



anonymous



Jesus'
hidden years . . .
and yours

alicia britt chole



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To Barry,
my beloved husband, dearest friend, and wisest mentor:
a man who in faith treasures the unseen potential of every hidden soul.
In the spirit of Barnabas, you invest in others richly
then with joy step back to watch them shine.





contents

PROLOGUE: in winter.....	1
PART ONE: hidden treasure	
1. the iceberg equation	5
2. introducing . . . chapter 30	8
3. quite literally formative.....	11
4. a mentoring moment	14
5. through the window.....	16
6. reflections	18
PART TWO: from nazareth, with love	
7. roots.....	23
8. a delayed destiny	26
9. it is time!	28
10. reflections	32
PART THREE: out of anonymity	
11. a split sky	35
12. affirmation from above.....	39
13. before.....	42
14. reflections	45

PART FOUR: into the wilderness

15. the desert?	49
16. to be tempted	52
17. forty, one, and three	55
18. reflections	59

PART FIVE: the temptation of appetite

19. the first lure	63
20. the first longing, means, and invitation.....	66
21. the first anchor.....	69
22. the first choice.....	72
23. reflections	75

PART SIX: the fruit of hidden years

24. "Jesus grew"	79
25. the preexisting word.....	82
26. the underrated virtue.....	85
27. a portrait of God.....	88
28. two thieves	91
29. reflections	94

PART SEVEN: the temptation of applause

30. the second lure.....	97
31. the second longing	100
32. the second means and invitation.....	102
33. the second anchor and choice	105
34. reflections	109

PART EIGHT: more fruit from hidden years

- 35. an unshakable identity..... 113
- 36. trust in God's timing 117
- 37. a disciplined imagination 120
- 38. reflections 124

PART NINE: the temptation of authority

- 39. the third lure 127
- 40. the third longing, means, and invitation 130
- 41. the third anchor and choice 133
- 42. our friend, the desert..... 137
- 43. reflections 140

PART TEN: the crowning fruit from hidden years

- 44. an eternal perspective 143
- 45. submission-based authority..... 147
- 46. a powerful duet 152
- 47. warning signs 155
- 48. warning signs, continued 158
- 49. reflections 162

PART ELEVEN: guarding the holy place of hiddenness

- 50. only one..... 167
- 51. wait, and keep your spirit sweet..... 170
- 52. finally, be still..... 174

EPILOGUE: the last leaf 179

NOTES 182



prologue
in winter

*He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season.*
—*Psalm 1:3*

A century ago, a few fragile seeds fell upon rocky soil. Through drought and flood, they clung tightly to earth, stubbornly stretching toward the heavens. Today, silver maple, post oak, and black walnut trees surround our home like tall, loyal sentinels. Their intricate, mingled root systems support the ground below. Their long, angular boughs weave a canopy above. Before I was, they were. My elders by many decades, their presence is steadying.

In the heat, I rest under the covering of their rich foliage. Bursting with shades of green, the leaves dance in the breeze. Winter's reduction is coming, but that does not halt the dance. Trees celebrate the moment, temporary though it is. In the spring, their new growth sings of hope. Their lush greenery offers peace in the summer. In the fall, their colorful collages inspire creativity. And in their emptiness, trees grace the winter with silent elegance.

Though my skin prefers their role in summer, somehow my soul prefers their lessons in winter. Then, when growth pauses, the trees have often become my teachers.

What the plenty of summer hides, the nakedness of winter reveals: infrastructure. Fullness often distracts from foundations. But in the stillness of winter, the trees' true strength is unveiled. Stripped of decoration, the tree trunks become prominent.

As a child I always colored tree trunks brown, but to my adult eyes they appear to be more of a warm gray. Starting with their thick bases, I begin studying each tree. Buckling strips of bark clothe mile after mile of weathered branches. Leafless, the trees feature their intricate support systems. Detail is visible, as is dead wood. Lifeless limbs concealed by summer's boasting are now exposed.

My eyes glide from one rough, uneven bough to another and then to the terminal, delicate twigs. A tree's posture is all-open, like arms ready for an embrace. So very vulnerable, yet so very strong. I find the display quieting and full of grace.

In winter, are the trees bare? Yes.

In winter, are the trees barren? No.

Life still is.

Life does not sleep—though in winter she retracts all advertisement. And when she does so, she is conserving and preparing for the future.

