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ALAN FADLING



An Unhurried Life

Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest

IVP Books

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A FRENETIC LIFE

I'm a recovering speed addict—and I don't mean the drug. I'm talking about the inner pace of my life. I always seemed to be in a hurry. I was the guy who looked for the fastest-moving lane on the freeway, the shortest checkout line at the grocery store and the quickest way to finish a job. It's probably pathological. But, like you, I also live in a hurried culture. I'm not the only one trying to get there more quickly and do things faster. In fact, there is little incentive out there to slow down. And the pace in the church doesn't seem all that different from the pace in the world around us.

My journey of recovery, my journey toward a more unhurried life, began when I was in my twenties. At the time I was a full-time college pastor, a full-time student at Fuller Theological Seminary and a new husband. I'm sad to say my priorities were pretty much in that order. I hadn't been in ministry long when a crisis hit. I was convinced that God had invited me to serve his purposes as the focus of my vocational life. But I also knew that I wouldn't be able to continue to do ministry or to live life in the manner or at the pace I had been maintaining. I knew I wouldn't be able to last for many more years or even months, let alone for three or four more

decades. My lifestyle was unsustainable. Only in my twenties, I was already showing signs of burnout.

It was at that time that I enrolled in a new Fuller Seminary course titled Collegiate Leadership and Discipleship. My position as a college pastor made the class an obvious choice. While I'm sure I gained many good insights into leading a college ministry, those aren't what I remember. Instead, I remember that built into the course were a couple of daylong retreats that gave me an extended time of solitude and silence with God. The first retreat provoked in me withdrawal-from-busyness symptoms rivaling those of drug addicts during their first week of rehab. I didn't know what to do with myself if I wasn't solving something, going somewhere or helping someone. The hurried pace of my inner life was exposed. There was nothing I could do at the retreat center except listen and no one I could be with except God himself. That retreat marked the beginning of a journey I have now been on for more than twenty years. And I'm still in recovery.

WAS JESUS RELAXED?

As I've traveled this journey, a few words of counsel have guided me. I remember reading what John Ortberg was told during a season of ministry transition in his life: "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."¹ Connecting ruthlessness and unhurry has been a fruitful piece of spiritual direction for me. In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, Ortberg suggests that "hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart."² And I agree. When I'm talking about hurried and unhurried, I'm not just talking about miles per hour. I'm talking about an anxious, driven, frenetic heart.

More recently, my friend Bill had a conversation with Dallas Willard,³ who has mentored many in a lifestyle of spiritual transformation. Dallas asked Bill a simple question: "If you had one

word to describe Jesus, what would it be?” What word would you choose? *Teacher?* *Lord?* *Compassionate?* Many words would fit. After Bill thought awhile, Dallas offered his own word. It was *relaxed*. Relaxed? Really? That word would not have been on my list. It wasn’t on Bill’s either. Was it on yours?

Part of me isn’t comfortable with the word *relaxed*. It sounds lazy, disengaged, selfish. When Bill told me that story, though, I knew I had to investigate the idea that Jesus was relaxed. What took root in my own heart was the desire to know Jesus as an unhurried Savior. I scheduled for myself a three-day personal retreat and spent the bulk of that time reviewing the Gospels and asking myself over and over, *Was Jesus really relaxed? Was he actually unhurried?*

As the hours became days, it became more and more clear to me that he was definitely more unhurried than the people around him were. After waiting thirty years to begin his ministry, his first ministry act was to follow the Spirit into forty days in the wilderness. His own brothers urged him to do some publicity if he wanted to be a public figure, but Jesus didn’t bite (Jn 7:4-6). He seemed frustratingly unhurried on his way to heal the synagogue official’s daughter (Mk 5:22-43) and to visit his sick friend Lazarus, who died during Jesus’ two-day delay (Jn 11:1-43). His sense of timing often puzzled those around him.

Jesus’ unhurried pace also stands in stark contrast to our twenty-first-century pace. Consider, for example, that not many of my friends in vocational ministry waited until they were thirty to get started (Lk 3:23). And to my knowledge, none of them began their ministry with forty days in the wilderness (Lk 4:1-2). The Spirit’s leading of Jesus was unhurried. What happened during that wilderness stay? Jesus fasted and he faced temptations orchestrated by the devil. It strikes me that the essence of these temptations was to provoke Jesus to hurry to get for himself what the Father had promised to provide, but in his good timing. I’ll talk more about

this in chapter four, but it shouldn't come as a surprise to us that a God for whom a day is as a thousand years (2 Pet 3:8) relates to time quite differently than we do!

I believe that modeling our life according to the unhurried pace of Jesus' life and ministry could be a healing and empowering vision for contemporary Christians. Yet many of us measure our faithfulness to God by how many tasks we get done for him or how many meetings we attend to plan his kingdom work. As glad as he is for our service, I believe he is even more pleased when we give him our attention and our friendship.

