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Intro: Hey friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm really happy to be here with you today. We've got a great show in store.

And y'all, today on the show I get to talk with Curt Thompson. Y'all, Curt Thompson is amazing. He's a Board Certified psychiatrist and the founder of Being Known, an organization that develops resources for hope and healing at the intersection of neuroscience and spiritual formation. He is brilliant.

His new book, *The Soul of Desire: Discovering the Neuroscience of Longing, Beauty, and Community* is fascinating, y'all. I really loved it so much. I cried almost every page I read. It's just beautiful. I cannot wait for all of us to get to learn from him together. So here's my conversation with Curt Thompson.

[00:02:02] <music>

Annie: First of all, Curt, thank you so much for being here.

Curt: You're very kind to invite me and to have me here. I was speaking to Fallon... this work that I do has to do with this thing we call integration, right?

Annie: Yes.

Curt: Which Jesus would say is becoming whole even as our Father in heaven is also whole. Thirty minutes ago I didn't have any idea what a podcast network was.

Annie: Oh, wow.

Curt: I even have a podcast and there are many, many things that I don't know about these things. And then in speaking with Fallon about what you've done in creating your network, I thought like, "Oh, my goodness!" What you're doing and imagining, not just for yourself, but for others in creating this network, as it turns out, is very much like what the brain does in its ideal states.

Annie: Wow. Really?

Curt: Yeah. Because the mind is, you know, we talked about this embodied and relational process, but it has all these multiple differentiated and linked functions that are correlated with different anatomical parts of the brain and functions of the brain and so forth. But the mind can't really do what it's going to do really, really well unless it has all these different parts that are coming together in this linked fashion, not in a really, really well-practiced orchestra.

As she was describing what the network is about that you've helped to envision, I thought, "Oh, my gosh, that's an extension of what a flourishing mind looks like right there in this very organization." I was just so tickled that I get to be invited to come and be part of that conversation. So thank you so much for that. Well done in what you're doing.

Annie: Thank you.

Curt: I mean, well, well done. It's awesome.

Annie: That means a lot. It's a dream come true for me. It really is to be able to... we can do so much more together than I was able to do by myself.

Curt: Right.

Annie: I mean, we are impacting so many more people on shows I'm not on than the shows I am on. I think when I'm gone I want to be remembered for that kind of stuff.

Curt: Right. Right.

Annie: We did gospel work that didn't have my name on it. Oh, I just love it. Thank you for saying that. I have been a fan of your work for so long. Thanks to *IF: Gathering* really. I mean, you've got to have the wildest collection of female fans now because of being a part of IF. Is that true? Did it change your life?

Curt: Yes. Yes, it did. I cannot tell a lie. It did. I mean the number of people that we now have in common that three or four years ago I didn't know at all. In some respects, anything that I'm doing, I've said is an extension of being invited into other people's spaces. So it's very humbling. So yes. I don't know if they should be my fans, but I'm grateful that we are friends.

Annie: We are. We are. I have read *Anatomy of the Soul*, I have read *The Soul of Shame*. I just got to read the *Soul of Desire*. Will you back us up a little bit? How did you start connecting in a spiritual way really -- you've done a work that you're one of the first that I've experienced, where you put together what happens in our brains and how God made our brains with what's happening in our souls and helping us to integrate. As you talked about, how did that become your passion?

Curt: I tell the story of how I quite accidentally wandered into a workshop at the American Psychiatric Association's annual conference back now 17 and a half years ago, where Dan Siegel was teaching this half-day course on this notion of interpersonal neurobiology. For our listeners, it's this collection of scientific disciplines that all have a stake in what is the mind and how does it work well. Dan was one of the first people to really start to think about, well, what does the mind look like when it's flourishing in psychiatry, in medical schools?

So you get lots of training about what's wrong with a mind. It's not hard to decide, like, where is it broken? But the question of like, "What does a beautiful mind look like? How does the mind flourish when it's flourishing well?" That's a question that we don't really, really explore very much.

This is work that he was doing. And I left that workshop knowing I don't know how, but life is not going to be the same for me, because there were so many things that were just jumping off the page in that workshop and then subsequent interactions with Dan and others, such that this new emerging field of interpersonal

neurobiology to me reflects in Acts 17, where Paul is talking to Colossians and he says, "God never leaves Himself without a witness."

And we live in a world right now, 21st century, especially in the West, in which the primary way in which we come to believe that we can know anything is through the scientific method. Whether you know it or not, when you buy a toilet, it's through the scientific method.

Annie: The one we learned in school?

Curt: Exactly. Right, exactly. But it's applied to absolutely everything. So even applied to whether or not I can know things about faith.

