

What's the most important thing in the universe to you? What, more than anything else, permeates your thought life, pulls your heart strings, and propels your actions? Don't fool yourself. That supreme something, whatever it may be for you, is shaping the person you are becoming for better or for worse, turning you into someone radiant and full of life or making you a dim and weightless ghost of yourself.

But what if we worshiped Jesus? Not the imaginary Jesus invented by televangelism, consumerism, fundamentalism, mysticism, or some political ism, but the actual Jesus we meet in the New Testament? How can he, unlike any other object of worship, enlarge our intellects, our emotions, our actions, our relationships, our imaginations, our wholeselves? Drawing from science, literature, art, theology, music, politics, history, philosophy, psychology, pop culture, and more, Thaddeus J. Williams paints a fresh and inspiring vision of how we become most truly ourselves by mirroring the Greatest Person in History.



THADDEUS J. WILLIAMS (Ph.D., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) serves as assistant professor of systematic theology at Biola University in La Mirada, CA. He has also taught literature at Saddleback College, jurisprudence at Trinity Law School, philosophy at Labri Fellowships in Switzerland and Holland, and ethics for Blackstone Legal Fellowship and Federalist Society in Washington, DC. His previous books include *Love, Freedom, and Evil: Does Authentic Love Require Free Will?* (Brill, 2011). Thaddeus is a frequent speaker at churches and conferences and resides in Orange County, CA, with his wife and four kids.

"Brilliant, creative, wide-ranging, insightful, readable, challenging, and filled with wisdom."
—David S. Dockery, President, Trinity International University

"A creative, winsome, and entertaining book that will help all different kinds of readers understand what it means to follow and worship Jesus in our current cultural moment."
—Gavin Ortlund, author for *The Gospel Coalition*

"A brilliant resource for twenty-first century people seeking to live meaningfully in a world where meaning is harder and harder to find."
—Barry H. Corey, President of Biola University

"An astonishing, absolutely unique treasure."
—J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology

"This is a book we've all needed for a long time!"
—Howard Ahmanson, President, Fieldstead and Company

"Williams is one of the most exciting theological voices writing today."
—Gabriel N. E. Fulmer, Minister of Discipleship, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson (MS)

CHRISTIAN LIFE / Spiritual Growth

\$15.99
ISBN 978-1-9641337-71-4
515992
9 781941 537774



WEAVER BOOK COMPANY
www.weaverbookcompany.com

Artwork for Cover and Interior Design: T.J. Williams, "Cast of Characters," 2015-2016, pen on paper

REFLECT

REFLECT

"With trademark brilliance and wit, Williams turns his eye to the question of Jesus' identity and its implications for, well, everyone." — Ross Andersen, *The Atlantic*

BECOMING YOURSELF
BY MIRRORING THE
GREATEST PERSON IN HISTORY



WEAVER

THADDEUS J. WILLIAMS

REFLECT

*Becoming Yourself by Mirroring the
Greatest Person in History*

Thaddeus J. Williams



REFLECT: Becoming Yourself by Mirroring the Greatest Person in History

© 2017 by Thaddeus J. Williams

Published by

Weaver Book Company

1190 Summerset Dr.

Wooster, OH 44691

weaverbookcompany.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Cover design: Frank Gutbrod

Interior design: {In a Word}

Editorial: Line for Line Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Thaddeus J.

Title: Reflect : becoming yourself by mirroring the Greatest Person in History /
Thaddeus J. Williams.

Description: Wooster, OH : Weaver Book Company, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016036149 | ISBN 9781941337714

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life—Meditations. | Self-actualization (Psychology)—
Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .W55136 2016 | DDC 232.9/04—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016036149>

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| How to Meet Your Future Self | 1 |
| REFLECT Overview | 14 |
| 1. Reason: Mirroring the Profound Thinking of Jesus | 17 |
| 2. Emote: Mirroring the Just Sentiments of Jesus | 43 |
| 3. Flip: Mirroring the Upside-Down Action of Jesus | 63 |
| 4. Love: Mirroring the Radical Relationality of Jesus | 83 |
| 5. Elevate: Mirroring the Saving Grace of Jesus | 107 |
| 6. Create: Mirroring the Artistic Genius of Jesus | 131 |
| 7. Transform: Mirroring Jesus in All of Life | 155 |
| REFLECTION Log | 168 |
| Appendix A: The Secret of Becoming Irrelevant (Spend All Your Time Trying to Be Relevant) | 172 |
| Appendix B: Doing Our Theology as if It Is Actually True (Because It Is) | 176 |
| Acknowledgments | 180 |
| Notes | 181 |
| Index | 218 |
| About the Author | |

HOW TO MEET YOUR FUTURE SELF

They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throats. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.

