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Rhythms of Grace

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Chapter 1

The Pace of Grace

Get away with me and you'll recover your life. . . . Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. . . . Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

Matthew 11:28–30 MSG

The bell rang on the first day of school and the students began filing in. Excited chatter mixed, with sighs of resignation, floated from the hallways into the makeshift classroom of a temporary building. *I had no idea the administration had given me such a big class for first period*, I thought. *I need to make sure I have enough material to keep all these kids busy or the next fifty minutes are going to be a disaster!* When I looked down at my desk, I came to the devastating realization that I had left my lesson planner and all of my materials at home. I panicked and my mind went blank. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to teach. How would I make it through the day with no lesson plans?

If you have ever been a high school teacher, you will understand what I'm about to say. High school students are wild creatures.

They detect unpreparedness the way a shark smells blood. They can sniff it out a mile away, and when they do, they go in for the kill. They will gather in packs. They will mark you as prey, and they will circle you, looking for a moment of weakness. When they find it, they will strike quickly, mercilessly, and relentlessly. You will bleed out hall passes and discipline slips until you are dry, and at the end of the day the janitor will sweep your depleted body off the floor with the pencil dust and little paper circles from the three-hole punch. As a teacher, my greatest ally is my lesson plan book. I had left mine at home, and now I was cast adrift in a hostile sea. I imagined the rest of my day, bluffing my way through each lecture. The next seven hours would be miserable.

The small, stuffy room was filled to capacity. Some kids were even sitting on the floor. *This has to be a violation of some kind of code*, I thought angrily. *There's no way I can manage a class this size*. I had stepped out from behind the desk, steeling my will to take on the challenge ahead, when the room fell suddenly and completely silent. *What is going on?* Through the open window I could hear the sound of the lawn mower grooming the football field and releasing that distinctive smell of summer, the scent of cut grass. A breeze began to blow through the room, providing welcome relief from the muggy morning heat. The tension of the moment hung in the air for what seemed like an hour. The mower, the green smell of fresh grass, and the gentle breezes held my senses hostage until I realized I was feeling the breezes somewhere I should not be feeling them—my upper thighs. The students' escalating snickers jerked me back into reality just as I looked down in horror to find I had forgotten more than my lesson plans that day. I had forgotten my pants!

And then I woke up.

It had all been a dream . . . a particular kind of recurring nightmare I'd had for several weeks. These dreams all revolved around

similar themes: being overwhelmed, being out of control, or missing an important deadline like college exams or, as I had just experienced, being unprepared for the first day of school. *Why wouldn't they just go away?*

I looked around the room to get my bearings. My husband was sleeping peacefully next to me, his chest rhythmically rising and falling with each breath. The moonlight peeking through the shades revealed I was safe—there were no students in the room waiting to mock me into oblivion for forgetting my pants. All was well. I sat up and looked at the clock near my bed and discovered it was 2:45 a.m. The sun was not up yet, thank goodness! I lay back down on my pillow, relieved I could indulge in almost four more hours of blissful sleep.

Unfortunately, sleep escaped my grasp that night—and it wasn't the first time. Until recently, I had always been the “sleepy one” in the family. By 9:00 p.m., I was usually the one stomping grumpily around the house, turning off the lights and the TV. I was the one gathering up the cell phones for the night and shoosing everyone into their rooms so I could fall into bed. Now, all of a sudden, everyone was begging *me* to turn out the lights. I was unable to settle down in the evenings regardless of how tired I felt. I hid under the covers and played word games on my iPhone long after the lights went out. I woke suddenly for no apparent reason throughout the night. And, like this particular night, I wanted to go to back to sleep—I tried to—but the adrenaline rush that woke me up kept my mind and body in a state of high alert until the sun came up and the alarm went off.

As I lay there trying to fall back to sleep, I thought about this persistent and unwelcome disruption to my routine. I hadn't felt like myself in months. Why was I so out of whack? It was mid-November and the year was coming to a close, but in some ways I felt as if it had never really taken place. The months had flown by

with one major transition after another. We had moved into a new house and immediately discovered a mold (and rodent!) infestation that took over a year to repair. My husband and I were both busier than we'd ever been, and we were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with breakneck schedules and overlapping deadlines. All of these things—the good and the bad—began to take on a life of their own. I constantly felt I was forgetting something important . . . and usually I was. I just couldn't manage all the competing demands anymore. I felt like a hamster running on a wheel I couldn't keep pace with, and I didn't know how to jump off.