Annie: Wow.

Curt: And the difficulty with that is that there's many, many other ways of actually knowing things. Now, one of the most powerful ways we come to know things is not by me being the one who asks all the questions but by being known because somebody else is asking the questions of me.

And this emerging field of neuroscience, in fact, turns back on itself and says, look, as it turns out, the data of the science says that science itself is not the ultimate way that we know stuff. That the ultimate way that we know stuff is relationally. That's how we come to know things most powerfully.

And what I'm discovering is that in a time when science is speaking powerfully to people, and where people have a harder time making sense of and listening to and responding to the gospel as it has traditionally been given over the last 400 to 500 years, God is using His very creation, the creation of neuroscience to speak to people about the gospel in ways that heretofore we haven't been able to access.

So that combination of neuroscience and spiritual formation began to tick around in my brain, and out of this came *Anatomy the Soul*, really asking this question: how does neuroscience really both reflect and then re-energize our experience of what it means to be followers of Jesus and the emergence of the new heaven and new earth?

In the course of writing that, you come to discover this is this imagined sense of what God is up to. But in the course of that, we discovered that one of the common themes that really disintegrates systems is this work of shame.

Annie: Yes!

Curt: And shame we might say is... actually it's part of the created order. It's a signal built into the system of life that tells us that there's a problem but we respond to it in ways that evil tries to take advantage of.

So the second book on shame really then looked at what do we do about this primary disintegrating interpersonal and neuro biologic force that is in the world that isn't just a thing that makes each of us as individuals feel bad but actually disintegrate? I mean, it's behind racism, it's behind political rancor, it's behind everything that evil is using to hijack all that. And so tried to address that in the second book.

And then in this third book, I think, we eventually get to places where... You know, the brain is primed to look at the world and think about the world in terms of problems to solve. Like I'm always looking for where the danger is. Of course, this is not a bad thing, especially if I'm crossing the street and a car coming and crosses on.

Annie: Right. Right. Right.

Curt: But my commitment to looking for danger, my commitment to understanding my life as pathology, as being broken, my commitment to a narrative that is salt and peppered with shame all through, it makes it very difficult for me to ask the question, wait a minute, what is the new act of beauty that God wants to create? It's dangerous for me to do this. Because if you're going to create beauty, it takes vulnerability, it takes risk, it takes the presence of saying, "I actually don't do this very well on my own. I need somebody else to do this."

So I think kind of a pinnacle response to what came out in this book on shame that emerged out of the first book, questions about how we disintegrate things, is this question of beauty. And what is the next artifact of beauty? And not only that we are called to create, but we're doing this because we can't not do it. And we're not just trying to make beautiful artifacts, we're trying to do that as an expression, as a preamble to the beauty that God is creating us to be.

Annie: When you talk in the book about making artifacts... I was so moved. When I read about it, the idea of artifacts of leaving things behind for people to see the beauty of God, will you talk about that word a little bit? And why is that the word you chose? When we're talking about what we desire and when we're talking about making beauty, why artifacts?

Curt: Well, again, I am struck by the way the biblical narrative talks so explicitly about how rooted we are in the material world. And that beauty isn't a function just of... it's not just some abstraction. It is a thing that we see embodied to practice. I don't just see a beautiful painting, I don't just see a beautiful canyon, and I don't just hear a beautiful piece of music.

We do this work in these confessional communities that is kind of one of the rails on which this book runs. And I can't tell you how many times there has been an event and an experience in one of these groups, where something has happened even between the members in the group, some rupture that's happened and there's repair work that takes place and somebody else the group will say, "I've never seen a more beautiful thing in my life." Because we feel it viscerally in our bodies.

So the notion of artifact is a word that we use to represent a real substantive thing in the world. It is a real relationship. You were saying earlier that when you're gone, this network that isn't an abstraction, it's real people, really together, people will look at this and say, "This thing... is like this is the gospel," because of what we've sensed and imaged and felt and seen in real-time and space in real embodied ways.

This is the thing we remember far more powerfully, the things that our bodies sense in our chests.

Annie: Yes!

Curt: If I don't sense it in my chest, it has not yet become fully real to me. So that's kind of behind where that word comes from.

Annie: I'm sorry we're only six minutes and I'm already crying. Does this happen a lot when you do podcast interviews?

Curt: It's happened before.

Annie: You're like, "Yes, Annie, this is what I do to people. This is what I do to people." I was sitting by the pool on vacation reading this book." The pool was full of kids. I'm not married yet, don't have kids yet. So it's just me. And I'm on vacation by myself and I am bawling reading this book. And I feel like my chest is going to explode, sorry, when I'm reading about what we get to make and what God has invited us into if we will be vulnerable enough to admit we want to do the work that is before us.

