

Godsight: Renewing the Eyes of Our Hearts
Chapter 8: Twenty/Twenty Imagination

*Being saved and seeing Jesus are not the same thing.
Many are partakers of God's grace who have never seen Jesus.
When once you have seen Jesus, you can never be the same,
other things do not appeal as they used to.
--Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest*

Guenevere (Julia Ormond) paces the bare castle room; the broken pieces of her honor fairly crackle under her feet. Approaching footsteps echo down the stone corridor. The bolt is thrown back. King Arthur (Sean Connery) strides into the room, dismissing his escort. The air between them is crowded with betrayal, shame, desire. He gathers himself, struggling against everything rising in his heart. Her eyes steady, her body taut, she faces him, her chest barely moving as she breathes. Arthur forces his feelings into the words of a man who is also a king:

“I ask you not to lie to me even if you think you'll hurt me....Have you given yourself to him?”

“No, my lord.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“How did I fail you?”

“You've not failed me, my lord.”

“I saw your face as you kissed him.”

“Love has many faces. I may look on you differently, but not with less love.”

“When a woman loves two men, she must choose between them.”

“I choose you.”

“Your *will* chooses me! Your heart chooses him.”

“Then you have the best of it. My will is stronger than my heart. Do you think I put so high a price on my feelings? Feelings live for a moment and the moment passes. My will holds me steady to my course through life.”

What do you think? Has she given him “the best of it”?

After a hard day of obedience, I can picture myself having this conversation (from the movie *First Knight*) with God. “Lael, have you given yourself to another lover?”

“Given myself?” It takes me back to the first time I read Francis Schaeffer's *True Spirituality* and my revulsion at the picture Schaeffer made so clear: “It is possible, even after we are Christians, to put ourselves into the arms of someone else and bring forth his fruit in this world.” My little escapes that seem so innocent can be more than dining with the devil, more like falling into his arms and letting him have his way with me.

“No, my Lord.”

What a relief. It was a battle. I flirted with my escape. I longed for the relief, but I didn't cross the line.

My will held me steady.

It is a mark of highest Christian maturity to trust and obey God regardless of our feelings. To follow him because he is God, Lord of all the universe, and we are his creation. The way Noah built the ark when he had to be stuffing his questions, like “What is rain? What is a flood?” The way Mary yielded to God's plan when she loved Joseph, and a sudden pregnancy was bound to rewrite the script for their wedding. I love the way Eugene Peterson put it in his classic, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*: “We can act ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can feel ourselves into a new way of acting.”

However, many in the church have inherited from the reason-is-everything Enlightenment a slightly amended view: *It is a mark of highest Christian maturity to trust and obey God* and disregard *our feelings*. To count them as a tiny four-point footnote on the main thing: obedience. The difference is

subtle, but for me it has been the difference between the slow death of resignation and Life.

I have spent the afternoon leafing through old Bible study notebooks and prayer journals. My youthful passion for God's Word is organized by topics and books of the Bible. The pastor said it. I wrote it down. Roman numeral I, II, III, A, B, C. The flood of Bible teaching that poured from the pulpit caught in little pools of neatly printed paragraphs, some still wonderfully fresh with timeless insight, others clouded and stagnant with a subtle twist on the truth. A window on why I grew up with more of a passion for the facts of my faith than a Person to cherish:

From *Ecclesiastes*: "The only real happiness is in knowledge and application of Bible doctrine."

From *Daniel*: "God honors those who put doctrine first."

From *Acts*: On trial for his life Paul met "nothing but hostility and pressure, but Bible doctrine brought him through."

I wonder if Paul ever thought of it quite that way.

I am eternally grateful to my church and pastor for instilling in my life a firm foundation of God and his Word. Our church deeply honored the words God breathed into his chosen authors. We grieved over the public beating the Scriptures were taking from the culture and even from some churches. We gave sacrificially to foreign missionaries. We worshiped God in spirit and in *truth*. Today I read Frederick Buechner and other Christian authors who, in a world of great complexity and the hiddenness of God, struggle with doubt, and I wonder if part of what steadies my faith is that firm foundation from a brilliant scholar of the Word who taught with power and intellectual grit. Either that or I'm still too Blonde.

