

God's
Astounding
Opinion
of You

RALPH HARRIS



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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Foreword | 7 |
| Introduction | 9 |
| 1. Salieri's Game | 13 |
| <i>The Enemy's Strategy to Keep You from You</i> | |
| 2. The Pursuit of Trivial Nobility | 25 |
| <i>Jumping the Treadmill of Dissatisfying Delusion</i> | |
| 3. You Stink! | 35 |
| <i>What Does Death Have to Do with Your Life?</i> | |
| 4. Who Is I? | 47 |
| <i>Are You a Modification or a New Creation?</i> | |
| 5. The Demolition Derby | 65 |
| <i>Why Do You Feel Like You're a Crash-test Dummy?</i> | |
| 6. He Ain't Heavy | 73 |
| <i>Holy Spirit—Life of the Party</i> | |
| 7. Hitting My Pause Button | 83 |
| <i>How to Find God by an Intentional Delay</i> | |
| 8. Doin' the Monster Mash | 101 |
| <i>Slaying the Sin-loving Beast in You</i> | |
| 9. Cleaning Up Toxic Relationships | 111 |
| <i>Getting Free from the Prison of Devotion</i> | |
| 10. Friendship with Our Friend | 125 |
| <i>Does God Bother with You Because He's Bothered or Because He Likes You?</i> | |

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 11. | The Eyes Have It | 133 |
| | <i>If You Don't Like What You See, You're Missing Something Terrific!</i> | |
| 12. | Aliens Have Landed | 147 |
| | <i>The Proper Care and Feeding of the Everyday Foreigners in Your Family</i> | |
| 13. | The End of Pretending | 165 |
| | <i>Receiving Frustration's Gift to You</i> | |
| 14. | Stripping Mummies | 181 |
| | <i>Finding Freedom and Life Outside the Tomb</i> | |
| 15. | Taking Heaven with You | 215 |
| | <i>If All of Heaven Is Your Audience, What Are They Thinking?</i> | |

Salieri's Game

The Enemy's Strategy to Keep You from You

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:18

All deception in the course of life is indeed nothing else but a lie reduced to practice, and falsehood passing from words into things.

ROBERT SOUTHEY

Not long ago my wife and I had a home built for us here in Colorado. Having departed the stuffy congestion of Southern California, the expanse of the Rocky Mountains was wonderfully invigorating. Everything seemed new, which—in our case, at least—begged for new plans. Nearly everyone enjoyed our enthusiasm and did what they could to assist the rookies in the Rockies. Our home builders worked diligently, landscaping our front yard with Colorado staples such as river rock, aspens, and meadowlike shrubbery. It seemed like the team of workers had it all done perfectly in 15 minutes. Unfortunately, the backyard was not part of the deal—they left that for me.

Looking at my lineage, anyone would know why I was ill-equipped to tackle such a task. Generations of males in my family have been virtually clueless around lumber, pipe, and cement. Spend five seconds in my garage, and you'll know I'm not one of those guys who has every tool known to mankind perfectly laid out or hung up and who is anxiously anticipating a mission to Home

Depot over the weekend. The only reason I have any tools at all is because I had to buy them to use immediately—like a hammer.

But because we didn't want our daughters playing in a dirt backyard for the next five years, we carefully constructed a meticulous plan. After months of regular wrestling with dirt, trees, rock, shrubs, and demonic sprinkler lines, I felt I had broken out of the cursed line of ineptitude. A perceptive few confirmed my breakout by saying, "Wow. We didn't think you had it in you. *It actually looks good.*"

Finally, the day came for the crowning deed—the laying of the sod. After we had it in place, we christened it with delicately sprinkled water from our perfectly placed sprinklers and celebrated the flawless completion of our plan. Luxurious and unblemished, the forest green lawn proclaimed our magnificent success.

But there was a problem. Out of our eyesight, our lawn was playing the harlot. In what seemed like no time at all, we became convinced that our pristine fescue had been beckoning every nasty plant seed in our state to lay with it. Ugly offspring soon popped out all over our backyard, revealing what had been happening in the darkness without our knowledge and without our permission. Having planned so carefully and worked so hard, I thought my labor was virtually over—I could just stand back and enjoy the view. But for months on end, what greeted a look out any rear window were weeds, weeds, and more weeds.

We hadn't recognized the terrible effect something unseen and unknown could have on our plans. From those days to these, it's war in our backyard. Only now we know what's going on out of sight, and we're fighting a little smarter.

The Unseen Arena

The most important arena is not the one right in front of us, the one we can see, but the one out of sight, the one we cannot see. The real story is not first visible but invisible. Long ago God planned for His story, beginning to end, to unfold visibly over centuries of time. Since you and I first began our life of faith, we've been reading our

Bibles and looking to that invisible story more and more—it has our attention. Even if we don't look any different and even if the world around us doesn't look any different, our understanding of it all is *far different*.