For the first time since planting our church, I felt like I wanted to quit. It's not that I didn't love our church . . . I did. It's not that I wasn't grateful . . . I was. But at that moment, my ministry commitments seemed like the only negotiable things left on the table. I already felt as if I was throwing cargo over the side of a rapidly sinking ship, and even the valuable boxes were fair game. I never thought I would feel that way. I never really understood it when other people felt that way, although I always tried to be encouraging and helpful. And yet, here I was, ready to throw in the towel on everything I had spent the last fifteen years of my life helping to build. I was ready to walk away and never look back.

It was such a lonely place to be, too. Nobody, not even my husband, knew how I was feeling. I believed that telling anyone I was ready to quit would seem selfish and weak. On top of the stress was the guilt of knowing that what people saw on the outside was not the person I was on the inside. I was living a double life, but I was tired of the charade. I didn't want to fake it anymore; I just wanted to let it go. The funny thing is, letting it all go was just exactly what I needed to do. In fact, *it's just exactly what I ultimately did*. Only, I didn't let go by walking away from it all. I let go by learning to lean into God's grace and finding His divine rhythm for my life. It just took me a few more weeks to get there.

The moment finally came in our first church service of the new year. My husband, Stovall, was teaching a message called “Project or Process?” As he spoke, I clearly heard God speak to me for the first time in months. *Kerri, you are not a project; you are My child. Our relationship is not a project; it is a covenant. Your life with Me is a forever commitment. I’m fully committed to you for eternity. Will you commit fully to a lifetime with Me?*

Imagine you are married to a pastor and serve on the executive team of a church of twelve thousand people, and the Lord asks you if you will commit to a lifetime of living for Him. Of course, I had already made that commitment a long time ago. I became a believer in Christ when I was eight years old, and although my walk with Him has not been perfect (whose is?), it has been consistent. No, salvation was not the issue behind the words the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. Neither were they words of rebuke or a command to commit to greater devotional disciplines. Instead, the Spirit’s words to me were simply an invitation—an invitation to view everything in my life, including my relationship with God, through the lens of a sustainable, lifelong rhythm.

It was an invitation Jesus first gave to weary souls over two millennia ago:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28–30 MSG)

Tired. Worn out. Burned out on religion. All of those words applied to the state I was in. And you know what? *Recover your life . . . real rest . . . unforced . . . free and light living.* These were the kinds

of words that described exactly the state of being I wanted to live in but could never quite attain. I wanted a lifestyle of unbroken fellowship with Jesus. I wanted to learn to live in the rhythms of grace. And more than anything, I wanted Jesus to set the pace for my life.

Since that first Sunday of the new year when God reminded me that our relationship was a covenant and not a project, God has been teaching me more about what it means to walk in time with Him. As we travel together through the pages of this book, I'll share how I learned, and continue to learn, what it means to allow God to set the pace for my life. In the process, my prayer is that I can be a friend to you as you discover your own rhythms of grace.

Let the Music Move You

Rhythms of grace are God's divine tempo for your life. But before we talk more about what that means, we need to consider the nature of rhythm itself as well as our most basic response to it, which is *movement*. Sometimes while I'm grocery shopping, I suddenly realize I have been tapping my fingers on the cart in response to a song that's being played in the store. When I'm waiting in my car stopped at a traffic signal and someone pulls up next to me with their windows down and the bass booming through their speakers, I start to bob my head, to my kids' extreme embarrassment! I'm not trying to embarrass them, I just can't help it—I respond to music with movement.

I have a few playlists on my iPod that I listen to when I'm working out. There are different kinds of music for different kinds of movement. When I engage in the slow and sustained movements of stretching, I like to listen to the ethereal tunes of Enya or piano instrumentals. But when it comes to cardio workouts, Enya won't do. I need energy! I need motivation! I need speed!

So I pump Lecrae into my headphones. Why? Because the rhythm makes me move. How I move—the speed, the motion, the duration—is a response to the beat I am listening to. The rhythm of the music sets my workout pace, but when it comes to the pace of my life, I have to ask, *Who is setting the rhythm?* The answer depends on who has access to my ears, my mind, and my heart in that moment.

What music is playing the loudest in your ears right now? How would you describe your “movements” in response to that music? The answers to these questions matter because they provide an essential clue about who—or what—is setting the rhythm for your life. For example, are your movements through this season of life timid and hesitant? Perhaps the voice of insecurity has access to your ears. Are your movements disjointed and chaotic? Maybe guilt or fear is playing the theme song of your life. Or perhaps, like me, your movements have taken on a crazy momentum of their own. You’re not sure who is setting the pace, but you know you’re out of control.

