

DIVINE NOBODIES:
SHEDDING RELIGION TO FIND GOD
(AND THE UNLIKELY PEOPLE WHO HELP YOU)
by Jim Palmer
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CHAPTER FOUR

Death to the Phantom

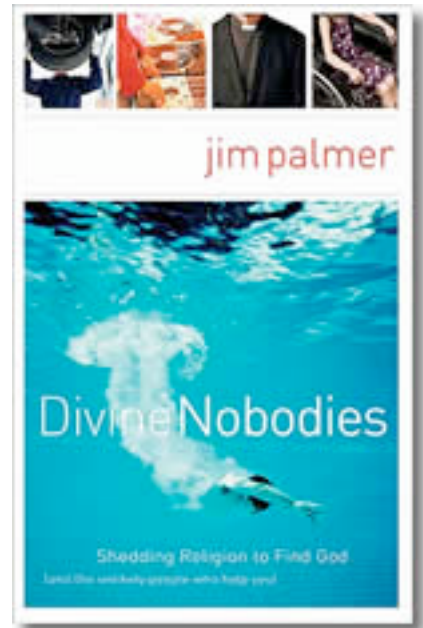
(Worthless Grace)

Identity

IT GETS RIDICULOUSLY COLD IN Angmagssalik, Greenland, and Ivangorod, Estonia. I know. Set to my Internet home page, I routinely check the weather in these remote places along with the town where I grew up (Blacksburg, Virginia), our honeymoon location (Cape Cod), and where I dream of one day living (Santa Barbara, California). I discovered the fascinating far-off places of Greenland and Estonia at the public library not a mile from our front door. These days I am experiencing a personal learning renaissance. Perhaps this is God's way of balancing out the dark ages of my college years when education was sacrificed on the altar of campus evangelism and discipleship. (Okay, okay, maybe there were also one too many dorm Ping-Pong tournaments and weekend road trips.)

While some enroll in continuing education courses, I pick an aisle in the nonfiction section of our library and peruse subjects and titles until coming across something interesting. By using this method, I have acquired a range of knowledge that enables me to hold my own in conversation if any of the following subjects come up: the rise and fall of the Sumerians; architectural nuances of an inviting street café; unique breeding habits of the giant kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys ingens*); and what really happened to Elvis.

The library is way underrated as a form of escape (remember Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*?). I can spend ten bucks and roll the dice on a movie or crack open a picture book of the Balearic Islands at no cost and imagine soaking up the sun on a rooftop patio overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. (Either way, I have to sneak in my own supply of yogurt pretzels.)



Sometimes you see strange things in libraries. Once, through a shelf of books, I spied a guy in the magazine section looking both ways before carefully slipping a *USA Today* into his briefcase. Hey! I hadn't even read the sports page yet. Then there's the time I saw the librarian at the counter turn away from a departing (and apparently difficult) customer and flip her the bird out of everyone's view except mine at the water fountain. It made for a strange moment when our eyes met, and it burst my bubble that all librarians are mild-mannered Mother Teresa types whose greatest joy in life is simply helping people find books.

One day while browsing, I came across a large picture book of Ireland, each page a photograph of some aspect of a day in the life of this legendary land accompanied by an explanatory caption. Settling into my comfy chair, I set off to the ancient island. Somewhere around Dublin the corner of my eye caught something that hijacked my attention.

All decked out in a pretty pink dress with white lace was a sweet little girl in a wheelchair. Her angel face was radiantly pale, and her sandy-blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail sporting a big yellow bow. Frilly white stockings disappeared into her sturdy white leather dress shoes, which were strapped down tight to the folding metal rests beneath her pigeon-toed feet. I could not turn away from this portrait of mangled beauty, despite knowing well enough that it isn't polite to stare at handicapped kids.

Kneeling down close beside the little girl is Dad. With one arm gently wrapped around her, he reads from an oversized storybook propped up in her lap. Slumped over against his shoulder, she is turned toward him, with the top of her precious head resting against the side of his face. She can't walk or sit up straight, and offers only an occasional groan. She's just sitting there unresponsive, seemingly oblivious, as Dad dutifully reads her a story, altering his voice to impersonate the different characters.

