

Introduction

I grew up in a household with a phone attached to the wall. My mother had an unthinkable long cord that would allow her to chat on the phone with her best friend while reaching from our harvest gold-colored kitchen to the laundry room on the other side of the house. I thought she was the queen of multi-tasking as she helped us with math homework, attempted to cook dinner, and folded laundry seemingly simultaneously. As complicated as her feat appeared to me at the time, compared to the lives we now lead on the other side of digital devices, those days seemed simple and focused.

According to an article from Business Insider, the average person touches his or her cell phone 2,617 times a day.¹ This means that thousands of times a day we shift our focus from what we are doing to check our phones willingly, albeit often unconsciously and habitually. That's not to mention the average of forty-six push notifications from apps that interrupt us and steal our attention.²

The Dawn of Distraction

It's not that distraction dawned with the age of the smartphone; the human heart was prone to distraction long before the

1. https://pages.dscout.com/hubfs/downloads/dscout_mobile_touches_study_2016.pdf?_ga=2.180416224.67221035.1650551540-199217915.1650551540

2. <https://www.businessofapps.com/marketplace/push-notifications/research/push-notifications-statistics/>

technological age (or the agricultural age or the Iron Age). However, the modern world has exacerbated and exaggerated our tendency towards distraction. Even before the age of the cell phone and the internet, back when my mom was getting tangled up in her twenty-foot phone cord, social critic Neil Postman noted a strong tendency toward distraction and inattention in the American public. He compared the diminishing attention span and life of the mind of the average American to the days when the general American public was happily willing to sit for seven hours to listen to a series of debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas.³ Today, our presidential debates last a few hours, and most people merely watch the highlight reel on social media feeds for thirty seconds.

To be clear, since the fateful meeting of Adam and Eve with the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, there has been a war for our attention and affection. The world, the flesh, and the enemy of God have been honing their distraction skills for thousands of years; however, the war for our attention entered a new era with recent technological advancements. Just as the machine gun and the U-boat transformed modern warfare, the battle for our attention has ratcheted up a notch with the age of the smartphone. Companies spend millions of dollars researching how to keep our eyes and minds tethered to a screen or an app. Apparently our attention is worth millions to the consumer market. Thankfully, it is worth far more to our God.

The Art of Attention

Our distractibility has even deeper, more lasting ramifications when it comes to relationships. When we first became parents, our dear friends who were a few years ahead of us told a convicting story about how their toddler taught them just how distractable they were, even as intentional, engaged

3. Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 44.

parents. The father would come home from work during his lunch break (I told you they were thoughtful, present parents) to spend time with his toddler daughter and son. Toddlers tend to have a lot to say, so the dad would sometimes slip into the pattern of shaking his head and saying, “Mmm hmm, mmm hmm,” thinking he could pull the wool over her eyes. The two-year-old daughter caught on to the ruse and started grabbing his chin during the conversations, chiding him, “No say ‘Mmm hmmm.’” It seems that even a toddler understands that attention is a sign of affection. As silly and innocent as the story sounds, we use that line often in our household to gently point out distraction and ask for focused attention from each other: “No say, ‘Mmm hmm’” has become code in our home for “Please give me your undivided attention.”

We live in a distracting world and distracted souls live within us. In such a world, the art of attention and noticing must be carefully cultivated. If this is true of ordinary subjects like learning calculus or how to knit or conversations with a toddler, how much more should it be true when it comes to the most complex and most satisfying subject of our attention: the God of the universe who desires a focused relationship with each of us. J.I. Packer wisely notes, “The more complex the object, the more complex is the knowing of it.”⁴ If it takes hundreds of hours of focused attention to learn a second language and scores of hours to acquire rudimentary skill on an instrument, how much more focused attention and intentionality must it take to grow in knowledge of, and appreciation for, an infinitely inexhaustible God?

Worthy of Wonder

The God who created all things, and still sustains all things with His Word, commands our attention to Him and His Word (Gen. 1; Exod. 20:1-6; Deut. 8:11; Heb. 1:1-3). Underneath the command to acknowledge Him and remember Him as

4. Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1972), 30.

Lord, GOD is inviting us to do the very thing for which we were created, and which tends toward our thriving. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us in its first question and answer, “What is the chief end [purpose] of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁵

The God who made the wonders of this world is worthy of our wonder (Ps. 19:1-6). The God who gave us His Word is worthy of our attention and obedience to it (Ps. 19:7-14). The God who wired our brains for complex thinking and focused interaction is worthy of the work it takes to think of Him and fight to be present with Him (Pss. 8:3-6, 139:13-14). As C.H. Spurgeon wisely notes, “The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.”⁶

Prone To Wander

If you are like me, you agree wholeheartedly with these statements, and upon hearing them, you are like the Ancient Israelites whose immediate response to hearing God’s laws given by Moses was a hearty, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8). But our similarity to the Israelites goes beyond their vow and bleeds into their near-immediate failure to follow through with it. I know the Lord is worthy of my wonder and rightly deserves my attention, but even as I agree, my heart devolves into distractions and my soul stares at lesser things. The deeply entrenched rut of unrighteousness in the human heart moves us quickly from worshiping and serving the creator to worshiping and serving created things (Rom. 1: 21-23). We are *incurvatus in se* (curved in on ourselves) when we ought to be bent in bowing adoration to God. Long

5. Williamson, G.I. *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946), 46.

6. Spurgeon, C.H. as quoted in *Knowing God*, 13.

before the Latin term was coined, God called out such idolatry in His people (Isa. 41: 21-29) while simultaneously inviting them back to worship of Him. We hear the longing of His heart for us to acknowledge and adore Him, both for His glory and our good, through the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me, hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David (Isa. 55:2-3).

