During Jim Palmer’s visit to Plain Truth Ministries, he recorded a podcast with Greg Albrecht (available at www.ptm.org) along with short videos and two messages for Christianity Without the Religion (CWR). Look for them in a few months!

We also wanted to introduce our readers to Jim’s book, Divine Nobodies. Thanks to Thomas Nelson Inc., we are delighted to share the following brief excerpt along with other selected passages from throughout Divine Nobodies.

My reason for becoming a Christian the summer after barely graduating high school was to escape hell, two of them actually. One I was told lost people suffer in after death, the other was the first eighteen years of my life. Being an unwanted child, failing to rescue my mom from her misery, and abandoned by my father, I have always felt the burden of proof squarely upon my shoulders to prove I have a right to exist. I was looking to purge that part of my life and found abundant metaphorical support in Christianity where one is “born again” and “the old is gone and the new has come.”

In college, I immediately connected with Christian groups that offered more than enough opportunity to cover up the pain of my childhood wounds with meetings, programs, and activities. I was mesmerized in Christian conferences with slogans like “Come Help Change the World,” “The Time is Now” and “Leave a Mark No One Can Erase.” I couldn’t save my mom, but with God I had a new mission to save the world. Perhaps I wasn’t so worthless after all.

Growing into adulthood, I lacked the raw materials needed to fashion a creditable identity. I wasn’t smart or gifted, and there was virtually nothing I seemed good at. Then one day at my university I was asked to speak in front of a group of fellow students and managed to preach an impassioned sermon, said by some to border on the equivalent of MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and was hailed savior (student president) of our campus ministry. Afterward, folks said I was a natural leader because I motivated (er...manipulated) people toward committed involvement.

Addicted to the Christian Thing

The Christian thing was going well. Like Jesus, I began in humble circumstances but unlike him, I rode high on the palm branches of people’s praise. I’m sure that was where my addiction to becoming a mega-something (anything) was born. On the first day of classes a professor looked at my official name on his role, called out James Patrick Palmer, and assuming as much, asked if I went by Jim. Up to that point I had always been called Jamie, and to this day it is the name I am known by in Blacksburg. I was pleased to accept the name change, which made my transformation complete. Jamie Palmer was buried and Jim Palmer was born.

For the next fifteen years, I never looked back and poured my soul...
into Christian ministry. I earned a Master’s of Divinity, landed my first ministry position at the largest, most innovative church in North America and received front-page newspaper coverage in the city upon launching my very own first church.

I was well on my way to becoming one of those Christian gurus who are invited to pontificate at seminars and conventions. This Christian thing was reeeeeeally going well, and I could not have scripted a better zero-to-hero scenario to prove I wasn’t the worthless nobody the place deep down inside me still ardently claimed.

Salvation: The Free-From-Religion Kind

Of course, at the time, I was not consciously aware of all these motivations. I was simply a man on a mission from God. I also do not consider the things I did all for naught. At any given moment, each of us is a mixed bag of motives, the known and the unknown. In the end, God understands we all are pretty messed up, but not outside the realm of his ability to save. I was convinced that God wanted (even needed) me for the mission of saving the world (again, I needed some mission to justify taking up space on planet Earth), when all along God mostly wanted to save me—not just the get-out-of-hell-free kind of salvation, but the setting-me-free-from-religion-kind.

So there I was, flailing about in the ocean of my despair, while still insisting on trying to rescue others. I had experienced enough significant failures to cause a normal person to look deep within, but I wasn’t and am not normal. Other than Jacob in the Old Testament, I might be the only other person stubborn enough to wrestle with God and actually have a legitimate shot at winning.

Turns out, God has his ways. Thankfully, on this journey God has provided the necessary epiphanies to save me from complete self-destruction and has opened my eyes to deeper realities. With a seminary degree under my belt, you would think those epiphanies would have come when caught up in a deep theological treatise—Calvin’s Institutes, perhaps, or Barth’s Ethics.

But that’s not what happened. What happened is what I’ve attempted to peck out (I can’t type worth a flip) in the following pages. God opened my eyes, not through theological and philosophical flashes of brilliance, but through the unlikeliest people—people I, well, just kind of ran into along the way. Everyday run-of-the-mill types, like you and me.