— PSALM 115:5–8

Imagine you are escorted through an underground laboratory into a controversial machine. You step inside a big silver cube and are told to think about whatever you love most in the world. A wall of glass rises out of the floor, dividing the cube into two equal chambers. Then everything goes dark. Your earliest memories project one after another on the glass. All of your firsts and all of your favorites, side-aching laughs, heart-palpitating joys, gut-punching rejections — all of it beams from your consciousness and onto the screen. On the opposite side of the glass all of the flashing rays of your personal movie reel seem to cluster together and take form. As the defining ideas, feelings, and choices of your life speed through the glass, your future self slowly materializes in the other chamber. Then the lights come up, the glass goes down, and you stand there, eye to eye with your future self.

REFLECT

1. EMERSON'S LAW

Blinking before you is the person you will become if all of your loves, hates, strengths, flaws, habits, and fears were to develop on course over the coming years. This is not a two-dimensional image doctored up with flattering filters. It is the real flesh-and-blood person you are becoming, for better or worse, staring back at you. In the up-close self-exposure of that machine, would you like the person your current character and choices have brought into existence? Would you see someone big-souled, caring, and full of life, or someone small, self consumed, and burned out? Someone flourishing or falling apart? Someone virtuous or vicious? Deep or dull? Who are you becoming?

There is no need to wait for future-self reflecting technology to answer those questions. There is one question that you can ask yourself now that, when answered honestly, can generate the same kind of future-unveiling insight. That question is, simply put: *What does your life say is the most important thing in existence?* If you were to stop and take honest stock of yourself—how you choose to spend your daily dose of breath and energy, which ideas occupy the most space in your thought world—what, more than anything else, moves you? Think about it. Be real with yourself. Whatever that ultimate something is for you now offers tremendous clarity about the person you are turning into. Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson helps us to see why:



A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will come out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our loves, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.¹

Emerson makes two keen observations. First, that everyone worships something; and second, that those deities will shape our identities. Celebrated American novelist David Foster Wallace echoes: “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is

no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.”² During his work as an economist, Bob Goudzwaard also came to the conclusion that everyone “absolutizes” something. We all serve god(s), take on the image of our god(s), then build society in our (that is, in our gods’) image.³ And long before Emerson, Wallace, and Goudzwaard it was Paul, the theologian, who opened a famous letter to Rome with the insight that whether it’s the Creator or the creation, everyone worships.

For the poet, the novelist, the economist, and the theologian above, the question is not *whether* we worship. They took that to be an obvious fact. The real question is *what* we worship. With reverent hands trembling we all place something on that altar of empty space we find inside ourselves. These diverse minds converge on this point and encourage us to choose that sacred something with extreme care because, for better or worse, whatever we choose to worship will inevitably shape us.

2. THE THEIST AND THE ATHEIST IN EVERY HEART

Let us call this Emerson’s Law: our deities shape our identities. We become like whatever we most love. Our objects of veneration define the scope and contours of our soul’s formation (or de-formation). Consider a few examples:

If “we worship products,” as Alexander Solzhenitsyn observed of American consumer culture,⁴ then we slowly become more product-like ourselves. Like the latest trendy toy, we cease to be a deep, significant, and soul-filling presence in the lives of others. We become more artificial, more manufactured, and more plastic. If we worship our romantic partners, then we tend to lose our own identities and slowly morph into our partner’s unimaginative clone. If we worship our children then we slowly become more childish, lacking the kind of wisdom and authority that should go with being a grown-up and a parent. If we worship other people’s opinions, then we gradually lose ourselves and become exactly who we think others want us to be. If we worship the biological rush of sex for its own sake, reducing other people to a merely physical means to that end, then we become more soul-less, less able to connect with and mean-

REFLECT

ingly love other people for their own sake. If we worship sexual icons on a glowing screen, becoming pornography addicts who treat people as two-dimensional images, then we become two-dimensional ourselves.

