

Seeing the Invisible— God from Ground Level

by Robert Robbins

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Prologue:

How this book came to be

On my fortieth birthday, I received a phone call from my brother-in-law, Joshua, a marine stationed in Okinawa. I don't remember much about that conversation, other than this one thing: He encouraged me to start writing again.

Writing had been an important part of my life for years. But during this busy middle season, I dropped the pen and picked up tools and telephones and babies. My hands were quite full without trying to put pen to paper.

The pen wasn't the only thing that had slipped from my grasp. I had become so busy, so absorbed in life and survival, that I began to leave out some of the most important things. At forty, I had a loving wife, six active children, an antique farm house in desperate need of just about everything, and a business that could have substituted for a perpetual motion machine—that is, I was kept in perpetual motion trying to make it run.

My life was crowded from morning till night, often six days a week. I just didn't take time to consider, to think, to really see the Invisible God at work in my world. I was too busy right now.

Nevertheless, Joshua's exhortation stuck in my mind. Several months later, when I stopped for a time to re-examine life, the idea of writing re-surfaced.

But what would I write about? Here I stood in the middle of life where the most conspicuous things are often a receding hairline and an advancing waistline. Nothing to write home about here. I was busy with a thousand things, but none of them seemed to be of any lasting import: "We worked. We were paid. We ate another meal . . . and we did it again."

But the emptiness of my experience was no fault of God's. He was at work through all the busyness; I just hadn't been looking for Him.

If you had asked me, "*Is* God at work in your life?" I would have unhesitatingly responded, "Yes." I know that God works in life, that He does not stand afar off from His creation while it groans and travails, that He Himself knows our distresses and cares. These are things that I know because the Word of God makes them plain.

But if you had asked me, "*What* is God doing in your life?" I may have fumbled for a good answer. I know that God is doing something, that He is working out His plan for good because I love Him and am called according to His purpose. But just how He was working good out, I hadn't taken time to consider.

And if we really want to see God, there is no substitute for time.

When Melissa and I were getting to know one another at a distance, an amazing volume of phone calls and letters winged their way between the two of us. We spent enormous amounts of time (and, on the phone calls, quite a bit of money) learning to love one another. We talked about our favorite colors and our theology and our views on life in general. We talked about the little things that happened in our day and how we felt about them. And it wasn't long before we were talking about wedding plans. . . .

At some point, I realized with astonishment just how much time this relationship was taking. As delighted as I was with the process, somehow it didn't feel like progress. At the end of a three hour phone call, I couldn't necessarily say what had been accomplished. I hadn't finished an important job and I hadn't made any money.

But tangible accomplishments weren't the point. The time spent on communication was preparation for giving my whole life to my bride, living for her rather than for myself and for what I could do. What was being accomplished was more significant than anything measured

by a ruler or quantified with a dollar figure: God was knitting two people into one.

As difficult as it was to justify at the time, my investment in Melissa and hers in me has paid rich dividends. It established the direction for what our life together has become in the past sixteen years; it poured the foundation for our relationship. Today we still talk together for hours, and we still love doing it. Having someone to whom I can express desires and disappointments and satisfactions and struggles is one of the sweetest joys I know. It is in the expression that I often learn what I really think and that I come to terms with what really should be.

Investment operates on its own principle. Addressing earthly versus heavenly wealth, Jesus stated the principle this way: “. . . *where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matthew 6:19-21).

If I want to love my wife, then there is no substitute for investing in her. If I want to enjoy my car, nothing can be better than to upgrade it, even in some small way. If I want to appreciate my children or like my house or get something out of my church, absolutely nothing can make them more precious to me than to give myself to them in one way or another. We naturally love ourselves, so when we give ourselves away, our heart follows.

When it comes to relating to God, understanding His purposes and ways in my life, or loving Him and appreciating His care, then we must invest ourselves in Him; we must give ourselves away to Him. The extent to which we are abandoned to God will determine the amount of satisfaction that we receive in our relationship with Him. After all, He is completely satisfying— the only hindrance is my capacity. And that capacity is enlarged when I am holding onto nothing in my life for myself.

The things that destroy earthly treasures, Jesus tells us, do not require assistance. Thieves, moth, and rust are opportunists, present and ready for action all the time. And the only thing preventing them

from their dirty work is my vigilance.

Eternal treasure cannot be attacked by this trinity of destroyers. Heaven knows no theft—and moths and rust, along with every other form of corruption, have no place there.

But I can be kept so busy investing in earthly things that I never put anything into the eternal safe.

After all, investing riches for eternity requires focused attention and a determined expenditure of all my energies. Weeds grow without my help, but a crop of righteousness must be planted, cultivated, and watered.

The process of investing in heaven's goods will look different for every person, but for each it will involve time and energy and self. For me, though I did not know it when I began, it involved writing, for writing forced me to stop and evaluate.

It forced me to think.

