

Chapter one

START BY STOPPING

In a book focusing on direction, purpose and ultimately stepping further into God's will for our lives, discovering the activity necessary for moving forward would seem like a natural place to begin. But instead, we're going to start by stopping.

For many of us, ourselves included, the idea of stopping or even slowing down sends our hearts into overdrive – especially if you've reached for this book from a place of fear or anxiety, feeling that you have to determine the direction your life is going in *now*.

In a world so fast-paced, and for a generation faced with more opportunities than ever before, to not be busy can seem like a subscription to a life of missed potential. Every day we hear or see stories of those who took initiative and who used their drive and passion to accomplish great things. It seems the more they do, the more success comes to them. So why would we stop?

However, after years of being told by the older generation to *slow down*, we have both learned the hard way that for people of our age one of the biggest barriers to discerning and following our direction is, in fact, busyness. And this makes sense; with so much noise in our lives it can be almost impossible to hear God's voice. Especially in seasons where we really need to understand the path God has for us or where we need to go, for many of us it will be clear that in order to hear from God we need to slow down or stop completely. Easier said than done, right?

WHY IS BUSYNESS SO GLORIFIED?

In today's world we often equate busyness with success. Whether it be on social media, in blogs or in real life, the idea of working, hustling and being 'on our grind' is celebrated and in many ways even glorified. As a generation, we've often equated living a fast-paced life with living an abundant, full and effective one. It's almost become a badge of honour to say we have so little sleep, need weeks to arrange a meetup, and have almost no time for frivolous pursuits. We're just too important to be on the margins.

As a magazine editor, I (Ruth) love watching interviews and hearing people's stories – particularly from those who have excelled in their chosen field. I was recently watching a talk-show interview with a well-known celebrity who started off by saying how she sleeps for only four hours each day, in part due to the number of projects she has on the go at the same time. The audience's response

was to cheer! The celebrity then went on to say how you have to be focused, making sure you're running a hundred miles an hour, otherwise you won't make it to the 'top' – without ever defining what the 'top' was.

And it's not just celebrities or the media that propagate this view. Even for those highly involved in the Christian community, where we have at least some understanding of the value of rest or 'Sabbath', many of us find it impossible to go against this mile-a-minute flow in our work, relationships or social lives.

BUSY BURNING OUT

The glorification of busyness is definitely something I have felt in my own life. Living at a flat-out pace is something I've continually had to wrestle with and guard against, particularly in relation to my work life. There was a time when I was sleeping no more than four hours a night, had every evening booked, and worked tirelessly through the weekends to the point where Monday would come around so quickly I wouldn't even notice. Then, something happened.

In spring 2015, I fainted – with no warning, and no apparent explanation. Moments later I was being lifted into an ambulance, then rushing through central London and finally sitting waiting anxiously in A&E, wondering why and how my body had completely shut down.

4 START BY STOPPING

That night, I heard the Holy Spirit very clearly say to me: ‘I can’t use you if you don’t stop.’

I thought, Wait, what does that mean? I’ve been busy with faith-filled activities, making the most of every opportunity, not wasting a single hour, working for God – how can it be that I need to stop?

Over the following weeks and months, through taking time out to reflect and study the Bible and converse with God through prayer, I realized that in all of my busyness I had stopped taking time out to spend with God. By pausing and taking stock I recognized that in that season I had made myself busy doing many activities God had not asked me to do. I was doing things through my own strength and, worst of all, I was often too busy to spend any meaningful time with God. I’d started to see him as the last thing on my to-do list, not the first. Instead of developing a deep relationship with him, I was surviving on scraps of prayer until I was so spiritually hungry I was too exhausted to carry on. The Bible tells us that God sent his Son Jesus to earth to save us from our sins so that we ‘may have life, and have it to the full’ (John 10:10), but clearly God’s idea of a ‘full life’ is very different from the life that many of us lead.

GOD’S PACE IS NOT OUR PACE

‘My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the LORD.

‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.’

(Isaiah 55:8 NLT)

Beginning to think about direction by slowing down or stopping may feel foreign to us because our culture tells us that we need to do more, achieve more, earn more *now*. Yet, as we see in the above scripture and throughout the Bible, God's way is countercultural; much of what he says is the opposite of what we see as 'normal' or 'right' in the world today.

Through the Bible and the wisdom held within, we see that God's thoughts are infinite, holy, vast and far superior to ours, so it makes sense to turn to Scripture to see what it says about God's intended pace for our direction.

WE WERE DESIGNED TO REST

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

(Genesis 2:2-3)

Perhaps part of our generation's problem with busyness stems from the fact that we don't see rest as purposeful. We often save rest for when we are at the end of a project or close to burnout. But in Genesis we see that intentional and regular rest was part of God's original plan for human flourishing. God didn't rest from all his work because he was tired; he designed rest to be a consistent thread running throughout our lives, in busy seasons and not. If

God himself intentionally chose rest, as his children we can and *should* choose to embrace rest as a purposeful part of God's pace for our lives.

A mentor once said to me, 'Learn to work from a place of rest.' I knew there was truth in her words but I never really understood what they meant until I stopped and let God shift my perspective. God created rest. Not as something to do *after* all the work is done, or when we finally hit breaking point, but as a necessary part of life itself.