But, the question arises: What about those who claim no deity whatsoever? Don't the many non-worshippers around the globe count as living, breathing proof against Emerson's Law?

That's a great question (I'm glad you asked). Consider how we express the impulse to worship even when we try to be our most anti-religious. It was the anti-religious Parisians of the French Enlightenment who hired a 14-year-old actress named Mademoiselle Candielle to dress up and play the Goddess of Reason. In the spring of 1792, wearing their Sunday best, they marched this blushing teenage girl along the Seine River banks and into Notre Dame Cathedral. There they sang hymns to their newly enshrined deity in a sacred ritual that would soon catch on in cities all over France. Religion did not fade away. The spotlight of human souls simply shifted to a new object of worship. Reason did not disprove God, so much as Reason *became* "God."

Read Carl Sagan, the brilliant and unapologetically atheist astronomer. You will meet a devout man, a worshiper on his knees before "the Cosmos" (which Sagan capitalizes). He wrote science books that read like hymns — full of zeal, reverence, and poetry. His Voyager Golden Record

In a meaningful sense, everyone is both an atheist and a theist at the same time.

and Pioneer Plaque, with greetings from and directions to Earth, were affixed to spacecraft and hurled into space like prayers. Sagan desperately hoped for answers from someone beyond what he called our "pale blue dot." The cosmos became a functional deity, a "God" for Sagan, where he looked for ultimate meaning and salvation.

Consider one of the most anti-religious regimes in history — the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. The Society of the Godless (also known as the League of Militant Atheists) took form. Russian churches and synagogues were bulldozed.⁵ Atheism became a state-enforced dogma. Did this produce the godless utopia that the Soviet leaders dreamed of? On the contrary, worship was redirected to a new deity — Lord Stalin — while tens of millions of heretics who refused to bow were starved or executed. The Society of the Godless was anything but godless. As G. K. Chesterton observed, "Once we

abolish God, the government becomes God.”⁶ In the act of abolishing religion in the traditional sense of the term, our own natures betray us and it becomes clear to others (if not to ourselves) that we remain on our knees, whether before Reason, the Cosmos, the State, or something else.

In addition to the cases of *religious* anti-religiosity above, we may add that, in a meaningful sense, everyone is both an atheist and a theist at the same time. I am an atheist about Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction, just as Kali worshipers are atheists about the God I worship. There are stalkers who worship their celebrity crush, materialists who worship their car, narcissists who worship their mirror image, and North Koreans who worship their supreme leader. The majority of us, I would guess, are atheists about their chosen objects of supreme devotion. They worship something that we don't, just as the most important things to us are irrelevant to them.

I have taught college classes like History of Atheism for nearly a decade. I have conversed with hundreds of atheists. I have a great many friends who are self-described atheists or agnostics and whom I respect and love very much. Nevertheless, I have never known anyone who is not on his knees to something or someone. I am just as atheistic towards what many of my friends deem most important, as they are atheistic toward what (or rather who) matters most to me.

This way of seeing things takes us further than many of the broken record debates between theists and atheists over God's existence. There is a great deal that can be learned in that ongoing conversation (especially when it is a conversation rather than a shouting match). But the sooner we acknowledge that we are all theists *and* atheists simultaneously, that we are all supremely devoted to some things and undevoted to others, that we stake our meaning in places where others don't and vice versa, then the more we can move forward, thinking together about which of these different "gods" bring out the best and the worst in people.

3. THE UNHAPPY FATE OF CHARLES DARWIN

If anyone remains bothered by calling her objects of supreme devotion "god," if referring to that supreme devotion itself with the word "worship" annoys anyone, then that is all well and fine. We wouldn't want a seman-

REFLECT

tic squabble to derail things. Bothered readers can simply substitute the G-word for whatever is most important to them, whatever they are most deeply moved for, their highest priority, or deepest love. We can then move forward to Emerson's deeper point, which is, how that all-important something for each of us shapes us in significant ways.

