

# **Seeing the Invisible— God from Ground Level**

**by Robert Robbins**

© Copyright 2011 by Robert G. Robbins.  
All rights reserved.

**Part 1**

# **In the Middle**

*Who are we  
and where is the Invisible God?*

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,  
for He who promised is faithful.  
And let us consider how to stir up one another  
to love and good works . . .  
Hebrews 10:23-24*

## The View from Forty

*Now this is not the end.  
It is not even the beginning of the end.  
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*

Winston Churchill could have said, “This is, perhaps, the beginning of the middle.” But the ring of patriotic ardor and hope would have been sadly lacking. Somehow, the concept of “middle” lacks the romance of “beginning,” with all its aspirations—as well as the satisfaction of “ending,” with its knowledge of a fight well fought.

But it is in the middle that we find ourselves. I started laughing with Melissa about being middle-aged several years ago. She told me that I could be middle-aged if I wanted to be, but she wasn’t there yet! Yet now I am well into my forties, and with my beloved wife just a pace behind me, the fact is undeniable: We are at the mid-point of a normal, God-allotted life-span.

## *Chapter 1*

# Common Era

After dinner on the lawn, a warm-weather tradition, Melissa and I sat enjoying a few minutes of conversation. Andrew and Rosemary, apparently needing to burn off a few spare calories, began racing from one end of the side yard to the other. Little feet flying over summer grass; little arms pumping earnestly in semi-coordination; little hearts racing. And then, flopping down at the finish line, the laughter of merry little voices had us all laughing. The spontaneity of dueling siblings, not so unequal in their abilities, turned the rest of us into a crowd of spectators cheering on Olympians.

All was well until my second daughter urged that Melissa and I join in with our legs as well as our voices. She wanted to challenge her father. Lots of good reasons could be marshaled against the idea: my bare feet were not as tough as hers; I hadn't run, all out, in longer than I could readily remember; we were still resting after dinner; it had been a busy day. . . .

But in the joy of the moment, somehow I said, "yes"—and even dragged Melissa into the starting lineup.

When someone shouted "go," more than a dozen feet thundered down the lawn, arms swinging, hearts pounding. But when we crossed the finish line, the terrible truth was revealed: my twelve-year-old daughter had beaten her father by an eyelash.

She submitted to a rematch . . . and then another rematch . . . until the fact was unavoidable—I could not beat my daughter even once.

I could comfort myself saying, "I never was any good at sprinting," or "Must be the influence of my wife's side of the family." But the plain reality is that one generation is making room for another. My own children are surpassing me.

And that is the way it should be though it is a little disconcerting when it actually happens. A growing awareness of the passage of time becomes focused in a single moment and I realize that my time is short, my days are few.

And then, seven-year-old Andrew made a startling revelation that set me thinking: “I was running so fast that I forgot where I was going!”

Many of us in the middle of life would have to make a similar confession. We are so busy living that we have forgotten what life is all about. We are the mechanic who is so enamored with nuts and bolts that he forgets he is building an engine. We are the cook whose interest in the quality of individual ingredients makes her forget that she is in the kitchen to bake a cake.

And painfully closer to home, we are parents who are so caught up in making sure that our children get a good education and participate in all the best extracurricular activities that we forget we are fashioning lives. We are husbands working long hours to bring home a paycheck that will afford our families the best “quality of life”—while we are absent. We are wives who are so busy making our house a pleasant place to live that we lose sight of what a home really is.

This “forgetfulness” is one of the great challenges for anyone in the middle of life or the middle of an experience. In crossing life’s streams, our whole being is concentrated on getting to the other side. Gasping for breath and blinking the water out of our eyes, it is as though the whole universe stops and waits while we exert mind and body on one thing alone.

But in reality, the world doesn’t stop just because we are in the middle of a job or a crisis or a season of life. The clock keeps ticking and the hours keep marching past. Opportunities knock and are gone when we are too busy to answer the door.

