

*Doing Busy  
Better*

ENJOYING GOD'S GIFTS OF  
WORK AND REST

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This book is dedicated to my sister,  
Helen Ann Swett Ferrel,  
who modeled loving people more than  
projects every day of her life on earth.

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# One



## The Undercurrent of Unease

It was always there, humming below the surface. Or maybe a low-decibel background noise like conversation at a coffeehouse, the drone of traffic, or the whirring of a ceiling fan. You know, the kind of sound so constant you become immune to it. But when it stops, the quiet seems like a stranger.

That's what I felt for years, but it wasn't a sound. It was a feeling. Maybe more like an undercurrent of unease, a sense that I should be doing something . . . all . . . the . . . time.

No matter what I was doing at the time, how important it was, or how much it needed my utmost focus, my mind hopped to something else on my to-do list. Or even more distracting, something that I needed to put on that list. Fear that I would forget kept it looping in my mind.

With that kind of mental drill sergeant at work, who can slow down, pause, or fully focus on the beauty of the moment?

When I did dare to stop, the sergeant sent his associate, Corporal Guilt Thrower, to make sure I didn't rest for long.

For years I simply had too much to do. Much more than one person could handle at once. When you've packed your schedule so tight there's no margin, breathing room, or thinking room—and definitely no room for missteps—it requires constant vigilance to keep that kind of life on the tracks.

And fun? Well, that was pretty hard to fit in. When you are that busy, fun is a hard-to-justify extravagance.

As if thinking about and managing what I needed to do wasn't enough, I thought about and managed what others needed to do. God gave me a wonderful husband and five children. They are all smart and capable, and yet five out of six of them have a severe forgetfulness gene.

I know all the parenting and boundary books (written by people obviously much smarter than me) tell you to allow logical consequences to happen and people will eventually learn coping techniques to manage themselves. But you have to read those books to know that information. And I was too busy to read those books.

So until I read those books my life consisted of daily reminders of assignments and tasks, nonstop hunting for things lost, and frantically helping someone finish something at the last minute.

Whew! Not only did I overload myself, but then I took on the responsibility for everyone in my family. I'm not sure why I stopped there—I mean, why not just take on the responsibility of the world while I'm at it?

Some folks go through *seasons* of overcommitment, usually because of something wonderfully good or terribly hard. Weddings, babies, moves, or illness can interrupt a well-ordered life and introduce chaos for a while.

There are honest reasons why some seasons of life are too busy. Sometimes circumstances collide and there's nothing to do but race to get things done.

From the glad to the sad, life's events can consume us at times. But when those times are past, if at our very core we are living in a healthy rhythm of life, we find ourselves returning to that rhythm.

That's not what happened to me.

*From the glad to the sad, life's events can consume us at times.*

### **Let's Just Call It an Addiction**

I would call my situation *chronic* overcommitment—moving from one rushed deadline to the next, with no downtime in between.

Some might even have called me addicted to busyness. I've never had an addiction before, so I'm not sure what it might feel like. But if it feels like a constant inner drive to seek out a source of comfort or pleasure, then maybe addiction is the right label.

For most of my life I lived with no margin. There was always something more I wanted to experience, learn, or achieve, or I wanted my children to experience, learn, or achieve. And so when an opportunity arose, my hand would shoot in the air with confident bravado and I'd say yes to something new.

Overconfident in my ability to make it work, and with some creative maneuvering in my schedule, I felt certain I could pull this new thing off.

Yes, I'll codirect vacation Bible school the week after my baby is due.

Yes, I'll take on that new responsibility at work.

Yes, I'll lead that committee.

Yes, I can have three sons on three different football teams in the same season. And a daughter on the cheerleading team.

Yes, I'll host that party.

At the time of my enthusiastic response, it all seemed so doable. *Really, how much time will it take? Just a few more hours a week. We'll just be more efficient with our mornings. Create a new after-school routine.*

Adrenaline at the excitement of something new fueled me for a while, but reality quickly set in. And once again “hurry up” echoed through the halls as everyone was stressed and pressed into an overbusy lifestyle.

And with that stressed reality came weariness. The kind of soul-deep weariness that hits when the adrenaline is gone. The kind of tired that makes a productive woman dissolve into tears because there are simply too many choices of plants at the garden center. Or tie-dye kits in the craft store.

I don't know how many other women understand this cycle: optimism, saying yes, living at warp speed, feeling overwhelmed, and swearing *this* will never happen again—until it does. Maybe it's only a handful of us. I know it's not everyone. Some women figure out how to pace themselves.



They know when to guard their “yes” and when enough is enough. They are able to fully enjoy the moment, not worrying about what comes next or who is doing what. They know when to set aside the project and have fun.

Are they just wired that way? Are they better at making choices? Have they learned the hard way that life is short?

I don’t know the answers for sure to those questions. That’s what I’m on a journey to discover. Because the hard truth is, none of that pacing or guarding or saying “no” to a new responsibility comes naturally or easy for me.

I like to work. I’m driven to achieve. I like responsibility and being in charge and bringing order to messes. I like being needed and someone asking for my help.

Plus, I’m afraid what might happen—or not happen—if I stop. So I dare not stop.