Consider Emerson's Law in the lives of two men. Charles Darwin was a gifted man who slowly evolved into that which he deemed most important in life. "My chief enjoyment and sole employment throughout life," said Darwin, "has been scientific work."⁷ From this work, he added, "I am never idle," as it is "the only thing which makes life endurable to me."⁸ One scholar observes, "Darwin became, in modern parlance, a workaholic. He felt emotionally secure only when he was at work."⁹ What effect did elevating scientific work to the place of supreme importance have on the kind of person Darwin became? Hear it from Darwin's autobiography:



In one respect my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds . . . gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare. . . . But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me.¹⁰

Darwin then describes the man he became in words that read heavy with remorse: "My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts," he says. "The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature."¹¹

We could weep for Darwin. An extraordinarily gifted man was turned into a scientific law-grinding "machine," a man whose love for great poetry turned to nausea, whose heart for art and music slowly turned to stone. What a nightmarish travesty to live through the petrification of your emotion, moral character, and intellect. Darwin came to see himself not as a robust soul bursting with life, full of years, wisdom, and joy, but as, in his words,

“a withered leaf for every subject except Science” (which he saw as “a great evil”).¹² If young Darwin could have stepped inside our machine and met the “machine,” the “withered leaf,” the unhappy man who emerged from the other side, would he have restructured his priorities? We can only wonder.

Consider Emerson’s Law at work with radically different results in the life of another influential genius, a man who has been branded “America’s first and best homegrown philosopher.”¹³ This celebrated philosopher (who will remain anonymous for now) offers the following autobiographical account of how his object of worship affected his soul over the years: “[It] brought an inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness and rapture to the soul. In other words, it made the soul like a field or garden.”¹⁴

Two gifted men. One became “a withered leaf” and the other a “garden.” Where did our second genius find his chief enjoyment? What did he worship? Did different objects of ultimate devotion have anything at all to do with the very different kind of men these two became?

4. THE EX-PLANET’S ICY REVENGE

We move toward a better understanding of Emerson’s Law (and the radically divergent results it can produce) with the help of the old word “glory.” Much of the meaning of this word has been lost in our century. When Jews of the ancient Near East spoke of “glory” (or *kavod*, as they would say in Hebrew) they spoke of weightiness, fullness, and substance.¹⁵ That is why Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet, talks about growing “lean,” “withered grass,” “dust on scales,” and “empty wind,” as the opposites of glory.¹⁶ It is why Paul spoke of the “eternal *weight* of glory.”¹⁷

While *kavod* meant heaviness — the opposite of light — the ancients also used “glory” almost synonymously with “light.” The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel saw God’s temple “filled with the *brightness* of the glory of the LORD,” and Isaiah looked forward to a day when “the sun shall be no more your light by day . . . but the LORD will be your everlasting *light*, and your God will be your *glory*.”¹⁸ For the Bible’s authors, God was not a distant flickering idea, but someone very real, luminous, and beaming.

How can this old word — *kavod* — help us understand the different ways in which deities shape identities today? Think of something both

REFLECT

weighty and radiant that roughly half of the earth's population can observe at this very moment — the sun. The sun has enough *kavod*, enough weightiness and radiance, to be the center point of our solar system. It has enough gravitas to keep earth and the other planets spinning on their proper orbits. It is also luminous enough to keep our tiny blue planet teeming with warmth, beauty, and life.

What would happen, however, if Pluto, disgruntled and embittered by the 2006 International Astronomical Union vote that stripped him of planetary rights, took revenge on our solar system with a plot to overthrow and replace the sun? Pluto's cosmic coup would prove catastrophic. With a surface that is 98% frozen nitrogen and a mass less than a quarter of Earth's, Pluto is no match for the sun's *kavod*. The shift from a heliocentric to a plutocentric system would send the eight remaining planets spinning off their trajectories into chaos. The icy ex-planet's lack of mass and radiance would soon turn earth into a cold, lifeless sphere drifting through lonesome space.

The insight becomes clear if we move from astronomy to psychology, from the space around us to the space inside us. If we place something too small and too dim at the center of our lives, something that lacks *kavod*, then the planets in our soul's solar system — our creativity, intellect, emotions, moral sense, relationships, and so on — will tend toward a state of chaos and lifelessness. The lack of weight will cause many of those planets to drift into empty space, while the lack of light will turn any beauty on those planets into withered leaves.