My mind began wandering, imagining this father's world.

On bended knee is a man who must walk through life brokenhearted for his daughter, who will never sing silly songs, skate in the park, or dance at her prom. A dad who loves his little girl perhaps even more because of that but who will never hear "I love you, Daddy," whispered in his ear or receive a homemade Father's Day card with sunshine and stick people. She will never do most of the things a

ponytailed little girl wants to do for her daddy. A tidal wave of sorrow crashed over me as I pictured my Jessica strapped in and slumped over in that wheelchair.

The lens of my soul zoomed in on her facial expression as she sits wrapped in her father's arms. Earnestly reading, she sits spellbound, gazing into his face with her mouth slightly open with a smile. He's glued to the book; she's glued to him.

What does she see? What does she feel? She seems so content and peaceful, at home really, resting her head against Daddy's face, receiving his love. Then again, that's all she can do. She's not even capable of reciprocating her father's love, and yet I can see she is his most precious treasure. Perhaps most look upon this scene in pity. How terrible to not be able to function in the most essential ways; perhaps in the eyes of the world she is useless. Not to her father. To him she is priceless.

Taking all this in, a torrent of troubling thoughts rose from somewhere deep within me. Would God still love me if I couldn't do anything for him? What if I were useless and couldn't do even the basic things I had learned a good Christian does? What if I couldn't impact others in any significant way, lead someone to Christ, serve a person in need, teach others Scripture, be a leader? What if I couldn't even go to church or have a quiet time? What if I couldn't progress any further in my spiritual life? What if I were barely even capable of having an intelligent thought about God? What if . . .

Complicating the matter further, the handicapped girl with her doting dad festered the wound of my own father's rejection.

Even before he left, he was never really there. To this day I cannot remember ever having a meaningful conversation with my father or a time when he looked me square in the eye and said he was proud of me or loved me. We never went on camping trips or to sporting events or worked on cars together. I tried out for the football team one year, hoping my father would take interest in me, but he never attended one of my games.

Somewhere back there that curlyhaired kid with gaps in his teeth and glasses held together by masking tape came to the unconscious but firm conclusion that he was badly defective, ugly, stupid, and worthless. This was the only logical explanation to a little boy for why

his dad was so thoroughly indifferent toward him and eventually left home altogether.

I'll be honest, all that "inner child" stuff makes me a little squeamish, but I cannot deny that my childhood self-hatred has played out in my adulthood with this automatic and insatiable drive to prove to the world (mostly myself and God) that I am not the piece of dung something inside tells me I am. Despite my sound grasp of the doctrine of justification, for all practical purposes, if God is my "Father," then I am still the useless stumbling son needing to supply sufficient reason for God to like me. My born-again legal standing before God was sufficient for warding off his wrath, but the idea that God was proud and satisfied with who Jim Palmer was seemed like a pipe dream.

Following me into the library that day was this phantom Christian I had created through years of being the kind of saintly person with whom I surmised God would be pleased. The whole drill seemed to be to strive hard to fulfill God's expectations and play your 1 John 1:9 card when you failed, earning you the right to start over and try harder.

Sitting there, a heavy weariness set in and I wanted to cry. I'm so tired of trying to get God to like me. I'm terrified of being abandoned and left alone in life. It had already happened a few times with people it's not supposed to. Having tasted of God's love, I didn't want to lose it. Making things work with God was my last great hope in life, and I couldn't afford to mess it up. If I drove God away, who was left?

I knew when I died I would go to heaven, but something deep within needed and longed for God now. I worked hard to stay on my game (daily quiet times, attending church, leading groups, and teaching classes) as I envisioned God in heaven perpetually asking, "What have you done for me lately?" I was desperate and willing to take whatever rest I could get, even if it was just an hour in a comfortable chair eating yogurt-covered pretzels and escaping to Ireland in photographs.