There is the Waffle House waitress, the tire salesman, the hip-hop artist, the swim teacher, among the odd cast of characters. Each of them unraveled a bit more the mystery of God and stretched the capacity of my soul to know him. Once my eyes were opened to this, it was like I was born again...again.

God’s Reason for Wanting Me

On one of my long runs (that’s any distance beyond three blocks), it dawned on me perhaps God’s reason for wanting me is much better than my reason for wanting him. Maybe God’s idea of my salvation trumps the version I am too willing to settle for. Uncovering your true reasons for wanting God and learning God’s real purpose for wanting you are a couple of revelations you need to have in order to get down heaven’s road. The first requires a brutal self-honesty, and the second an elastic head and heart, both of which you sometimes need a little help acquiring.

The people and places my help comes from border on the bizarre. I’ve been down quite a few spiritual detours and rabbit holes that somehow ended up at places I needed to visit. Sometimes the “detours” were actually paths toward greater enlightenment, and the ones I presumed right were the real detours headed nowhere. Let’s just
say I have learned to keep my eyes wide open. I must tell you, I am not a proponent of “religion,” even the “Christian” kind, but have never gone wrong following Jesus. Yes, I know it all sounds absurd. To really understand, you need to step into my shoes and follow your feet.

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Selected Quotes from Divine Nobodies:

I once angered a seminary professor to the point he promised to personally see to it I never occupied a ministry position with his denomination. Reaming me out behind closed doors, my suspicion was born that a fair number of people in professional ministry are psychotic and unstable. I never did occupy any position in his denomination (page ix).

My zero-to-hero story, the one where I take my place between Frodo and Sam to be counted among the fellowship of “somebodies” winning great victories for mankind (or at least invited to speak at a church-growth conference), wasn’t quite going as planned. On the brink of reaching coveted guru status, I discovered my wife of ten years had entered into a relationship with another man. This revelation sent our marriage plummeting, and after failed attempts in counseling to save it, ended in divorce. Other than the consolation of having no children of our own to put through the nightmare of a broken marriage, I could not imagine any scenario where this could “work out for the good.” At first I tried dodging any personal responsibility and strived to save face by emphasizing the technicality that she was the one who filed for divorce, but ultimately I could not escape the cruel truth that our marriage failed in part because I failed.

Soon after, I resigned as pastor of the church I’d started, which was widely known, having once been a Sunday morning front-page story in the city paper. In the dead of winter I packed my belongings and moved in with a single guy from our church, living in an ancient house without heat. News traveled fast and far, reaching the mega mother church up north where I’d been trained and commissioned.

Becoming a marked man is an abrupt and rude awakening for someone on the rise toward greatness. No explanation sufficed and any way you sliced it, folks saw a promising ministry-star who had crashed and burned. You can get away with quite a bit in career Christendom, but divorce is on the taboo black list of ultimate no-no’s. Stripped of my superhero-minister mask and exposed as a mere mortal, I became unnecessary among people who once hung on my every word.

I surmised heaven had me marked too, no longer just a child of God but now a divorced one. My sense of value and usefulness crashed, and I shamefully assumed my place in the land of misfit toys on the outskirts of God’s kingdom (pages 2-3).

Admittedly, my purely intellectual approach to God was in-
I had the rhetoric down, but did not really experience God in this way in everyday life. I did have a sort of relationship with my Bible, as much as one can have a relationship with a book.... I was a little startled at the implication that the written Word and the Living Word are not one and the same.... I'm beginning to see that Christianity is centered in a Person, not a book. The written Word was given to draw us into relationship with the Living Word.... Being honest with myself, I was making the Bible God out of the need for safety and predictability (pages 13-14).