We now know that there's a lot going on unseen, and it fashions our faith and shapes what we experience. We're learning that, in order to live in the visible, we must put our faith in the invisible. This is how we get to know God, and it's also how we get to know ourselves. From the moment the Garden doors were shut to Adam and Eve, man's greatest effort has been to live by faith in what he cannot see.

Our faith will drift rudderless if we don't know what's true and happening in the invisible arena. We'll be left confused and frustrated in the visible because that's where God's story is playing out, and we'll be left to pulling mysterious weeds out of our lives all of our days. But if we discover and believe what God says is true and important in the unseen, life will begin to make sense and excel—we will have the life that was promised by our Lord Jesus.

What God Thinks of You

In this book we'll look at what God thinks of Himself, but we'll concern ourselves primarily with what God thinks of you. Why is that important? If God and you disagree about who and what you are, your approach to Him and your approach to all of life will be a tangled mess. It cannot be otherwise.

This isn't a book on self-esteem with the goal that, after reading it, you'll feel better about yourself. That's not nearly enough. It is a book about accurate self-estimation based entirely upon what God thinks of you, and without question, you'll feel way better about yourself at the end. For the Christian, self-esteem isn't something you work up and get so you can live well. It's something you receive from God because you *are* well—now go and live! He loves it and is glorified when we believe Him about ourselves and live accordingly. That's the goal.

Fortunately, the way to it will be surprising and incredibly invigorating because it's certain that God thinks you're better than you do and that you're better off in life than you think. (By the way, He's right!)

God thinks He has made you a fantastic, Spirit-born person, quite a bit like Himself, well-recognized throughout the heavens. If you could right now take a poll of those in the heavenlies, they would all tell you how much you resemble Him. Of course, you'd have to be wary of those of the Liar Clan; they, after all, would lie. But even those on the demonic side of things know the truth about you. You should too.

You're different. And while you have a residence, an identity (mom, dad, brother, sister, lawyer, salesman...), responsibilities, and more, those earthly things are, at best, nice accessories for you and cannot ever match up to the truth about you. No matter how great and excellent your title, no matter how good your family, no matter how great your lawn looks, any identity you may have in the visible realm will never be as good as the identity you have in the invisible realm. It's what makes you different.

For sure, it's better than you think and *it's more real than anything else*. More than likely, you'll have to be weaned from focusing upon the various titles and roles this visible world has to offer in order to see the majesty of the invisible and to have it count for something. It might not be easy.

You Are Not of This World

Let me show you what I mean. If I told you that Jesus compared believers to Himself, how would you think we might stack up? It's better than you might believe, and it's fundamentally critical you believe it. Speaking about the people the Father had given to Him, Jesus said, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, *even as I am not of it*" (John 17:15-16).

According to God, we're not of this world to the same extent He

is not—we match with Him! Can you believe it? You are not *from* or *of* this world any longer, your natural birth having been overcome by your supernatural birth. One began your life, while the other changed it. One birth was of this world, while the other was of another—you're from the same place God is! That's what He thinks; how about you?

Through your new birth in Christ, God changed you from having the same earth-born nature as those still of this world, and now you're actually *of* Him, sharing in His very nature. You're now far more like Him at the center of your being than you will ever again be like the people of this world. You *are* different, and He wants everyone and everything to know about the great work He has done with you. He brags on you, and you might as well know why.

Not aware of how like Him you have become? It's probably because you've accepted and grown accustomed to what this visible world says about you: who you are, what you are, and how you are. Someone invisible labors night and day so that you will have this mistaken identity.

Satan works to fool believers into believing they are better related to the world they can see than they are to the world they cannot see. In essence, *Satan doesn't want you to believe what God thinks of Himself and what God thinks about you.* He's been at work concerning what Christians believe about themselves for a long, long time, employing brilliant tactics against them.

Salieri

This scheme is well-portrayed in the terrific 1984 Academy Award-winning film *Amadeus*. Best Actor winner F. Murray Abraham plays Antonio Salieri, the court-appointed composer to the king of Austria. A talented composer in his own right, Salieri discovers and quickly begins to resent a rather gifted, spotlight-worthy composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Soon Salieri figures out that God lives in Mozart. That He does is made especially obvious by the fact that while Salieri works endless

hours and even years to compose anything of any merit, Mozart dashes off the greatest musical pieces ever known virtually overnight and with ease: "As if he were taking dictation!" Salieri hisses. And it galls him, making him furious with God.

