

INTRODUCTION

Lean into the Mountain

It was a beautiful day to go skiing.

The air was crisp, and a fresh layer of powdery snow blanketed the mountain. My friends and I were in high school at our youth group's annual ski retreat, and we couldn't wait to hit the slopes. We had a full day of skiing ahead, but there was a variable in our plans that day how long would it take Amy to learn to ski? We hoped she could pick it up quickly so we could spend more time enjoying the day together.

Everyone else had skied before, but we were barely beyond beginners. However, we convinced Amy to skip the recommended half-day ski lesson and let us teach her. Our brilliant plan was to take her to the bunny slope, let her practice a few times, and then go up the chairlift for the real runs. "Come on! It won't be that hard," we assured her. "We've all learned how to do it. It shouldn't take long at all!"

Acting like the experts we *weren't*, we overwhelmed poor Amy with advice. I showed her how to snowplow, Sarah suggested shifting her weight, and Sherri told her to bend her knees and hold her poles to her sides. Amy tried to implement all our suggestions, but she could barely maintain her balance and kept falling or careening out of control.

Another friend saw us struggling and stopped to help. He took off his skis, got on his hands and knees in the snow, and pulled the tips of Amy's skis inch by inch across the side of the mountain. We laughed at the great lengths he was going to help her, but from the look on Amy's face, we were the only ones amused by this scene. Even with his help, she remained unsteady and continued to fall. Nothing was working, and Amy commented that it might be better if she spent the rest of the day in the ski lodge so we could go on without her. Just then, a skier from our group swooshed by and noticed Amy struggling. He shouted over his shoulder as he skied past us, "Hey! Just lean into the mountain!"

I'm unsure what "leaning into the mountain" meant or why that phrase made everything click inside Amy's mind, but it did. She dusted herself off, shifted her weight *into* the mountain, and skied to the bottom of the run without falling. We stood there in disbelief at her instant transformation. After all our *very* helpful tips and efforts, this simple (and somewhat vague) piece of advice changed everything. This subtle shift in her weight led to a significant shift in her mindset. One minute Amy was ready to quit, and the next she was first in line, ready to try it again. All because she learned to lean into the mountain.

The Discovery

This book is about learning to lean into a different mountain—the mountain of enjoying God in His Word and prayer. Admittedly, this mountain seems intimidating when we first look up at it. When we first draw near, we feel like true beginners, overwhelmed by its size. Still, we love the mountain, even though we don't know it very well yet. We set out with enthusiasm, loving the trails and the sweet mountain air. But soon, the weather turns, and our goal changes from enjoying

the day to getting through it. Suddenly, we become aware that staying on this mountain will require more endurance and commitment than we anticipated. *Can't we chill in the ski lodge for a bit?*

Have you ever felt that way when you open God's Word?

As a new Christian, God's Word is exciting and you want to spend as much time in it as possible. You're learning new things and seeing God change your heart. But after a while, it becomes more difficult. The thing you once enjoyed doing can start to feel like a chore or like a skill you've not yet mastered.

I don't know if that sounds like your experience, but it was mine. As a new Christian, I was taught to have a daily quiet time; however, when I couldn't consistently wake up early or stick to a routine of reading and praying, I felt guilty and like a spiritual failure. When I finally found the time, I expected to have an emotional experience, but I ended up feeling distracted and sometimes bored.

This confused me because I loved the Word and reading books *about* the Bible, but I struggled to enjoy the Book for myself. I was embarrassed when other Christians talked about their quiet times and what the Lord was showing them while I struggled to enjoy opening its pages.

Almost imperceptibly, a shift happened in my mind. I began to think of my quiet time as an exercise of my will. It was like lifting weights or eating broccoli: it wasn't something I always enjoyed, but it was good for me, and it would produce good rewards if I stuck with it. With this mindset, the practice that should have nourished my soul became a mental checklist to mark off before the day's "real" work began. I felt hypocritical for proclaiming my love for Jesus and His Word while also secretly struggling to enjoy meeting with him.

I wanted to change, so I joined Bible studies and accountability groups, made New Year's Resolutions, and

bought through-the-year Bibles. Each attempt helped for a time, but soon my enthusiasm waned and I was right back where I started. Exhausted from my efforts, I concluded this was just the way things were and that I would always struggle with this area of my life. One day, I picked up a book about spiritual disciplines (because *clearly* I struggled in that area). I came across a paragraph that stopped me in my tracks. Richard Foster, the author of *The Celebration of Discipline*, wrote,

The church Fathers often spoke of *Otium Sanctum*, “holy leisure.” It refers to a sense of balance in life, an ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, and an ability to pace ourselves. With our tendency to define people in terms of what they produce, we would do well to cultivate “holy leisure.” And if we expect to succeed in the contemplative way, we must pursue “holy leisure” with a determination that is ruthless to our diaries.¹

I had never heard of *otium sanctum* or holy leisure before, but it sounded like everything I lacked and desperately wanted. I wanted to experience more balance and less guilt, peace and less anxiety, rest and less striving. And most of all, I wanted whatever this holy leisure thing was in my life.

