

# THE INTENTIONAL YEAR



simple rhythms for finding  
freedom, peace, and purpose

**HOLLY + GLENN PACKIAM**

foreword by Rich Villodas

This book helped me rethink our family's plans for next week and for next year. If you feel like your stress, busyness, and distraction are sapping healthy rhythms from your life, Glenn and Holly Packiam are welcome and practical guides. You won't feel like you are reading about something ideal but unattainable. This is a book for real people, and the steps shown here can lead us to better lives.

RUSSELL MOORE, public theologian at *Christianity Today* and director of *Christianity Today's* Public Theology Project

The best part of this book is that a wife and husband are literally on the same page, in pursuit of God-honoring intentionality in their personal, marriage, family, and ministry lives. I love how Glenn and Holly weave their personal story into their desire for abundantly intentional years together. A richly spiritual, warmly relational, and vibrantly practical resource.

STEPHEN A. MACCHIA, founder and president of Leadership Transformations, director of the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and author of *The Discerning Life*

Glenn and Holly Packiam have crafted a book that's about so much more than just setting goals—they're showing us God's invitation to abundance through living with intentionality toward Jesus. What does it mean to create rhythms of renewal, rest, and refreshment in this hurried day and age? The Packiams answer that question beautifully with pastoral guidance and practical wisdom.

AUBREY SAMPSON, pastor, speaker, and author of *Known*

The breakneck pace of life in the modern world is leaving many of us exhausted and at a loss. In *The Intentional Year*, Glenn and Holly Packiam invite us to take a deep breath and settle ourselves amid the mad rush of a culture moving with far too much speed and far too little intention. Pastorally warm, theologically rich, and practically accessible, this book is a wonderful guide down a new path, toward the freedom, peace, and purpose every human truly longs for.

JAY Y. KIM, pastor of Westgate Church and author of *Analog Christian*

What a beautiful and life-giving book from Glenn and Holly. Together they have cultivated a life of purpose and significance through their intentional practices, and now they've invited us to make those our own. Our intentions embody our values. Whether you're an expert at intentions or are just starting down the path, Glenn and Holly have invited us into rhythms that are both simple and profound.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *This Book Is for You* and *You Can Do This*

Our world is full of chaos and disorder, but our daily lives can be different. Glenn and Holly have lived intentional lives, full of healthy habits and rhythms, and now we get to glean from their years of learning. You will find strength, wisdom, and encouragement on each of these pages.

BRADY BOYD, senior pastor of New Life Church and author of *Addicted to Busy*

We live in a busy world in which too many of us don't take the time to stop and reflect on what is happening in our lives, our families, and our world. This often results in stress, anxiety, and burnout. One of the ways we can guard our souls from spiritual burnout is by rediscovering the ancient rhythms of grace that are deeply rooted in the historic Christian faith. In *The Intentional Year*, Glenn and Holly Packiam invite us to slow down, take an inventory of our lives, and cultivate daily rhythms of prayer, rest, renewal, and work. This book provides a road map for how we can develop spiritual rhythms that have the power to transform us from the inside out and make us increasingly like Jesus Christ.

DR. WINFIELD BEVINS, author of *Liturgical Mission*

When my wife, Rochelle, and I started taking three days at the end of every year to reflect, celebrate, and plan, it took our relationship with each other—and with God—to another level. Even at that, *The Intentional Year* takes it another step forward. Glenn and Holly unpack how to use and leverage your and your partner's gifts and callings to bring light and goodness to a world immersed in darkness. Every couple needs that. You can't imagine how you will be blessed.

SEAN ISAAC PALMER, author of *Speaking by the Numbers*

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freedom, peace, and purpose

**HOLLY + GLENN PACKIAM**

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*The Intentional Year: Simple Rhythms for Finding Freedom, Peace, and Purpose*

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*To our parents, Bill and Roxanne and David and Karmen,  
for all the big and small ways you intentionally love us.*