It is one thing when a momentary crisis consumes all our energies and we are temporarily lost in a world of our own, like little Andrew

who forgot where he was going in our family race. But is quite another thing when we lose our connection to reality for entire periods of life.

Such forgetfulness has an insidious way of begetting more forgetfulness until we are not just crossing a stream but adrift on an ocean without chart or compass. We may be paddling furiously, but we haven't the faintest idea whether we are going anywhere at all. Life becomes a convoluted joke to which no one seems to remember the punch line.

Some of us find ourselves in the middle of life quite surprised, like an actor in a story who somehow didn't know the plot, or a person who looks in a mirror and doesn't recognize the face that looks back. This is not what we thought life would be like.

We used to dream, to imagine what life would be when we reached this point in our journey. We imagined that we would have done great things and made a name for ourselves and be loved by all who know us and respected by all who don't. We would have plenty of money and good health and lots of free time. And always there would be shining memories of the past and bright hopes for the future. No regrets—that was our motto.

We aspired to greatness, but greatness has not come. We muddle past the milestones of life, and no one pays any attention. Even in our little triumphs, who really cares that we painted the back porch a beautiful shade of green, or that our garden blooms this year as never before, or that we finally saved enough to add a much needed bathroom to our home? On the crowded sidewalk of existence, filled with thousands upon thousands of other muddlers, each looking at his own feet, each pondering his own experience, few glance up to flash a smile of approval. Even fewer really care.

And if we have achieved what we hoped for, what does it matter anyway? The greatest are a mist before the sunrise, their memories a hollow reminder that once upon a time there was a man who . . .

founded a great company and made a mint . . . got elected as mayor six times consecutively . . . hit so many home runs that people almost lost count. Can they hear their praise from the grave?

Nobody asks us what we are going to be when we grow up anymore, but we still feel like we want to become something, something other than what we are. And the further we progress through life, the less likely it appears that we are going to be anything that really matters.

We know the ditty that one person can make a difference, and after a fashion we even believe it. If we don't wash the dishes they just pile up in the sink and spill out onto the floor. That would be different. Or the family would just have to start using unwashed plates, and someone could catch a terrible exotic disease, and we would be jailed for being negligent parents. That would be different, too. So washing dishes does make a difference.

Just not the kind of difference that we wanted to make.

It is this daily grind of middle life that is one of its most dangerous elements, as it often goes hand-in-hand with a general sense of disillusionment and emptiness. Typically, our lives usually don't fail all at once. Like an engine, they wear down until something catastrophic occurs. The casual observer may remark, "Boy, that was sure a bolt from the blue." But the tuned ear would have heard the tell-tale knock of metal on metal and the trained eye would have seen signs of coming trouble.

Someone may say, "It's all fine to say that the daily grind is a dangerous place to live, but what are we going to do about it? Are you suggesting that we exchange the pauper's rags for the prince's finery? Or that we go bungee jumping every afternoon at 3:00? Or that we quit our jobs and chase our dreams with no concern for the welfare of our families?"

No. I did not say that the daily grind is the problem, but that it is dangerous.

And the danger is not in the plethora of little things themselves, but in the apathy that comes from being consumed by them.

What we need in the middle of life is not elevation to another station in life. We don't need to win the lottery or hike Mt. Everest or quit our jobs. We need a transformed view of the normal things that make up life. We need a view of the Invisible from the valley of ordinary living.

Every so often we catch a glimpse of what life is all about—and the bracing freshness of that vision invigorates us with new strength and hope, or challenges the validity of the direction that we have unwittingly fallen into. But a life that is worthwhile cannot just stand around waiting for a shaft of sunlight to suddenly illumine the darkness. In the darkness, in our confusion and misunderstanding, we must *seek* the Light.

Jesus' own disciples saw His unveiled glory only once. And then it was only three of them. During the rest of Jesus' ministry on earth, the disciples were required to look with eyes of faith in order to see the glory of God. It was visible in the healing of the blind man and the confrontations with the powers of darkness and the raising of Lazarus. But it was also visible as the thirteen men walked together down dusty roads and talked of the kingdom of heaven. It was even visible when they sat down and shared a meal together—for in whatever Jesus did, whether eating or drinking or healing or praying, He glorified God.

