

Your Sacred Yes

Trading Life-Draining Obligation for
FREEDOM, PASSION & JOY

SUSIE LARSON



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

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To my husband, Kevin—

Your constant and continual love and strength
have provided me grace and space to give my full yes to God.
Thank you, honey. Next to Jesus, you're my very best thing.
I'll love you forever.



To our families, the Ericksons and the Larsons—

We love you dearly.



To my Savior, Jesus—

Where would I be without Your love?
After walking with You all these years,
I finally understand that
You're far kinder than I can fathom
and more powerful than I can imagine.
I'll love and follow You forever.

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Contents

Foreword 11
Introduction 13
How to Use This Book 16

SECTION ONE—**The Sloppy Yes**

1. Caution: Danger Ahead
Say Yes to God's Wisdom 19
2. When I Move Too Fast
Say Yes to God's Power 30
3. Busyness vs. Abundance
Say Yes to God's Provision 43
4. There's Rest in God's Yes
Say Yes to God's Invitation 54

SECTION TWO—**The Shackled Yes**

5. Am I Captive?
Say Yes to Living Free 71
6. The Power of Peer Pressure
Say Yes to Humility 86

- 7. Do You See What He Sees?
Say Yes to Your Worth 101
- 8. There's Freedom in God's Yes
Say Yes to God's Best 116

SECTION THREE—**The Sacred Yes**

- 9. When God Redirects
Say Yes to Necessary Change 133
 - 10. Simple Sacred Steps
Say Yes to Divine Momentum 148
 - 11. Stand in Power
Say Yes to Your God-Given Influence 166
 - 12. Closing Thoughts
Say Yes to a Life That Counts 184
 - 13. Bonus Chapter
Faith and Fitness Challenge 196
- Acknowledgments 215
- Notes 218

Foreword

Susie Larson had me from the first paragraph of this book! By the end of the first page, she had already succeeded in making me want to become a different person who drinks from a deeper and quieter well. As one who reads dozens of books a year, I can't tell you how unusual this is for me, which is why I begged Susie early on to rework this book to include addressing men. In its early incarnation, *Your Sacred Yes* addressed wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters; I pleaded with Susie that husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons needed to hear this searing truth as much as any woman alive. If you're a man who is reading this, you're very welcome!

As an ardent fan of the Christian classics, I've been challenged by my brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox tradition who define "lust" radically differently than do modern evangelicals. If you say the word *lust* in a North American church today, 99.9 percent of the congregation will assume you're talking about sexual desire of some sort. In the Eastern classics, sex isn't the most destructive or pervasive lust—the fear of man and the desire for praise and approval is.

I've been convicted by this truth, but Susie helped me see this in a contemporary context that empowered me in a way I hadn't quite experienced before. She took me by the hand, peeled back the layers of my pride and approval lust, and gently told me, "You don't have to stay there. There's another place—a better place—out of which you can live more freely, more productively, more joyfully." Perhaps because of my own book titles, Susie's line "I refuse the rat race because God has called me to the sacred race" hit me as hard (in a good way) as anything I've ever read.

I usually race through the books I'm asked to endorse—the deadline in the front of my mind. But in this case, I felt God telling me to hold this book to a chapter a day. "This book is for you," He seemed to say (putting it in my own words). "Let it become a part of you. Let it nurture your spirit. You need to hear this."

Matthew 6:33 ("Seek first the kingdom of God" NKJV) and John 4:34 ("My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work") comprise every true Christian's calling. We get one life on this earth. Susie invites us to imbue each day with sacred meaning, sacred purpose, God-ordered delight, and the freedom of worshiping the only One whose opinion ultimately matters. That's a glorious platform from which to live. Her writing is steeped in scriptural understanding and discernment. Though she quotes plenty of Scriptures, even when she doesn't, you recognize the biblical priorities and instruction that have shaped her mind and gracefully challenge us.

Thank you, Susie, for this gift to the church and for calling each citizen of heaven to focused service, grace-based obedience, and the freedom of walking Christ's path.

Gary Thomas
Bestselling author of *Sacred Marriage*
and international speaker

Introduction

Are We Missing It?

I have a question for you: *Are we missing it?* Have we as God's people—who endure this crazy-paced culture—given away a mindset that *looks for and enjoys* the presence of God? Have we allowed the precious gift of expectancy to slip through our fingers? How often do we cup our hand to our ear and listen for heaven's song over our lives? Are we so bogged down with life-draining commitments that we've forgotten how good a belly laugh feels or how rich a time of quiet prayer can be? Do we relegate praise and worship to an hour on Sunday and thereby miss out on singing at the top of our lungs every other day of the week? Has it occurred to us that God longs for us to take a more life-giving path than the one we're on?