Looking back, it’s clear to me that I had been on the path toward burnout for a while. Over a period of two years, I had allowed myself to listen to some pretty destructive music. I was moving in response to rhythms set by ambition, fear, guilt, insecurity, and perfectionism (to name just a few).

People have different responses when it comes to dealing with the demands of life. Some people hop on the hamster wheel and keep going faster and faster, as if they can outrun the stress or even run away from it. Some people feel so helpless and out of control that they just stop moving altogether. Maybe you are the type of person who ignores problems in the hope that they will somehow magically go away. I understand each of those reactions—and I have experienced them plenty of times! Scripture exhorts us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1

NASB). We can't do that standing still, nor can we do it if we are so drained and frazzled that we collapse before we even see the finish line.

Endurance running is all about running at the right pace, and to finish strong each runner needs to find her own tempo. Somewhere between the hamster wheel and the full stop there is a perfect pace, a rhythm that is a custom fit for your life and the leg of the race you are running right now. This perfect pace is God's tempo for your life, His perfect rhythm. His grace is what gives you the freedom and power to find that rhythm and walk in it. Finding that rhythm and keeping pace with it is the key to running the race of life and faith with endurance until you cross the finish line.

What Rhythms of Grace Are — And Are *Not*

So what does it mean to experience rhythms of grace, to find God's tempo for our lives? It means we create space in our days, weeks, and months for spiritual and emotional renewal. We allow our relationship with God to structure our lives and mark out their rhythm. One way to understand how such sacred rhythms work is to consider how holiday rhythms work.

Every culture in the world operates according to an annual rhythm set, in large part, by its seasons and holidays. In the United States, Labor Day, followed by Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day punctuate the first part of the school year with rhythm. In my family, during the school year we march to the beat of busy days for several weeks, but we always look forward to the next holiday—the promised *fermata* that provides a welcome pause in the *tempo staccato* of our daily schedules.

Many annual holidays around the world were originally set by the church calendar and, thus, were referred to as *holy days*. Over

time, the two words got smashed together to give us the word *holidays*, but the modern term no longer carries the associations with sacred moments. Don't get me wrong. I love seeing my family, cooking huge meals, wrapping and giving gifts, decorating the house—even all the extra busyness these seasons bring. But as much as I love the fall and winter holidays, they do not mark out a *sacred* rhythm. If we desire a life that moves to the rhythms of grace, then sacred rhythms—rhythms set to God's tempo for us—must mark out the measure of our years and create space for our bodies, minds, and spirits to be refreshed and renewed. That's what rhythms of grace are—a spiritual structure for rest and restoration.

How, then, are we to establish sacred rhythms for our lives? And what should we do in those holy spaces in time? In the chapters that follow, we'll explore several aspects of the grace-paced life and consider some practical ways to use them. However, it's important first to acknowledge some potential misconceptions by saying what rhythms of grace are *not*.

Rhythms of grace are *not* primarily about:

- *Time management.* We will have to consider how we use our time, but that is not the focus. Instead, our focus is on how to see time for what it is—eternity in disguise. The pace of our lives *is* sacred. Our time on this earth is fleeting, yet our lives *are* eternal. What we do on the temporal side has an impact on the eternal side.
- *Discipline.* Discipline will be required, but it is not the goal.
- *Habits.* You will likely develop new habits, but they will serve as a framework for something deeper.
- *Withdrawing from the world to engage in spiritual practices.* You will engage in spiritual practices, to be sure, but they will set the tone of your everyday life instead of being something separate and compartmentalized.

- *Saying no and setting boundaries.* The discernment and strength you need in order to do these things will emerge from the rhythms of grace, but they are not the starting point.

To be clear, all of these things *are* part of a grace-paced life, but they are not the main idea. They are simply external structures that reflect the pace that God's grace has set for our lives—we must not mistake them for the goal. The way we approach these things will and should change in every season of life. Some habits change when we go from being in school to working. The way we manage our time might shift when we go from being single to being married. When we add children to the mix, we have to adjust the way we approach our spiritual disciplines if we are going to have any hope at all of having spiritual disciplines! However, no matter how the demands we face in each season of life change, our goal of staying in step with Christ remains the same.

God did not create one person exactly the same as another. He has a unique design, plan, and purpose for all of the billions of people living on earth. Different people can even sing the same song and it will sound slightly different. This is because each person interprets and expresses things in a one-of-a-kind way. Regardless of how different our life contexts may be, I believe we can all enter into rhythms of grace in a way that authentically reflects the way God created us to function in this season of our lives. It *is* possible.