# CONTENTS

Foreword by Rich Villodas *xi*

Chapter 1 The Spirituality of Intentionality *1*

## **PART 1 REFLECTION:**

**Looking Back and Looking Forward** *25*

Chapter 2 Reflecting on the Past *27*

Chapter 3 A Word for the Year *45*

## **PART 2 INVENTORY:**

**Examining Five Spheres of Life** *63*

Chapter 4 Practices of Prayer *65*

Chapter 5 The Power of Rest *83*

Chapter 6 Pathways of Renewal *97*

Chapter 7 Circles of Relationship *113*

Chapter 8 Habits of Work *133*

## **PART 3 ACTION:**

**Making It Stick** *153*

Chapter 9 Rhythms of Intentionality *155*

Chapter 10 Calendar Rules *183*

Epilogue *193*

Acknowledgments *197*

Notes *201*



## FOREWORD

**Have you ever thought, *I need a plan—a good, simple plan to deepen my faith.***

If that has ever crossed your mind, you are among the millions of people who have thought the same thing but haven't been shown a way to do this. How do we grow in our lives with God? How can we better integrate our faith into the mundane ordinariness of life? How can our faith form in us the kind of character we truly long for? How can we live with a heightened sense of God's presence?

As a pastor, I'm regularly in conversation with people asking these questions—people who want a faith that matters, a faith for one's entire life and not just for the overtly spiritual moments of a given year. But cultivating this kind of faith can feel daunting. "Where do I begin?" "What should I focus on?" "Is there a simple way to begin the journey (or to deepen what I've already been doing)?" These are the questions I'm often asked. Frankly, these are the questions I'm thinking about *for myself* on a regular basis.

When it comes to growing in our lives with God, ourselves, and others, we need more than religious platitudes and spiritual hype—we need trusted guides who can take our hand and show us the way. And I thank God for this book you're holding because I can't think of better guides to lead you into a more intentional faith life.

I've known Glenn and Holly Packiam for a number of years. We have shared many a meal together. We have spent numerous hours in conversation about faith and life. In the years I've known them, I've been inspired by the depth of love they share and the breadth of insight they carry. As you will soon read in this book, Holly and Glenn have cultivated an intentional annual rhythm for many years that has established a strong foundation for their marriage. But you need to know something before you turn this page: *This is not simply a book for marrieds*. This is a book for *everyone*, at all stages of faith.

As I read through this book, I was blown away by how much ground they cover in such little space. This is a book

you can read rather quickly, and at the same time, it's a book that you will want to return to for years to come. Glenn and Holly offer beautiful theology, accessible spiritual practices, and a refreshing honesty that will put you at ease. Instead of wanting to "try harder," you'll walk away with a longing to order your life in a way that bears good fruit.

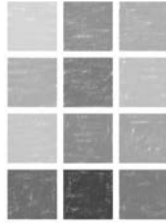
The life God has for you far exceeds anything you can imagine, but here's the thing: *It won't happen without intentionality*. You can't autopilot yourself into transformation. The life you long for won't emerge by accident. You need a plan. And I can't think of a better place to start than here.

*Rich Villodas*

*lead pastor of New Life Fellowship*

*author of The Deeply Formed Life and Good and Beautiful and Kind*





## CHAPTER 1

# THE SPIRITUALITY OF INTENTIONALITY

*Life is what happens . . . while you're busy making other plans.*

**John Lennon, "Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)"**

### GLENN

We should never have met—a farm girl from Iowa and a pastor's kid from Malaysia. Yet there we were, standing outside the classroom building on the campus of Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Some mutual friends introduced us. I was a junior; Holly was a freshman. When we met, neither of us thought much of it. Well, I thought Holly was gorgeous but way out of my league. And thanks to American-TV stereotypes, I concluded



from her blonde highlights and tan skin that she was a cheerleader from California. She, I can only guess, must have looked at me—with my closely cropped hair, gold-rimmed glasses, and argyle-before-argyle-was-cool-again sweater—and thought I was a sweet, nerdy foreign student. (I was wrong about her. She would not have been far off the mark about me!) But here we are, some twenty years into marriage, grateful for the providence of God in guiding us to each other.

*Providence*, though, is a funny word. Some people use *providence* as a synonym for *fate*, a destiny written in the stars. Christians usually think of providence as the sovereignty of God, who is working in the midst of all things for our good and his glory. But even then, there are questions about where our own choices come in.

The interplay between God's sovereignty and our free will is far too big a conversation for this book, but our marriage is itself a demonstration of the mystery: God drew Holly and me together, and yet he invited our participation. Or to say it another way: God's providence does not preclude our participation. Just because God is involved doesn't make the events of our lives automatic. Somehow . . . somehow . . . God makes room for our action.

