



How do I know
my sins are
forgiven?
Ever OK?
What is
truth?
Is the Bible
true?
Who create
God?
Is God real?

**LIVING WITH
QUESTIONS**

DALE FINCHER

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Living with Questions

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Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

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QUESTION 1

DOES WHAT I THINK
REALLY MATTER?



THE WORLDS WE MAKE

PROTECTING YOUR VILLAGE FROM THE DRAGON IS WAY MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR JOB.

That sentence was printed on a Mountain Dew banner that hung outside the Electronic Entertainment Expo, also known as “E3,” in Los Angeles.

I laughed. *What does THAT have to do with Mountain Dew?* I thought. *And who really needs an excuse to play another video game?*

The kinds of gamers who attend E3 log dozens of hours every week to build up their massive, multiplayer online characters. Others enjoy the shorter rounds in first-person shooters (my personal favorite). And if they aren't shooting Nazis or practicing wizardry, then they're coordinating a simulated family (*The Sims*) or moving their dancing feet in sync with directional arrows (*Dance Dance Revolution*) or creating an alternative life (*Second Life* or *Eve*). For many, video gaming is a lot more fulfilling than going to school, working an after-school job, spending time with family, or even obeying the law.

This last one became evident during the crime spree at the release of PlayStation3, which included three UPS workers who stole more than \$19,000 worth of the systems during shipment.⁶

Yet what happens when I'm more into my video games than my job? Who'll make the money I need to support my hobby? Or what happens when my wife feels like I love my machine more than I love her? How do I remember it's just a game?

Keep this video-game world in the back of your mind, and let's get a bird's eye view of the kinds of worlds we live in.

Besides video games, humans have created worlds or *diversions* as part of everyday life—diversions their creators hope will make them feel important, valuable, or perceived as being aware. Or people may turn to even deeper diversions that help them dodge life because they don't have any hope or because they have a need for belonging, security, or love.

Our motivations often reveal if something is just a diversion. And the opportunity for diversion is everywhere. The following are just a few of them:

⁶ “Three Booked in PlayStation 3 Thefts,” *The Times-Picayune* (on www.NOLA.com), December 21, 2006.

DIVERSION #1: MONEY

Many people are controlled by the diversion of making money. To them, money means more spending power.

Others pursue money because it provides material power, and they believe that's true security because it prevents others from taking advantage of them.

Money also helps pretenders believe they're more important than and superior to others.

What motivates the kind of career we want? Is it the amount of money it provides? Or does the job we want match our best abilities?

DIVERSION #2: TRENDS

Some divert to trends, particularly fashion. We want to be perceived as being "aware" and "up-to-date" and "relevant." We desire to belong.

Have you ever thought about what really makes clothing *fashionable*? It changes all the time. I've often wondered what aliens might have thought if they'd landed on our planet back in the '80s and seen our clothing styles. Would they have believed we're intelligent life forms?

I often think we allow fashion to play Jedi Mind Tricks on us.

In *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, Obi-Wan (Ben) Kenobi and Luke are smuggling droids into the Mos Eisley Spaceport on Tatooine. The stormtroopers interrogate them, but Ben sweeps his hand and uses the Force to control their minds.

Ben: (sweeping his hand) *These aren't the droids you're looking for.*

Stormtrooper: *These aren't the droids we're looking for.*

Ben: (sweeping his hand again) *Move along.*

Stormtrooper: *Move along. Move along.*

Fashion does something similar to us. In the 1990s, the two most popular fashion trendsetters were Madonna and Princess Diana. If they wore it, then "relevant" people followed it. Today, based on what we find in popular magazines, other celebrities now fill those trendsetting roles.

We look to them, and we imitate them. As fashion copycats, we dress up in the latest fashions to show others that we're aware of what's "really" going on. Some will even contradict the popular glamor style with a counter-culture style. That group will play the same fashion games to show they're the smart ones who know what's "really" going on. Our deep desire to be included and part of something important is sewn up in our fashion sense.

And because clothing companies know all about our desire to fit in and our willingness to imitate, they turn on their Jedi Marketing Mind Tricks to prey on us.

