

## INTRODUCTION

### Why Embracing Obscurity?

What do you, me, a student, a musician, a stay-at-home mom, a laid-off blue-collar worker, a pastor, and a successful entrepreneur all have in common?

We're drunk.

In our defense the epidemic is so common that most of us don't even know we're under the influence. We're confused, blinded, and wandering around like sailors at dawn; but, then again, so is everyone else, so why should we be alarmed? But this unsuspected poison is simultaneously numbing us, diverting our attention from the kingdom and undermining the gospel of Christ.

We're drunk all right. We're intoxicated with a desire to be known, recognized, appreciated, and respected. We crave to be a "somebody" and do notable things, to achieve our dreams and gain the admiration of others. To be something—*anything*—other than nothing.

Whether you're an athlete, postal worker, missionary, or government employee, haven't you felt the insatiable draw of

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notoriety? Where do you think that comes from? We live in a culture that bases significance on how celebrated, or common, we are. And now the church seems to have followed suit. This is serious stuff. It's serious because of its source. It's just the sort of lie that Satan—the father of lies—manufactures and sells best. It's not too shocking. It can be justified and religious-sized and explained away easily enough. But it kills with the same force as the “big sins” from which we distance ourselves.

We all feel it. We all sense the power of this problem, even if we only see the tip of the iceberg. Yet even as our intoxication draws us away from our Maker and His mission, we're not sure what to do with it.

There's an obvious catch right off the bat: How could someone address the problem without promoting themselves at the same time? Who's going to listen to someone talk about our need for humility while simultaneously posing for pictures and expanding their platform with speaking tours and book signings? And even if someone *did* find a way to take themselves out of the spotlight, who would want to “waste” so much time and energy on a message that promised little to no credit? That would be taking it a little too far, right?

Truthfully, that's right where I was. I saw the problem but didn't know how to address it without winning the World's Biggest Hypocrite award. So, like many others, I just chose to ignore the issue altogether (along with all the implications it held on my own life).

I wanted to let go of this message, but—not unlike Jonah—God wouldn't let go of me.

Choosing to remain anonymous is not some ploy or gimmick to generate book sales. Trust me—this message has decimated my career ambitions! Since its unlikely inception, *Embracing Obscurity* has been from God and dedicated back

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to God. Still, I'm sure some skeptics will wonder if this is all a hoax. Others might question why I would use "Anonymous" as a byline yet use personal pronouns and my own stories and experiences.<sup>1</sup> I can only answer that I've come to realize embracing obscurity is not about wiping ourselves from existence but rather, voluntarily, becoming nothing in light of everything God is and has promised us. Why? So we can bring Him greater glory. It's about making Him, not ourselves, look good. Maybe in sharing some of the history behind *Embracing Obscurity*, I can lend credibility to my sincerity . . .

It all started one nondescript Sunday, as I sat listening to a guest preacher talk on the humility of Christ. He spoke of servanthood versus acts of service, of our puny attempts to "be somebody," and of a God who had everything yet chose to be nothing. As the Spirit moved, I was cut to the heart by his message. If any of us dare follow our suffering Servant-King, we must learn both to trust Him and to travel in His footsteps. My mind searched for a word to encompass all that was turning my world upside down. Then in a rare divine moment, the phrase came: *embrace obscurity*.

For a moment I was satisfied, kind of like finally remembering the words to a song you've been humming all day. Then the weight of the words began to sink in. *Wait . . . embrace obscurity? Who in their right mind would want to do that? And what would that do to my life?* But no matter how much I resisted the implications, I knew—right then and there—I must.

So began a journey—a sometimes painful journey—into the depth of Christ's humility. As I traveled (though I am far from arriving), I increasingly realized that this is a message not just for me, but for every follower of Christ—the comedian, the politician, the single mom, the bank teller, the CEO.

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And I began to feel that God was asking me to share this message, which brought about the great quandary mentioned earlier: Even on my cleverest day, how could I justify the hypocrisy of writing—and taking credit for—a book called *Embracing Obscurity*?

Yet God wouldn't let it alone.

