. The bare field we'd flown the hawk upon is covered in gossamer, millions of shining threads combed downwind across every inch of soil. Lit by the sinking sun the quivering silk runs like light on water all the way to my feet. It is a thing of unearthly beauty, the work of a million tiny spiders searching for new homes. Each had spun a charged silken thread out into the air to pull it from its hatch-place, ascending like an intrepid hot-air balloonist to drift and disperse and fall. I stare at the field for a long time.[10]

What Macdonald experiences in that moment is revelation. Those shimmering threads had been there the whole time. While standing in the field, watching the hawk, willing it to fly, her world was cold and hostile. But given a few words, and standing in a different place, her way of seeing was transformed.

Our lives are very much about seeing. We talk about seeing opportunities or seeing a way forward. We train ourselves to see in certain ways, too, to see potential in an empty canvas or a blank page or in the raw ingredients of a meal. Athletes train to see the trajectory of a fastball or an opening in pass coverage. Once you've learned to see the world in certain ways, you don't have to think about it any more. It becomes automatic.

Jeremiah's invitation—and Jesus' invitation, too—is to see the world in a different way. "Stand by the roads, and look." It's an invitation that offers rest for our souls and reveals the world to be much more wondrous than we'd thought or feared. It's a world permeated by God's grace and filled with his presence, from the brightest to the darkest places—a world where everything is being reconciled and made new in Jesus.

What kind of world do we live in? Does it make the most sense to say that our encounters with beauty and wonder are happy accidents, random stimuli that happen to trigger our brain's pleasure center? Or is it possible that we live in a world where spider silks lit by the setting sun or a hillside flecked with frost flowers can be seen as something more than random?

We've feared it to be otherwise, and many have talked themselves into believing those fears are true, contented themselves with an empty universe. Low expectations protect us from disappointment. But Jeremiah's invitation—and Jesus' own—is to hope that the world is a place of meaning and love. Walking that ancient path, where the good way is, opens our eyes to see—and reside in—a different world.

PATHWAY 1
RE-ENCHANTING OUR WORLD

I've spent some time discussing what it means to be shaped by a disenchanted world. Key to that formation are disciplines of disenchantment. These aren't just ideas; they're often stories, and stories have a way of working on us at a deep level. For instance, it's one thing to hear someone say, "Life is random and meaningless." It's another to watch a movie like *Garden State* or *Castaway*. Movies capture the imagination, and these two in particular tell stories that erode a sense of meaning, order, and purpose in the world. Bravery, in each, is facing the randomness and meaninglessness of life.

This kind of storytelling is happening all the time in movies, novels, and music, but it's also happening in a kind of shorthand in everyday conversations, especially when they veer near the spiritual or supernatural. Not long ago, after a string of violent mass shootings, there was a social media uproar over the "thoughts and prayers" sentiment that often gets repeated after a tragedy. "Enough with your 'thoughts and prayers,'" people wrote. "*Do* something." While there's some degree of politicking going on in many of those tweets, there's also a bit of revelation about the way people see the world: thoughts and prayers are wasted in an empty universe. It's a perfect example of a world primed for disbelief.

So how do we change? How do we experience things differently?

We need to reorient our lives around a different set of stories. The people of God have always been storytellers. Starting with the exodus, God's people have been telling and retelling the story of their Savior. Even the Ten Commandments begin with a nod toward the story: "I am the LORD your God, *who brought you out of*

Egypt." God reminds Israel of their salvation before he calls them to a way of life.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's status as either righteous or rebellious roughly coincides with their faithfulness to remember (and tell) their story. Periodically, the story gets lost, the gods of neighboring tribes begin to appear in Israel's worship, and the nation falters. But then, someone finds the law, they read it, and a renewal movement begins.

Our situation today is much like theirs. We're called to worship competing "gods" who go by names like sex, money, power, and status, and like Israel, we need to remember the story of the God who rescued us from slavery to these lesser gods.

In the New Testament, storytelling continues. Every sermon in the book of Acts is a retelling of the story of God's salvation through Jesus. The sacraments that lie at the heart of Christian worship—baptism and communion—are shorthand symbols for the story of Jesus' death, resurrection, and the restoration of all things.

If we want to leave behind our disenchantment, we have to find ways to immerse ourselves in these stories. We have to counter the stories of our disenchanted world.

To do this, I want to suggest that we think in terms of marking time. By marking time, I mean that our lives should have signposts and landmarks, significant moments that call us to remember that we are citizens of a different world.

I like thinking about this in terms of concentric circles. Each circle narrows to a shorter interval of time: yearly, weekly, daily, hourly.

MARKING TIME

Yearly. In a given year, most Christians have at least two significant moments that call them back to God: Christmas and Easter. These two holidays are anchor points in our calendar. Christmas is

ordinarily preceded by a time of anticipation called Advent—remembering the longing of Israel and the longing of the world for a savior. Christmas, with its feasts, its practice of gift-giving, and all the lights and tinsel that come along with it, is meant to be an over-the-top celebration of the generosity and mercy of God.