If, however, the center of our souls, that which we glorify the most is, in reality, glorious, then our object of worship is massive enough to pull all the diverse spheres of human nature into a balanced orbit. There is also enough light to turn those different spheres inside us — our creativity, intellect, emotions, moral sense, relationality, and so on — into planets teeming with gardens, full of life and color.

5. THREE MARKS OF KAVOD

If we put Emerson's Law together with this ancient Hebrew idea of *kavod*, we reach something like this: everybody lives like something is the most weighty and radiant thing in the universe. If that something is, in reality,

weighty and radiant, then our lives will take on something of that gravitas and glow. If we glorify inglorious things, however, then we ourselves become more weightless and shadowy, more like ghosts. Have you ever encountered a ghost in real life? In a sense, we all have. There are people whose lifestyles and spirits you could almost wave your hand through without bumping against anything solid.

There are see-through people and Technicolor people, with a thousand shades in between. The most vivid, substantial people you've ever met did not fall asleep one night as ghosts and wake up as sages. There is a backstory behind the best and worst of people. If you follow that backstory deep enough you will find something glorious that long ago began forming the most robust souls and something inglorious at the heart of every ghost. What, then, makes something glorious and, therefore, a center of weight and light in our lives, versus something that lacks *kavod*? Consider the following three marks of glory.

Glorious things are first things, not second

Consider the difference between first and second things. A partygoer who makes "fitting in" his first thing, for example, finds himself preoccupied with his social performance. Do you think he will fit in? Of course not. Constant self-analysis will leave him crucial seconds behind social cues. Our partygoer turns into the very oddball he dreads becoming. His efforts to fit in have made "fitting in" impossible. Why? He has mistaken a second thing for a first thing, a byproduct for a goal. If he put something else first, like caring about the people around him so much that he forgets to worry about himself, then he would likely find himself fitting in without even trying.

Life is full of these paradoxes. The most miserable people are often those who spend all their energy trying to be happy. People who become the most toxic in relationships tend to be the very people who hyper-obsess about finding the perfect mate. The person who spends all his brainpower getting everyone to like him ends up lonesome, too self-absorbed to be a true friend. C. S. Lewis points us to the principle behind these paradoxes: "Every preference of a small good to a great, or partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which

REFLECT

the sacrifice is made. . . . You can't get second things by putting them first. You get second things only by putting first things first."¹⁹

David Foster Wallace helps bring Lewis's principle out of abstraction into the real world, cataloguing some of the most popular second things that make for destructive gods:



If you worship money . . . you will never have enough. . . . Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid. . . . Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.²⁰

This leads us to a second mark of *kavod*.

Glorious things are unbreakable, not brittle, things

I used to think that church songs where you could swap out all the God references with “baby” were evidence of a sappy romanticism in my own faith tradition. There may be truth to that. But perhaps the interchangeability of “God” and “baby” in church songs says less about church songs and more about love songs, less about how churches man-size God (which does happen) and more about a much broader tendency in the church and culture-at-large to God-size our romantic partners:

Gonna build my whole world around you. . . .

You're all that matters to me.

— The Temptations, “You're My Everything”

You know it's true, everything I do I do it for you.

— Bryan Adams, “Everything I Do”

If we believe in each other [there's] nothing we can't do.

— Celine Dion, “Love Can Move Mountains”

You're my religion, you're my church.
You're the holy grail at the end of my search.
— Sting, "Sacred Love"

She tells me, "Worship in the bedroom."
The only heaven I'll be sent to is when I'm alone with you.
— Hozier, "Take Me to Church"

Back in graduate school I met "Jane." Jane was enjoying a new romantic relationship. She was the kind of person who was always in a relationship, with a list of exxes that seemed to roll on like the credits of a Peter Jackson film. After listening to Jane's story of break-up after brutal break-up, I saw a glint of hope in her eyes as she described her new special someone. She sounded like a psalmist describing Yahweh: "He's perfect in every way. He's so good to me. He's my rock, my breath of life, my *everything*."

Suddenly it became clear. Jane was not in a relationship; she was in a religion. She was looking to her boyfriend not to fill boyfriend-sized needs, but to fill God-sized needs. She was seeking nothing less than absolute perfection, and she was convinced that she had found it. What will happen, though, when reality chips away at that flawless statue, eventually crumbling the bigger-than-life effigy of her boyfriend that Jane built up in her imagination? Jane will be devastated, not because her boyfriend let her down, but because her "God," her functional deity, has failed her. Her whole identity built around her brittle idol comes crashing down. The boyfriend himself (as opposed to the one who existed only in Jane's imagination) will likely feel crushed under the burden of superhuman expectations that have been heaped on his shoulders.