But as much as we loved God's Word as precept and proposition, somehow I missed the fullness of truth in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The truth was not just a proposition, but a Person. Maybe you've heard of the little girl whose Sunday

school teacher asked, “What is brown, eats nuts, and has a bushy tail?” Her little hand shot up, but then she hesitated. “I want to say 'a squirrel,' but is it 'Jesus?’”

We could have used a little of her routine wisdom in our church where, instead of “Jesus,” the answer to just about everything was “Bible doctrine.” Our shepherds taught us to think about our faith less as a relationship and a little more like Driver's Ed: You learn the Bible facts in the lecture and make the right choices behind the wheel, and you'll be at rest, happy on your journey. Make the wrong choices, and you'll wind up a wreck in the ditch. If you find yourself in the ditch, apply the truth of 1 John 1:9 (“confess our sins”), and God's grace will haul you out of the ditch and get you back on the road. Sorrow for your sin is beside the point.

Propositions, principles, reasons, volition, transactions—we were children of the Enlightenment, far, far removed from our shameful cousins who literally installed a statue of the goddess of Reason in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, but champions of their modern mind-set. It was all about the mind and the will. In our church and family we did not use God and passion in the same sentence. Our pastor cautioned us against projecting our emotions onto God, teaching us that God didn't have emotions like we did--part of his “otherness.” Growing up, I imagined God to be rather patrician and nice, like presidential candidate John Kerry before Bill Clinton taught him how to loosen up. I didn't grow up thinking that God was passionate about me. I didn't hear others talk of being passionate about God. God's love for us and our love for God were reduced to sheer choice, an act of the will. Tenderness, longing, passion? I have some notes on “sentimentalism” I could show you.

From *Ephesians*: “Walk in love. Live a life controlled by love, *not maudlin and gushy*, but Christlike love—pursuing the will of God, obedient to the Father, self-sacrificing.”

“Love has many faces, my Lord,” said Guenevere. “If you have my will, then you have the best of it.”

“Do I?” cried Arthur. “Do I?”

When I met Jack, he was a full-time seminary student working thirty hours a week and superintending a junior high department at a large church. To keep all those plates spinning, it took every ounce of discipline he could muster and a mentality he celebrated with a sign on his desk: “Do what needs to be done. When it needs to be done. Whether you like it or not.”

It is a dream to be married to someone like this. It’s like having a thoroughbred racehorse for a husband—one light touch on the reins of Scripture or reason, and he changes out of the wrong lane into the right lane. With me the Holy Spirit has to saw on the reins until I’m frothing at the bit, and sometimes he still has to get off and threaten me with a big stick. Which is why just “doing your duty” never completely did it for me. I am way too passionate about my own ideas.

Jack sensed my frustration and resignation and would try to encourage me, telling me we just need to “do our duty.” And I would respond, “You just don’t understand. I wish it were enough, but something’s missing.” And we would have these long talks about doing the right thing, making your choice, and I knew I should, and I tried, but, well, you’ve read my sorry progress. God has taught me something of who he is through suffering and obedience. But, given my history, the way I’m wired, and my divided heart, I needed a clearer vision of God’s heart—to see what’s in his face when he looks on me.

God grows our vision for him and his kingdom through the vision of other people he brings into our lives.

Not long after my watermark decision for obedience, Jack and I attended a conference together in Dallas. One of my favorite speakers rose to the podium. If anyone can inspire the troops to take the hill, it is Chuck Colson. We were the Christian marines on the front lines of life, and he was waving the flag and moving even stubborn recruits like me to swell with kingdom pride and *do our duty* out of gratitude and honor to God.

In the next session this fellow we’d never heard of took the podium. The first words out of his mouth were something to the effect of, “With great respect for Mr. Colson I wish to disagree.” Jack and I looked at each other. Who was this

slight, happily energetic unknown to take on Chuck Colson? It was like Martin Short challenging Charlton Heston for the role of Moses.

This was our introduction to John Piper, whose topic was taken from his then newly released book *Desiring God*: “Delight yourself in the Lord!” (Ps. 37:4). ‘Be glad in the Lord and rejoice!’ (Ps. 32: 11).... How shall we honor God in worship? By saying, ‘it’s my duty’? Or by saying, ‘it’s my joy?’¹ “Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.”² A scholar with a passion for God’s Word was proposing that the love that most honors God is not sheer choice or just doing our duty. My tired, dutiful little heart beat faster.