#### HOLLY

My father is a farmer. That's not to say I learned much about farming. My parents had two daughters, and they didn't hold any illusions of our being ranch hands. Still, you don't grow

up on 180 acres of corn and alfalfa, with dozens and dozens of beef cattle roaming around, without picking up a few things.

If there's one thing any farmer knows, it's that stuff doesn't grow on its own. Well, let me rephrase that: *Some* stuff grows on its own—just not the stuff you want. Weeds run amok with little human aid. But to grow the crops you want, you've got to be intentional. You have to have a plan. And a rhythm. Even in Iowa, where the soil is rich and fertile. There are things my father did every single spring, things he did every single summer, things he did every single fall, and things he did every single winter. You can't hope for a good harvest in the fall if you wasted time in the spring.

Cultivating fruit may be slow, but it requires intentionality. My farming father once told Glenn that he had to farm slowly on purpose. "Every magazine I read tells me how *not* progressive I am, and how that's a bad thing," Dad said. "I have to be *intentionally regressive*. For me, farming is a way of life. I think of farming as a vocation."

Farming is a wonderful picture of the human vocation, the calling to be a human being. When God made the first man and woman, he placed them in a garden and gave them charge over it. Having been made in his image, they were to reflect his wise and loving order in the world. They were to bring order out of chaos and fruitfulness out of potential. There, at the beginning of the world, before sin and sickness and evil had begun to infect everything, human beings were called to be cultivators of creation.

Cultivation requires intentionality. Fruitfulness flows from faithfulness. Growth happens only on purpose.

## **STOPPING ON PURPOSE**

When a blizzard hits where we live in Colorado, everything stops. No school. No meetings. No soccer practice or dance class or music lessons. Everything just stops. Yet most of us never stop. With Zoom and Teams and everything else online these days, even a blizzard can't make us stop.

But this book is an invitation to stop. To listen. To pray. To be free of stress and anxiety and worry. To live intentionally.

The trouble is, life happens *to* us. The alarm goes off, and we stumble out of bed and begin our day, moving from one appointment to the next, mindlessly scrolling social media during the lulls between things. By the time we get home, our brains are fried and our souls are depleted, but our bodies just keep moving on autopilot. Prepare dinner, clean up the kitchen, take the dog for a walk, get the kids to bed, scroll social media again.

How do we get off this train?

We don't have time to step back from our days, much less from our lives, to examine what we're doing and why, right? Or so we think.

The frantic pace we find ourselves struggling to keep doesn't have to be our reality. We can live with a sense of vision, purpose, and deliberateness that helps us order our days.

It may be helpful to think of your life in a few specific

spheres. We can live more intentionally when we name those spheres. It may be that we already devote time and energy to those places, those dimensions of our lives. Or it may be that in naming these spheres, we recognize that we are not devoting the time and energy we should to those places. In this book, we're going to focus on five key spheres—prayer, rest, renewal, relationships, and work—that require our attention and investment if we want to live a more purposeful and abundant life.

Then, we must choose to interrupt the cycle of default living by *stopping intentionally* to examine *how* we want to live within these spheres of our lives. This can unfold in different ways depending on the person, but we'd recommend marking out a couple of times a year to get away, pray, reflect, and plan for the season ahead.

A little over a decade ago, Glenn and I began talking with several couples who prioritized going on an annual or semi-annual retreat to reflect on the previous year and look ahead to the coming year. The couples went to different places and followed different rhythms during their retreats, but their intentionality was the same. We noticed these couples were *choosing* to orient their lives around God. This kind of lifestyle didn't just automatically fall into place; they purposefully carved out time every year to pay attention to what God was doing in their lives and look ahead to where they were going.

We were inspired to follow in their footsteps, and so we embarked on our first retreat. We ventured to a historic site in our community that rented affordable rooms and provided

breakfast. Being in a place where breakfast was provided felt like a small luxury for parents of three little ones! We spent two nights away from home, taking time to rest, delight in the Lord and each other, reflect on the past year, and prayerfully discern what God might have for us in the coming year.