And so it is with us. Seasonally, we too are stripped of visible fruit. Our giftings are hidden; our abilities are underestimated. When previous successes fade and current efforts falter, we can easily mistake our fruitlessness for failure.

But such is the rhythm of spiritual life: new growth, fruitfulness, transition, rest . . . new growth, fruitfulness, transition, rest. Abundance may make us feel more productive, but perhaps emptiness has greater power to strengthen our souls.

In spiritual winters, our fullness is thinned so that, undistracted by our giftings, we can focus upon our character. In the absence of anything to measure, we are left with nothing to stare at except for our foundation.

Risking inspection, we begin to examine the motivations that support our deeds, the attitudes that influence our words, the dead wood otherwise hidden beneath our busyness. Then a life-changing transition occurs as we move from resistance through repentance to the place of rest. With gratitude, we simply abide. Like a tree planted by living water, we focus upon our primary responsibility: remaining in him.

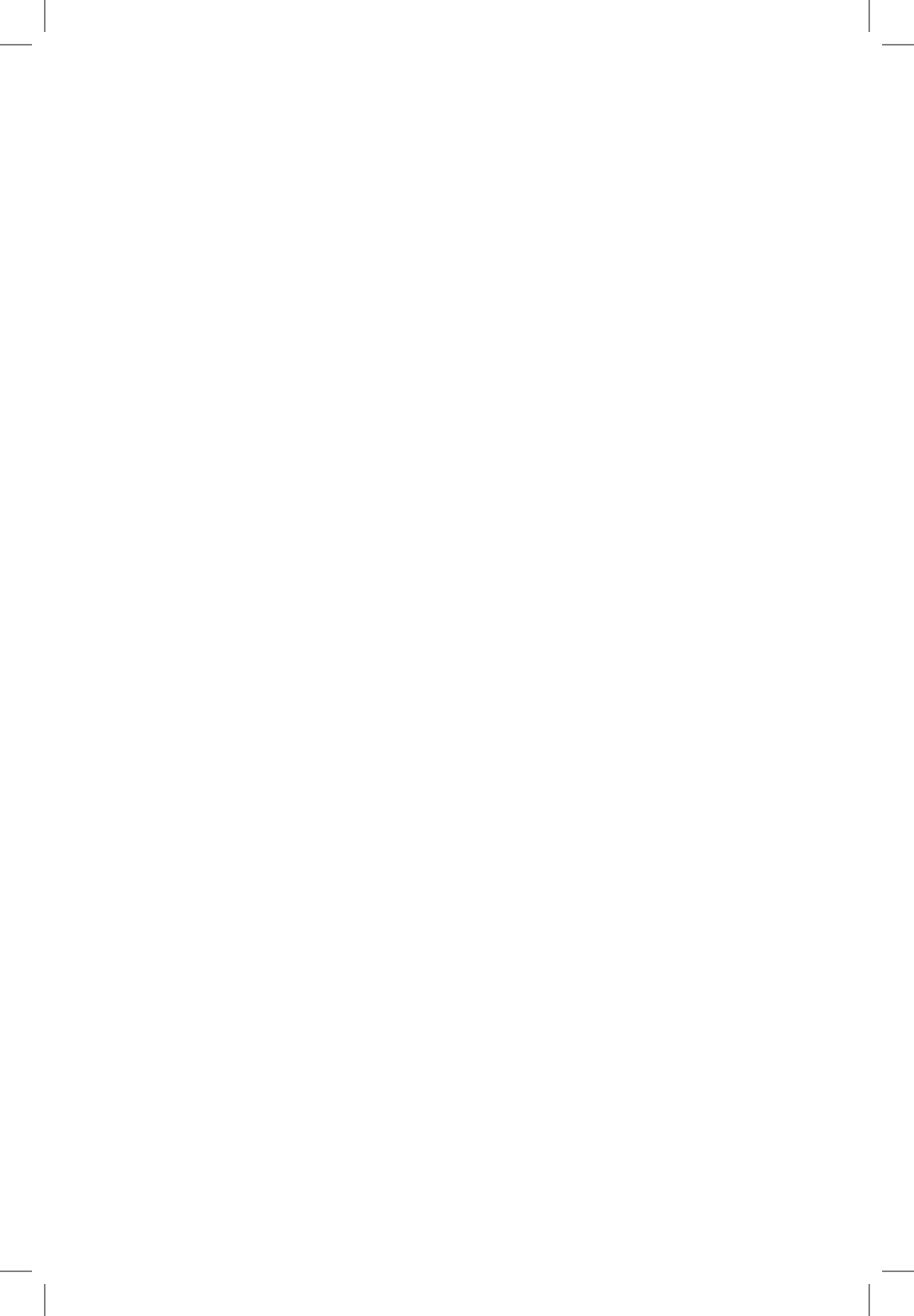
In winter are we bare? Yes.