Messages flash before us: *Nothing to wear? Come to Merino Outlets. Everything on sale!*

Us: *I'm cleaning out my closet to make room for my new clothes. I must have them. I'm aware of celebrity fashion, and I should be wearing those styles to fit in. Here's my money.*

Messages: *Now you're acceptable. Now you're included. Move along.*

Us: *Now I'm acceptable. Now I'm included. Moving along.*

Fashion mind tricks are multifaceted, and we're vulnerable to them because we believe fashion will give us what we're really looking for. First, celebrities and designers create new designs, and then the marketers promote these latest styles in print, on television, and online to change our tastes toward the new trend.

Then retailers get more of our money, which was all spent on clothes we didn't even need and wouldn't have wanted if we weren't so emotionally needy.⁷

When I was in my early teenage years, I remember how important it was to "peg" my pants. If I didn't do it, people would laugh. Making sure my pants were rolled was more important to me than my homework. I laughed at my parents for taking bell-bottoms so seriously when they were younger. And the cycle of fashion keeps spinning, and we think it's so important.

⁷ I suggest you watch *The Merchants of Cool* by Douglas Rushkoff, a documentary on advertising to teenagers. You can see it free at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>

Here's a thought about fashion: It has less to do with truth and more to do with trends.

How weird would it be to say skinny pants are *truer* than boot-cut pants? Or bald is *truer* than a mullet? Or stripes are *truer* than plaids?

Yet by looking at the magazine covers displayed by the checkouts in grocery stores, we'd believe fashion is the only remedy to our need to fit in.

And most of us know what happens when we rebel against the opinion of the mob. We feel behind the times, old school, or "sooo last year's model." We feel as though we don't belong.

I enjoy fashion, but its overemphasis gets a little weird. Even in a world where people say "everything is relative" and "what's true for you isn't true for me," we still feel pressure to fashionably conform or be left behind. It shows how desperate we are to make sure people think well of us.

Want to know to what degree you seek fashion as a diversion? Ask yourself how much time and money you spend on it. If you don't come from a wealthy family but still insist on carrying a Louis Vuitton bag or buying \$100 Nike shoes, for instance, then you're probably seeking fashion as a diversion.

DIVERSION #3: WATERING DOWN GOD

Another diversion is found in our talk about "religion." We divert into passivism to avoid conflict. And avoiding conflict, in our minds, equals peace. But peace is more than the absence of disagreement.

That's because our publicly funded schools insist God is a *religious* idea. Many believe that learning about God isn't truly possible, helpful, or educational. They divert conflict by silencing those conversations, saying talk about God has no bearing on real matters of learning.

Yet when we get on the Internet or watch TV, this idea is taken to the other extreme. Rather than keeping God-talk off-limits, MTV, for instance, creates religious commercials. In 2005, MTV created 24 different "Spiritual Windows" highlighting the religions of the world.⁸ With so many different views of God—or gods, really—all being treated as though they're basically the same, how are we supposed to take one view seriously? If all religions are special, then no religion is special.

⁸ *Chicago Sun-Times*, "MTV's 'Spiritual Windows' Mix Faith with Rock 'n' Roll," March 11, 2005.

The diversion is either to avoid God or to make all gods the same. But real talk—about which God exists, what God is like, and how we can find him—is avoided.

Do you find yourself saying all religions are basically the same? Do you find that talk about God makes you uncomfortable and even stirs up feelings of anger inside you? Do you hate it when people start talking as if more than one God may exist? Pay attention to those feelings and ideas. They may clue you in to the fact that avoiding an honest talk about God is a diversion for you.

DIVERSION #4: OUR PLACES OF WORSHIP

The major trend toward an increased interest in spirituality suggests a diversion.

People turn to Christianity or Islam or Buddhism or Wicca not because they find them true, but because they find them helpful. Or they say it's good for their children to be exposed to moral teaching. Or they find their religion of choice gives them a sense of purpose. All the while, they insist that each of us needs to find the religion that's *right* for us. Rarely do I hear people speak of a religion that's right for everyone without some kind of protest about proselytizing or bigotry.

Even in Christianity I see people attending worship services and finding diversions in the music, their acts of service, their attendance record, and their small groups. So while churchgoers may claim they're trying to have a "God experience," all the while they're simply having a "music experience" that stirs their emotions in a certain way.

Just like all diversions, any of these church activities can be good or bad. What we must question and explore what is our motivation.

DIVERSION #5: OUR MUSIC

We've found music as an endless background noise to fill our lives: Work, study, and free time.

