



FOREWORD BY ANN VOSKAMP

THINGS
NOT SEEN

A FRESH LOOK AT OLD STORIES
OF TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISES

JON BLOOM

“Bloom shows you with powerful clarity how to weave gospel-priorities through all your work and all your moments.”

Ann Voskamp, author, *New York Times* bestseller, *One Thousand Gifts*

“Jon Bloom has an extraordinary gift for mining rare gems hidden in familiar Bible stories and characters. His insights are imaginative, biblical, and practical. Jon prompts readers to see with new eyes, examine their hearts, and face life’s challenges with renewed perspective and joy. I enthusiastically recommend *Things Not Seen!*”

Randy Alcorn, Founder and Director, Eternal Perspectives Ministries;
author, *Heaven*, *If God Is Good*, and *Money, Possessions & Eternity*

“I trust a writer who not only sees deeply into the treasures of Scripture, but takes what he sees into his soul, and with it serves his family, church, and friends. Jon Bloom is one of those writers. And one of my treasures is to be one of those friends. We welcome you into this circle of joy.”

John Piper, Founder, desiringGod.org; Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary

“Jon Bloom unpacks the deepest truths about God in a way that every human can receive. You don’t want to miss anything he writes—this book is no exception. Prepare for your faith to expand.”

Jennie Allen, author, *Restless*; Founder and CEO, IF:Gathering

“The Bible is full of stories not just so we have something to read to our children at night, but to help us understand what it is like to walk with God in a broken world. Jon Boom revives the age-old tradition of using biblically informed fictional additions to creatively retell the Bible’s most familiar stories. He also intersperses pastoral insights as a skilled soul physician. This book will stir and encourage your faith.”

Adrian Warnock, author, *Hope Reborn* and *Raised with Christ*

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OF TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISES

J O N B L O O M

FOREWORD BY ANN VOSKAMP

 **CROSSWAY**
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To Levi, Eliana, Peter, Moriah, and Micah

You are my beloved children; with you
I am well pleased. (Luke 3:2)

You have taught me more about trusting the
promises of God than you may ever know.

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FOREWORD

ANN VOSKAMP

I HEARD ONCE OF a man who split black ash and wove baskets.

And he wove prayer through every basket.

The man wore faded plaid and old denim and lived alone high up in the Appalachians where the dirt didn't grow crops, but it could grow basket trees.

He lived such a distance up in the hills that he really didn't think the cost of transportation to some Saturday morning market would exceed any profits from selling his baskets. Nevertheless, each day he cut trees and sawed them into logs and then pounded the logs with a mallet, to free all the splint ribbons from those trees. Splint slapped the floor.

And the basket-making man, he simply worked unhurried and unseen by the world, his eyes and heart fixed on things unseen.

“When the heart is at rest in Jesus—unseen, unheard by the world—the Spirit comes, and softly fills the believing soul, quickening all, renewing all within,” writes Robert Murray M'Cheyne.¹

Day after day, the man cut ash, pulled splint, stacked baskets. He said that as he held the damp splint and he braided—under and over, under and over—that God was simply teaching him to weave prayers into every basket, to fill the empty baskets, all the emptiness, with eternal, unseen things.

¹Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1845), 461.

It was like under all the branches of those basket-growing trees, he knew what that clergyman James H. Aughey wrote: “As a weak limb grows stronger by exercise, so will your faith be strengthened by the very efforts you make in stretching it out toward things unseen.”²

Come the end of the year, after long months of bending over baskets, bending in prayer, when his stacks of baskets threatened to topple over, the man kneeled down under those trees that grew baskets—and lit those baskets with a match.

The flames devoured and rose higher and cackled long into the night.

Then, come morning, when the heat died away, satiated, the basket-making man stood long in the quiet. He watched how the wind blew away the ashes of all his work.

To the naked eye, it would appear that the man had nothing to show for the work. All the product of his hands was made papery ash—but *his prayers had survived fire.*

The prayers we weave into the matching of the socks, the working of our hands, the toiling of the hours, they survive fire.

It's the things unseen that survive fire.

Love. Relationship. Worship. Prayer. Communion.

All Things Unseen—and Centered in Christ.

It doesn't matter so much what we leave unaccomplished—
but that our priority was things unseen.