And in my personal life, I'm in a moment where I'm also having to be braver than I've been before in a long time. And it's requiring vulnerability, but I see beauty on the other side, and I see an artifact coming, and we're going to build something that is worth this.

Curt: Right. Right.

Annie: So when you talk about the book being seen, soothed, safe and secure, those are the four things we want. Those are four things when we feel desire and us, if I'm retelling your book to you correctly-

Curt: Yeah, right on.

Annie: When we feel desire in us is because we are longing to be seen, soothed, safe, or secure. Is that true?

Curt: Right. Right,

Annie: Is it all four of them?

Curt: It's all four and it starts at birth and it never ends. I like to say that every baby comes into the world looking for someone looking for her. And it never stops. It never stops. So for us to become these artifacts, these objects, this pulsating body of beauty, not just because individually...like I'm only able to become beautiful to the degree that you and I become beautiful together. They're direct functions of each other.

So the first thing that has to happen is the baby has to literally be seen. And not just seen as an object, "Oh, there she is," but also seen then to be soothed. Because I'm not just going to admire her as the distant observer, I'm going to engage with her and she comes out crying, she comes out wanting to nurse, she comes out with all these needs, right?

Annie: Yeah.

Curt: Needing to be soothed. And then to be soothed over time, with that, the baby, the newborn, the infant, toddler, the 58-year-old learns that they're safe, right? That they can be confident in this environment in which I'm growing up. I can learn. And that's safe. One of the things that we talked about in the book, the safety is not just from the outside environment, not just save from things that are bad that are going to happen to me, I'm also learning to be safe from myself.

Annie: Yes, I am safe in my own self. Yeah.

Curt: Right. Because part of God's love is as much about His no as is His yes. And so the two-year-old who has the impulse to do all kinds of things at some point will need to be trained to be safe from themselves, in addition to safe from outside things.

And once this is constructed, we move into what I would consider to be this notion of secure. Tina Payne Bryson and Dan Siegel kind of named these four words, but here's where I diverge from them a little bit. When I talk about security, this notion... Genesis 2:26-28, is just something you can't avoid as human being. "Therefore be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth." Flourish, extend, steward it, grow it, create, even as your creator has also created.

And this notion of I'm going to be safe in order for me now to launch out, in order for me to be secure enough to take risks, secure enough to make mistakes, secure enough to know that I'm going to try things and there's going to be ruptures. If I'm going to love you well enough. At some point, I'm going to piss you off, at some point, you're going to hurt my feelings.

I need to know that when I experienced ruptures that would we do the work of repair. When things fall apart, I always have a place where I can return to, where I'm going to be seen, soothed, and safe—this secure base. And so here's where this is about secure attachment. But we would say this is written into the first chapter of Genesis. When you imagine the Holy Trinity, saying, "Let us make mankind," we would presume that they see Good Friday coming.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Curt: And even so, you wonder, "Is Jesus thinking, 'I'm not sure that this is such a good idea.'"

Annie: Right. We don't have to start there.

Curt: We don't. "Do you really want to do this?" And yet there is this sense in which He is secure enough that He launches into this space that is going to leave Him in a very vulnerable, dangerous place. Because He knows, even as He's being crucified, that He is being seen, soothed, safe. Even in a space that is anything but that.

Annie: Yes!

Curt: And this is where we would say that beauty really begins to emerge. It's not hard for us to look at the things that we have created that are beautiful, everything from your network to the Grand Canyon to... my wife and I just got back from nine days in Iceland.

Annie: Oh, was it awesome?

Curt: I have no words.

Annie: Oh.

Curt: I have no words. And that's not hard to imagine beauty. It's very different to imagine beauty and crucifixion. It's different to imagine beauty in relationships that are so horribly fractioned in our racism, in our political difficulties, all the things. Difficult.

And we would say but it is those spaces that God looks back through Easter and says, "Good Friday tells us that there's nothing more beautiful than a crucified Lord in the context of Easter." And so part of what we do, even as followers of Jesus is that we are called to look for beauty on the other side of people's brokenness and to invite them to become curious about where the beauty is.

Of course, as we say... and I wrote about one of the examples of a marriage where they come into the office, and I'm asking, "What's the new beautiful thing you want to create?" And they're like, "What the heck."

Annie: They don't have it.

Curt: "It doesn't make any sense at all." This is what Jesus is talking about when they're so confused about how suffering is invariably going to lead, not because of its good in and of itself, but because God is never leaving us without His witness.