For a dozen years or so, Glenn and I have been carving out time for our annual retreat at the end of December or the beginning of January. Our retreat plan has ebbed and flowed during this time, but in recent years we've come up with a rhythm to guide us into a more intentional life. Here's what our retreat rhythm usually looks like:

- **Connect, share, and process:** For the first night of our retreat, we enjoy an evening out just to catch our breath and share our hearts with each other. Processing helps us shift our focus to rest and reflection from the chaos of normal life, with carpool driving, meal prep, work, parties—you get the idea. If you're single, an evening out might include treating yourself to an amazing meal or going to one of your favorite spots. It could also be fun to invite two or three trusted friends to join you on a retreat.
- **Reflect on the past and on what lies ahead:** The next morning, we each find a private spot to journal and pray reflectively about the previous year (or six months if we do this twice a year). We look back at the goodness of God and name the grief and gifts of the past season. Then

we take time to look ahead and listen for God's direction. Is there a key word or theme we need to pay attention to, a sort of framing story for the season to come?

- **Connect, share, and process:** After a time of individual reflection and listening to God, we come together over lunch and process what God has shown us. We share from our journals and talk about any key words or themes we received from God regarding the months ahead.
- **Take an inventory of five spheres of life:** We spend the rest of the afternoon reflecting on the spheres of prayer, rest, renewal, relationships, and work and the rhythms that have characterized our lives in each of these spheres over the past year. What rhythms have helped us connect with God, stop and reflect, rest and renew? Which rhythms do we want to continue in the coming year? Are there any new practices we could start? What relationships have we invested in over the past year? Are there people we want to bring in close in the coming months, or relationships we need to let go of for a time? Finally, we evaluate the work we're doing—paid or unpaid—and ask the Lord to help us see if anything needs to change. Maybe the work doesn't align with the gifts God has given us, the growth we've experienced, or the capacity we actually have in this season.
- **Connect, share, and process:** Over dinner in the evening, we discuss our inventory of practices, comparing

notes and finding places of unity. Sharing and processing helps us shape a vision for the coming year.

- **Establish rhythms for the next season:** The final morning, we bring together everything we've been talking about and establish rhythms for each sphere of life in the coming year. What specific practices do we want to engage in that will help us pray, rest, be renewed, connect in relationships, and work?
- **Make a plan of action:** After a break for lunch, we do the unglamorous but crucial work of turning our list of practices for the next season of our lives into dates and times on the calendar. When will we go on dates? When will we set aside time for rest and renewal? When will we pray or work out or have friends over? If the practices we've established don't make it onto our calendar and become scheduled events, they will remain abstract ideas.

This rhythm for our annual retreats has anchored our marriage and household for more than a decade. It has become our garden box for fruitfulness, the trellis for our life on the vine.

Even if you don't start off a new season with an annual retreat, incorporating key practices at different points during the year can be a game changer. In the following chapters, we'll walk you through rhythms that reflect the five spheres of life. These rhythms, or sets of practices, will help you find

freedom from anxiety and hurry and transition from autopilot mode to purposeful living.

First, let's talk about the importance of practice.

## **THE POWER OF PRACTICE**

There was a brief time when I held the record at my small high school for the most three-pointers in a game: seven. It didn't last long, but it was fun while it did!

Basketball is a sport of streaks. Players can go on a tear, making every shot they heave up, and then they can go cold, throwing nothing but bricks. When a hot streak ends, even the best shooters can't seem to make a bucket. In basketball, as in many other sports, athletes can't control the outcome of a game or even their own performance. But they can control their *preparation*. That's why so many athletes set goals around practice routines rather than performance outcomes. For a basketball player, that may mean setting a goal of shooting one hundred three-pointers before and after every practice, as opposed to trying to become a 40 percent three-point shooter over the course of a season. Players never know what their shooting percentage will be, but they can decide what their practice routine will look like.