Again, today, that's always the call: slay the idol of the seen. Slay the idol of focusing on only what can be seen, lauded, noticed. Today, a thousand times again today, I will preach

²John H. Aughey, *Spiritual Gems of the Ages* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing, 1886), 95.

His truth to this soul prone to wander, that wants nothing more than the gracious smile of our Father: “*Unseen. Things Unseen. Invest in Things Unseen. The Unexpected Priority is always Things Unseen.*”

“Pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret . . .” (Matt. 6:6 NIV).

“For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

It's the things unseen that are the most important things.

Though the seen product of the baskets may have gone up in a flame of smoke, it was the unseen prayers that rose up like incense that had changed the man, much like Thomas Carlyle said: “It is the unseen and the spiritual in people, that determines the outward and the actual.”³

When the heart and mind focus on things *unseen*, that's when there's a *visible change* in us.

The outward and the visible only become like Christ to the extent we focus on the unseen and invisible *person of Christ*.

“In truth, the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them,” writes Jonathan Edwards.⁴

These pages you hold in your hand, these are a rare and unforgettable focusing. After meeting Jon Bloom, you walk away quietly saying: “He is so much like Jesus.” And when you walk away from these pages—that is exactly what will happen: you will have become so much like Jesus.

³Thomas Carlyle, *The People's Edition of Thomas Carlyle's Works*, 37 vols., *Wanting* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), 3.

⁴Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 218.

The ideas and images and truths that Jon Bloom memorably guides into the recesses of the mind and heart, usher in the invisible power of Christ to govern the worries and lies and anxieties and stresses—and make them obedient to his sovereign will and relentless love and perfect ways. Jon Bloom is the wisest of guides, the most tender of pastors, the most honest of truth-tellers, and the most skillful of theologians—who shows you with powerful clarity how to weave gospel-priorities through all your work, all your moments: *Things Not Seen, Priorities Things Not Seen*.

Turn these profound pages and you will know it: your heart and mind focusing on his invisible kingdom.

Then go ahead—

Weave your baskets—

and the invisible kingdom will be made blazingly visible in our midst.

Ann Voskamp
author of the *New York Times* bestsellers,
One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are
and *The Greatest Gift*

the farm, Ontario, Canada,
December 1, 2014

A WORD TO THE READER

HEBREWS 11 IS IN the Bible to remind us that God hides his most precious treasures for his saints in their most difficult and painful experiences.

Think of how Abraham and Sarah agonized over their infertility for twenty-five years before God fulfilled his promise of Isaac. Think of how Isaac and Rebekah agonized over the treacherous and nearly murderous rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Think of how Jacob agonized for years in grief over the belief that wild beasts had killed Joseph. Think of how Moses agonized for forty years in the Midian wilderness over his lost opportunity to deliver his enslaved people, and then struggled another forty years in the Sinai wilderness over his people's faithlessness. Think of how David agonized for years as Saul hunted him like an animal.

Now think of the blessing that each agony eventually produced.

This motif, of agony giving birth to glorious blessing, climaxed in Jesus's unparalleled agony on the cross and in the disciples' agony over the loss of their messianic rabbi, only to unleash the greatest blessing the world has ever known when Jesus was raised from the dead.

And the motif has continued since the time of Christ. Saints throughout church history have agonized through difficult labors, imprisonments, terrible persecutions; danger from robbers, unbelievers, false brothers, travel hazards, natural disasters, hunger, cold, and exposure; the sorrows of disease,

disability, family strife; and on top of those, “the daily pressure . . . of . . . anxiety for all the churches” (see 2 Cor. 11:23–28).

Now think of the blessings the agonies of the church age have yielded.

Hebrews 11 reminds us that God is doing far more than we can see in our agonies—these things that are so painful at times that they seem unbearable. We plead for God to deliver us from them, and we wonder why he keeps letting them go on.

The purpose of this book, like Hebrews 11, is to remind us that we are in good company when we feel bewildered by the struggle. It seeks to imaginatively draw us into very real people’s very real experiences of walking by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7), and to allow our brothers and sisters from history who are now in the great cloud of witnesses to encourage us to hold on and to not give up (Heb. 12:1). They remind us to trust God’s promises more than our perceptions. For faith is “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Promises will hold us up when perceptions make us sink.