What's in Store

If you flip back and look at the contents page, you will see that this book is divided into three parts. In part 1, we explore the three foundational components for sacred rhythms—*Shalom*, Sabbath, and Grace.

In part 2, we explore pacesetters and peace stealers. We'll learn some empowering truths about new ways to live—ways that honor rest and make it the baseline beat that sets the rhythm of our lives in work, relationships, physical health, and spiritual vitality.

In part 3, we dive into practical strategies for managing time, relationships, and other significant factors that affect the pace of our lives. We will also consider how we can sustain these new, positive changes.

If you're like me, you might be tempted to jump straight to "fixing it," whatever "it" may be for you. But I encourage you not to skip over the first parts of this book in order to get to the "how-to" part. Instead, I invite you to look at this as a process to be engaged in rather than a project to be completed. If you are willing to value the process as much as the outcome, I believe you will achieve much greater clarity about the things that are weighing you down, and you will also find the freedom and confidence to let them go—for good.

Remember that this is not a performance grid to impose on your life. And even though I am sharing my journey with you, keep in mind that what I share is simply what works for me. Applying these principles will likely look different in your life than it does in mine, and that's fine. Part of the beauty of rhythms of grace is their adaptability. Take your time, absorb what you read, reread parts that stand out to you, and give yourself permission to establish your own rhythms of grace.

My hope is that the message in this book is one you will refer back to again and again as the seasons of your life change. I pray that as you begin to listen and respond to the Holy Spirit, you will discover God's divine tempo for your life. My heart's desire is that you will go the full distance of your race, and not just so you can crawl exhausted across the finish line. I want you to enjoy the race and come to the end with your head held high, a smile on

your face, and your arms lifted in a double fist-punch! And, my friend, getting to that moment is all about pacing yourself now for the long run.

In the next chapter, we'll consider the core principle of the rhythms of grace lifestyle, which is wholeness. The word the Bible uses for this kind of wholeness is *shalom*, and it is the starting point for creating a sustainable pace. Before we can even begin to think about clearing out our schedules and making health and relationships a priority, we have to know what kind of people Jesus has called us to be and become attuned to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we build our daily lives—which eventually add up to our whole lives.

For Reflection

Rhythms of Grace is designed to guide you through a process that will help you to identify and establish new rhythms for your life. As part of that process, each chapter includes questions to help you make connections between your life and the teaching in that chapter. You will notice that one particular question is repeated at the end of every chapter: “What do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to you?” The reason this question is repeated is because taking time to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit is how we get the right “music” in our ears—it’s how we learn to move in response to His timing and His perfect pace. If we fail to listen for the sound of His voice and then to respond to the words He speaks, we cannot hope to move to the rhythms of grace. Taking time to briefly write down your responses to these questions will be a great help to you when we get to chapter 10, “Reboot Your Schedule.” There, you’ll have a chance to reflect back on what you wrote, which will help you begin to do the

The Pace of Grace

practical work of constructing your annual, weekly, and daily rhythms.

Get ready to step into the rhythms of grace!

1. How do you feel after reading this chapter?
2. What parts of this chapter relate to your life?
3. What do you hope to take away from reading *Rhythms of Grace*?
4. What do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to you?



THE FOUNDATIONS OF RHYTHM

IN ORDER TO BUILD A LIFE CHARACTERIZED BY SACRED RHYTHMS, we need to understand three foundational principles—*Shalom*, Sabbath, and Grace. *Shalom* is an inner experience of well-being that overflows into our outer world. When we are living in *shalom*, we worry less about managing time and setting boundaries and focus instead on living authentically from the inside out.

Sabbath is the baseline beat in God's rhythm of rest. There is a hidden message in the biblical command to observe the Sabbath that might surprise you and change the way you think about rest altogether. I know that was the case for me!

Grace, as we will explore it here, is the experience of being yoked to Christ. God calls each of us to a purpose that is expressed, in large part, by our daily work. Yet, isn't that same work usually the biggest contributor to the frantic and chaotic pace of our lives? The gift of grace is that when we are yoked to Christ and fall in step with His rhythm, our daily work is no longer at odds with wholeness and rest.

Chapter 2

Shalom: Everything As It Should Be

I'm leaving you well and whole.

That's my parting gift to you. Peace.