Sometimes we overcommit for all the wrong reasons (pride, insecurity, fear, hastiness). Other times we have the best of intentions for giving away our time (a good cause, a great need, there's nobody else). Either way, we need to ask ourselves some probing questions:

- Do the vast majority of our yeses increase our faith and fill us with a greater expectancy of how God is moving

in our midst? Or do they drain us to the point that we find ourselves weary, simply rushing from one thing to the next?

- Are we captive to our commitments, or free to respond to God's invitation to do life with Him?
- Is our current path a catalyst to increasing joy and faith, or does all of our rushing make us more prone to worry and fear?
- When we assess honestly the time we give away to our various commitments, do we find behind it all a divinely inspired soul growing in grace and strength? Or are we a spent and weary soul, losing steam by the day?

Nothing drains us more than signing up for things God never asked us to do. Yet all too often that's exactly where we lose our way. When we live shackled to others' opinions, expectations, and requirements, we give away our yes because of a lie. We commit to things in order to save face, and as a result, we miss out on God's invitation to fully entrust ourselves to Him.

Days will fly by and sacred moments will continue to elude us until we decide to hit the brakes and take inventory of what's driving us.

Consider this book an invitation to break free from the bondage of others' opinions, overcommitment, and the un-appointed obligations that drain us dry and steal our joy. It's time to reclaim our days so that our moments matter in the greater scheme of things. Both our no's and our yeses matter to God because He loves us best and He's the one who can make the most of our days and our moments.

I don't want to miss one thing the Lord has for me. How about you? First Corinthians 4:20 says this: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."

The kingdom of God isn't just a theory we discuss, nor is it just a list of do's and don'ts that we must carefully obey. Instead, it's a living, breathing relationship with Jesus, the Most High God who intends to transform us from the inside out, mark our lives with power, show us where to go, and use us in ways completely disproportionate to who we are.

Sadly, once we've secured our eternity, far too many of us live like the rest of the world. We rush from one thing to the next. We worry about the same things the lost world does. We enslave ourselves to the same things many others are addicted to. We commit ourselves to lots of things—many of them good things, but things God never asked us to commit to.

When we forget—or become too busy—to tap in to the provision and power God has made available to us, we find ourselves weary, rushed, earthbound people who merely react to our circumstances. From the outside looking in, we look like everybody else—tired, overworked, and underjoyed.

But Jesus invites us to live as joyful, secure, expectant people who respond to the nudges of the Holy Spirit within us, who live awakened to the adventure of faith God invites us to, and who believe that as kingdom people, everywhere we place our feet, the spiritual atmosphere changes because Christ-in-us has led us there.

Jesus invites us to walk intimately with Him, to abide with Him and in Him in such a way that our life abounds in life-giving fruit—solid evidence that we're connected to a supernatural Source. He invites us to experience His kingdom power mightily at work in us, through us, and all around us. That's the invitation.

Life is a gift. Time is a treasured commodity. When we open our hands and give what we have to Jesus—be it our moments, our gifts, our time, or simply room and space for Him to show up—we find life to be a sacred journey.

When we do life with a consistent awareness of God's presence in our midst, we find joy. And that's the place where healing, fulfillment, and abundance happen. Jesus invites us to live purposeful and passionate, focused and free. It's time to grab hold of our moments and cherish our days the way Jesus cherishes us.

I don't want to miss a thing He has for us, do you? I didn't think so. I so look forward to making this journey with you.

With joyful expectancy,
Susie Larson

How to Use This Book

Please use this book in a way that most suits you. If you grow best in the context of a Bible study group, approach this as a six-week study, and complete two chapters each week. Reflection Questions and Discussion Starters are provided after each chapter, and you will find in-depth Bible study questions in a **Workbook** that can be downloaded at www.susielarson.com.

Also available separately is a **DVD Study Companion** that includes six twenty-five-minute segments that cover and expand on the material in this book, two chapters at a time. Together, the book, workbook, and DVD allow groups to host a six-week study at home or church.

Please note: Some of the Reflection Questions and Discussion Starters probe deeply and may feel too personal to address with others unless you're with your closest confidants. You decide what to share. You may prefer to read the book during your alone times with God and talk your way through it with a few close friends.

Either way, I encourage you not to take this journey alone. Invite others to stand with you, pray with you, and spur you on as you reclaim for God the sacred areas of your life.

SECTION ONE

THE
SLOPPY
Yes

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Caution: Danger Ahead

Say Yes to God's Wisdom

Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.