It seems fitting that I wrote an early draft of this introductory chapter in a quiet room at a retreat center. The setting was idyllic. My window looked out on a long stretch of lawn with trees that seemed to reach up to the heavens in praise. My cell phone coverage dropped out, which I once would have considered a liability but now consider a definite plus. That quiet, unhurried environment exposed my internal struggle with hurry. I feel hurried inside even when nothing actually urgent is on my schedule. Hurry has become a habit: I find myself stuck in emergency mode. Even when nothing outward is pressuring me to pick up the pace, I feel an internal impulse to get to some ill-defined "next thing" that needs my attention. It's pathological. I need healing. I need grace. I need to learn from Jesus himself how to live at his unhurried pace.

The Spirit of God has been working in my heart to teach me how to move at the pace of grace rather than at my own hurried, self-driven pace. I have also realized that an unhurried life is not a lazy life. In fact, it can be the exact opposite.

HOW WE GOT THIS HURRIED

There are a number of reasons why I'm hurried. Maybe some of these same things fuel your hurriedness. First, I've learned, and perhaps I've even been trained, that the faster I go, the more things

I get done. There's some truth to that, of course. But I wonder if all those things I'm getting done matter as much to God—or even to me—as I assume they do. I may be getting more tasks done at a faster pace, but my sense of why I'm doing them has faded. I'm also aware that God's great commandment to us isn't "Get more things done," but to love him with the whole of our energies, capacities and passions and to extend that love to others. And love isn't rushed. The first trait Paul mentioned when he described love in that famous chapter of his is *patient* (see 1 Cor 13). Patience is an unhurried virtue, and it's one of the virtues we have the hardest time with. In my preoccupation with efficiency, I miss much that God wants to do in my life and say to me in the moment. Hurry rushes toward the destination and fails to enjoy the journey.

Adding to the addiction to speed are cultural assumptions about hurry that are built into our mindset. We have a bias toward hurry. Ours is a culture that values speed, efficiency and quickness. Waiting is bad. Getting what we want now is good. Period. We don't stop to ask if what we're getting is even what we most deeply desire. Hurry is a way of life in which advertisers have been mentoring us for years!

This bent toward speed is supported by our very language. Just take a minute to look up the word *slow* in your dictionary. Notice how many of the definitions are negative in tone. My Microsoft Word dictionary offers the following as the first three meanings for the adjective *slow*: "sluggish," "time-consuming" and "stupid." Merriam-Webster offers more than a dozen definitions of *slow*. Half are negative, and half are neutral; only one feels positive: "not hasty." The definitions offered for *fast* are far more positive in tone.

Now consider the connection between hurry and boredom. Do you realize that boredom is a modern phenomenon? It's a way of describing how the empty spaces between our hurried activities feel to us. I grew up in a semirural suburb of Sacramento, California, in

the 1960s, and what my kids call boring today was the normal pace of my life. Video games, DVDs, cell phones and the like had not become ever-present. We had just three network channels, one PBS channel and one or two local channels on our small TV. Cartoons were a Saturday morning treat; they weren't available 24/7.

Being unhurried doesn't mean being lazy, uninvolved, casual or careless. Those four words expose our culture's false thinking: "Hurry is efficient. Hurry is productive. Hurry is evidence of my importance." Consider the answer we get when we ask, "How are you?" More often than not, the response is "Busy." Although the word is often said with exasperation or resignation, I think just under the surface we believe that we'd be judged as substandard if we ever said, "I have just enough to do," or "These days my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We assume that others will admire our busy and (implied) successful lives. Yet I'm less and less impressed with the outcome of a hurried life. In the long run, does hurry really lead to a fruitful life?

TECHNOLOGY AND SPEED

Since the 1960s and 1970s, our hurry has also been fueled, ironically, by technologies that promise to increase leisure time and give us a much more *unhurried* existence. Instead, technology has accelerated our pace of life, making our days fuller and giving us much less downtime. We now have the ability to fit more and more tasks into a given amount of time. We have technology to fill every minute with more and more work and activity. We fail to realize how weary and distracted this filled-to-the-brim life makes us. We can get more things done than ever before, but few people would argue that this has made life more meaningful. In fact, a whole new science has emerged that addresses time pathologies. There is time pressure. Time urgency. Most severe is hurry sickness.⁴

Now I don't want to imply that hurry is only a contemporary

issue. Percy Ainsworth, a pastor from the 1800s, said:

This busy world will surge about you with the tread of restless feet and the throb of restless hearts. And little that you will do will seem to make a pause in the rush of things. But you may in Christ find rest for your soul. You will rest in your work, knowing that duty is eternal; rest in your service of others, knowing that sacrifice is eternal; rest in your purest earthly communion, knowing that love is eternal. This is the *hasteless* life, and those that “believeth in Christ” will live it.⁵

Where Ainsworth says *hasteless*, I want to suggest *unhurried*. The unhurried life Ainsworth described is what I want. Like me, he longed for a life with rest rather than rush, and he died in 1909! Hurry was just as much a reality one hundred years ago as it is today. We now have technology, though, that enables us to hurry at greater and greater speeds. We can drive five hundred miles or fly five thousand miles today in the same amount of time someone a hundred years ago would have traveled just twenty miles. No wonder hurry is a big issue for us. Our technological tools translate our inward hurry into outward hurry.