Not everyone values practice the same way, however. Glenn likes to recall a press conference in 2002 when reporters were interrogating a young NBA star named Allen Iverson for not practicing with his team, the Philadelphia 76ers. Frustrated by the questions, Iverson replied, "If I can't practice, I can't practice. If I'm hurt, I'm hurt. I mean, it's as



simple as that.” Then he went on a legendary tirade about being grilled for missing practice time:

It’s easy to sum it up when we just talk about practice. We’re sitting here . . . I’m supposed to be the franchise player, and we’re in here talking about practice. I mean, listen, we’re talking about practice. Not a game. Not a game. Not a game. We’re talking about practice. Not a game. Not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game like it’s my last. Not the game. We’re talking about practice, man. I mean how silly is that. And we’re talking about practice. I know I’m supposed to be there. I know I’m supposed to lead by example. I know that and I’m not shoving it aside, you know, like it don’t mean anything. I know it’s important. I do, I honestly do. But we’re talking about practice, man. What are we talking about? Practice? We’re talking about practice, man? We’re talking about practice. We’re talking about practice. We ain’t talking about the game. We’re talking about practice, man.<sup>1</sup>

In the span of just a few minutes, Iverson used the word *practice* fourteen times! This quote became infamous because everyone knows that *practice* is the foundation of *performance*—and dismissing practice means throwing away the long-term goal of enhancing performance on the court. The star player’s rant sounded as if he wanted to work hard

only when the arena lights were on. That wasn't an accurate read of Iverson's intentions, but you can see why his rant made headlines.

The importance of practice doesn't just apply to basketball. The apostle Paul told young Timothy that living an exemplary Christian life was going to take some work:

Train yourself for a holy life! While physical training has some value, training in holy living is useful for everything. It has promise for this life now and the life to come. . . . Don't neglect the spiritual gift in you that was given through prophecy when the elders laid hands on you. Practice these things, and live by them so that your progress will be visible to all. Focus on working on your own development and on what you teach. If you do this, you will save yourself and those who hear you.

1 TIMOTHY 4:7-8, 14-16

The Christian life takes practice. Paul admonishes us to develop lifelong, Spirit-powered practices. Practices are powerful for many reasons. Here are three.

### *Practices Can Be Catalysts for Change*

In *The Power of Habit*, business writer Charles Duhigg writes about the transformative impact of “keystone habits.”<sup>2</sup> When people adopt certain habits—from making the bed each morning to making a to-do list every night for the

next day—other things in their lives begin to change for the better. A constellation of good habits clusters around one key new habit.

In this book we're going to unpack one new keystone habit: *taking time to stop for the purpose of moving forward*. We'll also discuss the implications of making this habit, or rhythm, an essential part of our lives. We believe that the practices we'll explore in this book can be catalysts for changing the ways we approach our prayer lives, our rest, our renewal, our relationships, and our work. It's a way of interrupting our default mode, our grinding monotony, so we can rediscover purpose, peace, and freedom. The keystone habit of stopping at least once a year to reflect, pray, and plan leads to establishing a set of practices, or rhythms, that will help us become fully alive to the Lord and the people in our lives.

You may not think that sounds spiritual enough. *Why can't God just bring about the changes in our lives that he wants? Why can't we just trust his timing and be content and not stress out so much about spiritual growth?* We tend to believe that God inserts himself into our world like a parent on the sidelines of a toddler soccer game who can only take so much before sprinting onto the field to help the kids know where to go.

But that isn't actually how God works. He isn't waiting for the right moment to intervene, nudging things here and there as needed. He is *already* involved in his world. God created the universe like a composer writing a symphony—and I think he often sings along with the angels, "The whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3, ESV).

Part of the point of spiritual formation is training our eyes to see and our ears to hear God in the world, and learning to sing along with creation. That requires changing our tune. We can't join in God's symphony if we're singing our own songs. To hear his song, we must begin with silence and tune our hearts to the notes. As we do, we find ourselves increasingly aligning with the work of God.

*Practices Prepare Us for Moments of Testing*

When we lean into practices, we develop the character required to persevere in moments of testing. Habits are like root systems that run deep underground, connecting us to the Source of living water and preparing us to bear fruit. Or as many spiritual writers have suggested, habits are like a trellis that supports the sometimes-weak vines of our intentions so that fruit can grow in our lives. Habits prepare us for crisis. They help us endure seasons of drought and rise up even when our strength is waning. Habits give substance and direction to our best intentions.

On January 15, 2009, US Airways flight 1549 made an unpowered emergency water landing in the Hudson River after an encounter with a flock of geese caused both jet engines to fail. All 155 passengers and crew aboard successfully evacuated. The incident came to be known as the Miracle on the Hudson. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright uses this illustration to make a point about character, or the “power of right habits.”<sup>3</sup> We tend to think that God overrode the course of events that day and miraculously guided the

plane to safety. But what if he was working *through* people instead?