Proverbs 4:23 NLT

Sin is not where the enemy most often gets his foothold on the godly. Rather . . . the enemy more often latches on to weakness—or maybe I should say a hidden spot of vulnerability. Of course, Satan knows that weakness can turn to sin in a heartbeat when exposed to just the right amount of pressure.¹

Beth Moore

Years ago I responded to a breakfast invitation from a woman I had recently met. She'd read my first book, had watched me from a distance, and wanted to talk with me. I looked forward to getting to know a new friend. I had no idea I was about to receive

a wake-up call that almost knocked me silly. Our eggs and hash-browns sat untouched on our plates. She leaned across the table with purposefulness and proceeded to tell me her story—how she and her husband once served in visible leadership roles (like my husband and me), and how people honored and respected them for all of their contributions (again, like us), and how, for a season, all of their activity bore huge amounts of fruit (like us, it seemed).

Then, one day, it happened. In a moment of sheer exhaustion and unrealized vulnerability, her husband lost his footing, tripped up morally, and everything came crashing down around them. At the time she and I met, they were still sorting through the wreckage, trying to put their life back together. She leaned closer and said: “Susie, I’m quite sure that neither Kevin nor you have any thoughts or secret desires to step off of God’s best path for you. But I see the weariness in your eyes, and I know we have a fierce opponent who is our enemy. He’ll wait for just the right time to trip you or Kevin up. He intends to take you out. God has put you on my heart time and time again, and I’m telling you, warning you, please step back, get some rest, reset, and put some firmer boundaries around your marriage, your life, and your time.”

That breakfast date put a healthy fear of God in me. I believe it’s entirely possible that she saved us from some kind of devastation, and I thank God for her courage. Kevin and I were racing toward burnout at the time, and that encounter was one of the catalysts God used to slow us down and put us back on track. Since then, we’ve maintained certain marriage and time boundaries.

Thankfully, God loves us all enough to alert us to the enemy traps and dangers down the road. May we be wise enough to listen to the messages He sends our way and make the necessary course adjustments.

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

Proverbs 27:12

When we—without thinking too much about it—give away our time to things un-appointed by God, we will *not* have the grace to sustain them. Consequently, we put ourselves at risk of the enemy’s schemes. We may forge ahead with energy and enthusiasm, but, under our own strength, we’re not strong enough to keep our own footing. Especially when we live out from under God’s best will for us.

We need Jesus every hour—and for good reason. We need Him because without Him, we fall into the traps the enemy sets for us. And by extension, we miss out on the life of precious intimacy God invites us to enjoy *with Him*. We follow the Shepherd because He guards and guides us with the utmost care. He teaches us as we follow Him. And He draws us so close that our hearts actually begin to beat in rhythm with His. A with-Him kind of life is what He intended for us from the beginning of time.

My eyes are always on the Lord, for he rescues me from the traps of my enemies.

Psalm 25:15 NLT

Where Are You Vulnerable?

A great chasm exists between an abundantly full, fruitful life and a strained, drained, busy life. We’ll explore the invitation to faith-filled abundance in a later chapter. But for now, let’s look at the impact of the kind of busyness that leaves us vulnerable and exposed to the enemy’s schemes. The Chinese word for *busyness* combines two symbols made up of these two words: *heart killer*. So true. I know from personal experience how dangerous and draining overcommitment can be. Like a slow death, my overcommitment all those years ago killed my passions, my perspective, and my sense of calling, leaving me weak, tired, and disillusioned. Maybe you can relate.

Several months ago I decided to cover the topic of spiritual vulnerability on my radio show. The phones lit up, and listeners called in to share about their near misses, their failures, and the steps they now take to guard their hearts. I'll never forget one particular call that came in that day. The woman, who wished to be anonymous, shared how both she and her husband had been busy running parallel paths, doing life simultaneously but separately. Then she met a man. She choked on her words as she attempted to share the rest of her story. "I mistakenly believed that the burden of my obedience to God—given the current state of my marriage—would be heavier than the consequence of my sin," she said. "But I couldn't have been more wrong. It would have been far easier to resist temptation than to face what I'm dealing with now."

I've heard this same story countless times from solid, engaged Christians who felt suddenly blindsided by temptation and vulnerability—and seemingly out of nowhere. Over and over again, these precious souls wonder why they allowed themselves to believe that God had somehow sanctioned their busyness.

Looking back, they wished they'd seen the warning signs. They say they'd give anything to go back and to have someone sit them down (like that precious woman did for me) and challenge their current pace and choices so they could have fixed the broken places in their wall.