Not only am I driven to cross things off my to-do list and tackle the next project, I’m also motivated by the fear of what I might miss. What opportunities or experiences will pass me by if I don’t jump on them now? There’s always the fear that “this” might not happen again.

“This” changes all the time. It can be friendships, volunteer positions, or assignments at work. For example, if my week is jam-packed but a friend I’ve been wanting to connect with asks me to have lunch, I’m afraid to say no. It’s not that I’m worried about hurting her feelings, but what if she doesn’t ask again and I miss this chance?

Or if I’m overloaded at work but an opportunity arises that I’ve been wanting. I’m concerned I won’t get another chance if I say no. So I say yes and work overtime to get it done.

The idea that opportunities are scarce pushes me to take on more than I can handle.

And when you combine all those characteristics *without* an understanding of God's plan for rest, you get a perfect storm for being a walking disaster.

And that, my friends, is what this book is about. In spite of all this hardwiring that pushes me to do more, I'm convinced

*The idea that opportunities are scarce pushes me to take on more than I can handle.*

God never meant for me to live nonstop. At the very start of creation God built work and rest into the architecture of our lives in perfect symmetry.

We were created and commanded to work, and we were created and commanded to rest. The problem comes when we don't enjoy both of these two components in our lives.

Both work and rest are sacred, so why do so many of us feel guilty when we are resting? And then, because we know we should take time for ourselves and others, we feel guilty when we are working!

My journey to find this healthy, guilt-free approach to work and rest has been a long one. I haven't figured it all out. I seem to learn one lesson, implement it into my life, then learn another lesson and apply it. Then I get myself overbusy and have to regroup. Two steps forward, one step back.

I've spent years trying to understand why I tend toward overcommitment and why it's so hard for me to rest. And I've wondered if being busy is really bad. Or maybe we need to be busy about the right things and know when to stop being busy.

Thankfully, I am learning. I'm not the crazy woman I was years ago; my family can tell you that.

The reality is, my life is always going to be full. I'm probably always going to be busy; I'm just wired that way. But I don't have to be overbusy.

The promise of an unhurried, productive life calls my name. I want to live with margin and room to breathe while still getting things done. I want to honor the Sabbath, fully trusting that God will help me complete my work in six days. I want to live without the weight of countless deadlines, with plenty of time to hang out with Jesus, family, and friends.

*The promise of an  
unhurried, productive  
life calls my name.*

I have a feeling you do too. There's got to be a way to do busy better than we're doing it now.

Jesus knew we needed to learn to balance work and rest, because apparently even His first-century followers were exhausted. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I love that Jesus identified our common condition of weariness without specifying how we got that way. This way, the promise of rest applies to all of us.

Isn't it ironic that to find Jesus's offer of true rest, we need to apply an instrument of work—a yoke?

Jesus said His yoke was easy and His burden was light. Those words should be added to some list of great oxymorons somewhere. Kind of like jumbo shrimp or deafening silence.

A yoke was a bar of wood linking two oxen. Usually the farmer linked a bigger, stronger ox with a younger, weaker

one. The strength of the stronger animal allowed the weaker one to accomplish more than it would alone and without bearing the full weight of the work. The stronger ox assumed more of the responsibility so the weaker one wouldn't be crushed.

When we take on Jesus's yoke, He carries the bulk of the weight for us in all areas of our lives. We aren't solely responsible anymore. He guides us and leads us so we aren't crushed. And in doing so we learn from Him a way of life characterized by peace and joy. We find it's possible to work and yet have deep spiritual and physical rest. We find His expectations aren't anything like ours. They don't add extra burdens that are impossible to fulfill.

Nowhere in Scripture do we find the kind of franticness that characterizes some of our lives. We do find lots of messed-up folks, but that's usually when they've decided to try life their way.

When we do life God's way, there is a pleasant sense of order, with enough time to do everything we need to do and everything we are called to do. Jesus certainly modeled that. Just look at all He accomplished in the three years of His recorded ministry, and yet we never read about Him being frazzled.

There are no recorded times of Him yelling at His disciples, "Stop goofing off and get a move on! We've got lots to do."

Instead, in the midst of the needs and demands, especially when people clamored for help, we hear Him say, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31).

Oh, how I long for that way of life. And I have a feeling you do too.

I'm convinced it's possible. There must be a way to do busy better. There's absolutely too much to do in God's kingdom for us to *not* be busy about our Father's business . . . but there's too much to do to not rest and recharge in the presence of Jesus.

Maybe we need to live more in the center of this oxymoron, this light burden and easy yoke.

This is the way of Jesus. And today He invites all of us who are feeling worried and burdened, from whatever has made us feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and guilty, to come with Him. That's the best place to start. Because although I'm going to do my best to share practices and principles for doing busy better in your life, nothing compares to the soul rest Jesus offers.

Now that we've taken care of first things first, let's get started with the idea of being busy. It's a condition most of us experience and yet feel helpless to manage. What drives us to live like this?

*There's absolutely too much to do in God's kingdom for us to not be busy about our Father's business . . . but there's too much to do to not rest and recharge in the presence of Jesus.*