After all, the captain of that flight—Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger III—had been flying since he was sixteen. In 1969, Sully enrolled as a student at the United States Air Force Academy, which happens to be located in our city of Colorado Springs. As a freshman, he was one of twelve selected for a glider program. A year later, he became a glider instructor. After graduating from the academy, Sully went to Purdue University for postgraduate studies. Then he served in the Air Force as a fighter pilot for five years, earning the rank of captain. He became a commercial pilot in 1980 and was almost fifty-eight when he landed flight 1549 in the Hudson. He had been flying airplanes for more than forty years! Sully, as Wright points out, was neither relying on spontaneous virtue nor consulting a rule book. He had spent years developing the character and skills required to handle the situation. A lifetime of practice equipped him to land an engineless plane and remain calm in a crisis.

### *Practices Embed Knowledge*

#### GLENN

Several years ago, when we were visiting Holly’s parents on their farm outside Akron, Iowa, one of our children came down with a fever, and we needed some medicine for her. I offered to run to the drugstore in town, just a few miles down the road. I could picture the street in my mind, but I’m more of a word guy, and my sense of direction is pretty

bad. (Holly could tell you some stories!) Before heading out the door, I asked what street the store was on. “Main Street,” Holly said.

Wanting to double-check, especially since Holly hadn’t lived there for several years, I asked her mom, Roxanne.

“It’s right on Main Street, Glenn,” she said, looking somewhat bewildered.

GPS on phones wasn’t quite a thing yet, but how hard could it be to find Main Street in a town with about one thousand people and only one blinking light? So off I went down the road. In short order, I saw a street sign that said “Main Street.” I confidently made the turn, only to discover a row of houses. No stores, no bank, no library, no pharmacy. I drove around a bit longer, allowing for the possibility that the town had changed since I had last been there. But it didn’t take long to realize that the drugstore was clearly *not* on Main Street. When I finally found the row of businesses—the only row in town—I looked at the street sign. It said “Reed Street.”

When I got back to the farmhouse, I promptly informed my wife and mother-in-law that the drugstore was not, in fact, on Main Street but rather on Reed Street.

“Of course,” they said, cocking their heads and drawing their breath slowly in an “Ah, yes” sort of way. To them it *was* Main Street no matter what the street signs said.

Holly learned her hometown not from maps or street signs but from riding around with her parents and grandparents. She had ridden her bike on those streets and learned to drive a car through that small, quintessential American

town. Her first job was at the drive-in around the corner from “Main Street,” and she’d spent summers lifeguarding at the pool a few streets over. She didn’t learn that town by the names of things. She learned it by heart through the practice of living.

That’s what practices do—they bring an inner knowing deep down inside us. When we make time to pray, we enter into the mystery of knowing God. When we stop for a Sabbath, we learn that God is the creator and sustainer of all things. When we take time to renew our joy, we discover the gifts of God’s good world. When we make time for friends, we remember where true riches in this life are found. When we work with a sense of mission and vocation, we embed the knowledge of our callings into each day. Good habits and practices help us learn and live by heart.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK TO MEASURE YOUR PRACTICES

- What is a key practice you already do that shapes other smaller practices? For example, maybe making the bed every morning leads you to sort the laundry or stack your books.
- What practices have stood the test of time? A regular date night? A standing pickup game of basketball?
- How have practices helped you embed knowledge into your life? What are some things you don’t even have to think about because you’ve done them so much?

- What spiritual practices have been most fruitful in your life with God?



## **EFFORT AND EARNING**

At this point, you may feel your heart beginning to race or your stomach beginning to churn. Perhaps you're thinking, *My life is stressful enough, and this is starting to sound like a "Come on, do better!" kind of book. I don't need another inspirational challenge to live my best life or another list of steps to accomplish more.*

America is famous for its infatuation with efficiency and productivity. We don't know how to go slow or live small. We want to live large, to be bigger, better, and faster. Honestly, as a first-generation immigrant from Malaysia, I get the appeal of that obsession. I love America's propensity to dream big, to innovate and improve, to maximize *everything*.