Here's an important truth: When we run ourselves ragged doing too many things (most of which God never asked us to do), we leave unattended the sacred areas of our lives (e.g., intimacy with God, rich relationships with others, physical and spiritual health). What's the result? We miss out on the best of what God has for us, and we leave these areas exposed and vulnerable to the enemy's schemes. Read this important passage from Proverbs 25:28: "Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control."

Think through that passage for a moment. A life without self-control leaves a person as vulnerable to destruction as a city whose protective walls are in shambles. When we think of self-control, our minds typically leap to overeating or overspending. But all too often, we manage our time like we manage our money—more goes out than what comes in. We don't realize how our busyness makes us less stable and more vulnerable.

Though God calls us to live full, abundant lives, He doesn't run us ragged or ask us to grind our gears to the point of breakdown. We can trust Him to know what's best for us. If we don't practice a measure of restraint when it comes to all of our time commitments, if we don't say no to continual and perpetual busyness, we'll say yes to it by default and leave ourselves vulnerable as a result. Our human nature and our culture are powerful forces that compel us to commit to more than God asks of us. At some point, we have to humbly embrace this truth about ourselves: *We all have our limits.*

Tim Chester writes:

People do *not* feel stressed simply because they have a lot going on. Most of us enjoy doing lots of things. We only feel busy when we try to do *more than we can*. The problem is not expecting to do a lot, but expecting to do a little bit more than is possible. . . . So here's a foundational truth for what follows: *God does not expect me to do more than I can.* . . . If God doesn't expect me to do more than I can, the key question to ask ourselves is: *Why am I trying to do more than I can?*²

Why *are* we so quick to say yes when no, at times, might be the better answer? What do we hope to gain (or avoid) by giving away our time to so many different things? Someone once said, "If the devil can't make us bad, he'll make us busy." We all fall into the trap of overcommitment from time to time, but it's important to understand the cost every time we do.

Overcommitment puts a strain on our relationships, our physical health, and our ability to make sound decisions. When we give away our time to too many things at once, we also give away these precious things:

- Our times of refreshment (time freely spent in the Lord's presence to be strengthened, renewed, and redirected by Him)
- Our sense of well-being (margin that allows for rest, exercise, and time and space to spontaneously respond to the nudge of the Holy Spirit)
- Our perspective (the ability to view our lives through the lens of God's promises instead of our problems)

When we're in over our head, we tend to shift to a get-through-the-moment kind of mindset. We take costly shortcuts that we pay for later (more about this in the next chapter). When we run from one thing to the next, we miss the beauty and sacredness of the present moment, and we're less likely to identify where the enemy has set a trap for us. Sometimes we're the last ones to discern our own vulnerabilities. That's why we need to stand in the gap for each other like my new friend did for me.

About a year ago, I sent a letter to a pastor friend of mine. I took the risk and issued him the same caution my friend issued me. First I shared my experience with my friend, and then I wrote the following exhortation to him:

You have God-given leadership abilities, but you're worn out. You seem a little jaded by the ministry thing (I was there too), and you're physically tired. Your sweet wife is weary and needs you. Here's my charge to you, friend: Pull back and reignite your love affair and intimacy with

Jesus and with your wife, make time for your kids, and get back in shape physically.

Make everything else get in line and take a number. I promise you that if you seek first His kingdom and guard first your marriage, your family, and your physical health, you'll last long, finish strong, and be established in God's best for you.

God bless you, brother. I believe with all my heart that God wants to nourish, revive, and reset you in a way that feels wonderful to you and protects all that you love.

Kevin and I are seeing once-godly marriages drop like flies all around us. It's caused us to close the ranks on our own marriage even more and to be bolder when it comes to our friends. We're enjoying our marriage now more than we ever have. And we're stronger in ministry now more than ever. I do believe it's because of changes we made years ago.

I welcome your thoughts or any response you want to give me. I do hope you know that I come to you in brotherly love.

Thankfully, this friend responded just as I anticipated he would. He graciously thanked me for taking the risk to challenge him in this way, and he said it confirmed some of the things God had already been speaking to him. He made the necessary changes that were life-giving for him and his family.