In winter are we barren? No.

True life still is.

The Father's work in us does not sleep—though in spiritual winters he retracts all advertisement. And when he does so, he is purifying our faith, strengthening our character, conserving our energy, and preparing us for the future.

The sleepy days of winter hide us so that seductive days of summer will not ruin us.



PART ONE



hidden treasure



CHAPTER

1 | the iceberg equation

Have you ever felt hidden?

Have you ever moved to a new place or entered a new environment where no one knew who you were, what you could do, or what dreams ignited your soul?

Have you ever crossed the threshold into another season of life, like parenthood or extended studies, where you shifted from recognition to anonymity, from the court to the bench, from standing as a leader to sitting as a learner again?

Have you ever resigned or retired from a position or title and transitioned from being sought out to left out, consulted to unconsidered, celebrated to celebrating others?

In these hidden seasons, we are more familiar with being invisible than acclaimed. Concealed for months or years or decades, our potential seems to hibernate like a bear in winter, and over time we begin to wonder if spring will ever awaken it again.

Hidden hopes. Hidden dreams. Hidden gifts. All of us are acquainted with chapters in life when our visible fruitfulness is

pruned back, our previously praiseworthy strengths become dormant, and our abilities are unnoticed by the watching world. Like a flower whose budding glory is covered up by wet leaves, we sense the weight of hiddenness in our hearts and whisper, “I have so much more to give and be.”

But there is One who can see the beauty of that covered, smothered flower: God himself. And, mysteriously, his delight in that beauty is not diminished by its leafy camouflage. Neither would his pleasure be amplified by the flower’s visibility. Good news indeed for the hidden.

In fact, obedience to this God who appreciates the visible and invisible equally has led many truly great souls into long seasons of anonymity. Some emerged from obscurity into eminence. Others remained relatively unknown. All agreed that God never wastes anyone’s time.

Whether we enter hiddenness deliberately (as in pursuing an education or relocating with a new job) or unwillingly (as in an extended illness or in grief following the loss of a loved one), we can spend years feeling that the greatest part of us is submerged in the unseen, as though others can only see the tip of the iceberg of who we really are.

Through chattering teeth, arctic scientists inform us that only one-eighth to one-tenth of an iceberg is visible. As much as 90 percent is submerged in the unseen. Because of their enormous mass, with that proportion, icebergs are virtually indestructible.

10% visible + 90% unseen = an indestructible life

The most influential life in all of history reflected the iceberg equation. Ninety percent of his life on earth was spent in obscurity. Ten percent of his earthly life was spent in the public eye. And all of his life was, and still is, absolutely indestructible.



CHAPTER

2 | introducing . . . chapter 30

Of the Gospels' eighty-nine total chapters, only four offer any information about Jesus' life before the beginning of his public ministry. Mark and John skip the subject entirely. From this fraction of information about Jesus' early life provided in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we glean the following:

- ✎ Jesus was born in Bethlehem in a smelly animal pen (followed by hidden days).
- ✎ He was circumcised in the temple on his eighth day (followed by hidden months).
- ✎ Before turning two, Jesus received a visit from Eastern wise men (followed by hidden years).
- ✎ At the age of twelve, Jesus got in trouble for staying in the temple, listening and asking questions when he was supposed to be with his parents' family headed back home (followed by almost two entirely hidden decades).

Eighteen years after the temple incident, Jesus emerged from hiddenness, and his adult ministry commenced by the Jordan River at a wild man's baptismal service! All four writers of the Gospels mark the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry by introducing John the Baptist and his declarations concerning Jesus:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly

be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ✠ (Luke 3:15–17; see also Matthew 3:11 and Mark 1:7–8)

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” ✠ (John 1:29–31)

A powerful (and slightly frightening) introduction! But it is important for us to remember that this starting point marked by the Gospel writers is not chapter 1 of Jesus’ life; it is chapter 30. We know practically nothing about Jesus’ first 29 hidden chapters of life. Only three years, less than 10 percent, of Jesus’ days are visible through the writings of the Bible. Over 90 percent of his earthly life is submerged in the unseen.

