

Q&A with Sara Hagerty
Author of *Unseen:*
The Gift of Being Hidden in a World That Loves to Be Noticed
Zondervan, August 2017

Q: How did “hitting a wall” in ministry affect you? What happened specifically?

A: Lives around me were changing for Jesus but my life was stagnant. My passion for ministry ebbed and a vague emptiness took its place. I'd have dinner with a teenager who'd just asked Jesus into her heart and find myself mindlessly repeating answers I'd said for years. I knew how to share about God's love with others, but I no longer felt like I was living in it myself. There was a voice in my head that wondered, Am I just saying these things about God, or do I really believe them? So, I'd come home and check in on my heart, carving out space to sit with God and ask that question out loud. Except when I got there, that space and time alone with Him felt awkward—like I was supposed to share the kinds of things you mostly only say in hushed tones to a close friend, but instead this was a conversation with a distant acquaintance. I didn't quite know how or where to start. More than thirty minutes with my Bible open but without a Bible study to plan, and I didn't know who I was supposed to be. I wasn't sure who God was, either, in my less-productive quiet time and in the seemingly “nonessential” moments of life.

Q: Where did these questions lead you?

A: These questions would eventually guide my eyes toward finding the unseen beauty of a hidden life in God. But as it is with most beginnings, first they were unnerving. I knew God was benevolently disposed toward me but I'd always assumed His benevolence was also connected to my “producing” something for His kingdom. When I felt productive in ministry, it wasn't hard to imagine that God had loving thoughts toward me, or that He looked at me with warm affection. I had a harder time trying to imagine what He might be thinking about me during the hours of the day when I wasn't doing anything tangible for Him. What was the expression on His face when I didn't have a trail of changed lives lined up behind mine? How did He feel about me on Saturday morning while I was lying on the couch in sweatpants, exhausted from the week?

Q: So, you were faced with the choice—keep doing more for God, or give up the striving.

A: Yes. Something inside of me knew there had to be more to my life with God than being productive and sharing the good news with others. Something inside of me craved the God I'd find when I wasn't changing the world. I'd always thought my craving for more in life would be satisfied with more ministry, more impact, more good works for God. But instead of filling me with more, the escalating effort I put into those things left me feeling empty.

As I saw it at the time, I gave in to burnout, but there was more to it than that. I'd been driven by a passion to see lives change, but I also craved the validation I received when my life made a notable impact on someone else's. Over time, the deep satisfaction I'd found in my work lessened. The nagging drive, albeit subtle, to which I'd responded to do more and more, continued to leave me feeling inadequate. My expectations for myself increased as my ability to meet those expectations diminished. Even worse, I had begun to see myself as critical to God's success. But now I just couldn't do it anymore. So, I left the ministry I admired.

Q: What impact do you think social media has on our idea of greatness?

A: In this digital age, we might well wonder, “If it wasn't posted on social media, did it really happen?” We can't live for the beauty of the hidden life while simultaneously feeding on likes and comments. As long as we don't make big impact synonymous with greatness, there's nothing inherently wrong with it. However, the unintended consequence may be that we begin to think that anything that isn't big and observable isn't great, which renders the rest of life a waiting room. Wasted time. When we live a life of constantly reaching for the next big thing, we miss the greatness God is calling us to right here, right now. In the small, the ordinary, the hidden moments. The white space. Great kingdom impact comes not just from actions that make a dramatic and observable impact, but from all the accumulated moments we spend looking at God, to bringing Him glory in private, and letting Him shape our insides. One more social media post can never settle me as much as exhaling my thoughts before God. I want—I need—to talk to God when no one is looking.

Q: What did you learn as you explored the “unproductive” life?

A: I discovered layers of God I hadn't considered when I was barreling through life, when He was only a leader and a coach to me. Slowly, my desire to see and feel who He was within the pages of His Word prompted me to look at the lines on His face. To take a long and thoughtful look at Him—and not just once. As I did so, I saw that He not only invited me to see

Him—in the minutia of stories I’d read for years in order to gain broad themes and lessons—but that He also saw me, right there in my middle minutes. His life on the earth and in these pages held expression. Toward me. When I slowed, I saw that He, too, looked through the layers of me to know and respond to my heart. He wasn’t driving me to produce in such a way that all I saw was the back of His shoulders and His firm gait as He charged ahead of me; He was turned toward me and looking into me, with a soft-heartedness and an ever-unfolding invitation. His face held a gentle expression. Loving expression. Toward me, who was doing nothing for Him.

Q: This increased your desire to connect more intimately with God?

A: In a year that felt like failure by all my ministry productivity standards, I grew desperate to lock eyes with God and see the expression on His face toward me. I knew if on an average Tuesday afternoon I could see God as the Initiator, the One who gently draws me close and with tenderness, then I could finally find deep-soul rest. I wouldn’t have to work so hard to get God’s attention because I already had it. Every single ordinary minute of my day would be an opportunity to encounter the unwavering gaze of God.

This is hiddenness. It’s not a natural concept for our human minds to apprehend. There are times in life when God tucks us away. He might hide us in a difficult job or an unwelcomed circumstance where we feel misunderstood. He might hide us in a crowd where we feel unseen or behind the front door of our home, changing diapers and burping babies. He does this all so that we might see another side of Him, this God who looks deeply and knowingly into us when no one else is looking or noticing, and come alive under that eye.