Here's another important point: *We're not called to a busyness that drains us; we're called to an abundance that trains us.* Amidst our constant busyness, the enemy would love nothing more than for us to embrace a false sense of security. We tend to think that we've managed the craziness up to this point without any major mishaps, so we must be in better shape than most. But this is no way to live, and it's exactly the mindset

the enemy wants us to have. Read these cautionary words from Beth Moore:

We begin to see a few little hints of weakness in the boundary here and there, but with our busy lives we often pay little attention. Here's the big one: we reason that, after all, nothing disastrous has happened before. Listen carefully, never assume that just because a smaller problem hasn't exploded into a bigger problem before, it's never going to. Wrong. That's exactly what the enemy wants us to think. Don't ever forget what a schemer he is.³

In the pages ahead, we'll unearth some of the reasons for our constant and continual busyness. We'll look at the fear of others' opinions and even the ungodly sense of obligation that drives us to say yes when God would have us say no . . . all so we can say yes to something altogether different and better for us.

Not to say that God only invites us to do those things we love to do. Dying to ourselves that we might more boldly live for God is a painful (yet beautiful) process. Obeying Him when it doesn't suit us is downright hard. But every hard thing God asks us to do is always accompanied by His promise to transform us as we go. It's always an invitation to something more, something better than we would ever choose for ourselves.

Always and forever, we must remember that where He guides, He provides, what He asks of us, He supplies for us. No matter if He calls us up a mountain or down through the valley, He promises to stay by our side and to whisper in our ear, "*This is the way, walk ye in it.*" He leads us on paths of righteousness for *His* namesake. Nothing compares to walking intimately and powerfully with God through every season of life.

Precious Lord,

*Lead me to the Rock that is higher than me. Give me
a renewed perspective of my life and of Your great love*

for me. Show me even now which of my time commitments put me at risk and drain me of my precious energy. What are the next steps I should take, Lord? Show me the broken-down places in my wall—the areas of my life I've neglected because I've been too busy doing other things. Give me a fresh vision of Your best will for me in this particular season of life. What do You have for me here? What am I missing? What promises are mine for the taking?

I long to live in the ebb and flow of Your grace and goodness. Forgive me for my tendency to do more than You've asked of me. Forgive me for the countless times I allow my mind to wander to worry and angst. I will rest in Your presence today. I choose to embrace the truth of Your unfathomable love for me even when it's hard for me to believe it. I choose to see life as a precious gift straight from Your hand. I choose to remember that my yes and no are sacred and set apart for You, Lord. Fill me up to overflowing so that I may be a wellspring of life to everyone I meet. Thank You for new mercies and new beginnings. I trust You with my life and look forward to learning what it means to live out of Your divine supply for me. I love You, Lord. Amen.

Personal Reflection

1. What time commitments currently drain you?
2. Looking back, did you seek God's wisdom before you said yes to each of these commitments? (No condemnation here; just take them one by one.)
3. What's the cost of these commitments?
 - a. Time-wise
 - b. Emotionally
 - c. Relationally
 - d. Spiritually

4. What important things are you *not* tending to because of the time and space these commitments require? Honestly assess areas you've neglected. What parts of your life need attention?
5. What are some next steps the Lord would have you take to refortify your life in these areas (e.g., reprioritize prayer time with your spouse; stay off the Internet after everyone has gone to bed; plan for and prioritize exercise)?

A Wise Word

We would be better Christians if we spent more time alone, and *we would actually accomplish more if we attempted less and spent more time in isolation and quiet waiting upon God*. The world has become too much a part of us, and we are afflicted with the idea that we are not accomplishing anything unless we are always busily running back and forth. We no longer believe in the importance of a calm retreat where we sit silently by the shade. . . . [Yet] we can never have too many of these open spaces in life—hours set aside when our soul is completely open and accessible to any heavenly thought or influence that God may be pleased to send our way.⁴

Group Discussion Starters

1. Read the Wise Word quote above again. Consider what it means to have an “accessible” soul. How accessible are you regarding God’s input in your life?
 - a. Are there certain times of day when you’re more apt to hear His voice?
 - b. What times are you more likely to miss Him?

- c. Are there any adjustments you can make so you can better hear Him during those times of day?
2. Share about a time you committed to something for all of the wrong reasons. How did that go for you?
 - a. What price did you pay?
 - b. What did you learn?
3. Looking at your current time commitments, which commitment are you sure is God-ordained? How do you know?
4. What areas in your life do you sense God wants you to fortify and give more time to? What has to go so you can tend to this part of your “wall”?

Faith Declaration

I declare in the mighty name of Jesus that I am an anointed, appointed child of God! I am filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered by His love. I walk in the Lord's presence as I live here on earth. I have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to do His will. I refuse to throw my yes around like it doesn't matter. Life is a gift, and my time is a gift. God invites me to walk with Him and do the next thing He gives me to do. I am loved, called, and fully equipped to live the powerful life God has assigned to me. I refuse the rat race because God has called me to the sacred race. And I will run with holy passion and conviction. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen!