

FOREWORD BY PAUL CHITWOOD

HANCE DILBECK

A

PSALM

FOR

UNSEEN

SERVANTS

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR QUIET,
HIDDEN KINGDOM WORK

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B&H
PUBLISHING®
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

979-8-3845-2417-5

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Brentwood, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 241.4
Subject Heading: CHURCH VOLUNTEERS \
GRATITUDE \ HELPING BEHAVIOR

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Dedication

A man often came to mind as I worked to understand Psalm 134 and the dynamics of serving unseen. His name is John R. Jones, and I dedicate this little book to him.

The Team at GuideStone might find it odd to consider John Jones an unseen servant. He was a key leader at GuideStone for most of his life—the chief operating officer for twenty-five years. John poured out his life serving those who serve the Lord. He worked with integrity of heart and skillfulness of hand, enhancing the financial security and resilience of literally hundreds of thousands of people. But, most people he served have never heard his name or recognized his unique and extraordinary kingdom contribution.

John, thank you for all you have done for me. Thank you for serving unseen.

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Foreword

“Unseen is not synonymous with unimportant. In fact, for the unseen servant, they work without an audience, without applause and without notice. It is vital.”

Hance Dilbeck

What a surprising and, at the same time, unsurprising reminder from Hance Dilbeck. Sadly, in the personality-cult culture of today’s evangelical world, having the leader of a large evangelical organization be the one to remind us of unseen servants is quite surprising, at least to me. I’ve seen the lengths to which our evangelical rockstars will go to protect their personal brand and insulate themselves from interaction with those who buy their books, pay for their simulcasts, and make real sacrifices to sit in the crowd to listen to them at their conferences.

A PSALM FOR UNSEEN SERVANTS

Having served smaller congregations, I have personally felt the sting of feeling unseen, especially when trying to invite guest speakers. Often, we were unable to fill the pulpit. And when we could, we still run the risk of people canceling for various reasons. I even recall a time when my three-year-old daughter was nearly ran over at a busy convention center by people who were rushing to see the next big speaker.

Now comes a book from Hance Dilbeck on the unseen people in ministry with hundreds of employees who serve hundreds of thousands of pastors, missionaries, and church and denominational staff members. He's the same Hance Dilbeck who once pastored a large, growing church, and today is welcomed to the pulpits of megachurches and the stages of the largest conferences. So, yes, having a leader like that author a book reminding us of unseen servants is quite surprising, at least to me. Much like my reaction to a book on humility written by a pastor well-known for his pride, *A Psalm for Unseen Servants* would automatically find me the skeptic, were it not that Hance Dilbeck is the author.

Through mutual friends, I have known about Hance and his reputation for many, many years. I have known him personally for well over a decade. And here is what I know: as

FOREWORD

a pastor, Hance was a shepherd, not a celebrity. As a denominational leader, he is a servant, not a rockstar. As a friend, he never fails to be an encourager, sharing Scripture, voicing prayers, and lending a listening ear. Hance has not lost the humility gained from a humble beginning. And he has not lost the gratitude experienced by a sinner saved by grace. That he sees the unseen servants of the Lord is of no surprise to me, nor is the fact that he wants us all to see them . . . as the Lord sees them.

Who should read *A Psalm for Unseen Servants*? All of us.

This book is a gift to those who serve others while remaining genuinely unseen, as it reminds them of the One who always sees—the One who truly matters. From the church janitor to the missionary in a closed, impoverished country whose story will never be told, even the most humble and sincere servants will have their hearts blessed and guarded by the Scriptures, illustrations, and wisdom in this book.

A Psalm for Unseen Servants is also a gift to the church. Hance reminds us how dependent we are on those faithful unseen servants who, in their love for Christ and His Bride, carry out the work of ministry week after week, year after year, and over a lifetime. He reminds us how the church should

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express gratitude to them and for them. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (v. 21). Indeed, “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (v. 18). Every faithful servant, regardless of visibility or popularity, is an essential part of the body of Christ.

Not to be left out, *A Psalm for Unseen Servants* is also a gift to leaders, providing a necessary and timely reminder that, as I heard it said long ago, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Regardless of one’s role or acclaim, we are equals. And we should “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant” than ourselves (Phil. 2:3 ESV). Moreover, leaders, like the Church, should be quick to see the unseen servants around them, express gratitude to and for them, and recognize how dependent we are on others to make ministry happen.

No, “Unseen is not synonymous with unimportant.” Thank you, Hance Dilbeck, for helping us to see that—and to see those who truly are important.

Paul Chitwood, PhD

President, International Mission Board

Introduction

High-Risk Occupation

Call to Evening Worship

A song of ascents.

