

Imaginary Grace by Pastor Marty

This last week while I was at church, I had a vision. It was right in the middle of the corporate worship time. I sensed that the Holy Spirit was doing His stuff, so I opened myself to see or hear what He might be saying or doing. At that point, I had a vision. Now, when I say that I had a vision, I am not suggesting it was one of those visions that replace normal eyesight and seem like I am somewhere else or watching a movie screen. This was what I believe is a much more common type of vision: the Spirit opened the eyes of my imagination to see what my physical eyes were not ready to see themselves. In Hebrews 5:14, we read that through practice, the mature (perfect, complete, whole) have their senses trained to discern good and evil. I have often wondered how this works: how do we learn to discern between good and evil using sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch? The answer is that it begins with our imagination. If we use Moses as an example, we can imagine what it was like to see the burning bush, hear God speak, feel the warmth of the pillar of fire, taste mana, or smell the incense used for sacrifice. In those instances, Moses' senses relayed to him what was really happening. Today, God is doing just as much as He was then, but it usually is not quite as visible: His Presence is with us even when we do not see a burning bush or a pillar of fire, and He is constantly speaking to us even when we do not hear His voice from a burning bush. It is through our imagination that our senses learn to discern His works.

Through our imaginations, we learn to discern God's works through our senses today.

In the vision I saw Sunday, there were angels worshipping God as He was seated on His throne. Now, nothing about that contradicts Scripture; we know with absolute certainty that there are angels worshipping God as He is seated on His throne, for the writings of Isaiah and John tell us that this is an ongoing event. The only question that we have to address is how much we can trust what we imagine. Some take an extreme Reformed approach and discount any use of the imagination beyond picturing things that took place in the Bible for the purpose of understanding them better. From their viewpoint, we can imagine what David felt when he went up against Goliath because it helps us to understand his faith in God, but imagining ourselves as David and our personal trouble as Goliath is dangerously close to dabbling in the occult. I think this perspective is not only ridiculous but also diabolical because what it actually does is limit our spiritual lives to only what we can rational think or materialistically feel. As beings made in God's image, we are much more than just our thoughts and feelings; we are beings that have a connection not only to God but also to eternity. According to Paul, even unbelievers "live and move and have their being" in God; how much more this is true for believers who have the Holy Spirit residing within us! Our imagination is part of being made in God's image, and it is intended to be used in worship, prayer, obedience, repentance, ministry, devotion, service, and even in sharing the gospel.

Our imaginations are intended to be used in every single aspect of our lives in God.

Because God has created us with an imagination, it should be accepted and affirmed. However, that does not mean everything coming into or out of our imagination is good any more than everything associated with our thoughts and feelings are good. Paul commands us to take authority over thoughts that are contrary to Jesus and to train our minds to focus on what is good. Jesus commands us to take responsibility for our attitudes toward others and choose love instead of lust, bitterness, pride, hatred, prejudice, and selfishness. In the same way, we have to sanctify, guard, and train our imaginations so they will respond to the Holy Spirit instead of the sinful nature or even the demonic. As a whole, the Christian Church lacks discernment in many key areas because there is a significant misunderstanding

when it comes to recognizing exactly what the imagination does. Some things, such as pornography or hate, are relatively clear when it comes to how they poison, inhabit, and grow in the imagination; other things, such as images of horror and violence, are sometimes freely accepted by some with no clue how they pervert our inner symbolic system. Movies, television, books, and music are exceptionally dangerous because they are able to cloak dark images in suspense, romance, and excitement so that they appear innocent or attractive. Ungodly images open a door for demonic access to every part of us.

Allowing polluting images into our imaginations opens our souls to demonic influence.

The imagination can be a very powerful aspect of our relationship with God, but it needs to be sanctified. First, we have to get rid of all of the dark and destructive images that we have gotten stored in our memories through things we have read, seen, or even heard. Pornographic, violent, or traumatic images quickly store themselves in our brains through natural chemical reactions, and they are easily triggered and surface at undesired times. There is actually a relatively simple process for getting rid of them once we understand how the imagination works. (I will do a video instruction on that next week). Second, we have to begin safeguarding what we allow into it. This means we have to avoid the things that are contrary to holiness and wholeness. We will fail at this if we do not recognize that a majority of these images are as addictive to the imagination as drugs are to the body. When a person decides to quit smoking, drinking, or doing drugs, there is a physiological craving because the body experiences a lack of something it has been used to getting; similarly, when our imagination begins to form a lack of certain types of images that we are accustomed to having, there is a period of craving to get them back again. Not preparing for this increase in temptation can make resistance significantly harder. Third, we have to accept that the presence of these images in our imagination over long periods will absolutely have weakened our conscience to them so that they will not seem “that bad” when temptation arises. Cleansing our imaginations is a spiritual discipline that takes time, commitment, and serious resolve.