Sitting alone and brooding before a large and impressive crucifix, Salieri pulls down the emblem and sets it into a blazing fire, saying to Jesus concerning Mozart, "From now on, we are enemies, You and I. I will block You. I swear it! I will hinder and harm Your creature on earth as far as I am able. I will ruin Your incarnation!" For the remainder of the film, Salieri lives to frustrate the God-indwelt Mozart, robbing him of any recognition or joy of the gift of God within him. He is brutally successful, and finally, Mozart wears out and dies a poor man—alone, unhappy, and unfulfilled. Generations since have marveled at the obvious gift of God in Mozart, celebrating God in their love for his music, but Mozart had that joy and knowledge stolen from him. We know who was in Mozart, but Salieri's game was to make certain Mozart did not.

It was Satan's game then, and it remains his game today—don't let people know where the invisible God is. Let them think He is *out there*, but don't let them believe He is *in here*. It's a pretty good game, don't you think?

How long has it been since you've marveled at the fact of "Jesus in me!" or had a genuine bit of delight over Him living in you or a good leap for the joy of it? Has it been a while? Then I think the game is against you. I think "Salieri" has been about his business with you, seducing you into siding with his estimation of you ("You're nothing special—*just look at you*") and perhaps of others as well.

That's the game, and if he can, he'll get you to play along. Don't think about whether or not the invisible God lives in people and approach them accordingly. Think of them according to what they do and how they're doing at life. Think of people based upon what you can see, not based upon what you cannot see. After all, who can say what people are really like when you can't see them, right?

Wrong! If God is in the vessel, then you do know what they're really like. They're sons or daughters of God, and they are not best seen by what is visible but by what is invisible!

Remember the World You're From

Do you see?

If we don't see this, we'll be overwhelmed by the visible, and our approach to all of life will be twisted. It cannot be any other way. Dominated by the visible, our attraction to it will become a form of addiction—we'll value and live for it more than we'll value and live for the invisible. The affects will be disastrous because we'll be living not *as we are*, but *as we think we are*. The truth won't have us—a lie will. And nobody lives well in a lie.

Satan would have you to estimate yourself based not upon the world you're *from*, but upon the world you're *in*. And that will not do.

Paul emphasized this truth to the believers in Colossae:

I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Colossians 1:25-29).

It would be the pinnacle of understatement to say that for centuries, being “near to God” was not without serious issues. Following Him meant incredible, tragic, strange, and wondrous things would happen. But God *in man*! Is He serious? Think of it—God's likes and dislikes, God's loves, God's abilities, and God Himself within

man. Consider how He would stand out from there! It would be obvious.

And that's the plan. Perfect. But it's not easy to walk around in your day thinking, *God is in me right now, at this very moment and will not leave me.* There may not be much to support that visibly. Nevertheless, facts are facts.

Things Are Different Now

But it wasn't always this way. During God's relationship with man under the old covenant, was anyone ever told to offer himself to God? No. Not once. Why not? No one was ever good enough, no one was ever entirely without blame or sin, and so the intimate presence of God was denied him. A spotless, unblemished, and entirely perfect animal was to be offered in his place. That was acceptable.

Is it the same now with the new covenant? Not at all! "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to *offer your bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1).

Offering your body is an act of worship because you believe what He says about you, the offering: You've been made "holy and pleasing to God"! Through Christ, you've become perfectly acceptable. He didn't make you just a believer; He made you an excellent place in which to live. You're compatible! You probably don't always feel as if He's at home in you or He's entirely happy about His new digs. Yet faith looks to the invisible—not to the touchy-feely—and you know He's there because He says so.

Further, during the former covenant, would anyone have gotten together with a few friends, enjoyed some nice Egyptian ale, and at around midnight sneaked into the Holy of Holies? *No, sir!* Why not? *Because God was in there!* Nobody entered that holy place unless he was the high priest—and then only once a year. It's not at all difficult to imagine he had been prayed-up for weeks and took plenty of the blood of a spotless lamb with him. You didn't mess with the Holy of Holies because God *Himself* was in that temple.

Has it ever struck you that today God's Holy of Holies, the temple where God lives, is *reading this right now*?

Think for a moment on Paul's words to those sloppy Corinthian Christians: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; *for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple*" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Have you thought of it? After finishing your morning coffee and walking out the door to work, have you thought, "Well, here I go, God's sacred mobile home into the day"? No? You're not dumb—Satan's been at work addicting you to the visible so that you find it difficult to live in the invisible. And faith is frustrated.

Peter and the Gentiles

He worked on Peter too. Because he had been absent from the God-is-making-all-things-new class, Peter received from the Spirit a nightmare revelation that his assessment of people was a tad bit off. Three times Peter was given a dream filled with nasty-looking, non-kosher creatures, which he assumed were in nature as they looked—*nasty*. Not so.