*Now bless the LORD,
all you servants of the LORD
who stand in the LORD's house at night!
Lift up your hands in the holy place
and bless the LORD!*

*May the LORD,
Maker of heaven and earth,
bless you from Zion.*

Psalm 134

A PSALM FOR UNSEEN SERVANTS

Imagine working on the deck of a commercial fishing boat. The wind and waves rock the boat, every step you take is fraught with potential danger. Nets, booms, winches all constantly threaten harm. You are just trying to make a living, but every day your life is at risk. According to The Pew Charitable Trusts¹ and the FISH Safety Foundation, more than 100,000 commercial fishermen are killed each year worldwide.

Have you ever taken the time to watch the men replacing a roof? They work hard carrying heavy loads, swinging a hammer in the hot sun putting shingles into place. Their work is impressive in its own right, but of course it is all done high above the ground on a steep, slippery surface with no safety net! It is dangerous work.

Go to the tall forests of the Northwest and observe a logger. These modern-day Paul Bunyans do not use a big blue ox. They use fast-moving, powerful machinery—spinning blades, heavy equipment, difficult terrain. And of course, time is always of the essence. The fatality rate among loggers is 82 per 100,000 workers, compared to the average of 7 per 100,000 in the general population.²

HIGH-RISK OCCUPATION

Fishing, logging, and roofing are high-risk occupations. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics declares them the top three most dangerous occupations year after year.³

The thing is, those who enter these occupations know that they are assuming significant risk. Their employers often provide frequent safety demonstrations, reminders, and trainings. These needed workers are fully aware of the dangers of their chosen professions. This book deals with another kind of dangerous work. These occupations come with risks that are much more subtle, yet still quite real. The risks are not usually physical, but more often spiritual.

Consider the risks of working in a religious setting, in a church, or a Christian ministry. Those who work out front in these ministries assume risks of which we are very aware—hypocrisy and pride.

The examples are too numerous to list. The president of the Northern Seminary in Illinois resigned in 2023 after he was accused of bullying and retaliating against staff that brought the matter to trustees.⁴ A Florida Roman Catholic Church had a former finance manager plead guilty in federal court to defrauding her local congregation of \$775,000.⁵ Some leaders falsify their credentials to obtain more prestige

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and higher positions. Others divert church resources to their personal bank account. Let's not leave out the scourge of sex abuse that has rightly ended many ministry careers. Most of us have read multiple media reports on similar matters and it makes our hearts break for the impact on the kingdom and for the victims.

But what about the men and women who work behind the scenes? Are there unique risks for those who serve unseen?

We all know that behind every successful church or ministry there is an army of workers who labor far from the limelight. They do the work to ensure the books are balanced, the livestream goes off without a hitch, to make sure the musicians can be heard—but not too loudly!—amidst the congregation, who ensure the facilities are ready week in and week out and (much to the doubt of many in the sanctuary) that the building is neither too hot nor too cold.

Most people begin working in a church or Christian ministry *because they are committed to the Lord, believe in His work, and want to work in a more pleasant or protected environment. They love the Lord, love the people, and love the work.* These are folks who quickly learn that their church staff is made up of flawed people too! These occupations are

HIGH-RISK OCCUPATION

viewed as safe, sheltered, and free from the pressures and temptations found in the secular workplace or the corporate culture. That is partially true, of course. Working in a church or ministry is a special calling as unto the Lord. But human beings *are* human beings. Flawed people exist in the church office, just as they do anywhere else. Because of that, subtle dangers lurk.

The unseen servant might not struggle with hypocrisy or pride and all their ugly fruit, but what about a root of bitterness?

When we serve unseen, behind the scenes, we can begin to feel unappreciated, or worse, even completely unnoticed. Over the years, our work that began with a strong sense of service to the Lord becomes disconnected from the Lord. We do our work without any sense of His presence or His pleasure. Also, work that we once viewed as having vital connection to the kingdom of God becomes very ordinary and disconnected from biblical mission. Worst of all, though, while we begin serving with a deep love for the people of God, this feeling of being unappreciated often creates a bitterness toward the people we serve. We no longer love them; in fact, we resent them. “If only the church didn’t have all these people, I could

get my work done!” It’s easy to forget *why* we do what we do. Our bitterness can build barriers that keep us from connecting our work with our Lord, His mission, and His people.

Consider some unseen servants found on the pages of Holy Scripture.

I love the story of Martha and Mary told in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus has been teaching around the countryside, and in verse 38 of Luke 10, Jesus enters a village and Martha welcomes the Messiah into her home. Martha and Mary, of course, have a famous brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus would raise from the dead. Martha was hosting the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of the Most High, so she did what any reasonable unseen servant would do: She got distracted by her many tasks.

Jesus had an entourage—twelve disciples who came along with Him. Likely, she was busy preparing a meal fit for the King and His followers. She wanted to make sure the house was presentable to them.

Her sister, Mary, though, didn’t worry about the preparation. Instead, Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and was listening to what he said” (v. 39). It’s hard not to have this image in your mind’s eye. Martha was likely agitated and finally called upon

the Lord, “Don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? So tell her to give me a hand” (v. 40).