I'm not ungrateful for the gift of speed as it relates to technology and transportation. I don't want to access the Internet at dial-up modem speed. I don't want to ride a horse and buggy five hundred miles to visit my extended family. And I'm grateful for a plane that enables me to leave for and arrive in another part of the world on the same day as opposed to weeks- and months-long train trips or ocean voyages.

WANG MINGDAO: WALKING WITH GOD WITHOUT HURRY

In his book, *Faith That Endures*, Ronald Boyd-MacMillan tells the story of a number of conversations he has had with Wang Mingdao, one of China's most famous church pastors of the last century.⁶ The

first time he met this famous—and persecuted—Chinese pastor, they had the following interchange: “Young man, how do you walk with God?” I listed off a set of disciplines such as Bible study and prayer, to which he mischievously retorted, ‘Wrong answer. To walk with God you must go at walking pace.’”⁷

The words of Wang Mingdao touched me to the core. How can I talk about the Christian life as *walking* with God when I so often live it at a sprint? Of course we “run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” but we may fail to run with “our eyes [fixed] on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:1-2). Jesus is inviting me to walk with him. Too often, I find myself running *for* him. There’s a difference!

On another visit, Boyd-MacMillan asked Wang Mingdao about his twenty-year imprisonment for proclaiming Jesus in China. That cell became a place of unchosen unhurried time for Mingdao. There was nothing to do but to be in God’s presence, which he discovered was actually *everything*. Boyd-MacMillan summarizes what he learned from Wang Mingdao:

One of the keys to the faith of the suffering church: God does things slowly. He works with the heart. We are too quick. We have so much to do—so much in fact we never really commune with God as he intended when he created Eden, the perfect fellowship garden. For Wang Mingdao, persecution, or the cell in which he found himself, was the place where he returned to “walking pace,” slowing down, stilling himself enough to commune properly with God.⁸

CLASSIC WISDOM FOR UNHURRIED LIVING

What counsel do I find in the Scriptures and Christian writings from centuries past for living a more unhurried life?

Psalm 46:10 offers us this unhurried invitation: “Be still, and

know that I am God.” Relax and remember who is in charge here.⁹ Vincent de Paul, a seventeenth-century French priest dedicated to serving the poor, said, “[The one] who hurries delays the things of God.” My usual pace of life reflects a different belief: “The one who hurries gets more done for God.” Vincent claimed, however, that the person who hurries ahead in the things of God actually falls behind. But somehow we believe that hurry will hasten the things of God. What if Abraham hadn’t rushed to help God keep his promise by having a child with Hagar (Gen 16)? Abraham’s hurry caused serious delay of the things of God.

Proverbs 19:2 says, “Desire without knowledge is not good—how much more will hasty feet miss the way!” Here one of the costs of hurry is exposed. We feel the temptation some drivers feel: “I don’t know where I am. What should I do? I know! I’ll drive faster!” Hurrying like that puts us at risk of running past God’s way for us. We somehow think that rushing about will put us on a fruitful path to God, but the opposite is usually true. Taking the unhurried way enables us to be attentive to God’s presence and guidance. I want to learn to live at that pace of grace. No slower and definitely not any faster.

Author and pastor Wayne Muller tells the story of a South American tribe who would march for long periods and then abruptly sit and rest. When questioned about this pattern, they said “they needed the time of rest so that their souls could catch up with them.”¹⁰ Maybe being bored at times is a gift, an opportunity for those of us who go so fast we may be leaving our souls behind.

In his classic *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips tells us that God is “never in a hurry.”¹¹ Never in a hurry. How might a deeper awareness of God’s gracious pacing transform our way of life and work? What would happen among us if we were to take on his unhurried manner? What might such a life look like? These are the questions I am bringing to these pages.

AN UNHURRIED JOURNEY WITH JESUS

I have come to appreciate the gifts of following an unhurried Savior. For example, I've found that a more unhurried inner pace decompresses my false sense of drivenness. I've also learned that "making things happen" isn't as helpful as learning to respond with courage to whatever God is doing. He makes things happen, and I would be wise to choose to work with him. My hurry is what often makes the yoke of life and ministry heavier than Jesus means it to be.