Piper offered an illustration so simple; we marveled that we had never understood it before.

Suppose on (my wedding anniversary) I bring home a dozen long-stemmed red roses for (my wife). When she meets me at the door, I hold out the roses, and she says, “Oh, Johnny, they’re beautiful, thank you,” and gives me a big hug. Then suppose I hold up my hands and say matter-of-factly, “Don’t mention it; it’s my duty.”... Dutiful roses are a contradiction in terms. If I am not moved by a spontaneous affection for her as a person, the roses do not honor her. In fact they belittle her. They are a very thin covering for the fact that she does not have the worth or beauty in my eyes to kindle affection.³

Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy.... On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the discipline of rigorous thought. But true worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and love deep and sound doctrine.⁴

For many, Christianity has become the grinding out of general doctrinal laws from collections of biblical facts. But childlike

¹ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1986), 73.

² *Ibid.*, 65.

³ *Ibid.*, 72-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

wonder and awe have died. The scenery and poetry and music of the majesty of God has dried up like a forgotten peach in the back of the refrigerator.⁵

Had he been in my old church? Had he seen my notebooks? I recently asked my father, “Dad, if loving God with all your heart means loving God with obedience *and passion*, how could we have missed the main thing—the greatest commandment?”

My dad responded, “Well, no one ever showed us that is what it meant.” Such a simple and yet profound statement. God’s Word clearly told us, but we didn’t have the imagination to see what it looked like and what it meant for us.

It is hard to describe what it feels like for someone to put words to the empty place in your heart that has been longing for something it cannot express as long as you can remember. For even though God has made me a very passionate person, that passion was never directed or invited toward God in a way that reached my heart. Somehow I absorbed the idea that if you wanted to hook up a little passion caboose behind your engine of the will fueled by your coal car of reason and doctrine, well, fine. But you would probably run faster without it.

I left the church of my youth in my junior year of high school. A new Young Life high school ministry was beginning in our area. In their small group Bible study I discovered the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, the importance of the ministry and gifting of the body of Christ, and a few other things I think my church forgot to tell me. The old mechanical application of Bible doctrine gave way to a clearer vision of *relationship* with God. You don’t just sin and fall in the ditch and call the 1 John 1:9 tow truck. Sin is that “giving yourself” to another lover. If I acknowledge my sin to God, that may be the bottom line of confession. But if I don’t feel the least bit of regret or sorrow, it is a measure of how little real affection I must have for God.

In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis writes, “My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of his presence?" Although it was slow going, God's Spirit was chipping away the old image little by little. Through Piper's words God shattered another icon. I saw in John Piper's heart and eyes and words a passion for a God of passion who was greatly honored by our desire for him. A God who wanted my affection much more than my resignation.

You may have come from churches where your shepherds served neither dried peaches of orthodoxy nor the empty frenzy of all passion and precious little truth. You are welcome to skip this short rant and move on. Or you may read this and think it is indeed "maudlin and gushy." Didn't I just quote Jesus saying that the real proof of love is obedience? Yes, it's true. But does the *bottom line* of "dutiful roses" honor God like the *fullness* of "roses and affection"?

Who better knew the difference than David? God gave King David the highest title to which we can aspire: "A man after my own heart." If I look at David, I can see a heart that God loves, a reflection of God's heart. Frankly it's "gushy" and desperate and awestruck. In David's own words:

My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. (Ps. 13:5)

The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" (Ps. 29:9 NIV)

Oh, magnify the LORD with me....Those who look to him are radiant. (Ps. 34:3, 5)

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light. (Ps. 36:7-9)

Radiant, rejoicing, crying out, "Glory!", feasting, drinking from a river of delights....Was that a picture of my heart's response to God? At least sometimes?

I think the last time I cried, "Glory!" was in the flush of a 75%-off sale at Dillard's.