So with a scrap of time here, a few minutes there, and chunks of time when possible, I carved out time to think, to consider—and to write. And as I began to record some of the everyday occurrences in my ordinary life, as I worked through my struggles and trials on paper, I began to recognize the hand of God. I began to see the Invisible.

My story has not been the drama of narrow escapes from death or heroic courage in a concentration camp. “It was a dark and stormy night,” is definitely not a good opening line for this book.

But in the process of learning to see my life from God's perspective, I have realized that the message He has been writing into the pages of my experience is essential—even critical. For I am not the only one who finds himself in the middle of life, immersed in activity, but dry of meaning and devoid of purpose. I am not the only one for whom the drums of incessant busyness beat their rhythm into the

soul. I am not the only one who has lived for a “free moment,” and when it surfaced, lunged for it like a hungry dog after raw meat.

It is to you, my companions in this journey, that I write. And whether you feel ingloriously middle-aged or just in the middle of a job or relationship or situation, these thoughts are for you.

It has been said of life’s experiences that “Half the fun is the anticipation; half the fun is the memory; but it isn’t always so fun going through it.” That well describes any “middle” place in life. Getting started is exhilarating and finishing is rewarding, but it is in the middle that we prove what we really believe. It is one thing to say that we know life should be lived on a different plane, and that our existence should be a great adventure with God. It is quite another to see how holding bowls for children with the stomach flu is a part of the “great adventure”—especially when your own stomach starts to turn somersaults. . . .

And yet, most of us will spend the majority of our days in the mundane, monotonous drudgery of middle life. So to write them off by waiting to live for God when the crisis comes consigns the greater portion of our days to mediocrity, or just self-absorbed pleasure seeking—always looking for something else, something that will fill our emptiness. In that way we become practical atheists, living like there is no God—or deists acknowledging that God is out there, but not interacting with our world in a dynamic way.

This book is to counter these fallacies.

Perhaps you, like me, would never say you believe in a remote God who occasionally looks in on His creation but does not intervene. But, it is the easiest thing in the world to live like that is what we believe. A brief scan of the New Testament shows that Christianity is not about good talk isolated from good living; it is not just good ideas to be puffed from monasteries or grand theology to be drunk at the fountain of ease.

Christianity is about getting dirty; it is about living in the trenches with both eyes fixed on the Invisible God, both hands available to His bidding, both feet ready to take us where He sends.

When God wanted to show us what He is like, He did not show up as an angel robed in light, silver trumpet sounding the glory of the Eternal One. He did not come dressed as a prince at whose word a dozen courtiers scurried to obey.

He came as a baby, born in the humblest of circumstances to an unwed mother. Jesus' story was not a foreshadowing of the modern rags-to-riches romance; His life, in one sense, devolved from rags to nakedness, torture, and a cruel death. And the few short years of His adult life did not find Him friend of the rich, the famous, or the religious elite, but of fishermen and tax collectors.

His hands, as ordinary as mine or yours, reached out to drunkards and prostitutes, pulling them from the slime of the gutter to the glory of ordinary life lived on an extraordinary plane. His face didn't make you look twice—He was not a model or a movie star—but in those eyes was the depth of eternity and the aching love of the Father for His lost children. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!”* (Matthew 23:37).

We do not know that He possessed a uniquely remarkable voice, yet at His command the wind and waves were immediately stilled, and men, women, and children were instantly healed. The Psalmist tells us that *“The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon”* (Psalm 29:5). Yet that great Voice which shakes heaven and earth was tuned to our capacity as He unleashed the truth of who God is through simple words.

And what about His courtiers, scurrying to obey? Well, his twelve all left Him when the hour of crisis came. One of them, the stoutest in his assertion that he would die rather than deny Jesus, cursed

emphatically that he did not even know Him. And one of them betrayed Him.

He appeared to be, in many ways, an ordinary Jewish man. But He was Divinity on display in human flesh. His life was the perfect exegesis, the best possible explanation, of the Invisible God.

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son . . .” (Hebrew 1:1-2).

If God chose to reveal Himself to mankind through the medium of normal human existence, is it any wonder that He might want to use our normal lives as a part of His great plan for the ages?

So this book is a segment of my story of God from the ground-level of normal life. It is personal, but I invite you to walk in my experiences with me and to see God in them. In my life, I think you may see yourself, for the God who is alive and dynamic in my story is the God who will be the same to you if you seek Him.

This book is about a process, about the growth in my own understanding of how to see God when the normalcy of life seems to hide the heavens from view. I invite you to join me in learning that every day is a new opportunity to see the Invisible, however plain or simple our circumstances may be.

This book is an exploration, a voyage of discovery, a probe into gray unexceptionalism. Through common experiences, uncommon views of the Invisible command the center stage—and in the process of seeing Him, our lives are transformed.

For me, the process of placing these thoughts “on paper” has become a dialogue between God and me, a conversation in which He instructs as I sort through emotions and experiences, hopes and disappointments, the past and the things to come—in His light.

Listen in and join me in this conversation of the ages.