John 14:27 MSG

When I was a young girl, my grandmother went through various hobby phases. One time she got into CB radios. It must have been the influence of that old Burt Reynolds movie *Smokey and the Bandit*. She saw that movie one weekend, and a few nights later she had a huge CB radio sitting on the kitchen counter and had struck up random conversations with truckers all over the Southeast. She was never shy about trying new hobbies, and she usually managed to rope my grandfather into trying them too.

One of her more traditional hobbies was putting together jigsaw puzzles, and I don't mean the little two-hundred-piece kind. I'm talking about the kind of puzzles with a thousand or more pieces. One day I walked into her kitchen and the CB radio was gone. Instead, there were thousands of tiny puzzle pieces lying on

top of the breakfast table. I had seen puzzles before, but never one with so many pieces. Each little fragment held a tiny brushstroke of color, and each one was cut in a unique shape. Not one piece could be fit together randomly or unintentionally. Just looking at all those little disorganized bits of puzzle board lying there in a pile of chaos made me start to stress out. (And I was only eleven!)

“Grandma, how in the world are you going to finish this puzzle?” I asked. “The pieces are so tiny, and there are so many of them.”

From the corner behind the table she pulled out the box the puzzle came in and pointed to the top of it. “Well, Kerri, the picture on the top of this box is what I’m trying to make. I just keep fitting the pieces together until they match the picture,” she said.

“But won’t that take a long time?” I protested.

“Yes, it probably will,” she said. “I guess I will just have to be patient with the process and learn as I go.”

The picture on the top of the box helped her sort through the pieces of the puzzle by reminding her of what she was trying to create. It showed her the big picture—the end goal—so she could make sense of all the little pieces she was working with at any given moment. My grandma wasn’t overwhelmed with the puzzle because, amid all of the little pieces scattered everywhere, she could see the big picture.

We all have multiple pieces that make up our lives, and at times those pieces seem like they just don’t fit together. How do our jobs or daily tasks connect to our family relationships? How do our family relationships fit together with our church commitments? What about the marriage piece—where does that go? And the finance piece? And the friendship piece? Where do all of these different pieces of life fit, and what’s the big picture we’re supposed to be looking at while piecing them together?

Wouldn’t it be nice if we had something like a puzzle box top

with a picture of the “good life” on it—a life of meaning, purpose, peace, and fulfillment—that we could look to as a guide as we assemble the various pieces of our lives? Wouldn’t it be reassuring to know that the picture we are assembling day by day, year by year, is going to add up to something beautiful when it is all said and done?

The good news is that we *do* have something like this to guide us. The even better news is that the image on the box top is the masterpiece of God’s original intent for us, which is *shalom*. *Shalom* is the big picture we must look to if we want to put the pieces of our lives together with meaning and order. It’s the first thing we need to explore when we consider moving into a grace-paced life.

Meaning and Order

What word comes to mind when you hear the phrase *rhythms of grace*? For some, it might be the word *peace*. This is especially true for those of us who are feeling overwhelmed and unfocused. In those moments, all I want is a little peace!

But what is peace really, and what does it look like? Does it mean that I have no conflict in my life? I would have to move out into the mountains and live like a hermit away from the rest of the world for that to happen. Just the fact that I am married and have three kids (and a dog!) makes this impossible.

Peace is much more than the absence of trouble. It’s even more than experiencing a feeling of surpassing calm during times of stress and trial. Peace, the way it is described in the Bible, is one aspect of a much bigger and more complete picture of wholeness.

Shalom is the Hebrew word for “peace.” Most of us have heard the word *shalom* and understand its general meaning. What used to come to my mind was simply the absence of conflict, hardship, or stress—a perfect state of calm and serenity. When I read the

Scriptures or heard sermons about Jesus being the Prince of Peace, I translated that to mean that as long as I was obedient to Him, my life would have minimal levels of stress and conflict. Conversely, I interpreted feeling stressed or experiencing conflict as a lack of peace. What's interesting about this notion of peace is how unbiblical it is. Think about it. Jesus' life was not at all free from hardship, stress, or conflict. Based on my misguided definition, even Christ did not walk in perfect peace! So what is the meaning of the *shalom* kind of peace found all throughout the Scriptures? The answer starts in Genesis.

The well-known words “in the beginning” open Act 1 of the Bible with the most sweeping, epic drama ever played out—the saga of God and humankind. Before one star lit the sky, before one blade of grass sprung up from the new earth, the Bible tells us that the earth was “formless and empty.” The Hebrew word for “formless” is *tohu*. The short definition? Waste. There was no order, no life, no night or day. Just the chaotic wasteland of “the deep” and the Spirit of God hovering over it (Genesis 1:2). How long the earth was in this suspended state is anyone's guess, but what changed it all was a sound—the sound of God's own voice penetrating the void.