After some divine arm-twisting, *Embracing Obscurity*—and anonymity—was born. Apart from the surprisingly difficult logistics of writing anonymously (like keeping my own family in the dark), my flesh has been as rebellious as Terrell Owens at a press conference. Old sin dies hard. I've found myself imagining scenarios in which I get some sort of glory for the work involved in these pages: "accidental" discoveries, best-sellers' lists—even one daydream in which I was discovered by a respected mentor and rewarded on my deathbed. My pride evidently knows no bounds. The struggles I've encountered in writing this book have been poignant reminders that we all—myself included—need this message.

The church (again, including me) has come so far in imitating the world's tenets of success that we can barely distinguish the two. There's a sense of urgency in our condition I think few of us realize. And unless we find the antidote soon, we'll live and die in our self-deception. The urgency of this message compels me to pen these pages.

In the chapters ahead I'll try to keep to the background, letting Christ do His own work in your heart and life. As you read, and for the rest of your life, I pray that you will find and embrace the unsurpassable joy, freedom, and newfound purpose to be had in embracing obscurity.

# CHAPTER 1

## One in a Billion

*We are here for only a moment, visitors and  
strangers in the land as our ancestors were before us.  
Our days on earth are like a passing shadow,  
gone so soon without a trace.*

I CHRONICLES 29:15 (NLT)

*Our days on earth are like grass;  
like wildflowers, we bloom and die.  
As for man, his days are like grass—  
he blooms like a flower of the field;  
when the wind passes over it, it vanishes,  
and its place is no longer known.*

PSALM 103:15–16

Seven billion, twenty-five million, four hundred twenty thousand, three hundred ninety.

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That's our best guess at the number of people on planet Earth as I write this.<sup>1</sup> Hardly fodder for self-importance. But as the reality of numbers like that have a way of escaping us, if you really want your own insignificance to stare you in the face, try standing on top of the Empire State Building in New York City, while 8.3 million people sprawl out below. Attend a concert at the Northwest's Gorge Amphitheater, with twenty thousand people groovin' all around you. Take a long walk along the streets of Monaco, where thirty-three thousand people are crammed into less than a square mile. If you've ever gone to Disneyland in June, Mall of America in December, or tried to grab a hot deal on Black Friday, you know what I'm talking about. There are hoards of people on this planet.

Perhaps you, like me, can point to a specific instance when your self-important naiveté came crashing down. It was near 3:30 on a Friday afternoon, and I had the unfortunate need to be driving on a ridiculously crowded interstate. Stop-and-go traffic would have been preferable—we were just stopped dead. The cars across the median were lumbering along (lucky for them), and, since I had nothing better to do, I started watching weary commuters as they passed—a visibly agitated woman in a silk blouse applying lipstick; a Justin Timberlake look-alike in a newly polished Camaro, talking on his cell phone; a thirty-something singing like nobody's business; an older Asian lady in a supermarket uniform; a mom and her kids arguing; and they just kept coming . . . and coming . . . and coming.

After a hundred or so cars, I started to get a little depressed. Each one of these people had a life, a circle of acquaintances and family, a story to tell of their history, aspirations, disappointments, and fears. Who did I think I was, anyway, completely preoccupied with how this traffic jam was

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going to make me late for I-can't-even-remember-what? What could possibly possess me—or any of us—to think that my story, my *life*, is somehow different, unique, important?

Have you ever had one of these moments? A split second when the enormity of humanity pounds you into a pea-sized lump of insignificance? An occasion when a crowd leaves you feeling a little disillusioned and more than a little irrelevant? If not, look for one. As uncomfortable as is the prospect, unimportance is good for the soul.

Solomon got it. At first glance, his book Ecclesiastes is a real downer, especially to the world's optimists.

“Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless!”

What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content.

History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, “Here is something new!” But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. *We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.* (Eccles. 1:2–11 NLT, emphasis added)

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I told you it was a downer!

But wait, there's more. If nearly seven billion fellow humans coupled with the cyclical pattern of history have never underscored your unimportance, just look underfoot.