The word “leisure” stuck out to me the most, prompting me to rethink my approach to the Word. I viewed meeting with a friend over coffee or lunch as a leisurely activity, so why couldn’t I transfer that anticipation to my meetings with God? Essentially, we were doing the same things—listening, sharing, and finding satisfaction in each other’s company.

I began researching holy leisure and discovered the concept of *otium sanctum*, a term used primarily by monks and early

1 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hachette UK, 2012), 31.

Church Fathers to describe restful devotion. The idea appealed to me, but I wondered if this was a concept for a bygone era, a time for monasteries and not for busy people in metropolises. Was this beautiful phrase more romantic than it was realistic? Could my lifelong struggle with enjoying God's Word really be as simple as changing my mindset about it?

As I began to approach God's Word with the goal of holy leisure in mind, I instantly enjoyed it more. Instead of feeling confined by a daily quiet time, I was eager to leisurely meet with the Lord and have my soul nourished in His Word. Like a day on the slopes, I began to find connections in His Word like hidden trails through the trees. I was excited about what I was learning, and I started blogging as a way to clarify my thinking and share my insights with others. I was learning how to pursue holy leisure and lean into the mountain.

The One Thing

Despite my association of leisure being for vacations and times of ease, I found that holy leisure wasn't an excuse for laziness, but was instead a whole-hearted pursuit of the most essential thing in life: loving and enjoying Jesus. I found evidence of the pursuit of holy leisure in many familiar stories in God's Word.

David, who penned over half of the psalms, delighted in God, and he touched on the concept of holy leisure when he said, "*One thing* have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4, emphasis mine).

His single-hearted pursuit was to behold the beauty of the Lord. The man after God's own heart knew that nothing could match the joy of being in God's presence, and he wanted to live in that presence forever.

Mary epitomized a mindset of holy leisure when she chose to sit at Jesus' feet instead of serving with her sister Martha in the kitchen. I saw myself in Martha's preoccupation with serving while simultaneously neglecting the most important thing. Martha complained, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, *but one thing is necessary*. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:40-42, emphasis mine).

Jesus' tender rebuke of Martha's misplaced priorities was also aimed at me. All her chores and selfless acts of service weren't as important as enjoying and being near Jesus. Martha's work, while necessary, had temporary benefits; Mary's investment was eternal.

And who better to demonstrate a single-hearted devotion to enjoy God than the Apostle Paul? His religious pedigree meant nothing compared to his all-consuming passion. He said,

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. *But one thing I do*: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12-14, emphasis mine)

Paul demonstrated what I later learned is the paradox of holy leisure: resting in and enjoying God isn't passive, but active. Like Richard Foster said, holy leisure and the rest that it affords come from ruthless pursuit.

David, Mary, and Paul laid it all on the line for the “one thing” of beholding Christ. My Martha-like heart had been looking at this all wrong. The one thing I needed wasn’t to do more, but to behold more. Jesus is the treasure, the one thing we all need and want most, even if we’re unaware of it at first. For the first time, I saw obtaining the treasure not as a chore but as a pursuit of the spiritual rest and enjoyment that holy leisure promised.

Suddenly, I longed to go to the Word. I had never been an early riser, but I began to get up before my family to experience the one thing necessary—beholding Christ. My heart was enjoying God like never before, and I was experiencing holy leisure.

How Do You Approach God’s Word?

Because the Bible is the very Word of God, approaching it is unlike reading any other book; our mindset and heart posture affect how we receive it. That doesn’t mean we need to come perfectly prepared or fully focused every time. God is gracious and His Word is living and active, so it meets us in our weakness and cuts through our distractions. Still, the way we approach Scripture shapes how we’re formed by it.

If you’ve struggled to enjoy God’s Word, treating your quiet time as a task or approaching it with distracted or self-centered motives, you’re not alone. The question isn’t whether you always get it right, but whether you’re growing in a single-hearted desire for God, like we see in David, Mary, or Paul. Here are eight different ways you may approach your time in the Word. Which one most resembles yours today?

The Legalist

The Legalist knows she has been saved by grace, but still feels pressure to earn God’s favor through spiritual discipline. She

understands that Bible reading and prayer are necessary for spiritual growth, but she treats them as duties she performs each day rather than sources of joy for her heart. The peace and joy that should come from being in the Word are often overshadowed by her desire to meet strict, self-imposed standards.

The Perfectionist

The Perfectionist is closely related to the Legalist. While the Legalist is concerned about the function of “doing” Bible study, the Perfectionist is worried about the form of it. Her quiet time needs to look a certain way, whether that’s with her perfectly curated routine, or with her beautifully highlighted Bible posted online for others to see. Beneath the polish, she longs for God’s Word to move from the page into her heart, bringing transformation rather than perfect presentation.

The Feeler

The Feeler wants to steer clear of the Legalist or the Perfectionist, so she only goes to the Word when she “feels” like it. She banks on God’s grace and isn’t bothered by her lack of discipline. When she does turn to the Word, she’s often on the lookout for an emotional experience or a direct word from God. When her studies become tedious, boring, or too challenging, she usually steps away.