David's heart delights in the principles and precepts of God's Word. But he was a man who could spend his entire Saturday sitting in God's sanctuary just drinking in the fair beauty of his presence. His was the heart of a poet filled with

imagination and obedience, a heart very much like the heart of Jesus. Yes, it's true that Christ's love was expressed in “pursuing the will of God, obedience to the Father, and self-sacrifice.” But how can we look at Jesus' sacrifice and not see the depth of his passionate love for us? Why do we look at so many paintings and movies and see what Philip Yancey calls a “Prozac Jesus?”

In Yancey's book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, I found another sledgehammer at work on my image of Christ:

The gospels reveal a range of Jesus' emotional responses: sudden sympathy for a person with leprosy, exuberance over his disciples successes, a blast of anger at wholehearted legalists, grief over an unreceptive city, and then those awful cries of anguish in Gethsemane and on the cross.⁶

He seemed excitable, impulsively “moved with compassion” or “filled with pity.”... Three times, at least, he cried in front of his disciples.⁷

Obstinacy frustrated him, self-righteousness infuriated him, simple faith thrilled him. Indeed, he seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less. More passionate, not less.⁸

In a one-two-three punch, about the time I was catching Piper's and Yancey's fresh visions of God, along came another fellow with a sledgehammer. I was writing *Worldproofing Your Kids*, and I occasionally discussed my ideas with a friend, John Eldredge, who taught worldview at Focus on the Family Institute. He offered comments on my manuscript and helped me further by sending along a manuscript he was working on. The book was entitled *The Sacred Romance*. For someone who had grown up with God as a six-star general, it was quite a shock.

The pastor of my youth had regularly groaned from the pulpit over all the pale, skinny Jesuses that saturated our cultural imagination. “Where is the Jesus that sawed thick planks of wood and toppled tables heavy with silver?” he would ask. The God who shone on the early screen of my imagination was, above all,

⁶ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1995), 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

powerful and smart. He had a great deal to teach me, and I was eager to learn. His strength exploded on the screen of my imagination in brilliant miracles of creation, drowning armies, and raising the dead. Later, in the burning inflammation of my joints, I felt the full weight of his sovereignty. But all that size and strength and unquestionable control kind of crowded out the love, I think.

Jesus as lover?

From my early vantage point in our community of faith, it seemed we applauded strength and beauty and intelligence more than we delighted in bending down, coming near to a struggler, and lavishing grace and forgiveness. In my prayer journal I wrote: “May I really delight myself in you, God;” and then in the same breath, “Will you give me the desires of my heart if I trust in you?” Looking back, I think I may have been tap dancing in hopes that God would toss a few coins my direction. After the onset of my illness, I found myself still trying to shuffle a little soft shoe, trusting God had a purpose in the pain he allowed into my life. But here's the rub: When you are performing for someone, it's hard to get close. When you've been wounded by someone, even if intellectually you know it's for a purpose, it's difficult to draw near.

John echoed my thoughts in his manuscript: If we think of God as the Author behind the larger story of life, his intelligence and strength may have created the story, but they also separate us from him. “Power and knowledge don't qualify for heart. Indeed the worst sort of villain is the kind who executes his plans with cold and calculated precision. He is detached; he has no heart. If we picture God as the master-mind behind the story—calling the shots while we, like Job, endure calamity—we can't help but feel ...(like) 'rats in the cosmic laboratory.’”⁹ We wonder, where is his heart?

“What if,” John asked, “just what if we saw God not as Author... but as the central character in the drama?”¹⁰ Beginning with the “heroic intimacy” of the Trinity in eternity past, he retold the story with God as the hero, giving life, love, and the splendor of good gifts. When the hero was betrayed, first by the angels,

⁹ John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 71-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

then by Adam's race, John invited me into the grief and longing of God's heart at the loss of his beloved. He showed how God responded time and again with grace and lavish love. He deeply desires us and promises to come for us. God, as the Sacred Romancer, relentlessly pursues us...for what?

For our hearts--"our laughter, our tears, our dreams, our fears, our heart of hearts."¹¹ Not hearts as in emotions, but as in the biblical picture of heart—our deepest, truest selves.