Likewise, Easter is normally preceded by a season of anticipation called Lent. In Lent, the church historically takes a long fast and spends forty days preparing for Easter with a time of repentance and lament. Good Friday is the deepest day of mourning, and on Easter, everything changes. The church is decorated with flowers, a feast is laid out on the table, and everyone gathers to shout, "He is risen! He is risen indeed."

Here, too, our families typically gather and celebrate. Easter and the days around it can be a particularly dynamic feast—remembering Holy Thursday and the Passover, fasting for Good Friday, and feasting again to celebrate the resurrection.

Whatever your church tradition is, there's value in marking out these days as sacred (or if you don't like that term, then call them "unique"). By celebrating them, you mark your own life with the two most significant moments in the life of Jesus. Not only that, you stand with Christians all over the world and all through the centuries who shaped their days with the story of God.

Weekly. Perhaps the most significant rhythm in our lives is gathering regularly with the church. It's significant because it's the most outward, Godward hour in our weeks, and because it's a time when the invisible is made visible: the scattered church comes together; the signs of the kingdom are present in bread and wine and in the waters of baptism. The gathered church is a foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth.

It often doesn't feel like a heavenly experience, though, and showing up can be difficult. As someone with young children, I'm

as aware of this as anyone. It can be brutal getting your family organized and out the door. Once you're at church, it can be distracting to sit next to the crazy person who talks to themselves through the sermon. It can be frustrating when your church tries on a new musical or stylistic identity, and you have a hard time participating. And yet, again and again, the Scriptures tell us that gathering with the church is necessary (Heb 10:25) and that Christ dwells with his people in a unique and rich way when we gather and sing together (Col 3:16).

For these reasons and more, the gathering of the local church is like the heartbeat of the Christian life. It's a time when we unite with other believers and where we can look around and remember "I am not alone." In a disenchanted world, that's more important than ever.

Weekly habits might also include regular practices like fasting or feasting, or gatherings like small groups, accountability groups, family dinners, and more. Each of these is a way of marking our time and calling our attention back to the kingdom of God.

Daily. Daily disciplines include journaling, praying, reading Scripture, and many more. For now, the specifics aren't important. (I'll explore many of them in the pages ahead and explore thinking through daily routines after chapter seven.) What's important is to begin thinking in terms of daily habits. How are we marking our time on a day-to-day basis so that we're regularly rooting ourselves in this bigger story?

Hourly. The final circle is moment-by-moment. How do we go about our days in a way that sustains an awareness that we live in another world? Paul talks about "praying unceasingly." Brother Lawrence wrote about "practicing the presence of God"—an effort to fill his mind constantly with the knowledge of God's presence. Frank Laubach, a missionary, wrote about a "game with minutes"

in which he trained himself to turn his thoughts to God minute-by-minute throughout the day.

While these might be lofty goals, I want to start much more simply, with a practice known as breath prayers.

BREATH PRAYERS

Breath prayers are exactly what they sound like: prayers that can be said in a single breath. To practice this discipline—which has been shared by Christians for many ages—you simply take in a deep, calming breath and, while exhaling, pray quietly or aloud a simple phrase meant to reorient you to God's presence, his kingdom, and his good will for you. It's a practice that brings the whole person—heart, mind, and body—back to an awareness of God's presence.

Many people begin this practice with the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me." You might take a favorite verse of Scripture and adapt it. Matthew 11:28 can become "Lord, I am weary, give me rest." Romans 8:1 can be prayed as a reminder that "there is no condemnation." For me, Colossians 3:3 has merged with a line from Augustus Toplady's hymn, "Rock of Ages": "Let me hide myself in thee." Each phrase is like the tip of an iceberg; it reaches back into a deeper, richer story and roots us in a larger, God-filled world.

The beauty of this practice is in its portability. There is no place, no meeting, no encounter in life where one can't stop and take a slow, deep breath. If you practice it regularly, you'll find yourself whispering prayers without having to think too much about it; they'll simply be part of life.

I believe these concentric circles can frame out our lives, filling them with touchstones that call us back to God's kingdom. They are a practical way of re-enchanting our world and our experiences, signposts on our journey that remind us that the world is far bigger, far more wondrous, and far more mysterious than we have been told.

TAKING STEPS

Take an inventory of your practices in each of the circles. Write them out: yearly, weekly, daily, hourly. For each category, ask yourself three questions:

- How consistent are these practices?
- How helpful are these practices?
- What's a step I could take in this circle to deepen and enrich these practices?

Habits and practices are only sustainable when they're valued in our communities and families, so be sure to talk with your family and closest friends about all of this. Consider how you might take steps to value these things more deeply together.