### It's a Big, Big World

God spared no attention to detail or sheer quantity when creating *billions* of species no human being will ever even see. Science has done their best to name, categorize, describe, and study all the creepy crawlies, fungi, bacteria, and other strange organisms that live on and under the soil; but they readily admit there is no way to get to them all. Specialists estimate the number of fungi species likely reaches 1.5 million; and even though tens of thousands of roundworm types are already known, there are likely millions more completely undiscovered. The next time you shake the soil out of your garden gloves, imagine the millions of bacteria that live in just a gram of dirt, representing several *thousand* species.<sup>2</sup>

But if the sheer quantity of living things that live and die with no thought to our existence doesn't point you to something completely outside yourself, have you considered the universe lately?

When God created the heavens and Earth, He spared no expense. In fact, the vastness of the former borders on excess. Earth itself is impressive enough, with its precision orbit, delicately balanced atmosphere, laws of nature and physics, varied life forms, and intricate biodiversity. But Earth is minuscule in size and influence when compared with the grandeur of the heavens.

If our solar system were represented on a twelve-inch ruler, our sun (which is more than one hundred times the diameter of Earth) would be smaller than the period at the

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end of this sentence. On this same scale, our galaxy, The Milky Way, would be larger than the Pacific Ocean. But we're not done yet. If you could zoom out even farther, you would see that God has created an innumerable number of galaxies. Innumerable! Our own galaxy is home to more than one hundred billion stars, let alone multiplying that by infinity.<sup>3</sup>

This realization should bring new meaning to Psalm 147:4, "He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them." Isaiah 40:26 says, "Look up and see: who created these? He brings out the starry host by number; He calls all of them by name. Because of His great power and strength, not one of them is missing." And yet we are told all this is "but the fringes of His ways; how faint is the word we hear of Him! Who can understand His mighty thunder?" (Job 26:14).

Feeling small yet?

If so, you're in good company. Many faithful men and women have come to think little of themselves in light of all that God is and does. As Thomas à Kempis said:

He who would learn to serve must first learn to think little of himself. This is the highest and most profitable lesson, truly to know and to despise ourselves. To have no opinion of ourselves—and to think always well and highly of others is great wisdom and perfection.<sup>4</sup>

We like the thought of "perfection." We can tolerate the idea of "thinking well and highly of others." So why are we turned off by this "highest and most profitable lesson"—to think little of ourselves?

## The Nature of Obscurity

The trouble with you and me and the rest of humanity is not that we lack self-confidence (as we're told by the world) but that we have far too much self-importance. The thought of being just another of the roughly one hundred billion people to have ever graced this planet offends us—whether we realize it or not. We have such a high opinion of ourselves that to live and die unnoticed seems a grave injustice. Yet for the vast majority of us, has God called us to anything else? *Webster's* defines *obscurity* as, “relatively unknown: as . . . (b) not prominent or famous.”<sup>5</sup> That pretty much sums up the vast majority of humankind, doesn't it? Even those rare men and women who make a mark on our society—a passionate speaker, a star athlete, an active politician, a gifted musician, an empathetic humanitarian—they're still “relatively unknown” in the grand scope of the world's consciousness and especially in light of history. Even we authors can't escape obscurity. Every time I visit a Barnes & Noble, I'm ready to lay down my pen for good. Solomon's words taunt me as I stare at the obscene number of volumes: “There is no end to the making of many books” (Eccles. 12:12)!

In the big picture we're all in this obscurity thing together. That's hard to remember in our little bubbles of influence. It's easy to think we're somebody when we're well known at church, or in a particular industry, or at our children's schools. When we have a nice portfolio, or a few letters after our name, or have a commemorative plaque on a little park bench somewhere, our pride creeps in and tempts us to want more: more recognition, more admiration, more influence, more, more, more. Few, myself included, have ever given thought to wanting less.

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Obscurity comes in two forms: It can be either assigned (by God) or chosen (by us). I don't know whether one is harder than the other. I just know that from a prideful, human point of view, either can gnaw at us. We don't want to live as one in a crowd. We don't want to be just another person living in a subdivision in the suburban sprawl that has become America. And we certainly don't want to die without making our mark on something . . . *anything*.

A handful of truly "great" people on this planet will become immortal in the history books as world-changers. But since there's little chance the likes of them will ever have cause to read yours truly, I can effectively ignore that group for now. For the rest of us, the 99.9 percent of humankind that fall into the first category, our lot of obscurity has been assigned. As much as we claw and clamor, whine and pout, we're just not going to be an Alexander the Great, a Queen Elizabeth, or even a Mother Teresa or a Billy Graham.