The disciples didn't always catch the vision. Many times they were lost behind the curtain of the ordinary. Like the time Jesus warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees:

*And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how*

*many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”*

*Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:7-12).*

Jesus used common, ordinary things to expound divine realities. The normal things like planting a field or gathering a harvest or welcoming a wayward son were tiny pictures to reveal the Invisible God. He did not want the understanding of His followers to stop with the earthly pictures, but by faith to see the Father and His ways.

So what keeps us, as Jesus’ modern followers, from getting through to the great Realities He wants to reveal through normal things? Why don’t we see the hand of God at work, at home, in every trial and blessing?

- **I’m busy.**

When I was a single guy employed by a Christian ministry, I worked night and day. I liked what I was doing, felt it was valuable, and I felt significant and important doing it. During those years, I usually returned to visit my family about every six months. It was on one of these occasions that a dear relative asked me some question like, “How have you been?” and I answered, “Busy.”

I don’t remember the exact words of the response, but the gist of it was, “If busy is all that you have to say for yourself, you don’t have much to say.”

The comment was made much more kindly than that, but the thought continues to ring in my ears to this day. Really, it is true. If the sum total of living is, “Well, that was a busy week,” then we missed the entire point.

No doubt there are many times when we plod forward without a vision, mouth in the dust. These times call for faithfulness and

determination: “God called me to do this thing and I must keep on until He says to stop.”

But frequently, the reason we are not seeing the Invisible, is because we are too busy to spend any time looking for Him.

In the economy of eternity, God has established the rule that those who would find Him must look for Him. This is not a game of hide-and-seek in which we endlessly pursue a God who is trying to elude us. This is the best kind of seeking: While we seek for God, He is seeking to reveal Himself to us. This is not an Easter egg hunt in which we perpetually hope that we might catch a glimpse of God around the next corner or under the next bush. We can be perfectly confident: *“You will seek Me and find Me. When you seek Me with all your heart, I will be found by you, declares the Lord . . .”* (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

Busyness reduces all of life to a to-do list. If we are “spiritual” and “disciplined” we might have “Seek God” on the to-do list. Maybe we even have it at the top.

The trouble is that God doesn’t want a check box next to His name. “There, I read my Bible and prayed. Got that out of the way. Now what was it that I needed to do today?”

God wants the entire to-do list to flow out of seeking Him. We don’t seek Him for five minutes and then assume that we are done for the day. We are to seek for Him in every circumstance, no matter how routine. “How can I see God in this situation, at this moment?” should be our prayer. And, if God should re-direct our day through an unexpected event or need (something that happens so frequently that the unexpected should be the expected), we don’t need to feel that our schedule was jilted. We don’t need to despair, “Now how will I get it all done?” This interruption is God’s intervention; He is showing us His will as we are seeking Him. And as to getting it all done, it may be that He didn’t want us to do it or that He has another, better means for meeting the need.

I've run my life on a to-do list for a long time. I put down all the things that seem essential to accomplish or that I want to do. There is no problem with a list to keep organized; in fact, it can be a useful way to keep from losing your head in the middle of life. Some people might get fancy about it and prioritize each item or color code it. But however well thought through, if we are going to see God in life, it is essential that the to-do list be subjected to Him.

*Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand (Proverbs 19:21).*

This is not just a gift of words, "Here is my list, Lord. You can see what needs to be done, and I give each item on it to You." Great start, but if we snatch the list up after the "Amen" and proceed into the day like the list belongs to us, then we are no better than liars. The epitaph for such a day might well read, "He was busy." A pretty sad way to bury a perfectly good set of twenty-four hours.

Either we will seek God as our first and highest priority, or busyness will conquer us.

- **I'm unconvinced.**

"Is seeing the Invisible really all that important?" We might never actually utter these words, but the underlying attitude is all too common.

One Sunday night years ago I decided that I would trim up the back of my own hair. Never mind that I had never done it before; with my hairstyle it just couldn't be that complicated.