However, when we state our desire to “be like Jesus,” we are not referring to Jesus’ anonymous years. “I want to walk like Jesus walked and live like Jesus lived!” is generally *not* equated in

our hearts with, “I want to live 90 percent of my life in absolute obscurity!”

Our enthusiastic declarations that we want to “be like Jesus” reference Jesus’ visible years . . . with a few notable exceptions. In these statements we are *not* saying, “I want to subject my body, spirit, and mind to an extended wilderness experience,” or, “I want to be brutally beaten, suffer excruciating pain, and be murdered at the hands of mocking sinners.”

No. Our desire to “be like Jesus” contains several exemption clauses, not the least of which are Jesus’ hidden years, desert experiences, temptations, tortures, and crucifixion. We will pass on those, thank you. What we *are* most definitely interested in, however, is Jesus’ character and authority. How we long to see his character and authority transform this broken world through our lives!

But Jesus’ character and authority are not isolated entities. They are not disconnected commodities we can purchase at a discount. Jesus’ character and authority come with Jesus’ life, 90 percent of which was lived in quiet anonymity.

“What would Jesus do?” we ask sincerely (in word and song, on T-shirts and in bracelets). Well, for starters, he embraced a life of hiddenness. As we will soon see, Jesus’ hidden years empowered him to live an eternally fruitful life.



CHAPTER

3 | quite literally formative

hid•den \hi-d^ən\ *adjective* **1** : being out of sight or not readily apparent : CONCEALED **2** : OBSCURE, UNEXPLAINED, UNDISCLOSED¹

Who would wrap a flawless, exquisitely cut, utterly unique diamond in common newspaper? From the accounts of Jesus' life, it appears that God would! He offers to humanity his Son—the most pure, precious, and priceless of gifts—wrapped in plain, nondescript paper. Then, along with the angels, it seems as though God watches history unfold like a parent with anticipation thinking, *I can't wait for them to realize what I've given them inside that package!*

So Father God clothes his Son with human flesh, hosts the birth of the world's Savior in a stable, and dispatches an elite angelic company to make the announcement of all ages before a small, somewhat less than internationally influential band of shepherds.

This was unexpected even by the devout. Diamonds are supposed to be displayed dramatically, not hidden discretely. All along, the people thought their promised Messiah would appear in convincing power to lead them spiritually and politically into a new day. They thought the packaging would be removed in a spectacular fashion before their eyes. Who would have guessed that God in his wisdom would conceal his gift for thirty years and then plan for the last shreds of packaging to be removed and the greatness of his Son to be fully revealed only in death?

Hence, this word *hidden* characterizes the vast majority of Jesus' life on earth. Why? Why would Father God wrap the glory of heaven in plain paper, announce the birth of his precious Gift with a full angelic choir, and then hide this priceless package for three decades?

We certainly would not have permitted the Son of God to live in anonymity for 90 percent of his life! Every breath would have been monitored by the brightest minds in medical research. Every movement would have been captured by the media and analyzed by psychologists. Every word would have been weighed by theologians, recorded by historians, and printed on tastefully designed posters.

Hidden? No way! Our tendency is to only hide things that are shameful or incomplete or insignificant. So when we see the gaps in Jesus' story we are apt to think, *Too bad. I would have liked to know more. But I am glad that the biblical writers documented the most important moments of Jesus' life.*

Now, certainly all that is recorded in the Scriptures about Jesus' life on earth is eternally essential and valuable. But does it then follow that the unrecorded is unessential or of lesser value? Because we naturally grant more weight to the visible than the invisible, it is easy for us to underestimate the vital importance of the three undocumented decades preceding Jesus' three celebrated years of public ministry.

However, with his life (and with ours), it is critical that we not mistake *unseen* for *unimportant*.

Consider human conception. Life commences in the dark warmth of the womb. God knits us together there with infinitely creative hands concealing from our curiosity his most mysterious

act of creation. Unseen? Yes. Unimportant? Not remotely. These months in the womb are quite literally formative. When this hidden phase of development is prematurely interrupted, the results can be tragic.

Or consider the growth of a plant. Before a gardener can enjoy a plant's fruit, she must tenderly and strategically attend to its root. So a plant's birth begins with its burial. The gardener commits a generally unremarkable seed to the silence of the soil, where it sits in stillness and lightlessness, hidden by the smothering dirt. Just when it appears as though death is imminent, its seeming decay reveals new life. The seed becomes less and yet more of its former self, and in that transformation takes hold of the darkness and reaches for the sun. All that is to come rests greatly upon the plant's ability to tightly and sightlessly develop roots in unseen places.