When God spoke into the formless chaos, something amazing happened. Meaning and order began to emerge in the midst of the void. Like the maestro calling the orchestra to attention, God commands, “Let there be light!” Then He begins to conduct a symphony so grand, complex, and intricate that it echoes throughout all the ages of humankind on the earth. In the opening passages of the Bible, you can almost feel the emerging rhythm of creation. Each day begins with a new creation (land, sea, plants, animals), which is then crowned with approval (“God saw that it was good”), and is followed by night and rest. And so the pattern continues until the sixth day.

The symphony of heaven culminates in the pinnacle of creation: human beings. Adam and Eve are placed in the middle of the garden of Eden with order and beauty all around. They receive authority to act as God's regents, His royally appointed stewards, over everything. Fruitfulness and increase are the rule. There is no death, only life. No disease, only health. No family drama, no power struggles, no abuse. Prosperity and justice are not at odds with each other. Such an idea was inconceivable because, in God's world, prosperity and justice are one and the same.

The world we see in Eden is a world characterized by *shalom*. *Shalom* is Eden's "normal," its fabric, and its outcome. *Shalom* is God's box-top picture of the good life. It is a state of abundant well-being and complete wholeness from top to bottom—nothing missing, nothing lost. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.¹

When it comes to ordering our own lives, *shalom* is the picture we are looking at and aiming for, but it's nowhere remotely close to the world we live in. With the fall of Adam and Eve, the image of God in human beings was shattered into a billion pieces, each fragment containing a tiny bit of the original masterpiece. We have the pieces, but not the box top—it was lost when the image was shattered. So how can the pieces be put back together?

The good news is that through His death and resurrection, Jesus gave us the hope and authority to reclaim a state of wholeness and fullness for our lives, a state of *shalom*. Just as my grandma looked to the top of the box as a model for reconstructing the image on her puzzle, we can look to the model of Jesus to put the pieces of our lives together. He is our box-top big picture—the perfect image of the life God intended for us from the beginning—thanks to Jesus, we can still have that life in great measure.

When God wanted to bring order out of chaos and create the universe, He spoke, "Let there be light!" When He wanted to

bring a once-and-for-all solution to the problem of fallen humanity, He spoke grace and truth in Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah said of Christ, “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace [*shalom*] was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5 NKJV). If God had stopped at redeeming us, if He had only covered our sin and opened the door of heaven just wide enough for us to squeeze in by the skin of our teeth, it would have been enough. But God is so gracious that He went way beyond the bare minimum. He wants us to be agents of His message on this earth, not only through the words we speak, but also through the lives we live. So in addition to His marvelous redemption, He returned to us what was lost in Eden—the gift of *shalom*.

But life doesn’t feel like that often, does it?

When life feels chaotic, our attempts to reclaim order and wholeness usually start with something external. I used to have a little ritual I turned to when my world felt like it was spinning out of control. I packed my laptop into the car and drove to Office Max, where I bought a brand new, undefiled calendar. Then I drove to the nearest Starbucks and drank my body weight in caffeine while I made lists of every single thing in my life—every project, every deadline, every relationship, important dates, upcoming projects, possible projects, my exercise plan, my diet plan. I turned my whole life into lists and plotted it onto an organizational grid.

For a few weeks, my little life grid made me feel better. It was nice to see all the puzzle pieces neatly arranged into categories. It looked beautiful on paper. Simple. Elegant. Clean. Like living in some kind of Apple® Store universe. But real life is nothing like that, and *real life* is where I *really live*. It’s anything but simple, elegant, and clean, and nothing like an Apple Store. It’s usually more like Wal-Mart—complicated, awkward, and messy. (No

disrespect, Wal-Mart. I love your butter rotisserie chicken. It has saved family dinner on many a night.) Real life is oblivious to my master plan and project timelines.

My kids, for example, actually have the nerve to get sick on the very day I have a curriculum deadline. *Kids, really? You couldn't wait one more day to get a cold? Tomorrow would have been a perfect day to stay home!*

My friends' babies have the audacity to be born days before their due dates. *Hello, little baby. Don't you realize I have you penciled in for Thursday? This is most inconvenient.*

My husband has the gall to disrupt my schedule by whisking me away on a surprise overnigher to the beach. *Hon, date night is not until Friday. Didn't you look at the master calendar? So inconsiderate.*

My life plan was getting in the way of actually *living my life*.