I find that when I am most hurried, I run past much that God is trying to show me, give me, lead me into. Hurry becomes my automatic-pilot modus operandi rather than a way to thrive in this life. I'm learning, as I watch Jesus' unhurried way, that keeping in step with him, living with him at a walking pace, is a way to sink into and enjoy the abundant life in him that he wants me to know.

So the question I would pose is this: If we are followers of an unhurried Savior, what should our pace of life look like? Since, for example, Jesus often stepped away from the needs of people to be alone with his Father in unhurried communion, might we, his followers, do well to learn to do the same? Being attentive to Jesus' life and learning from him can shape our vision of what the pace of grace will look like in our day-to-day lives. In some ways, living a Jesus-modeled, grace-paced life gets at the essence of spiritual leadership. I like to describe *spiritual leadership* as living a grace-paced life in the midst of a driven culture; living at a vital, life-giving, peaceful pace while remaining engaged and active in the kingdom work Jesus began here on this earth. I live not at the mercy of the culture's pace, but blessed by the mercy of my unhurried Savior.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In this book, we will take a closer look at the idea that Jesus is an unhurried Savior. Chapter two looks at Jesus' unhurried way of developing apprentices. He sought to cultivate in his first followers

an attentiveness to the Father that would enable them to influence people for Jesus far beyond their hopes or dreams. As I share my story of ministry leadership in a church setting, I want to offer insights you'll find helpful in the places of spiritual influence Jesus has entrusted to you as a parent, spiritual director, volunteer in your church or ministry leader. Next, chapter three looks at productivity and laziness and proposes that a more unhurried way of life is more productive than our often frantic and driven way. I also talk about *acedia*, a classic counterfeit to holy unhurry. Jesus' unhurried response to the temptations he faced in the wilderness will teach us how unhurry can protect us from impulsive actions that are less than life-giving (chapter four). A careful reading of Jesus' story of the good Samaritan will illustrate that being unhurried frees us to show compassion to the person right in front of us who is in need (chapter five). Chapter six explores Jesus' unhurried rhythm of prayer and ministry. He who often withdrew to lonely places to spend time in communion with the Father (Lk 5:16) encourages us to do the same: Jesus invites us to follow him in the rhythm of life he models for us.

In chapters seven through eleven, we will explore various facets of the unhurried way of life that Jesus invites us to share with him. Chapter seven talks about one of God's first gifts: during creation, he established the Sabbath, a day of rest. God later commanded his people to keep the Sabbath, a command Jesus fulfilled rather than abolished. In chapter eight, I share some of my experiences with suffering, an unwelcome reality in this fallen world that slows us down. In fact, nothing seems to slow our lives down quite as much as hardship or pain.

Chapter nine addresses Christian maturity, exposing the immaturity of our impulsivity and knee-jerk reactions. Maturity, however, does not happen overnight; it is, by nature, slow. Chapter ten offers some practical spiritual practices that can help us both

cultivate a greater attentiveness to the presence of God in our lives and enjoy a simpler, richer walk with him. Finally, chapter eleven focuses on the ultimate in unhurried time—eternal life. How would our pace of life be affected if we fully realized that, as followers of Christ, we are living eternal life *now*? Since eternal life isn't just a dim future promise but a vital present reality, what could be different about how we live our moments and our days?

At the close of each chapter, in hopes of helping you enjoy the gift of an unhurried life, I will provide a few reflection questions that I call “Unhurried Time.” In the spirit of our theme, I hope you’ll take time to reflect on one of them before moving along to the next chapter. If you are reading this book in a group, you can also use these questions to reflect together. From experience, I can share that it is in experimenting and practicing that I’ve learned to welcome the grace of a less hurried heart, mind and manner.

Let me close with a prayer for us as we begin our journey toward unhurriedness: *Father, thank you for giving us, in your Son, an example of a grace-paced life. You know how much in bondage to the hurriedness of our culture we can feel. We want to live at the pace Jesus lived, but we are such slow learners. So please give us ears that hear you, hearts that are attentive to you and minds that are quiet before you so that we can learn from you. Living an unhurried way of life seems impossible, but, Almighty God, nothing is impossible for you. Amen.*

UNHURRIED TIME

1. Think again about our cultural tendency to value a fast orientation and devalue a slow one. In what ways do you see this tendency in your own life? What voices, within or without, seek to keep you hurried? Why not take a few minutes to imagine in prayer how a more unhurried way might actually be a more fruitful one?

2. How do you respond to the idea of Jesus as relaxed? What is your initial reaction? Is it positive or negative? What changes would you like to see in your perspective here? Why not take a few moments to talk with Jesus about this?
3. In addition to some of the illustrations of Jesus' unhurried way that I've shared in this chapter, what others come to mind? What do these stories say about how you might be following Jesus in his way?