But there are dangers in such a mindset. We can fool ourselves into thinking that success is growth, and our value as individuals is in our productivity.

This book, however, is not about increasing your productivity or improving your efficiency. It's not about self-help or slapping a Band-Aid on your hectic life. It's about something much deeper. Something that will shift you internally, transforming your entire posture and way of being so your



life is sustainable and abundant—not just for you but for the Kingdom of God.

*Intentionality is about abiding in Jesus—and allowing the Holy Spirit to produce his fruit in you for the sake of others.*

Did you catch that? There are a few things in that statement worth unpacking. First, spiritual formation is the Spirit's work. The lead actor in this Big Story is the triune God—not you, not me. Intentionality creates space for us to sense the work of the Holy Spirit so that our participation is possible.

Second, fruitfulness is not the same thing as productivity. Productivity is about what we're *doing*; fruitfulness is about who we're *becoming*. That's why, when Paul listed the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, he didn't mention achievements or accomplishments; he listed what might be called virtues: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Third, fruitfulness is always for the sake of others. An apple tree doesn't benefit from an apple . . . until the apple is eaten and the core is thrown on the ground, where the seeds can then turn into other apple trees (at least theoretically!).

We'll say it again: Growth happens on purpose, and cultivation requires intentionality. Good things flourish through attentiveness. Weeds grow on their own, but fruitfulness flows from faithfulness. Growing as a Christian means *abiding in Jesus and allowing the Holy Spirit to produce fruit in us for the sake of others*.

But, still, the question remains: Doesn't *becoming* involve some kind of *doing*? And whose work is it—ours or God's?

Maybe you're wondering, *Isn't all this talk of intentionality and purposeful growth just a new kind of legalism? Isn't it a form of earning our place with God through works?*

We understand the question. In fact, human beings are prone to keeping scoreboards of “enoughness” (a phrase from David Zahl’s book *Seculosity*).<sup>4</sup> And when we find ourselves falling behind on the score, we develop systems of guilt management. So if the game is about reading the Bible more, the scoreboard is a Bible-reading plan or app. The app comes with its own version of guilt management, because if we fall behind in our reading plan, we know what to do to catch up. Or if the game is about our involvement in our children’s lives, the scoreboard is the number of parties we plan or teams we volunteer to serve. And if we find ourselves losing—as we inevitably will—we can redeem ourselves by showing how often we read to our kids at night, or how well we prepare their school lunches.

The truth is, *anything* can become a game of winners and losers. We can turn even our best efforts into an attempt to prove our enoughness or atone for our “not-enoughness.” But that’s not the life in Christ God offers us. That is not the way of grace.

Yet God doesn’t intend for us to do nothing about our growth. Sloth is not spiritual. As Dallas Willard wrote, “Grace is not opposed to *effort*, but [it] is opposed to *earning*.”<sup>5</sup> The difference between legalism and spiritual discipline is not the work or energy involved; it’s the motivation. Are we doing things to impress God and earn his favor? Or are we doing

them because we are dearly loved children of God who are being conformed to the image of his Son by the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17, 29)?

## **THE GIFT THAT GENERATES A RESPONSE**

To get the motivation right, we have to rethink grace. The Greek word for grace is *charis*, which quite simply means “gift.” In Western cultures today, we tend to think of grace as a gift with no strings attached. But in Eastern cultures and many cultures in the global south, a gift is meant to spark reciprocity. In Malaysia, when a neighbor brought our family a dish filled with food, my mum would never return the dish empty. She would send it back with something she had cooked. It wasn’t a forced gesture based on pressure or obligation. It was a way of expressing gratitude and reinforcing the relationship. Gift giving in the West is linear. It moves from one person to the other and then ends. Gift giving in the East is circular. A gift can create or affirm a relationship; reciprocating the gift with another gift reinforces it.

During the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 1500s, some preachers—in an effort to combat superstition, legalism, and the abuse of power in the medieval church—emphasized the notion of grace as a free gift. That was later modified—or distorted, as the case may be—by philosophers like Immanuel Kant, who thought of a gift with no strings attached as the purest ideal of a gift. But that’s not quite how grace works. It’s true that we cannot repay God for his grace. Nevertheless, grace is supposed to generate something in us.