What we are really talking about is proportions. When we see people as people rather than gods, then their faults appear in proportion to their size, that is, as *human* faults. If we blow people up to God-sized dimensions in our imaginations, then what are, in reality, finite faults will appear to us as infinitely huge faults. Faults that should merely hurt us end up apocalyptically destroying us. This superhumanity, that we often attribute to mere humans, is one reason people go from deifying to demonizing their romantic partners, children, and even celebrities (which

REFLECT

is exactly what Jane ended up doing with her new boyfriend, who was soon added to her rolling credits).

Something worth worshiping must be superhuman and unbreakable, not just in our imaginations, but in reality. If we had an object of worship proportionate to our heart's massive needs, then the people in our lives would shrink back to their actual human proportions, and so would the cracks in their characters. The restless Jane in all of us would find freedom to love people realistically — as people — suffering finite hurt rather than infinite devastation *when* (not *if*) they let us down. We would also free the people we care about to really love us back, unburdened by the crushing gravity of our infinite expectations. Returning to Lewis's categories, we find the real joy in these second things only when we find our deepest meaning from a first thing. This leads to a third mark of something with enough *kavod* to worship.

Glorious things are suns, not spotlights

A spotlight sends out one long narrow cone of light, leaving everything outside that cone in darkness. A sun, however, fires out light rays in all directions simultaneously. Some of the things we choose to worship are more like spotlights than suns. Put academic accolades at the center of your life and your intellect may brighten, but your emotions and relationships will be left in the dark. Worship a romantic partner and some passion may light up, but your intellect will be left to the cold and the cobwebs. When we turn good things into ultimate things, they leave important spaces in our natures hidden in the shadows.

This helps us make better sense of Emerson's Law. If we worship money, then it's not that we become green and wrinkly, but that money lacks the necessary properties to really illuminate the intellectual, emotional, and relational spaces in our lives. Cash is too mindless, too heartless, and too loveless. Worship it long enough and the best things in us remain in the dark, and we slowly appear as dumb and uncaring as cold hard cash.

If we say that the product-worshiper becomes product-like himself, more plastic, then plastic is really a shorthand way of expressing a lack of intellectual, emotional, and relational light. Consumer products are

inadequate gods because they are powerless to illuminate what is best in human nature. When malls become our churches and material things our objects of ultimate concern, then the best things in us are left in the dark. Shoppers in the cult of consumerism start looking more like the mannequins that they look to for meaning (they also become about as interesting to talk to). In the world of experience, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is not optional. People will bear the image of their gods for better or worse, or, as the theologians of ancient Israel observed, people “went after false idols and became false.”²¹

Consider your capacity to reason, feel, achieve moral greatness, love people well, help those in need, and create beauty. Imagine all of these powers of your humanity arranged around the primary light source in your life. Is that light source like a spotlight with its solitary cone fixed on a part of you while banishing the rest of you to darkness? Or is your object of worship like a sun, beaming warmth, clarity, and meaning on your whole being, leaving nothing to the shadows?

REFLECT OVERVIEW

Earlier we met an anonymous genius who grew to be a “garden.” He was a valedictorian graduate of Yale, where he enrolled as a Latin-, Greek-, and Hebrew-fluent 12-year-old.¹ He was instrumental to America’s First Great Awakening. He preached meticulously logical sermons that were cut short more than once when the volume of “piercing and amazing cries” from affected crowds overpowered his famously weak voice.² He served as president of Princeton University. He defended Native American rights and inspired one of the first schools in America that gave women educational parity with men. His books became required reading throughout the Ivy League for more than a century. He remains a beacon in twenty-first-century academia, influencing entire schools and fields of study that didn’t exist until he inspired them.³ He was also an adoring husband to his teenage sweetheart and wife of more than thirty years, with a full quiver of eleven deeply loved children. One study traced the bloodlines of “one U.S. Vice President, three U.S. senators, three governors, three mayors, thirteen college presidents, thirty judges, sixty-five professors, eighty public office holders, one-hundred lawyers, and one-hundred missionaries” back to his Massachusetts home.⁴ That garden of a man was Jonathan Edwards.