If you are cringing a little bit on the inside about how dysfunctional all this sounds, it's okay. It *is* dysfunctional. Most people see being organized as a strength—and it is—but any overused strength turns into a weakness. I was using my organizational gifts to put my outer world in order when the real problem was with my inner world. You see, disorder on the outside is almost always a reflection of disorder on the inside. My outer world kept getting out of control because my inner world was out of order.

Jesus wasn't just blowing off steam when He told the Pharisees, "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean" (Matthew 23:26). Like me, the Pharisees were trying to fix an inner problem with outward performance. They were trying to make up for the brokenness and dysfunction in their hearts by overperforming acts of religious piety. I was trying to make up for my self-doubt and fear of failure by overperforming . . . everything. I finally learned that I couldn't fix what's wrong on the inside by addressing only what was wrong on the outside. That's why time management systems, spiritual disciplines, and

health plans aren't enough—you won't bring long-term order to your outer world until there is order in your inner world.

Three Characteristics of *Shalom*

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey defines habit number 2 in this way: “Begin with the end in mind.” As we take steps to connect the pieces of our lives, we begin with the end in mind by keeping our focus on the box top of *shalom*. But having an image or idea about something and realizing it are two different things. So if Jesus invites us to live in *shalom*, how do we accept the invitation? In other words, how will we know when we've found it? How can we tell when we are experiencing it? Although *shalom* might take several different forms, I want to share three characteristics that describe how I have come to recognize and experience *shalom* in the context of my everyday life. Perhaps these characteristics can be a starting point to help you begin to recognize *shalom* in your life.

1. *I experience shalom when I am fully present and fully aware in the moment.* How many people or things get your undivided—whole—attention? If you think about it, it's likely a rare occurrence that you are ever fully focused on just one thing. “Multitasking” is a performance buzzword, and I used to wear my multitasking badge as proof of how efficient and productive I could be. However, recent studies show that multitasking is not really beneficial. Splitting your attention between several activities at once causes the quality of your work to suffer. I would also add that it causes the quality of your life to suffer.

I had so conditioned myself to divide my attention between multiple things that I actually felt bored focusing on just one thing. No matter what I was doing with my body, my mind was always otherwise occupied. In church, I would start off taking

sermon notes, but within a couple of minutes the margins of my note paper gave birth to shopping lists, project timelines, reminders of people to talk to after the service, notes about things that could be improved for the next service . . . you name it. I still wrote down all the points and Scriptures, but I didn't relax into the moment and really take it in. My body was in the sanctuary, but I was far from being fully present and fully aware of what was happening there.

I was always thinking about the next thing to be done or the one thing that wasn't done. I tried to listen to my kids' accounts of their days at school, but I was too often distracted by thoughts of things like getting dinner started, which left me in a hazy state because I was never fully invested anywhere. My diluted attention in the moment also left me with diluted memories. Even though I know there is no condemnation in Christ and I don't beat myself up about this, I do have regrets. And I'm so glad I have learned to understand the value of undivided attention.

I know now that I am experiencing *shalom* when what is happening with the people in front of me at any given moment is the focus of my thoughts, my emotions, and my energy. I am relaxed, making eye contact, curious about what they are saying (and not just mentally formulating my own response). I ask questions when I don't understand instead of hastily drawing conclusions. And you know what I have come to realize? Ten minutes of focusing in the moment leaves me feeling emotionally, spiritually, and mentally richer and fuller than ten hours of multitasking and splitting my attention between a thousand different things.

If you have been juggling too much for too long, the practice of being fully invested in the moment might feel strange at first. It still doesn't always come naturally to me. I have to remind myself to stop trying to hurry the conversation along. Sometimes I have to stop my hands physically from absentmindedly scrolling

through Instagram when I have a free moment. But the more I practice, the easier and more natural it feels for me. And it will come to feel the same way for you. As I continue to reclaim *shalom* wholeness in my life, I am getting better and better at giving this gift to others.

2. *I experience shalom when there is alignment between my outer world and my inner world.* How many times have you said yes to something and instantly regretted it? How many times have you found yourself looking forward to a relaxing weekend only to remember—with a sense of dread rather than excitement—that you committed to multiple engagements? Or maybe your boss asked you to do a project outside of your regular work schedule, and you said yes but you would rather be at home with your family. Maybe you signed up your kids for four or five different after-school activities when you knew that even one or two would push the limits of your schedule. *How did I end up here again?* you think. *Burned out. Exhausted. Grouchy.*

When our inner and outer worlds are out of alignment, we experience dissonance. Choices that clash with our beliefs or values create tension in our lives. In my case, the tension has often been between my public life and my private life. The private me, my core personality, is an introverted intellectual. And not just a little bit introverted; I'm ridiculously introverted! Like an absent-minded professor, I'm constantly lost in my thoughts—and I like it there! But the public me is a partner in a major ministry—a ministry that requires significant and routine interaction with people. See any problems there? Like many women, I sometimes feel like what I do does not necessarily bring out the best of who I am.