God calls us out for looking on lesser, lower things while ignoring His glorious invitation to come and be with Him. He uses language from nearly all the senses (tasting, seeing, and hearing), corraling our attention. He bids us look and listen to Him that we might live!

We pray with David, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4). Yet, we quickly move from gazing upon the Lord to gazing upon ourselves, our loved ones, our schedules, and our concerns. We slip into glancing at the Lord and gazing upon lesser things when the Lord would have it the other way. He deserves our gaze, while the world and the things of this world need only a glance.

All the while, our gracious God is saying to us, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you” (Ps. 32:8-9). I don’t know about you, but I do need some breaking with bit and bridle so that I will learn the art of adoration and the science of staying near to God.

Postured To Learn

If you find God worthy of wonder yet your heart prone to wander, this book is an invitation to learn the art of cultivating attention in a distracting world. Due to our previously admitted distraction, this book will be divided into two parts, in the hopes that we will better focus! In Part I, we will begin by looking long and lovingly at our attentive God: one who sees, hears, and moves towards His people. We will explore the connection between adoration and attention, as Jesus said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). We will do a deep dissection into our divided and distracted hearts, addressing the idolatry and lies that hijack our attention from God. After looking at our inattention, our intermittent attention, and our alloyed attention, we will explore ways to cultivate a focused faith. We will conclude Part I by studying three different forms of curiosity, showing biblical examples of each.

As we move into Part II, we will explore three major pathways of cultivating attention toward God and others: the pathway of presence (being where we are, with whom we are, as we are), the pathway of beauty (nature, poetry, art, and music), and the surprising but proven pathway of suffering. In each of these pathways, we will consider practical ways to practice focused attention. As we learn to look longer and focus the beam of our attention, we will discover growing affection for the God who made us from love for love. As we lift our gaze, by the help of our God, we will discover the God who is there, gazing upon us by His grace!

Part I

Chapter One

Our Attentive God

What we believe about God bleeds into our experiences of Him. If, according to the pervasive modern deistic sentiment, we believe God to be a disinterested watchmaker, we will experience a life distant and detached from His care and concern. If, on the other hand, we believe God to be a divine puppeteer, deciding our lives and moving us around like pawns on a chessboard, we won't give our attention to Him because our attention would not matter anyway. Thankfully, the God of the Scriptures is far from a disengaged creator or a power-hungry puppeteer. From the very first chapter of Genesis to the very last chapter of Revelation, God reveals Himself to us as engaged and attentive, intimately acquainted and involved in creation. Our God is one who sees and hears His people. He is our Triune God who loves us as the engaged Father, the incarnate Son, and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Created to be Attentive to God

In the first two chapters of Genesis, we learn about God's good intentions for the world and all therein. We see the entire Trinity at work together in creating everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). We hear hints at the inter-Trinitarian conversation that happened before creation (Gen. 1:26-27). We were created

out of the perfect relational fullness that existed within the Godhead. God the Father spoke through God the Son as God the Spirit hovered over the deep (Gen. 1:2). In Proverbs, we hear poetic hints of Jesus having been present with God at creation (Prov. 8:22-31). In the New Testament, we learn explicitly that Jesus upholds creation by the power of His Word (Heb. 1:1-3). The entire Trinity is fully engaged in both the original act of creation and the ongoing sustaining of all that God has made – and this includes us!

We were created by a graciously attentive God, but we were also created to give our creator our full and undivided attention. God Himself tells us this explicitly through the prophet Isaiah, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isa. 43:6-7). We were created to give our attention to God and to rightly enjoy all the things that He made. God created an environment for created humanity to live in communion, connection, and purpose with Him. Adoring relationship with Him was to be both the context and the very content of our lives.

Adam and Eve, the two creatures who received God’s “very good” (*meod tov*), enjoyed intimate interaction with their creator (Gen. 1:29-31). They were in the habit of walking with God in the garden of His making (Gen. 3:8). Peace abounded as they looked to Him for direction, listened to His loving commands, and prioritized life with Him.

It only took a seed of doubt whispered by God’s enemy to draw their attention away from God and unto self. The serpent drew Eve’s eyes away from a trusting gaze in her creator, enticing her to stare at the fruit of the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:6). Her physical eyes mirrored the action of her soul, as she was drawn from God to self. The early church father, Athanasius, who lived in A.D. 300 and helped write the Nicene Creed, defines idolatry as a turning of human attention away

from God and towards themselves, their concerns, and their immediate surroundings.¹

Even after their tragic choice to disobey, God pursued His people. Though He knew all that happened, God engaged them through questions (Gen. 3:9, 11, 13). Hereto, Athanasius offers insight into the sense of nakedness Adam and Eve experienced after their fall into sin. He writes, “They knew that they were not so much naked of clothing, but that they had become naked of the contemplation of divine things, and that they had turned their minds in the opposite direction.”² The very nature of their sin stemmed from their shifting their attention from God to created things. The apostle Paul writes similarly when seeking to define idolatry in the first chapter of Romans:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:21-23).

In what is known as the protoevangelion, God slaughters an animal to provide clothing for Adam and Eve who, newly aware of their nakedness before God, were hiding behind fig leaves (Gen. 3:21). This sacrifice and shedding of blood to cover their guilt and shame is the earliest hint of the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:4-11).

Though God’s very good creation rebelled against Him and transgressed His law, God remained attentive to them. Though their sin defaced and deformed His good creation, God showed mercy. God continues to create ways for them to

1. John Behr’s Introduction to *On the Incarnation*. Saint Athanasius. (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 28.

2. Ibid