

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 church fathers to describe restful devotion. The idea appealed

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

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 then 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