To find *shalom* I have to be intentional about finding ways and places to bring harmony to these two aspects of the life God has called me to. I had to accept who God created me to be—flaws,

weaknesses, shortcomings, and all. I had to learn to rest in God's grace and stop measuring my value as a person by how I performed. I also had to respect my need for solitude and reflection and schedule them into my life. By giving myself permission to honor those needs as part of who I am, I experience *shalom*—alignment between my inner and outer worlds.

Shalom doesn't require perfection, but when we are moving in the direction of *shalom*, we make decisions that close rather than widen the gap between who we are, what we believe and value, and what we actually do.

3. *I experience shalom when I focus on wholeness, not productivity.* On one of those occasions when I was sitting in Starbucks rearranging the pieces of my life into a grid, I was trying to create peace by imposing order and structure on my life. What are structures, really? They have a vital function—as vessels designed to hold something else—but they are not what's most important. For example, scaffolding is a structure designed to support a building while it is in the process of being built. Once the building is completed, no one wants to see the scaffolding—they want to see the building! To take it a step further, even the building is a structure designed to hold something else. No matter how lovely the architecture might be on the outside, the reason for the building's existence is whatever is going on inside it. If it's an office building, then the work inside, not the building, is what is of true value. If it's a home, then the life inside it, not the brick and mortar, is what matters most.

My problem was that the structure and order I was trying to impose on my life was designed to contain things like productivity, efficiency, and achievement, but not peace. I stuffed as much productivity into my structures as they could contain, and then expanded them as much as I could to contain more. The better my life management systems were, the more productive I could

be. But I was using the wrong box top as my guide—my tactics would never lead to the peace and wholeness I was looking for. Is it any wonder that, for all of my organizing and systematizing, my world still felt chaotic?

Depending on who you are, increased productivity might be easy or it might be hard. Either way, it misses the point. *Shalom* isn't about doing more. It's about experiencing more of God's peace in the midst of all the things we have to do.

Pursuing Peace

The goal of establishing and maintaining rhythms of grace is to become whole persons—not perfect persons, but whole persons. It's a process of making intentional decisions that enable us, over time, to reclaim *shalom*, which is a state of abundant well-being and wholeness. Maybe *shalom* wholeness seems so far removed from where you are right now that you can't even imagine what it would be like to feel whole. Maybe your life is fractured into a billion pieces at the moment. If so, I need you to hold on to hope and to trust that the God who brought order and meaning to the universe in creation is the same God who can bring order and meaning to the wastelands of your life.

Jesus is *sar shalom*, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Peace is His domain, and it is His to bestow. God *wants* us to live in *shalom*—wholeness—and He made provision for it in Christ. The depth and breadth of God's provision show us that salvation is not only for heaven, but also for the here and now. His kingdom is here, *now*. *Shalom* is for today. We don't have to go away on a retreat to experience it or shut ourselves off from humanity while we get ourselves together. The apostle John wrote, "The Word [Jesus] became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14 MSG). I love that! The beauty of God's grace, given to us in

Jesus, is that it is perfectly at home in the messiness of our everyday lives.

Although we will not experience its fullness until we reach heaven, we can begin to reclaim *shalom* now. If you feel that you can't even see all of the pieces of your life, let alone put them together, it's okay. Keep your eyes on Jesus. He is *shalom* itself. When you accept His invitation and follow His lead, you can take consistent steps on the road that leads to wholeness, well-being, and ultimately peace. And that's how you begin to allow God to set the tempo for your life, to walk with Him in rhythms of grace. That is *shalom*, everything as it was meant to be.

As you'll discover next, one of the most natural places we begin to find our rhythm is in creating Sabbath zones in our lives.

For Reflection

1. What are your go-to solutions or behaviors when things start to spiral out of control? Which of these things are working for you right now? Which ones aren't?
2. If you could experience *shalom* in the context of your daily life, what would it look like—at home, at work, in your relationships, when you are alone, etc.?
3. What do you sense the Holy Spirit might be saying to you about *shalom* wholeness?