Despite all my spiritual rhetoric about a “relationship with God,” one day I realized my Christianity was essentially a glorified behavior-modification program safely rationalized beneath a waving WWJD? banner. Mostly aimed at maintaining an acceptable religious and moral exterior, at least my pharisaical front looked good in comparison to all the other “sinners” of the world who presumably were on the bottom of God’s list because of their bad behavior....my Christianity had become a hamster’s squeaky wheel of do’s and don’ts (which I commonly referred to as discipleship) that were wearing me out, but not getting me anywhere. I wasn’t addicted to crack, I was addicted to religion in a vain attempt to get God to like me, bless me, or at least spare me from hell when it was all over. It’s funny how one can talk a good grace game, but for all practical purposes live by the law. I’ve learned that the “grace, but...” mentality is as lethal as anything you can sniff, toke or shoot up (pages 28-29).

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?”... “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?... 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 (pages S1-S3).

I grew up Catholic, became a Baptist, attended an Evangelical Free Church seminary, and pastored a non-denominational church. Through the twists and turns, the common denominator of all those years in church was my dependency upon services, clergy and programs to dispense God and facilitate my Christianity. My spirituality was largely doing church, but deep inside I hungered for something more. Ultimately, I decided to break from organized Christianity to see if God was real and could be known beyond the structures of institutional church (page 57).

Jesus taught about the kingdom of God more than any other subject and once said “the kingdom of God is within you.” He also spoke of the truth that “will set you free” and Paul referred to a dimension where “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”.... There’s a whole other world, a kingdom, if you will. There are no empty spaces. The catch is, Jesus said, you have to be like a child to get it. I’ve got to start believing he would never have said this if he hadn’t planned on making this real within me. My religion provides way too small a wineskin to contain all that Jesus wants to give (page 65).

I never stopped to ponder or question how my Christianity revolved around church. Jesus instituted the church and it is all over the New Testament, not to mention a couple thousand years of history. What was there to ques-

I wasn’t addicted to crack, I was addicted to religion in a vain attempt to get God to like me, bless me, or at least spare me from hell when it was all over. It’s funny how one can talk a good grace game, but for all practical purposes live by the law.
In my disillusionment with institutional church, I contemplated chucking Christianity, but I discovered that these were two separate and not nearly equal things.

My two-decade evangelical odyssey bred prejudicial feelings toward Catholics as I was told they believed in salvation by works, worshipped Mary, and ascribed godlike status to human leaders such as priests and the pope. It was clear from my church history class that Catholics had made a real mess of things, and the Protestant Reformation got Christianity headed back in the right direction. (Of course later I realized that we evangelicals were guilty of our own indiscretions of peddling “grace, but...” theology, gushing over prominent evangelicals in politics, music and mega-ministries and depending on preachers as the pipeline of truth.) I even lumped all those “collar-wearing” denominations together—Catholics, Episcopalians, Anglicans, Orthodox—they were all the same to me. Of course, my false notions only served to tee me up for a good humbling.

Despite all the denominational distinctions I’ve come across along the way, for the life of me, I cannot find any other litmus test Jesus insisted upon to authenticate his followers except love. This was unsettling when I realized, despite knowing Greek and Hebrew and the boxes in my attic filled with hundreds of my sermons on tape telling others how to be a Christian, I wasn’t very loving. Winston Churchill cautioned, “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.” My version of Christianity wasn’t making me much like Jesus.... The person God has been using to teach me about love during this stretch of my life is a tire salesman. He never intended to teach me about love (or anything else). I’ve just learned by hanging out with him. Rick has no Bible degree, never served in any sort of vocational ministry, and does not attend any local “church.” He likes a good cigar (Muncanudos preferred, Rick adds), has a beer every now and then, and you often find him on the lake in his boat. But by far Rick’s greatest passion in life is knowing God (not just knowing about God, but actually knowing God personally and intimately). His life is an example of an ordinary guy depending on Christ. I’m familiar with Christians who talk a good game and are paid and expected to live it. What I’m not as familiar with are people who just live it. Believe it or not, there are actually people like this. Like Rick.

I’m more aware of God these days. It once seemed I had to go searching for God and needed to find him. Turns out he was searching for me. No more striving to find him, just believing he found me. In my disillusionment with institutional church, I contemplated chucking Christianity, but I discovered that these were two separate and not nearly equal things.

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