# REDEEMED IMAGINATIONS

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William Blake once said, “[A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Infernal_Poetics/s7Ci3jo8xwAC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=a+fool+sees+not+the+same+tree+that+a+wise+man+see&pg=PA78&printsec=frontcover)” In a recent *New York Times*article, David Brooks quoted Blake as he [de](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/11/opinion/imagination-empathy.html)scribed the importance of the human imagination. Advances[in neuroscience](https://aeon.co/essays/imagination-is-such-an-ancient-ability-it-might-precede-language), he argues, highlight the way our imaginations (including our *moral*imaginations) shape to our perceptions of reality, both as individuals and as a society.

For example, our imagination affects our ability to empathize with others. When we can imagine the lived experience of others, we tend to be more compassionate, gracious, and open to wonder. Brooks laments that our society is terrible at cultivating a healthy imagination which, he says, is “the faculty that we may need the most.”

The social problem here isn’t a wholesale rejection of the imagination. In fact, we talk about imagination all the time, and the many aspects of modern society that captivate our imaginations. The problem is that we tend to think about the imagination in the same way we think about so many other aspects of our lives today, including identity and morality. As Carl Trueman described so well in his masterful book, [*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*](https://colsoncenter.christianbook.com/triumph-cultural-amnesia-expressive-individualism-revolution/carl-trueman/9781433556333/pd/556333?event=ESRCQ), we see ourselves as isolated individuals: self-determining, autonomous, our only responsibility as self-expression. So, our imaginations are both shaped and expressed without any external reference point.

Another problem is when [addictive technologies](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/tech-addiction-is-real-we-psychologists-need-to-take-it-seriously/2019/03/18/5f12ad2e-3c54-11e9-a06c-3ec8ed509d15_story.html) dominate our hearts and minds. Screens are designed to be captivating. Thus, God-given moments and experiences designed to shape our imaginations in healthy ways are instead mediated to us, either (mis)narrated by someone else or forced into some social media paradigm reduced to proving to others that we are happy or influential.

We’re unwittingly relinquishing imagination’s most fertile soil when we believe that we are primarily *self-constructed*beings, left with imposing meaning onto an otherwise purposeless universe. There is no true wonder or genuine compassion for others if there is no ultimate purpose to life.

Of course, the tragic irony is that humans have more avenues for self-expression today than any generation before. Shouldn’t creativity and imagination thrive in the digitial age? Anyone can be an artist, musician, or storyteller these days; anyone can *produce, express,*and even garner an audience.

But what’s the point? What ultimately limits a culture of limitless self-expression is meaninglessness. That’s why we continue to see the epidemics of [narcissism](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/narcissism-is-increasing-so-youre-not-so-special.html), [loneliness](https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2021/01/feature-the-loneliness-pandemic), addiction, [depression](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/major-depression-rise-among-everyone-new-data-shows-n873146), and [self-harm](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/11/23/covid-pandemic-rise-suicides/). It’s as if we are a roomful of kids who each brought something for show-and-tell, but we can’t stop talking long enough to appreciate what anyone else has to offer.

[Dallas Willard](https://vimeo.com/9026959) once quipped that no one stands on the edge of the Grand Canyon and shouts, “I am awesome.” Today, however, plenty of people stand on the edge of something wonderful, in a world full of God-given *wonder*, but cannot look outside themselves long enough to figure out that it’s really not about us. In our world of constructed selves, imaginary gods, and purposelessness, the true imagination withers and die.

[C.S. Lewis understood](https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/277) what is required to shape the imagination. “In reading great literature, I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore *less* a self, is in prison.” In the works of Spenser, Milton, and George MacDonald, Lewis sensed a true grappling with what [he called](https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/277) “the roughness and density of life.” Those authors could account for things like personhood, good, evil, purpose, and meaning. By contrast, atheists like Shaw, Wells, and Mills seemed surprisingly thin to Lewis.

Faced with “a desire nothing on Earth could satisfy,” Lewis concluded he was made for another, better world. His imagination, he said,  was baptized before his full conversion.

A revival of Christian imagination is desperately needed today. Not only because the next C.S. Lewis could be out there, waiting for the kind of beauty and artistry that might baptize his or her own imagination, but also because imagination points to a vital aspect of what it means to be human. Only humans mirror the Creator in this way, with the ability to imagine what is not there and make it so. God, of course, created the world *ex nihilo,*out of nothing*.*We don’t have that kind of power, but we do have the capacity to create, and our words, too, are profoundly powerful.

Jesus, the second Adam, appealed to the imagination in His words, His compassion, and by telling stories. He is the perfect expression of the proper role that imagination should have in our hearts and minds. In Him, we see that imagination is one of God’s richest gifts to humanity; a gift that can help us make sense of life, move us to compassion, and bring what is not, but ought to be, into reality.