[00:20:59] <music>

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And now back to our conversation with Curt.

[00:22:27] <music

Annie: I love that part of the book where you said what's the beautiful thing you want to create? Will you talk to our single friends for just a minute, the men and women who aren't married yet. When I was reading that I thought, yeah, I want to be with the man who we're creating something beautiful that's outside of ourselves. How do we look for that? And how can you know before you're married to someone? That's not a question, you sit down over pizza and go, "What's the beautiful thing you want to create?" Because do I want to create the same beautiful thing?

Curt: Right. Right.

Annie: How do we sense that or sort that or look for that or pray for that?

Curt: This would be my reflection. Our listeners can take it or leave it. This is part of the issue when we say, "What do we say to our single friends?" And I would say that we have to be careful to talk to our single friends as if the experience that they have somehow is just theirs alone. Because I would want to say to our married friends, we don't get to talk to our single friends without you being in the room.

This is as much about those of us who are in different spaces in life, especially in a culture that has made marriage a Holy Grail. We would want to say that we want those differentiated parts of our body of Jesus to be co-creating things so that we're not just saying to one part of the body our single friends, "What are you? How are you going to do this?" We want to say, "How are you? "And then to our married friends, "How are we going to do this together?" The ear doesn't get to say, "Well, because I'm not an eye. I don't..."

Annie: "I don't make something beautiful."

Curt: Right. The other thing I would say though is that I have a number of friends who are single who have just like enriched my... they continue to enrich me and not just because they're single, but because of who they are living, pulsating breathing person. And I want them not to be alone in the world. And I want them also though to be recognizing that... and this is what's really difficult for us.

You know, I say like when I hear Matthew 5 when Jesus says, "You're the light of the world. And who would light a lamp and then put it under a bushel?" Implying, of course, why would you do that if you're a light?" So I hear Jesus saying, "You're the light of the world, Curt. Don't screw it up." And what if instead, Jesus is really saying, "Annie, I look at you and I've never seen anything so illuminating." The problem is I don't believe that's the case—that I'm illuminating.

In our practice, we do a men's group that runs for about eight or nine months every year. And I can't tell you how many men for whom it is true who absolutely do not believe that they have emotional impact in the world. They don't believe it. There's no felt sense that when I walk in the room, the room is going to be more beautiful.

Annie: Wow.

Curt: There's no something like, I walk in the room and like, What do I got to do? Fix things? What do I do to make sure that I don't screw things up? How am I going to help things? There's no sense that my presence in the room necessarily can create a felt sense for the people in the room to be seen, soothed, safe, secure because I myself have not had the experience of doing it.

So I do believe that one of the things that we can do is to be practitioners of this work, those four S's with the people around us, discovering that as we are doing the work of enabling others to be seen, soothed, safe. That also it's not just that I create the opportunity for them to be secure. That practice also enables me to have the felt sense of how my life has impact on others.

One of the things that we recognize and there difference between somebody who does individual counseling with, somebody who's in a group, the difference between those two settings, one difference is that if I'm a patient in a counseling session and you're my therapist, I don't really get a lot of impressions that I'm being of much help to you. Like that's not what I'm paying you for. I'm not paying you for me to help you.

But in these confessional communities, one of the most important things that we recognize is that people begin to have the experience that I actually am helpful for the others in this community. And I'm, interestingly enough, not most helpful for them because I offer my wisdom and my wit and my suggestions. I'm actually most powerfully helpful because of my vulnerability, because of the parts of my life that are broken. Which of course is completely counterintuitive. But once again, it's all about Good Friday.

This whole notion of how we are vulnerable with others actually creates the opportunity for them to be seen, oddly enough. Because when I talk about the part of my story that I hate the most, that very act creates resonance within others about their own stories that heretofore they have not thought about that they don't know about even. I don't know that that's helpful. That's a lot of yapping about your question for our single friends.

Annie: No, that's so helpful. Everyone listening knows I'm a big fan of counseling. I've been in individual counseling for eight years, weekly, monthly, whatever, in the same relationship. And I went to On Site. And so I've done the group therapy experiential thing, and it blew my mind how listening to other people's stories healed me. Their stories were so different from mine. But when they would be vulnerable, and tell us what was really true going on in them, something would change in me about my story even though it was totally different.

Curt: Right. Right. We like to say that, when people ask, "what do you do?" I say, "My job is to help people tell their stories more truly." That's my job. And we have to recognize that we can't tell our stories most truly unless we are doing it consciously and intentionally with collaborators.

Annie: With collaborators.

Curt: The reality is nobody in the world ever self-identifies about anything.

