

"Astute, pastorally sensitive, and deeply searching"

—SINCLAIR FERGUSON



# THINK AGAIN

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RELIEF FROM THE BURDEN OF INTROSPECTION

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JARED MELLINGER

“You’re introspective. Everyone is. But if you’re honest, you’re more than introspective; you’re self-absorbed. You think about yourself a ridiculous amount. Everyone does. But there is escape from suffocating introspection and healing of the cataract of selfishness in your soul-eye. Let Jared Mellinger help you. He humbly and humorously speaks from experience. Discover, as Chesterton once said, ‘how much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it.’”

**Jon Bloom**, Cofounder of Desiring God; author of *Not By Sight* and other books

“Jared Mellinger’s book, *Think Again*, is simply one of the clearest, biblically faithful, most winsome, solidly helpful, and briefest(!) books you’ll ever read on the topic of introspection. Jared skillfully avoids the extremes of never thinking about ourselves and always thinking about ourselves, and points us to the only cure for our self-absorbed souls: being overwhelmed by the matchless beauty and glory of Christ. I can’t wait to give this to others.”

**Bob Kauffin**, Director of Sovereign Grace Music; elder at Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, KY; author of *Worship Matters* and *True Worshipers*

“In an age of narcissism, entitlement, and attention-seeking egos in search of self-esteem, we need more voices pointing us to a vision and story greater than self. For only when we lose ourselves do we find our truest, healthiest, and most life-giving selves in Jesus. Jared has written an excellent book to help us along in this journey.”

**Scott Sauls**, Senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN; author of *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *Befriend*

“A self-absorbed culture keeps telling us that the solution to our problems is somewhere inside of us. So we keep looking. I talk about me, then I ask you to talk about me. More mirrors, more lanterns, more navel-gazing. Trouble is, these things aren’t leading us to freedom and rest but to self-love or self-hatred. Jared offers us a way out of the vortex of introspection. Without obliterating the self, *Think Again* takes the reader up into worship and gratitude and out into the joy of service.”

**Matt Mason**, Senior Pastor of The Church at Brook Hills,  
Birmingham, AL

“Introspection is a plague that cripples our souls and clouds the love of our Savior. *Think Again* addresses our daily temptation to focus our attention inward. Jared not only helps us discern this subtle tendency but also provides the liberating alternative in the gospel. This book delivers grace.”

**C. J. Mahaney**, Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville, KY

“In this rich and thoughtful book, Jared Mellinger shows us that the solution to self-focus is God-intoxication. *Think Again* lifts the head of the introspective, the one lost in labyrinths of the self, and unveils the sure and certain hope of God. This God has not stayed silent; he has not kept to himself; he has not failed to provide a savior for sinners like us.”

**Owen Strachan**, Author of *Risky Gospel* and *The Colson Way*; theology professor, Midwestern Seminary

“Martin Luther believed man’s problem is that he is *incurvatus in se*—turned in on himself. In *Think Again* Jared Mellinger tackles one devastating effect of this in an astute, pastorally sensitive, and deeply searching but healing way.

Here is analysis, diagnosis and remedy all in one. Plus it's readable. The best books work on us while we are reading them and help effect the very transformation they describe. This is one of them."

**Sinclair Ferguson**, Author of *The Christian Life* and  
*Devoted to God*

"*Think Again* is a great little book. It navigates us through the maze of introspection in a biblical, practical, straight-forward manner. Read it for yourself; give it to a friend—for it shows how Christ can set us free from our own thoughts. I believe that for many people this will be a truly liberating book."

**Tim Chester**, Faculty member of Crosslands; author of  
over thirty books, including *You Can Change*

"*Think Again* is a surprisingly delightful book. Surprising in that such a short book can accomplish such depth in searching the reader's heart, delightful in its flow, humor, and encouragement. Jared, quite skillfully, delivers a very helpful resource for the very needed work of introspection. With great wisdom and the tender care of a pastor, Jared shepherds the reader to best see themselves only in view of Christ."

**Brian Davis**, Pastor of Risen Christ Fellowship,  
Philadelphia, PA

"Jared Mellinger understands that unless we learn how to take every thought captive, we can easily become captive ourselves to thoughts that control our emotions and ultimately, our lives. *Think Again* will help you find freedom as you learn how to guard your heart as you renew your mind."

**Bob Lepine**, Cohost of *FamilyLife Today*



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Introspection

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Jared Mellinger



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*For the lovely Meghan Claire*



# Introduction

Do you ever think about yourself in ways that leave you weary and exhausted?