As with a child in the womb and a seed in the ground, God's unanticipated move of hiding Jesus granted him protected, undisturbed room to be and become. From God's perspective, anonymous seasons are sacred spaces. They are quite literally formative; to be rested in, not rushed through—and most definitely never to be regretted.

Unapplauded, but not unproductive: hidden years are the surprising birthplace of true spiritual greatness.



4 a mentoring moment

Allow me to explain how the book you hold in your hands emerged. Years ago, I was prayerfully preparing a teaching. As usual, God did not tell me what to say. He simply inclined my heart in the direction of what I needed to study. That inclination led me to restudy passages from the Bible that describe the temptation of Jesus.

Previously, I had viewed Jesus' temptation as a real trial in his present and a foreshadowing of the trials he would face in his future as he walked toward the cross. Turning to the passages this time, I found myself remembering a decade-old conversation with one of my first mentors, whom I will call Marie.

Marie was a very private person, but when she opened the door to her personal life you needed to take notes. I always called her with a journal open and a pen poised. This woman was profound. And like most truly profound people, she was intimately familiar with pain. One day, Marie told me about a friend who visited her in the hospital after her third miscarriage. Trying to console her, the well-meaning friend had said, "You know, Marie, God is going to make you even stronger through this."

My mentor smiled, thanked her friend, and thought about her words for several days. Relaying the hospital conversation to me, Marie explained that though she appreciated her friend's intention, she questioned her friend's conclusion about the purpose of pain. Marie ended our time together that day with this thought: "I feel that trials do not prepare us for what's to come

as much as they reveal what we've done with our lives up to this point.”

As Marie considered the pain of her third miscarriage, she realized that her response to this trial was less of a window into her future than it was a window into her past. Her current choices reflected and revealed her past choices. How had she responded previously when her dearest dreams perished in her womb? Did she withdraw from God in bitterness or come near to him with her unanswered questions? Had she tried to outrun the pain, or had she given herself permission to grieve and let the tears wash her wounds? The choices of her yesterdays were revealed through the window of her responses to her current trial.

In other words, trials tell us less about our future than they do about our past. Why? Because the decisions we make in difficult places today are greatly the product of decisions we made in the unseen places of our yesterdays.



CHAPTER

5 through the window

Meditating on Marie's experience, a principle began forming in my mind: today's decisions foreshadow tomorrow's challenges and reflect yesterday's choices.

For example, let us say that Kevin made unapplauded choices in his twenties and thirties to exercise fairly regularly and eat healthy foods. He never appeared on the cover of a nutrition magazine, nor was he featured in the "heroes for today" section of the local newspaper. He simply woke up each morning and consistently chose to exercise and eat well. His friend Doug also made simple, consistent, unapplauded choices regarding exercise and diet through passive postponement, i.e., "I'll work on that later." "Later," however, did not make its debut until Doug turned forty and began experiencing the unfortunate realities of what I call genetic displacement.

Question: Both Kevin and Doug are facing increased poundage, but whose past choices incline him to make healthy decisions today? Exactly. Kevin's past choices have clustered over the years and created momentum toward healthier living. So is poor Doug doomed to eventually look like Great (and I do mean "great" in every sense of the word) Uncle Alfred? No. But the momentum of his past choices will create resistance as Doug tries to head in a new, healthier direction for his second half of life.

Rather discouraging for Doug, some may note. Perhaps, but it is reality. And, frankly, I would rather have the truth than an

illusion, regardless of how temporarily encouraging that illusion may appear. For both Kevin and Doug, this is not chapter 1 of their lives; it is chapter 40. For better or for worse, the decisions they currently are facing reflect the choices they previously have made.

Let us reconsider my mentor's quote: "I feel that trials do not prepare us for what's to come as much as they reveal what we've done with our lives up to this point." With Marie's wisdom in my soul, I turned once again to the passages that recorded Jesus' wilderness experience. Suddenly I realized that these first steps in Jesus' public ministry actually opened a window into Jesus' unseen past! For Jesus, and for us, "today" does not exist in a vacuum. Each day is in some way shaped by the days preceding it and in turn has an effect upon the days following it.