In the ears of students on campuses everywhere, we'll find those famous white earbuds. My sister-in-law has commented that during breaks at her public high school, most students will listen to their music more

than they'll talk to other people. I see kids who are willing to hang with their families as long as they can also wear their headphones. They keep themselves plugged in to their music and tuned out to their families.

Music is a tireless diversion today. We play it when we're walking, jogging, driving, resting, studying, partying, and—for some—even sleeping.

Music helps us find a place to belong because, like fashion, we identify with the artists. They give us permission to plant our flag and say, "This is my group. These people understand me." It's an easy way for us to join a side, whether or not that singer or band even cares about us. And it only costs a few bucks.

Another diversion music provides for us is that it moves our emotions. We listen to music to feel *normal*. We also divert some of the other emotions we're feeling—overlying one emotion with another—by drowning in our music.

A sense of boredom can turn to anger with the push of a play button. Adrenaline pushes through our blood just by skipping ahead to a faster song. And for those few minutes of a song, we can ignore our present situations. And we fear the quiet.

Experts tell us that when we listen to so many other voices through our noise machines, we hardly have time to listen to our own.⁹ We don't even know what our own thoughts and beliefs are.

More than meth, marijuana, or alcohol, music today is *the* drug of choice. We need it. Crave it. Feel lost without it.

DIVERSION #6: OUR BUSY SCHEDULES

We have schedules to keep, too: Sports practices, band practices, after-school clubs, friends, television, games, recreational drugs, IMing, chat rooms, and Web surfing, to name but a few.

No wonder students tell me they have no time to live with questions—they're too busy. They say it with enthusiastic insistence—as if being *busy* should be excused at all costs. Busyness becomes a diversion.

It exhausts me to be stuck in busyness, pressured to conform and perform—or get left behind.

⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, "How to Unplug Your Kids," October 27, 2005.

I received an e-mail from a student who told me he walked away from God because he didn't want to be a hypocrite.

God will understand, he said.

He said he's open to believing in God again, only he didn't have time to really know God because he's too busy with other activities.

God will go easy on me, he said.

For this student, God must be willing to wait on us and excuse our diversions. God must find ways to adapt to *our* lifestyles, fashions, and schedules, or else God will also get left behind.

A SIGN THAT WE “NEED” DIVERSIONS

When we slow down, a certain uneasiness appears to let us know we treasure diversions. *Do we feel a certain uneasy noise in our souls? A discomfort? A certain wiggling to do anything but be still? A nagging feeling that there must be something more?*

Then we ask questions of ourselves (even if we don't voice them)—

Why can't I control my emotions?

How do I stop being angry?

Why am I afraid?

What does God want from me?

Why do I feel insecure around my friends?

Why do I feel so lonely?

But instead of allowing ourselves to ponder and live with these questions, we find something else to take up our thoughts. Maybe we skip tracks to a better song.

It's not a question of whether we have uneasiness or not. We all have it at some level. It's more a question of where we'll go to deal with it.

This will help control my emotions, we think. *This'll take care of the problems I'm sensing in me and around me.*

It will help us *ignore* the uneasiness, anyway.

All of these diversions suffocate our souls because we use them to silence the noise in us and around us.

And we get into the habit of believing the remedy is just a matter of changing our feelings for the moment, and then maybe our loneliness and dissatisfaction will fade. Then the lyric by U2 may become our own: “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

LOST IN THE WILD

Go with me into J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Among the vast mountains and marshes of Middle-Earth walk Frodo and Sam, two Hobbits of the Shire. Their quest is to destroy the One Ring.

Tolkien writes that they are “bewildered.” At the heart of that word, is another word—*wild*. Tolkien, a linguist, means exactly what he writes. Frodo and Sam are out in the wild, nearly directionless, and carrying a ring they never wanted into a land no Hobbit dared enter. They don’t know the way.

We, too, are bewildered. We are in our own version of the Wild. We are born into it, and we find ourselves alone in it. Many people surround us—some who love us, but many who don’t—yet nobody really knows us deep down. Nobody completely understands us. We feel alone. We feel lost in the Wild.

To deal with it, we find new diversions—hobbies, music, activities, even religion—anything to keep us from the sad tale that we don’t know the way to go.

Yet we want to find our way Home.