I grabbed a pair of scissors, pinched the hair between two horizontal fingers, and cut. Measuring the length against the width of my fingers, it seemed that nothing could go wrong. Who needs a mirror?

Later in the evening, roommates crowded around me and explained in a mixture of horror and humor that the back of my head looked

like it had been zigzagged. How I had gone so far astray, I still don't know. But, the guys insisted that something must be done before I showed up for work on Monday.

There are some things that are best not done blind.

And when it comes to life, there is no substitute for seeing the Invisible God in every circumstance.

Let me clarify: Seeing God in every circumstance does not mean that we will always understand why God does what He does. Some things will remain a mystery all through life. We may not see how He is at work, but we can always see Him.

I was in Moscow, Russia, when the pastor of an unregistered church was asked what doctrine or Scripture had particularly sustained him during years of imprisonment for his faith. As I recall, he said that it was not one specific truth or passage that upheld him, but the presence of Jesus Himself.

God speaks to us through His Word and reasons with us as we contemplate the massive doctrines which reveal Him—but at the end of the day, there is no substitute for relating to the Invisible God on a personal basis, in your own particular circumstances. Knowing Him, was the apostle Paul's chief end (Philippians 3:7-11).

I am sure that my wife is glad that I know the color of her hair and eyes and without hesitation can assure anyone that she has ten fingers and toes, two arms and two legs, and two fine ears. I could get more specific and tell anyone how she likes her meat cooked, that she loves crunchy crackers and cold cereal, and what she thinks about mice. In short, I know a great many things about Melissa.

But knowing things about her is not the same as knowing her. Sure, these things are useful pieces of information, and if I am going to know her then these will all play an important role in our

relationship. But knowing her requires that I apply all that I know about her in the process of dwelling with and relating to her.

For instance, one of the most important things to Melissa is that we spend time together. Of course, this is one of the essential ingredients in any relationship, but it is of extra special importance to my wife. She would rather have time with me than a fancy gift or a big celebration. She likes those things too, but apart from one-on-one time, the other stuff just doesn't make the grade.

Over the course of our marriage, I have often failed to recognize Melissa's need for time. Let's face it: I am home almost every day and we talk about everything from potty training to gardening, and from how my stomach feels to what we are having for dinner. We talk when we get up in the morning; we talk as we go through the day; we talk when we go to bed at night. What more could she want?

But she does want more.

She has told me over and over that, while these things are nice, what she wants is time to talk about *us*, time to talk about things that really matter, time to focus on our relationship. Without that kind of time, she starves for relationship while I think that I am relating to her all day long.

Knowing my wife, then, means that I not only am aware of her need for one-on-one time, but that I do something about it. Just knowing facts about her does not constitute relationship any more than a photograph of water quenches thirst.

Very few needs in the Christian community could be greater than the need for practically seeing God in normal, daily life and personally relating to Him. It is well to hear eloquent sermons and riveting testimonies—we see the Invisible through these things, too.

But for many people in the middle of life, this is where their story with God ends. The rest of the week they grope blindly through the

maze of decisions, conflicts, and troubles, unconscious of the God whose hand has led them and whose wisdom and strength are available for the asking.

Personally, I find that I might question the value of seeing the Invisible (under my breath, of course) because I am not sure what difference it will make. Does it really matter whether I struggle on in darkness or in light? Will it change sickness to health or financial trouble to prosperity? Will it mend damaged relationships or will it make my children more obedient?

In these things, I am looking for the wrong kind of change. Seeing the Invisible God *does* change everything, but not in the way that I expect. God so personally cares about me, about you, that He does not do the simplest thing of merely modifying our circumstances. He tackles the much more difficult task of changing us. And the change He is working is to make us like Himself. One day, when we see Him face to face, that change will be fully realized and *“we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is”* (I John 3:2)

In the meantime, God is using ordinary things like our financial status and health and relationships to make us like His Son. Our responsibility is to learn to see the Invisible in the process of living.