Long before Edwards’s success as a philosopher, theologian, revivalist, pastor, and family man, he believed that he had found true *kavod*.

At age 19, while drafting seventy personal “Resolutions” in his journal, Edwards divulges his object of lifelong worship: “Resolved . . . to cast and venture my soul on the Lord Jesus Christ, to trust and confide in him, and consecrate myself wholly to him.”⁵ This glimpse into the center of young Edwards’s solar system is essential to making sense out of the man he later became, a man whose “sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively,” a man whose soul became “a flower . . . low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun’s glory.”⁶ We can’t understand how Edwards became a garden if we ignore the Sun that nourished his soul over the decades.

This brings us to the central thesis of this book. *Jesus is the most glorious being in existence.* He is the most massive and radiant person our lives could possibly orbit around. He is the First Thing. He is indestructible. The good things we enjoy in life are, in Edwards’s words, “scattered beams, but he is the sun.”⁷ Jesus is more reasonable, more passionate, more virtuous, more loving, more gracious, more creative, and more powerful than anyone or anything else. When we enjoy any true reason, passion, goodness, love, grace, beauty, or power in anyone or anything else, he is the Sun we discover if we trace those beams back to their true Source. He can shape, expand, illuminate, and grow us in ways that no amount of money, power, lovers, chemical rushes, or any other conceivable object of worship can. Whether or not we worship him will make the crucial difference in what kind of people we can expect to step out of the future self-reflector.

Jesus specializes in healing idol-a-holics.

But isn’t Edwards a fluke? What about those who claim to worship Jesus yet live inglorious lives? That’s the beauty of Emerson’s Law. It calls our bluffs. Our lives are dead giveaways to any perceptive observer of what we really worship, regardless of our publicly claimed deities. If we are really worshiping Jesus as he really exists, and not some figment of our imaginations or a religiously conceived fictional character called “Jesus,” then our lives will reflect something of the real Jesus’ glory; not perfectly of course, but perceptibly.

R-E-F-L-E-C-T structures our exploration of what it would look like if we actually worship and, thereby, became more like Jesus. In chapter 1 we

REFLECT

look at *Reasoning* like Jesus, developing his intellectual virtues. Chapter 2 turns to *Emoting* like Jesus, feeling joy at the things that bring him joy and outrage at the things that get his blood boiling. With chapter 3, we look at *Flipping* our upside-down attempts to live meaningfully to align with the holy actions of Jesus. Chapter 4 looks at *Loving* like Jesus, and cultivating his relational depth. Chapter 5 moves to *Elevating* people; mirroring the grace of Jesus, who pulls us up out of darkness and despair. Chapter 6 brings us to *Creating* beauty like the artistic Jesus, whose imagination brought us everything from sunsets to the spots on ladybugs. Lastly, in chapter 7, how do we *Transform* so that the fruit of his intellect, emotion, goodness, love, grace, and creativity grow in and out of us?

For many, “Christlikeness” is little more than a cliché, a spiritual buzzword for people who speak the strange tribal dialect of Christianese. Press people on its meaning and you find that “Christlikeness” is vaguely synonymous with being nice. Becoming like Jesus means so much more than that, and that is the focus of this book.

All of this is coming from a man who has bowed his knee to many finite gods — intellect, religion, romance, status, jobs, children — a man who continues to prove John Calvin right when he said that the human heart is “a perpetual factory of idols.” Thankfully, this is not a book about me, a recovering idol-a-holic. It is about Jesus.

And Jesus specializes in healing idol-a-holics.

NOTES

HOW TO MEET YOUR FUTURE SELF

1. These words are attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson in multiple works, including the Unitarian Universalist Hymnal.

2. David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” commencement speech, Kenyon College, May 21, 2005. The great Russian storyteller and skilled excavator of human nature Fyodor Dostoyevsky also found that “man has no more constant and agonizing anxiety than find as quickly as possible someone to worship.” Dostoyevsky voices this observation through the mouthpiece of “The Grand Inquisitor” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 1, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Penguin, 1978), 297–98.