It was as if John gathered together all my conflicted but still-trying-to-be-nice Christian feelings about God and packed them into words that bristled with razor-sharp spikes and hurled them right at God. And while I was waiting for God to strike us both with the plague, he took out his sledgehammer and smashed God. Only it wasn't really God, but just another faulty image, and the thing flew apart. And standing there was the Lover I've always longed for but didn't know how to find. But it didn't matter because he sent out his servants, and they found me shopping at Dillard's and *compelled* me to come to the banquet. Through all the suffering and halting steps of obedience, his Spirit had my heart all tidied up and ready to go. And finally I stood before him rejoicing, drinking in the delight of his presence.

"Glory," I whispered.

I've always known that God loves me. But I guess it felt like the kindly love of a teacher for a student or the love of a strict disciplinarian father for his child.

John Piper helped me see that *God longs to be worshiped with passion.*

Philip Yancey helped me see that *God is more passionate than I ever imagined.*

And John Eldredge helped me see that *God is more passionate for me.*

I've asked many people, "How did God move your heart from duty to delight?" A common response is, "I saw someone whose heart delighted in God, and I told God, 'I want what she has.'" When we want God like that, when we seek him with all of our hearts, it's an invitation. And God promises to show up.

¹¹ Ibid., 91.

It only makes sense to seek out people like that, to get next to them in real life or find a quiet corner with their books. But God is not waiting around. Look for the light and heat of his Spirit enlarging your heart and the screen of your imagination in the pain he allows and the choices he gives. Long ago he sent out his servants to beat the bushes for you. To me he sent a pastor loaded with Bible doctrine, the Young Life party throwing confetti and blowing their kazoos, and a string of thoughtful literary writers. Where would I be without them? Through the power of God's Spirit each had great impact or wrought drastic changes in my image of God. These were the ones with sledgehammers, but there were many others who chipped here and sanded there—Francis Schaeffer, Chuck Colson, Larry Crabb, Eugene Peterson, my parents, Grandmother Graham, the Freys, the Whitelocks, Joe Wall, S. Lewis Johnson, Lindsey O'Connor, Carol Kent, and Jack—to name just a few.

And the amazing thing is, most often I didn't seek what they brought me. Sometimes I was moving in their general direction; sometimes I was just out in the byways. They found me and invited me to the banquet.

God knows you're out there shopping at Dillard's or reading a book. He knows how his image plays on the screen of your imagination. He sees where you've pictured him a little too much like a bulldozing General Patton or a kind, but unassertive Clark Kent. Or maybe you see him in fuzzy gray tones instead of living Technicolor. He wants you to see him in all his glory. He longs to give you his greatest blessings. He will allow seasons of suffering and send his servants with sledgehammers. They will smash your image of God. They will help you see his face. They will drag you to the banquet.

Isn't that where you want to be? Is it enough to live a nice Christian life? Is it enough to choose obedience when your heart is stuck in resignation? You may be thinking you have given God the best of it.

"I choose you."

"Your *will* chooses me! Your heart chooses him."

“Then you have the best of it. My will is stronger than my heart. Do you think I put so high a price on my feelings? Feelings live for a moment and the moment passes. My will holds me steady to my course through life.”

“As mine does me. And yet, all I have to do is look at you, and everything I believed in fades to nothing. All I want is your love.”

“You have it.”

“Do I? Do I? Then look on me as you looked on him.”

What does Jesus see when we look on him? Does he see anything like the reflection of his desire for us?

I caught that reflection recently in a wedding where the bride and groom filled the sanctuary with the purity of their patience and the high voltage of their anticipation. In the flickering of a hundred votive candles and the profusion of cinnamon red and white roses, God's living picture of what he wants for me dazzled me to the brink of tears. It didn't help that the groom's cheeks glistened as his bride approached to the spare stringed accompaniment of “Amazing Grace.” Or that she gently wiped his tears as she took her place beside him.

Actually the moment came, not during the ceremony, but as I ducked out just ahead of the crowd to attend another function. I crossed the empty lobby just as the bride and groom burst in. He swept her into his arms and turned a full circle, eyes locked, a passionate kiss. Breathless, they clung to each other, drawing back to look at one another and hugging again. No words other than “oh,” “oh!” As in “Oh, I can't believe it's finally true. I can't believe you're finally mine.” It was the way he looked on her and she looked on him. Their eyes showed me again why God created me, why he endured the cross, despising the shame, why he still pursues me and invites me to his wedding banquet: He did it, he does it for passionate joy.

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5 NIV)