Gratitude, yes, but also *obedience and allegiance to God, as well as service and generosity toward others*. The fear that grace somehow comes with hidden obligations has caused many Protestants to develop a kind of spiritual PTSD at the mere suggestion that God requires—and empowers!—his followers to work in response to his gift of grace. Yet the New Testament writers had no such aversion. Peter, no stranger to the slow, intentional work of becoming more like Jesus, challenged his congregation with these words:

You must make every effort to add moral excellence to your faith; and to moral excellence, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, endurance; and to endurance, godliness; and to godliness, affection for others; and to affection for others, love. If all these are yours and they are growing in you, they'll keep you from becoming inactive and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever lacks these things is shortsighted and blind, forgetting that they were cleansed from their past sins.

2 PETER 1:5-9

“Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20, κτν). But none of our effort is effective without the Holy Spirit. A theology of works without a theology of the Spirit is legalism. For Paul and Peter and James and John, grace was found not only in the giving of Jesus Christ but also in the giving of the Holy

Spirit. Jesus did for us what we *could not do for ourselves*. The Spirit does in us and through us what we *cannot do by ourselves*.

Paul urged the Philippians to let salvation be embodied in their lives and practices, but he wouldn't let them forget that it was possible only because God was working in them:

Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

Okay. That was a long stretch of theology. Let's pause for a moment and take a breath.

Everything we're about to share with you can be interpreted as doing more good works to earn favor with God. Please don't read it that way. Instead, hear this as an invitation to come to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and participate in his work in your life so that you will bear fruit. All the practices we present in this book are *means of grace*, to use a more theological term from the English renewal preacher John Wesley. Spiritual practices don't earn grace; they help us receive it and take it deeply into our hearts and minds, bodies and souls.

Grace produces grateful generosity in us.

Grace fuels our fellowship with God.

Grace empowers our participation with the Holy Spirit's work in us.

In Christian tradition, spiritual practices are meant to be ways of abiding in Christ by the power of the Spirit so that we might bear fruit to the glory of the Father. Catch that. This is not a book full of new trends for proving our enoughness, attracting God's attention, or gaining his pleasure. We step into an intentional life as a *response* to his lavish love, fueled by his grace through the gift of the Spirit, to keep communing with Christ.

The providence of God doesn't cancel out our participation in his work. In Christ and by the Holy Spirit, we can now live out our original callings—our human vocations—to reflect the image of God and cultivate fruitfulness in the world for the sake of others. So let's be intentional about it. This year. Now.

The next two chapters involve the work of preparation, helping us look back and look forward prayerfully and purposefully. The five chapters that follow introduce a set of practices, or rhythms, that relate to five spheres of life—prayer, rest, renewal, relationships, and work. These practices enable us to pay attention to what's most important as we pause to reflect. In the final two chapters, we'll bring everything together, creating rhythms of intentionality and putting practices into action by enshrining them—if you will—on our calendars.

It works best if you read through the book slowly. Keep a journal at hand and stop every now and then to write down

your ideas, including the practices you could adopt and the changes you'd need to make to integrate them into your life. Pray as you breathe in and out. Welcome the Holy Spirit and his work in your heart. You're reading not for information alone but to allow God to form your heart, soul, body, and mind for his work in you and in the world. So let this act of reading be done in an attitude of devotion.

Are you ready?

## PART 1



# REFLECTION

Looking Back and Looking Forward



**We begin with preparation.** Intentionality means we don't simply barrel ahead, making decisions and setting priorities blindly. We must first take inventory of our lives as they are: reflecting on the year that has passed or the season that is ending. Then, once we have a sense of where we've been, we can stop and listen to the Lord about the year or season ahead.

It would be easy to jump immediately to goals and plans and schedules and habits. But that would be a mistake. We are so prone to pushing onward that we fail to learn from the past. We miss the chance to mark the faithfulness of God in the season we've just come through. When we remember well—when we confess our failures and mark God's goodness—we put ourselves in the right posture to enter into the next season well.

This time of preparation echoes what the people of Israel did in the Old Testament before they entered the Promised Land. After crossing the Jordan River, they set up memorial stones to the Lord their God (see Joshua 4). They stopped to remember what he had done for them and who he had called them to be as his people.

There is a listening that precedes any doing, a waiting that comes before acting.