The Striver

The Striver approaches God’s Word as though it’s a formula for success. She believes that following biblical principles, like the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, will guarantee a better life, so she works hard to live them out. When she misses a day or week in the Word, or life falls apart, she assumes her failure to keep up is to blame. Her time in

the Word can feel transactional, as though she's trying to earn blessings or maintain God's favor by her effort.

The Scholar

The Scholar goes to God's Word for material. She has a high regard for the authority of Scripture and knows it's living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. She's committed impressive portions of Scripture to memory and can recite chapter and verse. But instead of approaching her time in the Word with a worshipful heart, she's often digging through it for research, for content for her next teaching at Bible study, to win an argument, or to make the grade.

The Traditionalist

The Traditionalist's strength is in her routine. Her quiet time is a regular part of her daily schedule, just like brushing her teeth or making coffee. She deeply values Scripture and recognizes its importance for her spiritual health, but sometimes she feels like she's going through the motions. She's not dispassionate, but she often feels spiritually dry and yearns for deeper joy and fresh insights into the Word.

The Athlete

The Athlete approaches Scripture like a training regimen. She's diligent and determined, checking off her Bible reading plans and Scripture memory verses like reps in a workout. Her discipline is commendable, and her biblical knowledge is growing; however, she may equate spiritual maturity with her performance, forgetting that intimacy with God isn't earned through hustle. When her routine gets disrupted or she misses a day, she can feel spiritually weak or guilty, as though she's lost her progress.

The Psalmist

The Psalmist resembles David: she knows that the “one thing” she needs most is to dwell in the Lord’s presence. She’s growing in her pursuit of holy leisure, learning to prioritize communion with God and to enjoy the rest He graciously gives. Her love for Scripture is deepening, and she’s discovering new joy and freedom in walking closely with Him. Regardless of the season of her life, she makes spending time in the Word her priority. Her soul is laid bare before the Lord, and she meditates on His Word day and night.

Do you see yourself in one of the above approaches, or perhaps you float between a few of them depending on your season or circumstances? Sometimes, we become so accustomed to our ways that we don’t consider that there might be a better, more satisfying approach to the Word. Knowing where we are and where we want to go is helpful. But this assessment also begs the question, “How do I do holy leisure?” “What difference will this make in my life?” And “Can I apply this mindset to my family, work, and community?” Those questions and many others will be addressed throughout this book.

Holy Leisure in Everyday Places

Is a mindset of holy leisure the answer for the Legalist, Perfectionist, Striver, and all the others seeking to enjoy spending time with God and His Word from a pure heart? I believe the answer is a resounding “Yes!” The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is “To glorify God *and* enjoy Him forever.”² God made us to know and enjoy Him; therefore, our enjoyment of Him will be found where He has revealed Himself—in His Word.

² *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 1 (Westminster Assembly, 1647).

The subtitle of this book, “Enjoying God in Everyday Places,” suggests our pursuit of holy leisure moves from the inside of our lives out into our everyday places. Our love for God begins within us and then extends outward into our circles of influence. Knowing who we are in Christ and what He’s done for us affects how we see ourselves within the context of God’s bigger story.

This book is divided into four parts. In Part One, we’ll explore the hidden places of your heart and consider who you are in Christ, the bedrock upon which you can enjoy fellowship with God and His Word. In Part Two, we’ll examine the familiar aspects of life and explore how holy leisure impacts our family, work, community, and creative endeavors. In Part Three, we’ll look at the hard places of life and how holy leisure prepares us for trials and temptations when they come. And in Part Four, we’ll consider how holy leisure prepares us for a life of fruitfulness and blessing.

Because the pursuit of holy leisure is a mindset that transforms how we engage with God’s Word and the world around us, each chapter ends with a section called “Have This Mind.” These questions are designed to help you personalize and apply what you’ve read with greater intentionality, making this an excellent option for individual study or for use in a small group, book club, or Bible study setting.

This intentional time of reflection is not a rigid set of steps, but a way to reorient the heart from duty to delight. Scientist, philosopher, inventor, and theologian Blaise Pascal once said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”³ The pursuit of holy leisure is a call to stop filling the vacuum of your heart

3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

with things that won't satisfy and to turn to God instead. But fair warning: this book is not an instruction manual with twelve easy steps to take you from dutifully reading God's Word to delighting in it. It's not a Bible study method or a system to follow. Instead, it's an exploration of a mindset that will transform your daily quiet time into a pursuit of holy leisure.

You probably don't need to be convinced of rest's benefits. We understand its necessity for our bodies, minds, and souls. But what if we transferred the energy and enthusiasm we feel towards rest and leisure toward something that provides even longer-lasting enjoyment—knowing God in His Word?

Jesus told Martha that Mary's portion wouldn't be taken from her. Time with Jesus is an eternal investment with dividends we'll reap now and in the future. Holy leisure isn't an excuse to kick back and slack off; instead, it's a rallying cry to pursue just one thing with all the energy you can muster—enjoying God. It's a mindset shift that changes everything. I invite you to meet me on this mountain of enjoying God's Word and lean into it. Once you do, you'll never be the same.