OTHER WORLDS

In Frodo’s story, the armies of Rohan gather themselves along the largest city of the race of Men. Minas Tirith assembles its sentries on the walls, while Gandalf rides Shadowfax to the inner chambers where the Steward rules that white city. The moving Shadow of Mordor darkens the earth and sky with shadow, the Nazgul, and the Orc armies. The light and freedom of Middle-Earth are at stake.

How strange would it be if a group of rogue Elves sat on a nearby hilltop smoking and holding signs that say, *War is not the answer!*

Yet this is our world in the Wild. Many people are more willing to let our souls dwindle than to say something is wrong with the Shadows that surround us.

I long to exist in a world—even if for only a few minutes—where it's not about more shopping, music, and busy schedules. I desire to live in a world full of purpose and to find a village worth saving.

I want a place where I matter.

I may need to be like Bilbo Baggins, putting aside my walking stick and strapping on a sword so I can confront the dragon.

I have to agree with that Mountain Dew banner: *Protecting your village from the dragon is way more important than your job.*

Our village is Home, and our quest is to get there. It's where we want to live, be at peace, and be ourselves. Home is partly our community when we put down the selfish, dishonest, and fearful masks and get honest. Protecting our community, our nation, our world, and our lives will always be more important than our jobs.

Yet, how will we survive? We all desire to belong, to take part in fulfilling work, to experience deep relationships, and to be safe with a stable family. How will we accomplish this?

Throw more money at fashion so we'll look like everyone else? Throw ourselves into casual sexual encounters in an effort to find intimacy? Throw ourselves into an endless cycle of online gaming? Throw more hours into work we may not even believe in, just because we want to own a nicer car or appear more capable?

These are all legitimate desires. Yet if we don't live with life's deeper questions, then as we stare these desires in the eye, we'll find ourselves following them as simple diversions, instead of seeing them as a small part of something much bigger.

We don't have to fulfill our desires purely for the sake of endless entertainment or to avoid the deeper questions. We can step beyond the Jedi Mind Tricks and start asking questions.

Questions that will help us be ourselves.

MEANING BEHIND THE NOISE?

Behind all the noise in our world, life was originally supposed to be meaningful. All the fashion, popular music, and diversions are just a flashy tinfoil that covers what we long for most.

Could it be that the world we were born into has forgotten something important? Are we hiding in the Wild with a need to get Home?

We want a sense of adventure and purpose.

We want goodness to reign and evil to be destroyed.

We want to belong.

We long to count or matter to someone.

But we don't want to be lost.

What if one of our goals in life were to say we will follow our questions through the Wild wherever they lead us? What if we no longer needed life's diversions? Perhaps just over another hill or around another hedge, we'll find a purpose to life more beautiful, more sacred, and more terrible than we ever imagined.

THE QUESTION

"Does it matter what I think as long as I'm having fun?" a student asked me, a teasing smile on her face.

She knows there's something missing, yet she wants to do something truly satisfying.

But it may also mean she needs to stop fiddling with life in the Wild, stop feeding herself with diversions, and get knee-deep into what it's really all about.

"Does it matter what I think as long as I'm having fun?"

What she's really saying is,

LIVING WITH QUESTIONS

Come on! Does my mind really matter? Does the hard work of sifting through ideas really pay off? Please don't pester me with what I believe or what you believe and let's just enjoy a fun, easy life!

As an explorer living with questions, she's planted her flag in the soil of thought and raised it high with her question: *Does it matter what I think?*

THINKING MATTERS

When I was arrested with my friends on that Halloween night, a cold cup of ideas splashed in my face. They shocked and scared me. Up to that time, I was holding the wrong ideas about my purpose in life. I'd just assumed they were the right ideas, without really thinking about them.

I was basically standing in the dark, believing it was the light, until the real light shone in.

Ideas...

- are what we think about.
- may even be things we just assume and don't ever think about.
- determine the kind of person we'll marry.
- determine where we'll go to college.
- determine how much we value relationships and which friends we select.
- determine how much time we spend with our noses in front of a television

or in a book

or in front of a mirror putting on makeup every morning
or getting our hair just right,

or practicing athletics, musical instruments, algebra, photography,
or anything else we put our hands to.

- control our emotions much of the time.
- tell us how much our emotions, in turn, are allowed to control us.

- govern and can actually alter our desires in different directions—for good and bad.
- can either brainwash us into being slaves or shape us into leaders.

Ideas will ultimately determine the kind of people we'll become. Ideas are no small thing.

IDEAS THAT SHAPED A DANGEROUS CAUSE

In the 1920s, there was an eloquent young man whom people loved to listen to when he spoke at political rallies. On one occasion, he led his political party to revolt and was then sentenced to a year in prison. During his time in jail, he reflected on the revolt, on his politics, and on his country. He even began to pen his ideas in a journal, and eventually he formed a book he titled *My Struggle*. After he was released from prison, he published his book, and it captured the imaginations of his fellow countrymen.

The German name of this book is *Mein Kampf*, and the name of the book's author is Adolf Hitler. As you know, Hitler is recorded as being among the most evil dictators of all time.

Among Hitler's ideas: He believed his fellow Germans and other white people were superior to other races, such as Jews and Africans. He also held an *idea* that the Jewish race was more closely related to animals than to people. He said that like wolves, "Jews stand together in the plundering of their fellow men." He claimed that the devil himself, as "the symbol of all evil, assumes the living shape of the Jew."¹⁰

So Hitler had the Jews exterminated.

More than six million Jewish people died in the early 1940s under Hitler's Nazi regime—all because of *ideas*. Hitler thought Germany should reign through a violent assault on the rest of Europe and the world. His military machinery killed millions during World War II, all because of a few quiet *ideas* that were penned from within the silence of a jail cell in the middle of Europe.

¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Volume One, Chapter XI, Nation and Race.

WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS *ABOUT* IDEAS?

Right now, sit quietly for a moment and consider whether or not ideas even matter to you.

If they don't, then there's no reason to ask whether you have the right ideas or not.

If they don't matter, then your idea that "ideas don't matter" doesn't really matter either.

If you think about it longer, that conclusion is self-deception in the name of laziness or selfishness. Or, even more, to say "ideas don't matter" may be the verbal equivalent of lifting your middle finger and demanding to be left alone.

Disregarding the power of ideas is like driving on the interstate with your eyes closed. At some point, reality won't care if you believe in it or not. It will present itself to you in the form of a guardrail or an oncoming train or cliff.

And, bewildered, you'll be falling fast.

Or, like me, you may find yourself in the hands of the police, wondering what happened.

If ideas don't matter to you, then expect your life to ultimately follow a winding, messy path, leaving you adrift in the Wild from the things that matter most.

And if your life becomes a disaster, you'll feel regret like

- a sea captain who's shipwrecked because the *idea* of a compass didn't matter.
 - the mother of a dead child because the *idea* that seatbelts save lives didn't matter.
 - a homeowner after a burglary because the *idea* that locks protect us didn't matter.

If ideas don't matter, then ultimately *life* doesn't matter.

We'd end up with no more purpose than the animals. Enslaved by our

instincts and passions, we'd give no thought to wisdom or foolishness, and we'd ignore the past and not plan for the future. In the end, we'd be whisked away to do someone else's bidding.

All the people we admire most—from Michelangelo to Thomas Edison, from George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, from Mother Teresa to Socrates, from Gandhi to Wilberforce, from Martin Luther King to Jesus Christ—all believed in the power of ideas. Although they didn't necessarily agree on which ideas mattered most, they all agreed that ideas do matter.

CHILDLIKE FAITH?

If you're not yet convinced, let's see what God thinks about ideas. Do they matter to God?

I was recently giving a presentation at a church. The music was well chosen. The people cheerfully and seriously praised God. And then the pastor prayed, "Lord, give us childlike ignorance because we know we can never understand you."

Childlike ignorance? What? Whoa! I thought. *Is that our fear of living with questions talking?*

Many people in the Wild believe we cannot know or understand God. Because of this, they believe that knowing God doesn't matter.

Did this pastor have God all wrong?

One thing is for sure: God doesn't want us to remain children forever. God wants us to grow up, relish life and responsibility, learn, love, and know him better. Yet many times we're told "don't take life so seriously" or even "you should have a childlike ignorance." As I questioned things during my teenage years, many nice adults said, "Stop thinking so much" and "Take it by faith."

A verse that's often quoted in the church to squelch questioners is found in Matthew 18. People will sometimes use it to say we should have "childlike faith," which really means "childlike ignorance." Let's look at the passage:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child, whom he placed among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:1-4)

Here’s the scene: The closest students of Jesus wonder which of them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Obviously, they were into honor, prestige, and comparing themselves to one another. The problem of *pride* is as ancient as it is modern. So Jesus pulls aside a child and says to his followers that unless they become like that youngster, they cannot get into the kingdom of heaven.

What did Jesus mean? How are we supposed to become like children?

If we take Jesus’ statement out of context and simply say, “Unless you become like children...” then we can arrive at many silly conclusions:

Should we become *ignorant* like children?

Should we *smear hot fudge on ourselves* when we eat sundaes?

Should we *pick our noses*?

Should we *bounce on grandpa’s knee* to attain the kingdom of God?

Are these the keys to gaining entrance into God’s kingdom? Is this what Jesus was talking about?

When we make this verse say *anything* that pertains to children—even childlike ignorance—it’s absurd.

Fortunately, we don’t have to guess what Jesus meant; we just have to keep reading.

This is called putting things in *context*. I already mentioned the scene: The disciples are asking Jesus a question. Jesus makes his remark about becoming like a child. We must keep reading to understand what Jesus means. “*Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child...*”

Jesus is clear and precise. Do you see the virtue Jesus speaks of? It’s not *ignorance*. It’s *humility*. Children are humble. They know they need help tying their shoes or reaching for the cereal. They have no pride in needing Mommy and Daddy to protect them. They’re aware they need someone bigger than themselves—such as their parents and even God.

Brennan Manning put it this way: “For the disciple of Jesus ‘becoming like a little child’ means the willingness to accept oneself as being of little account

and to be regarded as unimportant”¹¹ and, I might add, regarding God as ultimately important. What does this tell us? Jesus does not want us to be ignorant, stupid, or harmless. Rather, *humility* is the key to the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it’s the key to our finding things good, true, and beautiful. And asking questions and searching for ideas that are true is one way to grow in humility.

GOD’S CONCERN FOR OUR IDEAS

Is it possible that the God of all reason created us to be unreasonable?

God isn’t against thinking. God thinks, just as we should think. In fact, God gave us the ability to do so and is quite insistent that we fill our minds with great ideas.

Paul refers to this in Romans 12:2:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Notice that Paul doesn’t say our minds should be removed, but *renewed!* The Master of the Universe tells us to use our minds to navigate the Wild. This is one reason why Paul says, “And do not conform to the pattern of this world.” In other words, “Don’t be a slave to the creative diversions of the masses and of our own making.”

God is telling us to open our minds. God wants us to reach out and grab great ideas, harness them, take them into our souls, and live them as full-blooded human beings. To bend our minds away from the Wild and toward the warm hearth of Home.

Great ideas are not for the closed-minded but for those who are ready for the challenge. In fact, God wants us to employ our minds to think the most rigorous thoughts—specifically about God’s character, power, and good and perfect will. In short, God wants us to understand his mind, purposes, and way of thinking and doing things. This cannot be done if we pursue “childlike ignorance.”

Now does this mean we can know *all* of God’s thoughts? Clearly, no. But we can know enough of them to fill our minds with goodness and

¹¹ Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*.

expand our imaginations to limits far beyond our video-gaming worlds.

Ideas matter to God. He framed the world with them. And God wants great ideas to roll around in our minds the way they roll around in his. This includes ideas all throughout the Bible, as well as our everyday interests—art, science, philosophy, relationships, sports, and entertainment. God desires for us to navigate all of these areas—not as sniveling weaklings who are pulled about by diversion, but as healthy, confident, and attractive souls.

THE DRAGON

Long before the race of Humans came into the world, there was a mighty angel—great in both rank and honor—serving in the high court of God. Though we know few details, we do know this angel wanted a station higher than the one he was created to possess. He wanted God's place, God's throne, God's power.

And with that, God struck him down. The angel wasn't built to be God; if he wouldn't choose what he was created to be, then he'd become far less.

His angelic name was Lucifer, the light bringer. Today, he's known as Satan, and he's no storybook creature with horns and a pitchfork. Even depictions of him in movies such as the *Exorcist* hardly match his twistedness.

In Revelation 12:9, he's called, "the great dragon." Satan is smart and savvy. He has more power than the world's empires combined, yet he can subtly influence the hearts of men and women with prettiness, pleasure, and half-truths.

He is active in the Wild, and he desires to devour people to fill his house below. Satan is a mastermind who strategizes with his Jedi Mind Tricks on how best to capture the weak.

Why doesn't God just crush this horrible creature? If God has so much power, why doesn't God simply wipe out Satan altogether? Well, God could, and God will—one day. But not yet. The battle is not between God and Satan. The battle is over what *we* will do with our ideas about God.

*There is a battle between Heaven and Hell over whether God is good. And the battle is for the human heart.*¹²

God could crush Satan in an instant. Yet that's not in God's purposes right now. God is more concerned about us. Will we see God as good? Will we choose to be God's friend? Or will we pretend we are God? Will we tell God to buzz off? Satan may influence us in many directions, but we still have the freedom to pursue God—or not.

Here's what the Bible says about the battle against the Dragon:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5)

The Dragon's major strategy is not swinging his mighty tail or enflaming our villages with fire. Rather, Satan works to make us believe that ideas don't matter. He wants us to lack understanding about the Wild and the way Home. He wants us distracted and ignorant. He wants us apathetic. He wants us plugged into our electronics and listening to a multitude of other voices so we hardly know our own. In other words, he wants us to trust our diversions.

The Enemy isn't interested in getting us to disbelieve God or to become atheists. That's not an effective strategy for him because thoughtful atheists are still at risk of thinking hard about God.

No, the Enemy has something more sinister in mind.

At the heart of Satan's warfare is his ongoing plan for us to misunderstand or disregard who God is and what God is like. It's an attack on our *knowledge* of God. So he effectively uses our diversions, which lead us to search for fulfillment in the things that don't—and can't—fulfill us, until we end up ignoring our souls' true satisfactions. Satan wants us playing in the Wild among the marshes of the dead, rather than looking for road signs that will lead us to safety. And he knows that if we misunderstand God or find God irrelevant, we'll misunderstand the importance of everything else as well.

But who will take up arms against him?

¹² Paraphrase from a discussion on beauty in Fyodor Dostoevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

One of my favorite writers once said, “It is not that we have not got enough scoundrels to curse, but that we have not got enough good men to curse them.”¹³ Our Home needs protecting from the many bad ideas that the Dragon flames down upon us. Many of us get burned, yet we don’t even know it. We’re just out in the fields, wearing our headphones and dancing with our eyes closed.

But there is one essential starting point to protect us, which, if we don’t get it right, little else will help us win the fight. It’s not more prayer, although more prayer is necessary. It’s not more Bible study, although that’s good, too. It’s not spending more time at church, although that will help us band together with other believers in the task. Rather, our protection is to arm ourselves with the best ideas we can find and then walk in them.¹⁴

Facing ideas, weeding through them, and using new tools along the way will help us understand ourselves, our hurts, our struggles, and how to deal with them without turning to easy diversions. This is no battle of swords and bombs.

This is a battle for our minds. What I think matters. And what *you* think matters.

QUESTIONS TO LIVE INTO

Find a place where you can have 15 minutes alone in the quiet (that means turning off music, TV, cell phone, etc.). Ask yourself these questions:

If all jobs paid \$10 per hour, what job would you choose? Why?

When you feel uneasy, lost, lonely, afraid, be-*wild*-ered what do you do? How often do you use the following as diversions?

Money-seeking

Fashion

¹³ “Public Confessions by Politicians,” *Illustrated London News*, 1908-1910, vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. George Marlin and Lawrence Clipper (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 64. Quoted in *Permanent Things*, ed. Andrew A. Tadie and Michael H. Macdonald (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 30.

¹⁴ Ephesians 6:10-20.

Church

Music

Busyness

What other diversions do you use that aren't on this list?

Why do you feel drawn to certain diversions? What do they do for you?

Unplug. Try going one day without listening to music. Any music. Then write down how you felt when you wanted to listen to music as your diversion. Were you surprised? Do you find it hard to admit how you really feel about this? After you go one day without music, next time try a whole weekend. After that, try a whole week. See what happens.

Find a friend and ask, "Do you think about your purpose in life?" See what happens. If your friend says *yes*, follow it up with, "Does it change how you think about life?" Discuss that a bit.

Hunt for Jedi Mind Tricks. Watch your favorite TV show. Pay close attention to the commercials. Whom are they trying to convince? What are advertisers trying to get you to believe? Do you find it easy to believe what they're telling you? Do you find you suddenly have new "needs" that you didn't have before you watched the commercial? Does the commercial change what you buy?