Welcome to the club. My name is Jared Mellinger, and I have been overdosing on introspection for as long as I can remember.

The goal of this book is to show how the gospel rescues us from fruitless self-examination, false guilt, discouragement, and inaccurate thoughts of ourselves. I want to offer practical counsel on battling unhealthy introspection and give hope to all of us whose minds are stuck on ourselves. Ultimately, I'm eager to draw our attention away from self and toward the glory of Jesus Christ.

Introspection is the act of looking inward. When we introspect, we are observing ourselves and reflecting on our thoughts, emotions, actions, and identity. Some of us are naturally more introspective than others, and this is certainly not a bad thing. The Bible commends self-examination and self-reflection.

But most of us lean toward extremes. Some people never study themselves; others constantly study themselves. I've written largely with those who tend toward

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hyper-introspection in view, but I hope everyone will benefit.

How do you know if this book is for you?

1. I've written to help those who know the burden of introspection, and who find themselves worn out from looking in.
2. I've written to help those who want to understand and care for others who experience the burden of introspection.
3. I've written to help all Christians discover how God wants us to think about ourselves.

Many of us are familiar with the problem of too much introspection. Our minds wander to our responsibilities, our spiritual growth, our appearance, or some other aspect of our lives. We spend excessive amounts of time evaluating ourselves. We overanalyze the things we say and do. We constantly second-guess ourselves and fear we might be making the wrong decisions in life.

In relationships, we are hypersensitive to the criticism and opinions of others. As employees, we fixate on our reputation and wonder what others are thinking and saying about us. We move through social settings with deep self-consciousness. We replay conversations in our minds.

As parents, we fear we are doing something (or *not* doing something) that will end up ruining our kids. We draw comparisons with other parents and their kids. On social media, we pursue the validation that comes from

likes and favorites and shares. In our appearance, we are discontent with how we look.

Our daily awareness of sin, weakness, and ineffectiveness leaves us disheartened. Self-accusations are relentless. We go through the day largely unaware of the beauty that God sees in us and in our good works. Then we go to bed at night exhausted, with false guilt and real guilt jumbled together, with our hearts and minds flooded with the experiences of the day, and with a general sense that we are failing in a lot of things.

We need help.

Too much introspection is a danger, but it's not abnormal or hopeless. However alone you may feel, no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to what others experience. However stuck you may feel, you can rejoice that God is faithful to provide a way of escape and to help you endure (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The Christian can take a deep breath and say "My God is with me." I can be full of hope today because Jesus Christ is full of power. However heavy my burdens, he will carry them. However sinful I am, his grace is greater. However deeply I am stuck in myself, the Lord will rescue me from constant self-consciousness and renegade self-reflection. And he invites me to fix my eyes on him.

That's what this book is about: How do we find relief when introspection becomes a burden? How does the gospel help us to *think again*?

I should mention terminology here at the outset. Rather than dividing words like *introspection*, *self-reflection*, and

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*self-examination* into inherently positive and negative categories, I rely on adjectives and context to signify whether I am talking about good introspection or bad introspection. Self-reflection, like reflection and thinking in general, can be positive or negative.

Here's a roadmap of our journey out of the burden of introspection: Chapter 1 introduces the problem of introspection from my own life. Next, we consider how we come to truly know ourselves (Chapter 2) and how we are supposed to feel about ourselves, including the issues of self-love and self-loathing (Chapter 3). Chapters 4–6 give counsel and comfort to those who are stuck in the introspective trap. We will explore the reasons we self-reflect (Chapter 4), how to break free from introspective doubt and despair (Chapter 5), and strategies for fighting false guilt (Chapter 6).

Chapters 7–9 address self-examination: practical suggestions for how to evaluate yourself (Chapter 7), the value of seeing the good in ourselves (Chapter 8), and how seeing our sin can actually lead to *greater* joy in Christ (Chapter 9).

Chapter 10 addresses the problem of hyper self-awareness. Finally, Chapters 11–13 are a call to look *outside* of ourselves: to creation (Chapter 11), community (Chapter 12), and Christ (Chapter 13).

May the Lord use this book, as 2 Thessalonians 3:5 says, to “direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.”

# 1

## It's a Long Drive Home from Hamburg

*Grace for all who are worn out from looking in*

When I was twenty-six years old, I became a pastoral intern at the church in Pennsylvania where I currently serve. My first job as an intern was to pick up Dave, my new boss and the longtime senior pastor of the church, at the airport. He was returning home from a ministry trip to Germany on Continental Flight 75. I was determined to make a good impression—show up on time, complete the assignment with excellence, and ask all the right questions during our conversation on the ride home. In short, I hoped to display my awesomeness.