Correcting Peter's view of people and of Gentiles in particular, the Spirit said to him, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). In other words, if God has made something brand-new or if God has come to live in a man (1 John 4:13), then regardless of his look, attitude, or behavior, he is *brand-new*, and God has made for Himself a holy, earthly dwelling place.

Satan knew this, and he fought against it. He fights still. Tactics? Focus the ones forever changed on the forever changing; swap the invisible for the visible. That'll do it.

Knowing the tactic, Paul cautions and instructs believers where to look in order to live. "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

If according to God we've become brand-new creations, entirely

new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17) and no longer of this world, then where is that visible? In the invisible! It's in the unseen eternal, in the never-changing arena that we are known for who we really are! Having been changed into sons and daughters of God, a look to the unseen arena will always reveal the truth of who we have become. That's why Paul urges us to keep our gaze *there*, fixing our hearts and thoughts *there*. In the unseen is where we'll find who we really are at all times, during any experience or condition in the visible temporary that is passing away. We don't "set our hearts on things above" (Colossians 3:1) in order to feel better about things below. We do it because that's where we'll find ourselves! We're known *there* but we're fairly unrecognizable *here*. *There* (in the unseen, perfectly real, eternal realm), we're got-it-goin'-on, stand-up-and-shout sons and daughters of God. *Here* (in the visible, temporary realm), we don't always look so good.

Don't Be Transfixed by the Visible

Where do you suppose Satan would like to galvanize our gaze, *there* or *here*? If he can attract the not-of-this-world sons and daughters of God to the things and situations of this passing-away stage, *here*, might he then be able to affect their thinking? Might he be able to pull off the scam of the millennium by seducing them into believing they are what they do and feel (and they are how they behave and think *here*) more so than what God says they truly are *there*? Do you suppose the devil could disrupt their faith—their belief about God and about themselves in relation to Him—and point it away from their native land (the heavenly realm) by bending it to earthly things? With a nod to Groucho Marx, you bet your life.

And it's not hard to hear again Salieri's words to Jesus about the talented Mozart: "I will block You, I swear it! I will hinder and harm Your creature on earth as far as I am able. I will ruin Your incarnation!"

So here's what's happened: By demonic concoction, many of us have come to believe that our behavior and thought life reveals more about who and what we are than what the Bible says about who and

what we are. Perhaps we're straight theologically (it's tucked away somewhere in our heads), but practically and dominantly, we're twisted and have the two realms—invisible and visible—entangled. When that happens, we exchange the unseen (always true and unchanging) for the seen (temporary and changing) *as reality*, and then everything gets distorted—including our lives.

We've affixed our gaze on the wrong place. Scripture tells us the importance of shifting our assessment of people away from how they look or behave to whether they have had a second birth. Although we are to no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view (2 Corinthians 5:16), we still fall prey to the temporary temptation. When we see our failures, struggles, and shortcomings, we begin to believe we are truly a mess in need of a lot of changes. What's wrong with that? Soon we'll become fascinated and fixated with ourselves instead of God. And that's tragic.

Transfixed by the visible, the practical relevance of the invisible will slip away, and eternal truth will begin to miss the mark of the heart. We'll begin to implore God to work on us, our misplaced faith missing the fact that He already has. And the separating identification of *there* and *here*, of eternal and temporal, is lost. The practicalities of faith are muddled and confused. What Jesus achieved for Himself by the cross and resurrection, the joy of making many the very sons and daughters of God, is frustrated. *That was Salieri's game.* And that's the tactic the devil has been using for a long time.

Brennan Manning writes the following:

The paltriness of our lives is largely due to our fascination with the trinkets and trophies of the unreal world that is passing away... When we are not profoundly affected by the treasure in our grasp, apathy and mediocrity are inevitable. If passion is not to degenerate into nostalgia or sentimentality, it must renew itself at its source. The treasure is Jesus Christ. He is the Kingdom within.*

* Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 8.

What to do? Where to start? Ask the Holy Spirit to expose every lie you might unwittingly believe, any subtle deception concerning what God thinks of you, what you are, and who you are with Him and how that affects your life. He will do it, and you'll find it to be one of the most exhilarating exercises you'll ever undertake. It's also the beginning of a whole new kind of love affair, one which changes your life by bringing you out.

And you'll love that.

Questions for Discussion

1. In this chapter, we have discussed how different (better!) your identity is in the invisible realm. What do you think about that?
2. If “looking at the invisible” seemed impractical to you, please explain why.
3. How effective has “Salieri” been at hiding you from you?
4. What are some of your hopes for the rest of the book?