Annie: I know. I hate that. I hate that though.

Curt: Nobody self-identifies. So what actually happens-

Annie: I want to believe that the story I experience is true. And it's not 100% true.

Curt: Right. So there are certain parts of my story that I cannot know unless you help me tell it. I mean, how many times have we been in... may you have had this experience where someone tell some of their story, and as they do so their words aren't really matching their emotional expression? And then someone else in the room says, "John, when you were talking about that, aren't you furious with your father? And John's like, "It's just something that happened to me." It's not until Sarah says to John, "I'm furious with your father than John has any access to the anger that is within him."

And here's where the beauty of God's created neurobiology comes into play. Because these things that we call mirror neurons, these resonant circuits or in which when you are being most true, especially about the things that are most painful, your right brain is talking to my right brain in a way that my left brain, which has worked really, really hard to protect me, it's all circumvented.

Annie: Yeah. I can't have any voice.

Curt: I can't put myself any longer from your vulnerable transparency. And if I find myself feeling things, and oftentimes, like, I don't even know what this is that I'm feeling, let alone where it's coming from, how it's related to my story. But the degree to which I've been working all my life, burning tons of energy trying to contain all that, which means that that is energy I do not have available to create.

Annie: To create. That blew my mind when you wrote that. But then it's almost like when I am busy managing my shame and holding and trying to live in a world where I'm managing my shame, I am using energy that is meant to be creating something beautiful out of vulnerability.

Curt: Right. Right.

Annie: Right.

Curt: Right.

Annie: Right. You bring up in the book a lot imagination and the power of imagination. I'm an Enneagram 7. And so I can reframe very well. And when I am in a relationship

or when I'm in a work relationship, I can actually imagine very far down the path. It's part of how I know whether to keep going-

Curt: Right. Right

Annie: ...is can I see as far? I say a lot, "I love the trailer, I want to watch the movie." But that doesn't mean the movie goes the way I thought, because the trailer never has the worst parts. The trailer never has the slow parts. But I can see a lot of trailers in my story. Will you talk a little bit about the power of imagination? And how do we know when we're going too far? How do I know when I've gone too far in my imagination and done too much? Because I don't know. I just let myself go, Curt.

Curt: Right. Right. Well, a couple of things, I think I would say. One is, I say this to folks, apart from certain conditions in which we are traumatized, medically, a brain tumor, head injury, so on and so forth, the brain is actually a pretty trustworthy organ. It's pretty trustworthy.

Annie: The brain is a pretty trustworthy organ.

Curt: It's a very trustworthy organ. Our challenge is that we often have experiences that because of their discomfort that we have, we identify that as a problem, we identify that as like, no, there's something wrong with me.

So if I'm anxious, I think my anxiety is there's something wrong. And that's not untrue to a certain degree. But what we really want to be curious about is like, Well, what is it telling you? What is it telling you? How does that relate to your question?

When we imagine things, we like to say that imagination can cover a lot of ground. I can daydream in my imagination. I can imagine the future as in trailer in the movie. I can imagine this. I see how this thing ends. And yet we never imagine in terms of our time heading into the future, we never imagine anything that we aren't simultaneously remembering. Which is where I like to say we remember our futures.

I don't ever imagine anything in my future that is not an extension of something that I've already experienced in my past. So when I imagine that things are going to go wrong, in some respects, it's going to be a function of my insecure attachment in my unrepaired ruptures in the past.

And so when my enneagram sevenness see all these things, one thing that we would want to say is that in our work that we do, we are always wanting to be

curious about, like, what is it that you do imagine? Talk about that story, and attach the emotional states that you have. What's going to happen to you?

One of the things that we say about our imagination is it is fueled by emotion. And emotion is really the thing that's in charge of directing where this goes. And it's true that there are two ways in which imaginations can be imperfectly helpful. One is this notion of like, "I can't imagine."

So for instance, when we asked the question, "What do you want?" "I don't know. I don't know what I want." That is a sign of a truncated imagination. But it has been sheared off for all kinds of reasons. Because maybe I grew up in a house where to imagine what I would want to imagine doing things, gets hooked together with painful experiences of being poorly disciplined or being shamed, made to feel afraid, and so forth. And so I don't allow myself. In fact, I practiced not allowing myself to imagine things. And I need someone else to help extend my imagination.

And then there's the other side of that where, you know, I have a difficult life and I let my imagination go anywhere. I just go all kinds of places. In both instances, the creative act always has to have proper boundaries. The creative act of imagination has to have boundaries. When Makoto Fujimura paints-

Annie: Oh, I love that you point at those paintings. I looked at all of them.