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Cleansing our imagination enables us to receive from God in many new ways. If we think about it, we will realize that we associate the ways we experience things in our imaginations to our physical senses. Almost everything we imagine takes the form of sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. This is how we begin to “train our senses to discern good and evil”—by learning to recognize and discern these same senses through our imaginations. When I received that vision at Church, it was not something I could see physically with my eyes; however, the image felt strong enough that I also knew it was more than just my imagination. I knew that I was seeing something “real” with my spiritual eyes. It has taken many years of seeing and discerning before I could be confident that I was not just imagining it. Still, I can only say that because I have reinforced the discipline of actively looking to see what God might be showing me while praying for discernment over whether it really was something God was showing me. Even now, there are times when I see things but still need to pray for confirmation, and there are times that I do not feel confident that it is accurate. There are also times when I am very confident that I am seeing something real in my imagination but sense that it should not be shared. Regrettably, there are times I shared something and later realized it was not God or should not have been shared, and there are times I didn’t share something and later realized it was God and should have been shared. Learning to tell the difference is precisely what the writer of Hebrews meant. Practice is only required because there is not only the possibility of failure but also the very real and exciting potential for improvement.

Practice and training are required because we can not only fail but also improve.

In the vision I saw, there were about 5 or 6 angels standing in a row, worshipping the Father. It is important to realize something about visions: even when they are real, they may not necessarily be literal; many visions described in the Old Testament were symbolic—they presented something true by using images that may not have been exactly what was really happening. When Ezekiel saw the vision of the dry bones becoming flesh, it was clear that God was showing him something true even though it probably was not involving a literal valley of dry bones literally turned back into real people. When God uses our imagination to reveal things to our senses, we have to recognize that interpretation plays a large part in it. Unless we have become adept enough to recognize it immediately, we have to take the care to ask Him whether it is literal, figurative, or a combination of both. We can get in a great deal of trouble and cause a lot of harm to others if we interpret everything as literal. For example, we may see a sign over someone's head that says "infidelity" and assume the person is cheating on a spouse; the problem is that the vision could also mean the person is suffering under the weight of someone else's unfaithfulness, or it could mean God is calling the person to begin advertising as a counselor for others who are struggling with temptation, or any number of other things. God created our imaginations as a complement to our rational minds: one uses thought while the other uses images and symbols. When God is using our imagination to complement our senses, some of the language is symbolic, not literal.

Some of the language we receive in our imaginations can be symbolic instead of literal.

Although I saw only a handful of angels, I knew there were many millions actually worshipping the Father at that very moment. What He showed me was a sampling for a reason. In this church, the worship team faces the congregation. The angels were behind the worship team, also facing forward. God was showing me something to convey a message. When this happens, there are often other ideas that fill in the context without needing to be specifically expressed. In this case, I understood that the throne of God was above us in the middle so that although the congregation was facing the stage, and the worship team and the angels were facing the people, both groups were facing the Father. Because time and space are all relative constructs used by God—they are His Lego blocks—this vision could be both symbolic and factual at the same time. I have no problem believing God sent a group of angels to this location for a time, but I also have no problem with the idea that I might have been seeing them *as if* they were there while they were actually in Heaven; both could be simultaneously true just like we can be actually seated with Christ in Heavenly places while we are still on this earth. Of all our human abilities, the imagination is the one most able to supersede time and space and experience eternity.

Our imagination is the trait most able to supersede time and space and touch eternity.

As both groups faced the throne and worshipped the Father, I also saw His glory, like a glowing cloud, coming down over the angels. What surprised me then was the details that communicated His message. As the angels worshipped Him, they were slowly waving their wings back and forth. (Please do not buy into the ridiculous concept that angels look like babies with wings; they are giant warriors with equally large wings). As their wings moved, the cloud of God's glory was being slowly blown over the congregation; the wings were acting like fans. With that image, I realized two things: the cloud was representing God's grace to the world, and the circulation of God's grace was a secondary result of the angels' worship; they seemed unaware of it. As I watched, I suddenly understood: Just as the cloud was circulated as a byproduct of the angels' worship, so God extends His grace to the world in secondary ways through our obedience and worship. In other words, when we walk in the Spirit and do His works, we usually only see the direct results; however, there may be an infinite number of indirect results that we do not see. It is through allowing Him to sanctify our imagination that we begin to see a few more.