Put yourself in Martha’s shoes for a moment. Was she being unreasonable? Likely, you’re thinking Martha has made an absolutely reasonable request.

How does Jesus respond?

The Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41–42)

Martha was serving unseen and had become bitter. Her work *was* vital. If people are to be fed, someone has to prepare the ingredients, get it into the oven on time, and make sure the table is set. But she lost sight of the most important ingredient: the Lord Himself. He’s fed 5,000 on a hillside with nothing more than a boy’s lunch of loaves and fish. He could handle supper for sixteen people.

Consider the older son. We know his story as The Parable of the Prodigal Son, who went off and wasted his part of the inheritance on lavish and wasteful living. The father waited

each day to see if his prodigal would return. He finally did, only after spending all of his inheritance and had hired himself out and was starving. The prodigal was repentant and was even willing to be a slave to his father, who instead put a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, and sandals on his feet. Then he had the fattened calf slaughtered for a barbeque feast.

The older son has been working diligently for his father, staying faithful to his calling. He served unseen, and as the responsible child, did everything required of him. So, as he comes home, he sees there is a celebration and asks one of the servants what is happening. He is told the good news; his brother is back safe and sound.

For the older brother, however, it's not good news. "He became angry and didn't want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him" (Luke 15:28). The older brother, like many unseen servants, focused on his service, his sacrifice, his obedience, and his needs. He couldn't see the great news the younger brother's return actually was, even referring to *his* brother as "this son of *yours*" (v. 30, emphasis mine).

Bitterness is real. It can grow and fester if we don't regularly check our spirits. It can also lead to outright disobedience.

Gehazi was Elisha's trusted aid and servant. In 2 Kings 5, we see the fruit of bitterness revealed. The story is familiar: Naaman, a commander in Syria's army, was a "valiant warrior" (v. 1), but he had a skin disease. An Israelite slave told Naaman's wife that he should go to the prophet in Samaria who could heal him. Naaman received permission from Syria's king to go to Israel with a letter to Israel's king, to seek out Elisha to be healed. Second Kings 5:5 said Naaman went with 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothing. Once Naaman came to Elisha, the prophet told him to go wash seven times in the Jordan River and his skin would be restored. It took a bit of convincing, but Naaman did as he was told. And when he was clean with "the skin of a small boy," he returned to Elisha to offer a gift, saying, "I know there's no God in the whole world except in Israel." Elisha refused the gifts.

Gehazi couldn't believe it. Elisha has let this Syrian off lightly in Gehazi's mind. So he spiritualizes the decision, runs after him, and lies, asking for 75 pounds of silver (one-tenth of what Naaman had) and two sets of clothing. Naaman is so overjoyed by being healed, he insists Gehazi take 150 pounds of silver and two servants to carry it. Gehazi drops the silver

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off at his house and dismisses the servants, and then returns to Elisha.

Elisha asks where he's been. Gehazi lies again, and Naaman pronounces a curse saying that Naaman's skin diseases would cling to Gehazi and his descendants forever.

Unseen service can lead to bitterness and covetousness. But ultimately, it can lead to disobedience. This should cause us to shudder and pause to ensure our hearts are right before the Lord.

This book is written for those serving unseen, behind the scenes, in churches and ministries. For the older brothers, the Marthas, and the Gehazis among us.

We will use a little psalm from the Old Testament to highlight the importance of unseen service and the keys to protecting ourselves from the subtle hypocrisy of bitterness. You might never have noticed this psalm in your devotional readings, or maybe never fully understood its significance. I hope this provides some comfort that close to the center of the Bible is a psalm with unseen servants in mind.

These servants will likely never be invited to headline a conference. Their work may not seem "spiritual" to everybody. But it's likely that their work would be missed if they didn't do

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it week in and week out. Let this be a reminder for the pastors who serve the unseen servants, and let this be an encouragement to those who serve unseen!

IN EVERY CHURCH, THERE ARE SERVANTS WHO WORK WITH DILIGENCE AND COMPASSION IN THE BACKGROUND.

These servants are the dedicated workers who unlock doors and stay behind to clean up the messes made throughout the day. We have seen them countless times, but hardly ever acknowledge them.

THEY ARE THE UNSEEN SERVANTS.

In *A Psalm for Unseen Servants*, Hance Dilbeck provides a resource that acknowledges the ministry of these dedicated workers, thanks them for what they have done, and encourages them to not lose their dedication to the task at hand. These servants are in every church. This book offers more than a nod. It is a celebration of the needed work that often goes unnoticed.

HANCE DILBECK is president and CEO of GuideStone. Dr. Dilbeck came to GuideStone from the position of executive director/treasurer of the Oklahoma State Baptist Convention in 2018. He has served as pastor in churches for nearly thirty years. He has been an active participant in denominational life, serving in leadership for Oklahoma Baptist University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the International Mission Board. He and his wife Julie live in Dallas, Texas, and have three married sons and ten grandchildren.

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