Curt: Yeah. I mean, again, I have no words. But when he paints, he doesn't have an endless canvas.

Annie: That's right. That's right.

Curt: There's a boundary.

Annie: That's right. That's right.

Curt: I mean, at some point, Beethoven's Ninth comes to an end. And it's in these spaces that I would say that relationally our boundaries are made by our cloud of witnesses. We want to continue to come back to these and say, "Here's what I'm wondering, What are you thinking?" And I'm not looking for you just to give me your analysis of what I think.

When I say, "Annie, here's what I'm thinking of doing," and you say, "Well, gosh, Curt, I feel really excited and I feel worried." And you talk to me about what you're worried about. And before you know it, I find that well, your worry actually

touches some of my worry. And before you know it, what I told you initially that I'm imagining gets to be expanded, but it also gets to be pruned. It also gets to be shaped. So that in the very same way that God, in the beginning, gives us this expansive palette in the garden, He also says no, He also puts a boundary on this.

And so our imaginations, necessarily as they are needing to be expanded... I mean, imagine if you're 18 to 36 months after the resurrection and you're trying to make sense of the book of Isaiah.

Annie: Right.

Curt: We knew for the last 400 years what the book of Isaiah was pointing to and the kind of Messiah he was pointing to, and all the things. And now we have people who've had an experience with a person who we think might be more than just a person whose Messiah is. They have to expand their capacity to imagine those texts. And they don't just have one person. They all have to do this together.

And in the same way, our expressions of those texts in which we also need people to help us imagine our lives on a regular ongoing basis.

[00:38:00] <music>

Sponsor: Hey, friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about another one of our incredible partners SuperBeets from HumanN. With as many things as there are demanding our attention, it can be tough to make sure you're getting all the nutrients you need throughout your day.

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And now back to finish our conversation with Curt Thompson.

[00:39:55] <music>

Annie: Actually, I'd like to read you a quote of your own, if you don't mind, and have you respond to it about imagination. And this is from the *Soul of Desire*. "Before we live into a different future, we must imagine it. And for us to imagine our future as God does, we will need His help, in particular, for no human is going to imagine the future as God does."

Curt: Right. I mean, I'm currently reading for the second time through this book called *Dominion* by Tom Holland, British author of antiquities. He was made famous by writing about a number of different kingdoms of ancient world. And he's writing about how our world has been shaped by Christianity. He's not a believer, but I would recommend the book to anyone.

He talks about this notion of how crucifixion in the Roman world was something that was so heinous that the Romans themselves, the Romans, and the Greeks who invented it wouldn't even talk about it in polite company, because it was so embarrassing to them as a public thing. But yet they used it throughout the kingdom as a way to contain unruly peoples.

And Holland asks the question... it was so embarrassing to the Romans that they didn't even keep records of it. There's very few records of it. So he says, "How is it possible that one in particular, one in particular, changes the world?" He would say, like, Look, the whole notion of men becoming gods, very common. But the men

who became gods in the Roman world were Caesars. They weren't slaves. They weren't people who were beaten. Right? They didn't become gods by crucifixion.

Nobody, but God would come up with Good Friday and resurrection. Nobody but God. We can't imagine these things. The evidence of the disciples, like, I don't know what you're talking about, right? I don't know which of these things must be fulfilled. Even on the road to Emmaus, Jesus has talked to them. They don't get it. Right?

Annie: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Curt: It's hard to imagine until He breaks the bread and they have an embodied experience with somebody. Like, you can talk all day long about theology. And talking out of my left side of my brain in and of itself is not going to be enough to help me imagine until someone else says, "Well, what do you think of this?"

And the moment you say to me, "Curt, what do you think if your marriage means this? What do you think if your singleness means this? What do you think..." The first thing that I'll discover is that the reason I'm going to have a hard time imagining with you is because it scares me. It taps into my unfinished business.

You know, Peter, a fisherman, and Jesus says, "Get out of the boat." And Peter is like, "This is what? But because you asked me, I'll do this." Again, we talk about imagination, often as a function of the mind that I do in this abstract place somewhere.

And I want to suggest to us that imagination is always, once again, deeply materially linked to relationship. I want to say to you, I want you to imagine this with me. And I want you to know that when you start down this path, I'm not ever leaving the room. That when things get dicey, when things get hard, when things are confusing, you need to know I'm not leaving the room.

Annie: Imagination feels so deeply tied to hope.

Curt: Right.

Annie: It feels like when we stop imagining it's because we are afraid of the disappointment if we don't get the thing we imagined. For every type of person, for young to old, married to single parents, non-parents, we're afraid to hope, so we're afraid to imagine. Does that feel true?