But then there was this out-of-order child in the wheelchair. . . useless yet priceless. She can't even sit up straight, but someone has gone through all the trouble of doing her up in bows and frills. An occasional grunt is Dad's only reward for giving his all in reading her the story. There's nothing she can really do *for* him, but she doesn't need to do anything; her father simply loves her. She's just slumped over, gazing into his face, receiving his love.

I've never spoken in tongues, healed anyone, or reached the blissful state of nirvana, and I probably wouldn't even know the yin from the yang if I ran right into it, but sitting in the public library thumbing through photographs of Irish foxhounds, farmers, and pubs, a picture of a girl and her father came down from heaven. Somehow, right before my very eyes, the Spirit transformed this sight into a snapshot of God and me, offering a completely new set of "What if . . ." questions.

What if I'm the girl slumped over in the wheelchair? What if there isn't anything I can do "for" God? What if he just wants me to lean against his face and receive his love? What if this phantom Christian I've been chasing is just a big distraction from resting in what God wants to freely give? What if my value and worth to God are not contingent on what I *do*? Maybe this is why I'm so tired inside. My soul has only so much energy, and the bulk of mine is being drained through striving to earn God's love and acceptance. What would it be like to truly know there isn't one more thing I ever have to do for God in order for him to be pleased with me?

I am so afraid. I'm holding on to all these things I feel I must do to stay on God's radar. Who will I be if I have nothing left to hold on to? Who will I be when I stand before God with empty hands? Maybe this is what God is trying to tell me. He wants me to open my clenched fists and discover I am not what I do but what he wants to give me. And what he wants to give me is love and life, unconditional love and life.

God placed the little girl right before me and gave me the eyes to see the deeper meaning of her handicapped condition. Until I understand I literally cannot *do* anything *for* God to achieve worth and value in his eyes, I won't stop trying. Maybe God wants me to stop trying.

Jesus once said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Wasn't Jesus essentially saying there is nothing *we* can do of value for God on our own? Think about it—isn't it a little silly to think there is anything God *needs* me to do *for* him? He's *God*! However, God did create me for the purpose of knowing him and has placed his life inside me so I can know him.

God wants me to experience him as life, peace, freedom, wholeness, and joy; and as I trust and depend upon his presence within, I come to know him in these ways, and God is pleased. If you're building a sandcastle on the beach a few feet from the ocean, what sense does it

make to be hauling Dixie cups of water one by one from your hotel room across the street on the fifteenth floor? There's an endless supply right before you for packing sand and filling moats. Maybe "accepting Christ" isn't so much a one-time thing we do as a formula for escaping hell in the afterlife, but rather a lifelong process of learning to depend on the sufficiency of Christ within for what we most deeply need and desire. His life fills our empty moats of worth, purpose, and love.

Though I had a seminary degree and could wax eloquent from the Pauline Epistles about "unmerited favor," somehow God could see I needed a little help to truly understand. He arranged for that angel in a wheelchair to be right in place, knowing I needed to witness a dad loving his daughter who couldn't do anything for him and didn't need to. Watching her peacefully and contentedly resting against Daddy's face, I could see she had found what my soul was yearning for. I needed to know a heavenly Father's love that did not require my striving to maintain it. Maybe you can't get the "know he is God" part right until you get the "be still" part down.

The other day Jessie and I were enjoying a pleasurable summer afternoon at the town park. While swinging her, I spotted a mom pushing a quadriplegic young boy down the sidewalk. Jessica saw too. She watched intently, and the question eventually came, "Daddy, what's wrong with that boy?"

After a lengthy explanation, trying to explain in six-year-old terms, Jessica became unusually quiet and continued watching. Without warning she finally responded, "Well, he's still a boy." A smile filled my face as I replied, "Yes, sweetheart, he's still a boy." There are some things you just are no matter what.

I never actually met the handicapped girl or her father in the Ireland picture book, but I learned two further things by reading about them. The little girl has cerebral palsy, and her name is Grace.

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