3. Bob Goudzwaard, *Aid for the Over-Developed West* (Toronto: Wedge, 1975), 114–15. See Romans 1:18–24.

4. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “An Interview with Malcolm Muggeridge” (May 1983), in *Chosen Vessels*, ed. Charles Turner (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1985), 186.

5. Roger Trigg notes, “Religion is always a target of totalitarian regimes. . . . Dangerous for would-be dictators, is the appeal to transcendent norms, and a supernatural authority beyond this life” (*Equality, Freedom, and Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 29).

6. G. K. Chesterton, *Christendom in Dublin*, in *G. K. Chesterton: Collected Works*, vol. 20 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 57.

Notes to “How to Meet Your Future Self” and “REFLECT Overview”

7. Charles Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Darwin (New York: D. Appleton, 1896), 65.
8. Charles Darwin, “A Personal Letter to W. D. Fox,” November 28, 1864 in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, 303.
9. John Crosby, *Sons and Fathers: Challenges to Paternal Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.
10. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, ed. Nora Barlow, in *The Works of Charles Darwin*, vol. 29 (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 158.
11. *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, 158.
12. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, 269.
13. See Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 225. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edwards “is widely acknowledged to be America’s most important and original philosophical theologian.” See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/edwards/>, retrieved May 30, 2016.
14. See Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative in Jonathan Edwards: Representative selections*, ed. Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: American, 1935), 12.
15. In Edwards’s words, “The noun (*kavod*) signifies gravity, heaviness, greatness, and abundance” (*The End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000], 116).
16. See Isaiah 17:4; 40:5–8, 15; and 41:29.
17. See 2 Corinthians 4:17, emphasis added. See also Psalm 63:5.
18. Isaiah 60:19; emphasis added. See Ezekiel 10:4.
19. C. S. Lewis, “First and Second Things,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 280.
20. Wallace, “This Is Water.”
21. See 2 Kings 17:15.

REFLECT OVERVIEW

1. “Yale’s first and foremost child prodigy” is a title supplied by his alma mater. See <http://je.yalecollege.yale.edu/about-us/history>, retrieved May 30, 2016.

2. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 206, 220.
3. Marsden credits him as inspiration behind Mount Holyoke Seminary. Other examples include Yale University’s first residential college as well as Nashville’s Jonathan Edwards Classical Academy and Trinity International University’s Center for Jonathan Edwards. For fields of study that have sprouted from Edwardsian thought, see *Jonathan Edwards*, 498–502.
4. *Jonathan Edwards*, 500–501. The disproportionate success of Edwards’s descendants earned him a spot in Ripley’s *Believe It or Not*.
5. Jonathan Edwards, *Resolution 53*, July 8, 1723 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), xxiii.
6. Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, 7, 12. Biographer Iain Murray agrees that the young Edwards’s *Resolutions* are “the key to understanding his whole life and future ministry” (*Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], 44).
7. Jonathan Edwards, “The True Christian’s Life: A Journey Towards Heaven,” in *The Works of President Edwards*, vol. 4 (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1852), 575.

1. REASON: MIRRORING THE PROFOUND THINKING OF JESUS

1. Matthew 22:37.
2. Jonathan Edwards, “The Excellency of Christ,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 682.
3. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.1.4, in *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982), 377.
4. Matthew 22:23–27.
5. Matthew 22:28.
6. This section, in particular the logical breakdown of the Sadducees’ argument, is highly indebted to the work of my colleague Douglas Groothuis of Denver Seminary.
7. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 377.
8. Matthew 22:30.
9. Matthew 22:31–32.
10. See Matthew 22:34.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thaddeus Williams (Ph.D., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam) loves enlarging students' understanding and enjoyment of Jesus at Biola University in La Mirada, California, where he serves as assistant professor of systematic theology for Talbot School of Theology. He has also taught philosophy and literature at Saddleback College, jurisprudence at Trinity Law School, worldview studies at L'Abri Fellowships in Switzerland and Holland, and ethics for Blackstone Legal Fellowship and the Federalist Society in Washington, DC. His previous books include *Love, Freedom, and Evil: Does Authentic Love Require Free Will?* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). He resides in Orange County, California, with his wife and four children.

Connect with Thaddeus at:

website: www.thaddeuswilliams.com

facebook: www.facebook.com/thaddeus.williams.568

twitter: @thaddeuswill