As I reviewed the flight information, I was unfamiliar with the locations of the departure and arrival for his flight: Hamburg and Newark. Actually, I shouldn't say they were unfamiliar. I had never heard of Newark, but I did know the town (or borough) of Hamburg. I've spent my whole life in Pennsylvania, and I know that Hamburg



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is a place in Berks County near the Schuylkill River. I just didn't know they received international flights.

From that moment forward it was lodged deeply in my mind as an unassailable truth that Dave was flying not from Hamburg, Germany, to Newark, New Jersey, but from somewhere in Germany to Hamburg, Pennsylvania.

The day before I was to pick Dave up, I googled "airports in Hamburg." All of the hits were apparently for an airport in some other country, which I found unhelpful. Reentering "airports in Hamburg, PA," I discovered a small airport called Blue Mountain Academy Airport. Apparently Continental Flight 75 was going to fly into Blue Mountain Academy Airport in the backwoods of Hamburg, Pennsylvania. That worked for me.

## **Welcome to Hamburg, Pennsylvania**

The next day I drove an hour and a half to Hamburg. When I arrived in town, I asked the guy working at the local gas station where the airport was located. (It is my distinct honor to be the only person who ever went to Hamburg, Pennsylvania, and asked that particular question.) The man was helpful enough to direct me to a small high school called Blue Mountain Academy.

As I was driving in, I saw a humble grass airstrip beside a cornfield and a crop duster aircraft parked beside it. I pulled up to the high school, parked my car, and went inside to tell the lady in the administrative office that I was picking up someone who was flying into the airport.

It's a Long Drive Home from Hamburg

At this point, I couldn't bring myself to say, "Excuse me, has Continental Flight 75 from Germany arrived?"

The dear woman must have seen her fair share of crazy people. She said she didn't know they were flying anymore, but kindly directed me toward the grass airstrip I had passed on the way in.

I parked by the airstrip next to the cornfield. *What a perfect day!* The sun was shining brightly; the tall stalks shimmered yellow and gold. I knew that any minute Dave's plane would be coming over the mountains.

*Wow. I sure hope that guy mowing the grass airstrip doesn't get hit by the plane when it comes in . . .* And there was the thought that finally brought me to my senses. In the realm of apologetics, Francis Schaeffer talks about pushing people to the logical conclusion of their presuppositions and collapsing their denial. That is what the man in the sleeveless flannel shirt riding his John Deere lawn tractor did for me that day.

Suddenly, a moment of bliss turned to sheer panic. It felt as if I had been punched in the gut. The still, small voice in my head was shouting at me: *You idiot! Something is terribly wrong!* I staggered from my car—my head spinning, my world collapsing. After calling Dave's administrative assistant and telling her where I was, I was graciously informed that my services were no longer needed on this assignment.

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## The Vortex of Self

The drive home that day was a thousand times longer than the drive there. And I was a thousand times more alone. *How did you not realize sooner!? Why did you not ask for more help!?*

Soon, questions were flooding my mind: *Just how pathetic are you, Jared? Do you really think you'll be able to be a pastor with this kind of incompetence? Are you going to lead God's people to have a heart for the nations when you don't even know that Hamburg is a place in **Germany**? Hey Jared, do you know where Paris is? What about Tokyo? Are those also places in Pennsylvania? What kind of inconvenience have you caused for Dave? What will other people think of you when they find out? What sin was at work that got you into this disaster? And what sin is at work in how you're responding **now**?*

Not only for the next few hours but that night and in the following days, the one thing I couldn't stop thinking about was *myself*. I felt trapped in a vortex of self-focused thoughts—and it wasn't restricted to this event; it seemed to touch every area of my life. I have heard it described by David Powlison as “barbarians rioting in the streets of my mind.” I left prayer meetings silently replaying the content of my prayers over and over in my head, fearing that I had said something dumb, or something rooted in a sinful desire to impress. I constantly scrutinized my behavior, my speech, and my thoughts.

I still experience a relentless inward pull almost every time I serve publicly . . . or receive critique from others . . .

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or spend time with “important” people . . . or perceive sin, failure, or weakness in my life. I know. I have problems. It's not easy thinking about myself so much, but hey, someone has to do it.

## Absorbed in Someone Else

One of the great challenges we face in life is that we are *constantly* turning inward. We experience anxiety, and we try to escape it by analyzing our soul to see how much peace we are currently experiencing. We experience shame and a sense of worthlessness, and we attempt to treat the condition by turning inward to examine our self-worth.