FINDING REST IN HIM

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
(Psalm 46:1)

Reflecting on Genesis, we begin to understand the productivity of rest as a necessary recharging for the work God has planned for us. However, the Bible goes further in showing us that God intended us not only to find rest, but to find rest *in him*. It is in spending time with God and resting in his presence that we can be fully satisfied, revitalized and spiritually replenished. The nature of this time of 'resting in God' will be unique to each of us – for some it will be through a period of quiet time, while for others it will be going for a jog or singing to worship music on full blast. For me it means spending time in prayer and studying God's word. Regardless

of how you spend time with God, the outcome will often be a sense of security in his presence, and deep peace.

A friend of mine recently told me about the power of pursuing a personal quiet time with God. The difference she had noticed in her life as a result was tangible. Previously she would wake up from a restless and broken sleep, frantic, with her to-do list at the forefront of her mind. And yet, the daily practice of waking up and waiting to hear from God, speaking to him and intentionally developing that intimacy, has literally transformed her life. Now, she wakes up with a sense of peace as she seeks God's agenda and direction for the day rather than her own. She's seen in her life that as she has intentionally integrated rest into her lifestyle, doors that she couldn't even have imagined have opened up for her. Instead of rushing into an overload of activity in order to see results, her slowing down and waiting on God has led to more progress than she could ever have made on her own.

Even though I can see a tangible change in my friend's life, I have found implementing such practices in my own life incredibly hard. As a Type-A personality, my natural default mode is just to get going, to write a vision, run after it, pursue it, to write a strategy and execute it. There are times when my prayer life has been dry, when I've been too busy to pray, but the more I engage with Scripture, the more I see that the battles of life are fought in prayer. The sacred place of communion and conversation with God is

where we receive wisdom and real direction. And so, as I grow in my faith, my motto has become ‘pray, plan and then act’.

CREATING A PATTERN OF REST

In the quotation displayed opposite, recorded in the Gospels, we see Jesus telling his followers again that he not only designed rest, but he *is* rest. But note here how Jesus doesn’t say, ‘Take the yoke off.’ He is not telling us *not* to work. He is showing us a better and more sustainable way to work, one that is not defined by busyness but by work *and* rest.

I don’t know about you but sometimes in wanting to embrace all this life has to offer, I forget that I want my life and work to be sustainable. Regardless of what I do, I don’t want to peak in my twenties or thirties and then tail off. For that to happen, a pace of life that makes room for work and rest is so important. In a world where there’s a rush to be an overachiever under the age of thirty, this can be hard, but the Bible is full of people who did the most amazing things later on in their lives: Paul the apostle (as seen in his letters), Abraham and Sarah (in Genesis), Moses (in Exodus) and Elizabeth (in the Gospels), to name just a few. As we explore the lives of characters in the Bible, it’s clear that not only does God have a longer view of our entire lives on earth, but he has an *eternal* perspective on our lives, which we explore more below in chapter four, ‘God’s ultimate direction’.

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

(Matthew 11:28–30 ESV)

REST RESTORES, TRUSTS AND OBEYS

Creating a pattern of rest in our lives will undoubtedly carve out more space for God to reveal his plans and purposes for our lives, but it is important to remember that God has already provided a blueprint for how we should live here on earth through the person of Jesus. If, as followers of Christ, we are to be transformed into his likeness, then it makes sense that we would do as he did. Jesus was a man of rest, often seen carving out hours away from the crowds to spend one-on-one time with God. Unlike the power-hungry king the people of the time were expecting, Jesus was a man of peace.

For many Jesus-followers today, our too-busy lifestyles mean we end up frantic, short-tempered and one disappointment away from burnout. However, we can see from Jesus' ministry in the Gospels that this was not his character. Often when we are searching for direction, we are searching for something to *do*, rather than a way to *be*. And yet, as we spend more time creating space for God and reading his word, we see that Jesus spent a lot of his ministry teaching people a way to be, rather than telling them what vocations he would have them choose.

The Bible says that God is 'slow to anger and rich in love' (Psalm 145:8). I know that, for me, it is when I am too busy, frantic and spent that my patience is replaced by frustration. The writer William J. Toms said, 'Be careful how you live. You may be the only

Bible some person ever reads.’ I wonder: if we operated and navigated life decisions from a place of rest, would more people perhaps be drawn to us and question the reason for our peace? As Christians we are to be ambassadors of the good news, of the gospel and God’s gift of peace, patience, trust in him and self-control. When we refuse to live lives that are frantic, we provide a great witness to those around us.

Another reason why the ability to stop and rest is an important aspect of the Christian life is that it teaches us obedience. Often the reason we ignore this command is that we get a lot of praise from our fast-paced world if we continue to stretch ourselves and ‘excel’. To shun this praise and instead seek to obey God speaks volumes. It is something I constantly have to work at, but I’d rather be obedient to God than successful in the world’s eyes. In turn, our obedience to God displays our trust in him, to both ourselves and others around us. It shows that we have faith; that we trust him and his plans more than our own efforts to lead us in the right direction. We explore this more below in chapter eight, ‘Trusting God’.

As frustrating as it might be for those of us who want to find our direction and run off ahead, creating space for God to speak is the best and *only* place for us to start if we want him to highlight his road ahead. Only by slowing down enough to build our relationship with God, adopting his intended rhythm of work and rest, will we begin to grasp God’s eternal perspective for our direction here on earth.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.

(Luke 15:20)