Curt: Right. Well, I think, to your question earlier about "what do we do?", I mean, our imaginations, like I can use my imagination all day, every day in such a way that has me down the rabbit hole of shame. That's how I imagined my life. Because we're never not using our imaginations. Literally-

Annie: We're never not using our imaginations. Right.

Curt: Because I image things. I don't think things without images in my head about the story that's behind it. So I'm always either moving toward Jesus or away from Him in my use of imagination. And that's why I need other people in my life who can help me imagine a different story because shame has so hijacked in my own personal life. Like I'm a professional sinner. Like I'm really good at this.

And so I need you on a regularly cadenced to basis to help form new neural imaginative networks. Such that I can hope, as you're describing, but I'm able to hope because in the same way that a toddler who is first learning to walk hopes, because she's walking towards someone she sees. I can hope that my legs will hold me, mostly because I'm not worried that they won't.

And when they don't, mom and dad are coming for me. They're never not coming for me. And it's in that space that hope is often built through suffering, not just because I get what I want, but because even when what I want doesn't happen, somebody's coming from me in order for me, once again, to be seen, soothed, safe.

Annie: Yeah. That is the trick of hope—knowing your legs can hold you and still falling.

Curt: And when this happens, it gives me confidence, faith... these three remain: faith, hope, love. I can hope and I can expand my imagination. Not primarily because I get what I want but because in the suffering toward any... any movement continues to remind me that I am not left by myself.

Annie: Yes. How do we find these communities? I mean, you've built them through your practice. So many of us feel lonely, so many of us don't have this kind of confessional community or group therapy. How do we even find it where we live?

Curt: It's a great question. Whenever I talk about this, I think back to the book called *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* by Paul Borgman. Borgman was a professor of literature at Gordon College. He taught the book of Genesis as a literature course, not as a theological course, a literature course, which turned into a book.

Annie: Oh, I'm going to read that. That's awesome.

Curt: In this book, he focuses on three major characters: Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. One of the questions that he posed when I read this book 20 years ago, he said, "Who knows how many people God tried to convince to go with Him to Canaan, before Abraham finally agreed?"

Annie: Wow.

Curt: We don't know because there's no story.

Annie: We don't know.

Curt: And I thought, "Oh, my goodness. The same thing is true of Jesus." God's asking Abraham, "would you come with?" And who knows who else God has asked? He asked Abraham, and Abraham finally goes. And then Jesus comes along and starts asking people to be His disciple. Who knows how many He asked who said no before the record starts to be recorded? We do know that there were others who... He did ask the rich young ruler, others that He did ask, "Come and follow Me" who said no.

The first thing that I would want to say is this notion of partnership, this notion of integration, this notion of community, I just want us to know that Jesus knows exactly how hard this is. This is not a foregone conclusion that Jesus said, like, "Yeah, this is the way I've made it. Just go do this." No. It is really hard to do. And He asks people, and some say yes, some say no.

So the first thing I want to say is this is hard to do. And it's hard to do not because we're weak, not because we're pansies, but because evil finds it to be anathema. Evil knows that the moment that you start to do this work, it's days are even more numbered.

Annie: Yes.

Curt: So, first step is you're not alone in knowing. God knows that this is hard to do. In the TV series *The Chosen*, there's this one line where Jesus is having a conversation with another man. And He says, "I ask a lot from people who want to follow me and I ask very little of those who do not." So He knows that He's asking a lot.

Tactically I'm just going to name some things for us to do but recognizing that this is hard to do, and we just keep asking. So our listeners may think if you can think of one person with whom you wouldn't be willing to try the notion of telling your

story to them and say, like, "I'd like to have some time for us to know each other and I want to tell you my story and I want you to tell me yours. And I want us to be vulnerable about that."

Of course, we're not just talking about anybody off the street. We're not talking about just doing it. Jesus didn't just randomly pick people. And we're going to try this. I remember I was here in Nashville a number of years ago speaking at a church and I said to folks, "This whole notion of creating these communities is really hard to do, and so much so that people will protect against, like, 'No, I don't want to do that.' And being kind of, you know, denied the opportunity. People want to do this with you, you just don't try."

I said, "It's hard to do. I don't know if anybody's going to do it." Six months later I got an email from three women who said, "We were the three people that you said we're going to do this. And for the last six months, we have been doing this. And it has not only transformed our lives, but it has transformed people around us because people are actually asking us what's different about you."

Now, it means then we can start with one person and then we bring another one in, and then we bring another one in. And I would say when you have a group of five, six, or seven folks that are part of this group that can transparently tell your story on an ongoing basis, this is why we call our groups confessional communities. Not because we're confessing sin alone but because we are telling our stories more truly, always acknowledging this is really hard to do. Nobody does this perfectly.

That's not the point. Jesus is not worried about the process. He's not worried about us doing this perfectly. He knows we're not going to do this perfectly. I mean, like otherwise, He wouldn't have picked disciples. He could have just done this all by Himself.

And so once we have two or three people, I would say, try that on for size. And you say, "Well, what does that mean to tell your story? I would say we take 20 minutes and tell your story. It's not easy to tell your whole story in 20 minutes. There are things I'm going to leave out. And then the other person tells their story.

In these groups, we have what I call a storytelling liturgy that we use, where it's a four-part back and forth, back and forth thing that a person tells their story. And then the listeners just reflect what they feel. They don't reflect what they think, they don't reflect their analysis of their story. They just reflect what they're feeling.

And then we give the storyteller the opportunity to respond to: what does it been like for you to hear other people's reactions to what you said? And they then talk about what their emotional states are. And countless times when someone talks about feeling things that they didn't know that they felt because of other people expressing things about their story, they didn't know they didn't know.

And then we give the listeners one more chance to name "what it's been like for you to have this experience of recognizing how your words has impacted someone else?" Again, back to this notion that we don't believe that we're that illuminating?

Annie: Yes, yes.

Curt: And yet when Jesus says, "You're the light of the world," it's not just a comment of responsibility, it's a comment of hope. To your point, it's a comment of saying, "Your being illuminating is going to enable others' imaginations to see that even when you're in the boat in really, really horrible weather, I'm going to invite you to step out of it."

I want to say that this practice takes time. This is not a thing that you do in six weeks. This is about the slow work of God. Everything about the world tells us that God is a God who works slowly because He is unwilling for any part of human experience to be left untouched by Him.

So we want to be in a place where I would also say... I mean, this is where your network... Your network is such a brilliant thing. This sense that you're not just there to support and say, "Oh, we can do this for you, we can do this for you, and do this for you." You're also there to talk to each other about what... when you're pulling your hair out, when things feel like they're falling around you, when someone is feeling broken, even in their vocational work to have you be able to say, "This is really hard," to have you weep with them about what's happening in their work, and say, "This is really hard and I'm not leaving the room."

Annie: This is really hard and I'm not leaving the room. That is one of the safest things I think I could ever hear from someone.

Curt: I would say this last thing. There are two major questions that we ask people frequently in these congressional groups. So the first question is, what do you want? We keep asking, What do you want? And what do you want behind that? What do you want behind that? What do you want? Because we are people of longing. We are people of great desire because we are imaging a God who has

made us, a God of great desire, who desires us to desire Him, and who desires us to be desired by Him.

And we are people of great grief. We are people of great longing and we are people of great grief. And life is to be lived in middle of those two things. Those two things. "In this world, you will have tribulation." And then he doesn't say but it's okay. He said, "But be of good cheer.

Even in the face of your longing, even in the face of your grief, be of good cheer." Because in the presence of nobody leaving the room because of what my spirit is doing, joy is going to be discovered. And not only joy but creativity, the likes of which you could never have realized unless or until you were willing to reveal the part of your life that was broken in the first place.

Annie: I could just keep you trapped in this room for a couple of hours. I just can't tell you how much your work means to me. So this is has been-

Curt: I know we got to... butwe can hang. I just want to take it in. I'm a guy who worries about his work isn't enough. So even right now it's a real moment, and I feel really seen and soothed, safe, secure. Here, even in this space, here, I really feel like God has shown up for me here now. So I'm so grateful.

Annie: I lay by a pool and felt seen and secure and safe and soothed by you. So it is more than I could have asked the Lord to do to have you feel some degree of what your work has done for me. So, that is it.

Curt: Thank you.

Annie: Thank you so much. I can't wait for people to get their hands on this. And until they can, they've got *Soul of Shame*, *Anatomy of the Soul*. But *Soul of Desire* is a book and a work that will make some artifacts that people will never forget, for the glory of God.

Curt: Thanks be to God.

[00:56:50] <outro music>

Outro: You guys, I mean, wow, right? Wow. We just were teary the whole way through. What a gift! What a gift Curt is to us! And I'm just so thankful. Be sure you get a copy of the *Soul of Desire* and make sure you're following Curt. Tell him thanks so much for being on the show.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, all the places you may need me, that's how you can find me. And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you. I'll do the same. Have a great weekend. We'll see you back here on Monday with one of our favorites John Mark Comer. See you then.