No one sets out to be overly introspective (“When I grow up, I want to think about myself every day in ways that make me miserable”), but an inward focus becomes a form of bondage. Self-awareness can be paralyzing, and our constant self-analysis leaves us discouraged.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his book *Spiritual Depression*, explains that much of our distress comes from excessive introspection. We are always turning inward, orienting our minds and emotions around ourselves. We are continually putting our souls on a plate and dissecting them.

The reason we are so preoccupied with ourselves, Lloyd-Jones says, is because we are not sufficiently occupied with Christ. “There is only one way to get rid of self, and that is that you should become so absorbed in someone or something else that you have no time to think about yourself.”<sup>1</sup> We must stop looking at ourselves so

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much and learn to enjoy Christ. This is what it means to be a Christian: “He spends his time in looking at Christ, in gazing upon Him. He is so enraptured by the sight of Him that he has forgotten himself. If you were to feel more interested in Christ you would be less interested in yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

The more we are captivated by Christ, the less we are caught up in self. Fear, false guilt, unbelief, and many other daily struggles are weeds that grow in the soil of thinking about ourselves too much, and thinking about Christ too little. Jesus rescues us from the introspection that would make us unfruitful and ineffective by fixing our eyes on him.

Charles Spurgeon says,

Some spend much of their time in what is called introspection. Now introspection, like retrospection, is a useful thing in a measure; but it can readily be overdone, and then it breeds morbid emotions, and creates despair. Some are always looking into their own feelings. A healthy man hardly knows whether he has a stomach or a liver; it is your sickly man who grows more sickly by the study of his inward complaints. Too many wound themselves by studying themselves. Every morning they think of what they should feel: all day long they dwell upon what they are not feeling; and at night they make diligent search for what they have been feeling.<sup>3</sup>

Spurgeon describes introspection as being like a store owner closing up shop, and then living in the store and spending all his time taking inventory of things that have not been sold. It's not the best plan, and there is little to gain by it. Spurgeon concludes with a simple exhortation that is exactly what we need to hear when introspection has run amok, and we are wounding ourselves by studying ourselves: "Forget yourself and think only of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

## A Better Way to Live

I've spent (and wasted) a lot of time and energy thinking about myself. I am the king of thinking about myself in unfruitful ways. And my self-reflection usually leaves me feeling beat-up and worn-out.

I need the truths contained in this book more than anyone. I'm writing because I am convinced there is a better way to live. That better way is summarized by Robert Murray M'Cheyne: "For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ."<sup>5</sup> Most of us end up reversing the ratio, taking at least ten looks at ourselves for every one look to Christ. It's a lot easier for us to look inward than to look outward to God and others.

The year following the Hamburg mishap, I attended a conference where David Powlison taught on unhealthy introspection.<sup>6</sup> It was a timely and helpful gift from God. I still remember Dr. Powlison explaining that our sinful nature has a *centripetal force* that pulls us inward, rather than a *centrifugal force* that pushes us outward. I began to understand my problem with introspection in a new

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way. I realized that self-analysis and self-knowledge are not the endgame, but a doorway to a life of love, obedience, and joy.

My prayer is that this book would do for others what Dr. Powlison's teaching did for me. I've realized my struggles are not unique. My directional incompetence is probably unique, and it might be unique that none of my friends let me pick them up at the airport anymore. But my temptations toward unhelpful introspection are not unique.

What do we do when we feel trapped in self-focused thoughts? We must remember the one who daily lifts our burdens. We must believe that the gospel speaks profoundly to our despair, self-idolatry, false guilt, and discouragement. We must learn that following Christ pulls us outside of ourselves and liberates us to look outward and experience the refreshment of enjoying God's world, God's people, and God's Son. We must seek after and pray for the peace and joy—the sanity—that comes from thinking about ourselves less often. And then we will be able to examine and keep a close watch on ourselves, while avoiding the kind of self-reflection that is always wearying and never fruitful.

The antidote to excessive introspection is not to completely forget myself, but to look more to the Lord Jesus Christ, which leads to thinking rightly—and less often—about myself.

Even if you're someone who doesn't lean in the direction of excessive introspection, this book is an opportunity to understand and grow in caring for those who

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do. And if you are inclined toward excessive introspection, take heart: The gospel sets us free from thinking about ourselves too much. There is an outward-focused God who delights to rescue an inward-focused people. He is leading us into a better way to live.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What are some of the benefits of healthy introspection?
- What are some of the dangers of unhealthy introspection?
- Where does introspection show up as a problem in your life?