Q: But you still believe this desire to be noticed is natural, maybe even placed there by God?

A: The truth is, we are made by God to be seen and celebrated. We like to hear our own name. When we are noticed and affirmed for our accomplishments or character traits, we feel that internal sigh of deep satisfaction that says: *Yes, I matter. To someone.* It is God who gives us this craving to be known, to realize that we *do* matter. Author and pastor Dallas Willard said it this way: “Unlike egotism, the drive to significance is a simple extension of the creative impulse of God that gave us being... We were built to count, as water is made to run downhill. We are placed in a specific context to count in ways that no one else does. That is our destiny.”

Q: How has Facebook and Instagram affected your longing for approval?

A: The problem is not that we long for significance, but that we are shifty or misguided in where we look for it. When we crave most the eyes of others—their opinions and accolades—we break our gaze with the only eyes that will ever truly see us. We forget the beauty of the Creator-eyes turned toward us—the ones that saw the inception of our life and loved what He saw. We’re still hungry for the thing for which we were made: to be seen, to be known, to be celebrated, to participate in something much larger than ourselves. But too often we settle for lesser things. It seems easier to get a “Like” online than it does to get quiet before God, to seek His face and listen for His whispers. Especially if we’re not sure what the expression on His face might be, or if His whispers will be kind. We wonder if God could ever like what He sees in us when no one is looking. And we forget it was in that same kind of hiddenness that our very selves took shape in the first place.

Q: Why is finding this “hiddenness” so difficult?

A: In the words of Paul, these hidden times can help us to, “think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth” (Colossians 3:3) We don’t naturally fall into this way of thinking. We breathe and pay our bills and use our words, all in the temporal. We need help to look at the unseen, the things of heaven (not the things we can touch with our hands or gauge with a measuring stick). Our truest life—once we come to know Him—doesn’t reside in the temporal world. Hiddenness is God’s way of helping us to detach from “the things of earth,” which we were never intended to grip. Paul goes on to say, “For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:4).

Sometimes hiddenness feels like death—of dreams, of the applause we crave from others, of tangible kingdom advancement, of apparent impact. Yet it’s right here in hiddenness that we are invited to fall in love with the God-Man we haven’t fully seen. It’s here that we find our real life.

Q: What happened when you started asking God how he felt about you when you felt unproductive and unsuccessful?

A: I started a new dialogue with God that didn’t include a plea for Him to use me in someone else’s life or to make my life matter. It was a conversation with God in which I saw that He cared for the inner workings of my heart and the insecurities that plagued me. I began to feel the pulse of His life in the biblical stories for which I had lost my passion. Not even whole sentences, but phrases from His Word that had once been pat answers were transformed into poetry, renewing my mind and

sparkling fresh and intimate conversations with God. Not only was He becoming more real to me as I took time to not just study but to soak in Scripture, He was personal. To me. This age-old God was newly vibrant to me. And I was starting to think He might actually like me.

Q: How do you compare this time to a tree—where we visibly see the branches and fruit, yet the root system underneath is what holds it all together?

A: I'd spent most of my twenties envisioning growth to be outstretched branches—majestic when hit by the sun and against the pure blue sky—and mostly forgot about the roots. But I could no longer grow tall in God without caring for my root system, without acknowledging that something buried beneath the surface must exist to give life to the trunk and branches I showed the world. Noticing and tending to my roots—my inner and hidden life with God—seemed secondary when there were important ministry branches to climb and spiritual fruit to produce and pick. So I focused all my time and energy on branches and fruit, while God was ever so gently inviting me to back to the soil. To hide in Him rather than perform for Him—to shift my attention from branches to roots, from my visible work for God to my unseen life in God.

Q: How did this transform your relationship with God?

A: I was merely a God-follower when I had eyes, mostly, to serve and respond to the world around me. I became a God-lover when I noticed Him seeing me and knowing me. Those exchanges, then, began to fuel how I interacted with the world around me.

Q: Do you believe God purposefully hides people, putting them in unseen places?

A: Absolutely. God loves to hide. Behind circumstances and callings and misjudgments and scorn from even the dearest of friends, He hides us. I join throngs of other women and men placed purposefully in hiding, who are also in training to be passionate lovers of God. They are cleaning toilets, working low-status jobs, changing bedpans, fielding criticism, and battling fatigue. And finding Him in the midst of it all. No moment is too small, too mundane, too insignificant to hide in God and waste time with Him. We may feel veiled and unnoticed, but God is training us to turn our eyes toward Him, to find Him there. Our hidden places aren't signs of God's displeasure or punishment. The psalmist says that the one "who dwells in the secret place of the Most High" has a refuge and a fortress in God (Psalm 91:1). God doesn't banish us to this hidden place. He invites us. And finding God in the secret can teach a heart to sing. This invitation to embrace hiddenness grows from a seasonal, one-time invitation into the question of our lives: *When no one else applauds you, when life is hard and makes no sense or simply feels like drudgery in the still, quiet, will you hide yourself in Me? Will you waste your love on Me, here?*

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***Unseen:
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