By examining the decisions Jesus made in chapter 30 of his life, we gain insight into Father God's formative work in Jesus during chapters 1 through 29! His baptism and wilderness experience hold significance, not only for his present and future, but also for his past. Because the strongest influences on the decisions Jesus made *in* the desert were the choices he had been making *before* the desert. In hidden places over hidden years, Jesus' choices clustered and created momentum that is revealed through the decisions he made in his public ministry.

Jesus' first three decades were mostly unrecorded, but they were not uneventful. By examining the first decisions and experiences of Jesus in his celebrated, public ministry we will begin to recognize the riches Father God planted in him (and seeks to plant in us) in anonymous, uncelebrated seasons of hiddenness.



CHAPTER

6 reflections



At the end of each part in *anonymous*, you will find an informal chapter such as this one that contains a set of personal reflections. God connects with each of us uniquely. Personally, I seem to interact most intimately with him outside on a quiet stroll or in my prayer room while playing the piano, meditating on the Scriptures, or thinking with pen and paper in hand. Though I would prefer to talk and walk with you through our dry creek bed, in these chapters I invite you to share a few moments with me and my journal (and hopefully a hot cup of tea or coffee!). These pages contain raw reflections and personal struggles with the destiny-determining choices we all face in anonymous seasons.

Some struggle with living in the past, others with living for the moment. Personally, my struggle has more often been in living for the future. As a young adult, my gaze was always set toward the next step or season or degree or plan or place or . . .

Distracted with daydreams of tomorrow's potential, I often found today's reality pale and tasteless in comparison. Before I could even be capable of valuing hidden years, I first had to start valuing each day as something more than just a boring prelude to the exciting future.

My perspective is thankfully different now (one or two or twenty-something years later), and I trace the beginnings of that shift to an unusual experience around a dinner table. After finishing my undergraduate studies, I went to Asia and eventually found myself tutoring students in English at a church-sponsored study hall on Tsing Yi Island. The beautiful people and their fascinating culture completely captivated me. In fact, I planned to spend my entire life serving and learning from the Chinese. (Obviously, since I am writing from the Ozarks of Missouri, that plan has since been revised.)

While there, my co-workers invited me to a “banquet,” which I equated in my mind with eating lots of food plus meeting lots of people plus enduring a painfully constructed speech. Walking into the restaurant, I soon discovered that Chinese banquets are more like journeys than meals. The experience that night unfolded slowly over several hours as course after course of what ultimately became a twelve-course meal was presented at our large, round, rotating table.

Back home in Texas, normally the first “course” at a restaurant was a bright bowl of chips and salsa. Of Hispanic descent, I genetically craved good salsa, but that is not why I went to restaurants. The chips and salsa were just fillers—something to get past, to get through, to get on with the main course that was not there yet (but was coming!). Then perhaps course number two would be a salad. Most often it was quite clear that the master chef had not touched that salad. It too was just a filler, something to get past, to get through, to get on with the main course that was not there yet (but was coming!).

Well, something surprised me about that Chinese banquet. Through course after course after course, I was not able to identify anything as “just a filler.” Nothing stood out as “only an appetizer” to get through, to get past, to get on with the main course that was not there yet (but was coming!). Every course—in presentation, in taste, in texture—bore the marks of a master chef. Then the obvious occurred to me: the reason no course looked like a filler was because, from the master chef’s perspective, no course was a filler. To him, every course was main.

Now, I confess that after a while I became a little distracted at the banquet and my mind started wandering back to past courses. Like that shark-fin soup—what was I thinking? Why did I not get more of that dish when I had the chance?! Then my thoughts would drift ahead to future courses as I worried about the possibility of chicken feet being on the menu. While I spent my energy reminiscing about and regretting the past, or daydreaming about and dreading the future, the course before me grew cold, and I wondered why it did not taste as good as it should.

That experience has returned to my memory countless times because I, and perhaps we, have a tendency to think that “main” is out there, not right here. Main is on hold, waiting to appear until after . . . we finish our education or get married or find that dream job or start a family or resolve that conflict or complete that task or get out of debt or retire or slow down or . . .

In moments when I am tempted to treat this gift called time as though it were some unfortunate filler, I hear a gentle

whisper from God in my soul: “Child, I am the God who wastes no man’s time. To me, every course in your life is main.”

Main is not behind us. Nor is main way out ahead of us. To our God, this course—call it transition, further studies, unexpected illness, financial crisis, grief, or a desert—is as full of potential as any course ever has been and any course ever will be.

Every course—and certainly every day—is a gift from God. (Enjoy it while it’s hot.)