We do well to listen to these precious biblical friends who have run the race before us. Their example reminds us not to begrudge the difficult afflictions we endure, because they are producing for us “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). Their stories remind us that God hides his most precious treasures in our most difficult and painful experiences.

Jon Bloom
Minneapolis, MN

GRATITUDE

I OWE MY FIVE children, Levi, Eliana, Peter, Moriah, and Micah, more than I can possibly express. God has used them and continues to use them more than they know to teach me to lean hard on his promises and not to trust in my frail and often mistaken understanding. I thank God every morning for the gifts of their precious lives and pray that somehow, through his strange and wonderful ways, God will impart grace to them through their stumbling and often deficient father. I dedicate this book to them with the prayer that it may become one of those ways.

I simply can't thank God enough for my priceless wife Pam, who joyfully and prayerfully carried more than her share of our life load as I wrote (especially as the deadlines loomed). Profound thanks to Ann Voskamp, who somehow carved time out of her incredibly full life to read this book and write a stunning and very gracious foreword. Special thanks also to John Piper, whose influence on me is pervasive. And to David Mathis, Jonathan Parnell, Bryan DeWire, and Joseph Scheumann, who improved various initial story drafts. I'm so thankful for Karalee Reinke, who carefully combed through the early manuscript and significantly improved this book. And it is a joy to thank the amazing team at Crossway: Justin Taylor, Josh Dennis, Amy Kruis, Janni Firestone, Angie Cheatham, Matt Tully, and my gracious editor, Tara Davis. What a privilege it is to work with you.

I'm deeply grateful to my colleagues at Desiring God, Scott Anderson and Josh Etter, for the patience and encouragement they extended to me during the months it took to complete

this project. And to Matthew Soderholm, who passed away during the final stage of writing. I miss your gentle spirit and your gracious wisdom, Matt. Thank you for working so hard and so well for this mission.

Jesus, my deepest thanks is always reserved for you. You have always been faithful to your word, though I have not always been faithful to trust it. Thank you for the amazing grace you have extended to me. Thank you for hiding your most precious treasures in the most difficult and painful experiences. And thank you for all that you have done to teach me to walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7) and put my greatest trust in things not seen (Heb. 11:1). I look forward to the day when the dim mirror of this age is removed and I finally get to see you face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). I know you long for that day, too (John 17:24). May it be soon.

And [Joseph's brothers] drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

GENESIS 37:28

“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

GENESIS 45:7-8

YOUR SIN IS NO MATCH FOR GOD'S GRACE

JOSEPH'S BROTHERS AND GRACE

Based mainly on Genesis 45

THE OLD HYMN SAYS it beautifully: “Grace, grace, God’s grace; grace that is greater than all my sin.”¹

But the grace of God is not only great enough to “pardon and cleanse within.” It is so powerful, as Joseph’s older brothers learned in Genesis 45, that it can take the most horrible sin that you have ever committed against another, or that has ever been committed against you, and make it the slave of God’s mercy.



“What do you mean he’s *alive*?” Jacob had no place to put Reuben’s words.

“I know it’s unbelievable, Father,” Reuben replied. “We hardly believe it, and we saw him with our own eyes. The Egyptian lord—the one who demanded that we bring Benjamin—he is Joseph. He’s not only alive, he’s . . .” Reuben stumbled over the strange sentence. “He’s now ruling Egypt for Pharaoh.”

¹“Grace Greater Than Our Sin,” Julia H. Johnston, 1911.

Jacob squinted skeptically. A son dead for two decades is not easily resurrected. “You are cruel to tell me such a thing unless you have no doubt.”

“I have no doubt, Father. It’s going to take hours to tell you everything. But we spoke with him. We ate with him in his house.”

Simeon couldn’t resist: “He sat us around the table in the order of our births! Before any of us knew who he was! We thought he was a magician.”

“And you should have seen how much food he placed before Benjamin!” joked Zebulun, giving Benjamin’s head an affectionate push.

Reuben continued, “He told us himself, Father: ‘I am your brother, Joseph.’ We responded just like you are now. I thought he was tricking us. But after talking to him for hours, there’s no doubt. It’s him. And the first thing he wanted to know was, ‘Is my father still alive?’” (Gen 45:3).