Even when an overarching, global obscurity has been assigned to us, we still have a choice of whether to embrace *personal* obscurity—an obscurity of heart as much as position. And *that* is the message I believe God has for us, a message He modeled as well as taught.

### An Obscure Sacrifice

We hear all the time about the Bible's "great men and women," the real "heroes of the faith." But I wonder if all their notability has not come from being made immortal in a document that has been read the world over. Think about it: If the lives and deaths of Joseph, Rachel, Jonah, Abraham, Moses, Nehemiah, even King David or the apostle Paul had not been

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divinely recorded in the pages of our Bibles, would we have any idea in the twenty-first century who they were? No more than other faithful men, women, and martyrs of ancient and modern civilizations who now lie nameless in the dust. Being of great faith does not guarantee timeless notoriety. Take as exhibit A “the young boy” of loaves and fishes fame.

You are likely familiar with Jesus’ miracle of feeding the five thousand. The Sunday school version goes something like this: As Jesus was teaching and healing a large crowd one day, it got to be late—too late to go home for dinner, and people (including the disciples) were starting to get a little cranky from their hunger. Of course, no one wanted to go home and risk missing any of what Jesus had to say. Enter “young boy.” Jesus strangely asks Philip where they could buy bread to feed such a large crowd of people. Andrew says sarcastically, “Hey, there’s a kid here with a few chunks of bread and a couple of dried fish. Ha-ha. But what are we going to do with that?” Of course Jesus knew exactly what He was going to do with that boy’s lunch. He had known all day. He had known His whole life. He was going to feed thousands.

Now think with me about this kid for a minute. He not only has the maturity to be spending his Saturday listening to a sermon rather than hanging out at the skate park, but he also had the remarkable faith to hand over the only food he had *with no promise of return*. Who knows—maybe he was a little miffed at giving up his eats. But since I doubt the disciples manhandled the kid to take his lunch from him, he must have given it willingly in the end. And just like the son who whined and pouted but still did what his father asked (see Matt. 21:28–32), this kid got full credit for obedience, even if his heart wasn’t *completely* in the right place at first. (Comforting thought, isn’t it? Which of us doesn’t have our

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own attitude issues?) Whatever his initial response, I'd say his act of surrender took remarkable faith! Yet in none of the Gospels are we even given his name, and he is never mentioned again.

Have you ever been asked this small-group ice-breaker question, "What Bible story character would you like to be?" Would this be yours? Would you want to be "the young boy"? Would you be willing to remain nameless, offering up your meager portion to your Savior, with no promise of return or guarantee of notoriety, but in complete obedience allow God to work His miracle through your small "lunch"? That's what embracing obscurity is all about: being content with being "relatively unknown" so that Christ can be made more known. Temporarily going hungry so that many more may be filled.

I want to close this chapter with a passage that will become familiar over the next ten chapters. As you read these words, marvel at the majesty and splendor of a God who could create innumerable species with a word, a God who knows trillions of stars by name yet would choose to become "relatively unknown" for your sake and mine.

Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—of those who are in heaven and on

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earth and under the earth—and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–10)

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had an experience that made you feel insignificant in light of the sheer number of people on this planet? An occasion when a crowd left *you* feeling a bit irrelevant?
2. Do you think our culture encourages people to feel important? If so, how?
3. Would you describe most of the people you know as generally lacking self-confidence or having too much self-importance?
4. What experiences here on Earth remind you most of God's vastness? What reminds you most of His attention to detail?
5. Do you agree that, "In the big picture we're all in this obscurity thing together"? Does the idea of obscurity in this life sit well with you?
6. If the idea of embracing your own obscurity rubs you wrong, what do you think are the root causes of those feelings? What beliefs, past experiences, or current circumstances might be contributing to your reluctance?

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7. How would you describe the difference between an obscurity of *position* and an obscurity of *heart*? Do you find the thought of one to be easier to swallow than the other?

8. If embracing obscurity hinges on “being content with being ‘relatively unknown’ so that Christ can be made more known,” how might Christ be made more known through your own obscurity?