Jacob’s stony expression didn’t change, though his eyes overflowed. He moved them from son to son, lingering on Benjamin, and returning to Reuben. “But you showed me his bloody robe. He was attacked by a wild animal. If he survived, why didn’t he ever come home? Why would he go to Egypt? Joseph would never have forsaken me.”

The moment had come—the one they had dreaded the whole way home. For twenty-two years they had kept this festering wound of wickedness concealed from their father. But now God had exposed it. Shame bent the heads of nine sons. Judah was the exception. He had asked to break this news to their father. He had led in their sin. He would lead in owning it.

“Joseph didn’t forsake you, Father,” said Judah, stepping forward. “*He* was forsaken. No, worse, he was betrayed.”

Jacob stared at Judah. “Betrayed by whom?”

Judah pushed hard the heavy words. “By his own brothers.

Brothers who hated him for having his father's favor. Brothers who hated him for having God's favor. In all honesty, we actually talked of killing him, but decided instead to profit from his demise. We sold him to Ishmaelite traders who were on their way to Egypt. To my lasting and terrible shame, Father, that was my idea—to sell my own brother as a slave. The blood on his robe was goat's blood. We were the wild animals."

Jacob sat down. Anger and hope churned together in his soul. The silence was long.

Judah broke it by saying softly, "His dream came true." Jacob looked up again. "Joseph's dream: it came true," continued Judah. "All eleven of us bowed down before him in Egypt. We sold him into slavery because of his dream of ruling over us, never dreaming as we did it that we were helping bring it to pass."

Reuben added, "Joseph holds no bitterness, Father. You know what he told us? 'God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God'" (Gen. 45:7–8).

"In fact," said Judah, "he wants us all to come live near him in Egypt to escape the famine. That's why we've brought all these wagons. He said, 'You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here'" (Gen. 45:13).

Jacob thought quietly for a long time. Then he shook his head and said, "It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die" (Gen. 45:28).



What Joseph's ten older brothers did to him was heinous. They made him the merchandise of international human

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trafficking. They subjected him to slavery and sexual abuse. They effectively threw him, with no rights or defense, into prison to rot.

But note Joseph's words: "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8). Neither treacherous siblings nor a woman's lust nor the shame of prison nor a cupbearer's neglect could thwart the purpose of God (Job 42:2) in preserving God's people (Gen. 45:7) and fulfilling God's promise (Gen. 15:13). God made evil the slave of his grace.

And he's doing the same for you. God is doing more good than you can imagine through the most painful experiences of your life.

If you've sinned against someone, do everything in your power to make things right. But know this: your sin is no match for God's grace.

And if you're facing the consequences of another's sin, take heart. Stay faithful. God knows, and he knows what he's doing. In time, you will see God turn what man means for evil into the slave of God's mercy.

GOD IS DOING FAR MORE THAN WE CAN SEE IN OUR PAIN. We plead for God's deliverance from our pain and wonder why he keeps letting it go on. We are not alone. A cloud of witnesses surrounds us and they help us understand. In these 35 creative retellings of Bible stories, Jon Bloom explores the hope and joy that Abraham, Moses, Naomi, John the Baptist, and others experienced in the painful process of discovering that God's promises really are more trustworthy than our perceptions.

"Bloom shows you with powerful clarity how to weave gospel-priorities through all your work and all your moments." **ANN VOSKAMP**

"I trust a writer who not only sees deeply into the treasures of Scripture, but takes what he sees into his soul. Jon Bloom is one of those writers." **JOHN PIPER**

"This book unpacks the deepest truths about God in a way that every human can receive. Prepare for your faith to expand." **JENNIE ALLEN**

"Vivid, nourishing sketches of Bible characters learning to live with their sometimes startling Lord." **J. I. PACKER**

"Jon Bloom has an extraordinary gift for mining rare gems hidden in familiar Bible stories and characters." **RANDY ALCORN**

"This book will stir and encourage your faith." **ADRIAN WARNOCK**

JON BLOOM is cofounder and president of desiringGod.org, and the author of *Not by Sight: A Fresh Look at Old Stories of Walking by Faith*. Bloom and his wife, Pam, live in Minneapolis with their five children.

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