

Foreword by Phylcia Masonheimer



Creating Grace-Based Rhythms
for Spending Time with Jesus

Naomi Vacaro

Creator of the Wholehearted Community

Advance Praise for *Quiet*

The demands of our day bombard us with loud cries for our attention. Naomi Vacaro's book is a refreshing reminder of our desperate need for quiet time with Jesus. Written with warmth, kindness, and understanding, this book will help you develop patterns of Bible reading and prayer that will grow your love for God and for others.

MELISSA KRUGER

Author and director of women's initiatives for The Gospel Coalition

If you've ever struggled with feeling like a quiet-time failure, this book will offer you a helping hand and tangible tools to stir your love for Jesus. In *Quiet*, Naomi Vacaro spurs us on toward a life that is fueled by God's grace and a love for his Word. By sharing her own story of leaving behind the weight of drudgery to grasp the delight of following God, Naomi beautifully illustrates how a quiet time is a gift of grace that roots our souls deeply in unchanging truth.

GRETCHEN SAFFLES

Bestselling author of *The Well-Watered Woman: Rooted in Truth, Growing in Grace, Flourishing in Faith* and founder of Well-Watered Women

This book offers a much-needed reminder to slow down and be quiet before the Lord. In our fast-paced, entertainment-driven, microwave society, we need to be reminded of what's most important: daily time with our Creator and Savior. *Quiet* is a book for every woman who desires to know Jesus in a

deeper and more intimate way. If you want true rest and peace for your soul, this book is for you!

BETHANY BEAL AND KRISTEN CLARK

Founders of Girl Defined Ministries and authors of *Not Part of the Plan: Trusting God with the Twists and Turns of Your Story*

This is such a wonderful resource for women who desire to grow in consistently spending time with the Lord. Naomi beautifully weaves her life story through these pages to illustrate the journey of growing in our love for and daily pursuit of Christ. It's a book you'll want both for yourself and to pass along to others.

HEATHER COFER

Author of *Expectant: Cultivating a Vision for Christ-Centered Pregnancy*

We all know we should be reading our Bibles more, but we often become distracted by the busyness of life and discouraged by our failures. We expect our quiet times to be perfect, complete with a comfy chair, a flickering candle, hot coffee, and . . . quiet. But creating these magical moments can feel like an impossible task, so we give up—or never even start. Naomi knows the struggle is real, but so is our God. In her book, *Quiet*, she equips you to dive deeper into God's Word, create sticky quiet-time habits, and develop a more devoted walk with God. This book is packed with practical tips, engaging stories, and insightful connections. Whether you're an avid Bible reader or just getting started, this book will help you grow and encourage your heart.

ALISHA ILLIAN

Author of *Chasing Perfect* and founder of Women Repurposed

Anyone who has battled guilt, drudgery, or unexplainable distance in their quiet times will be refreshed by Naomi's humble approach to this consistent problem. So many of us settle into a rut with no hope of climbing out, assuming steady and joy-filled quiet times aren't available to us. *Quiet* helps readers explore the root of the distance through thoughtful reflection and prayer, leaving us surrendered, refocused, and ready to pursue the Lord through his Word with a new perspective.

KATIE GUILIANO

Founder and artist at Hosanna Revival

Quiet is a beautiful and encouraging book that offers a fresh vision and practical advice for building daily intimacy with Christ. In our fast-paced world, having a regular quiet time can often feel more like a burden than a delight. This book brings us back to the heart of what spending time with Jesus is really all about.

LESLIE LUDY

Bestselling author of *Authentic Beauty* and *The Set-Apart Woman*

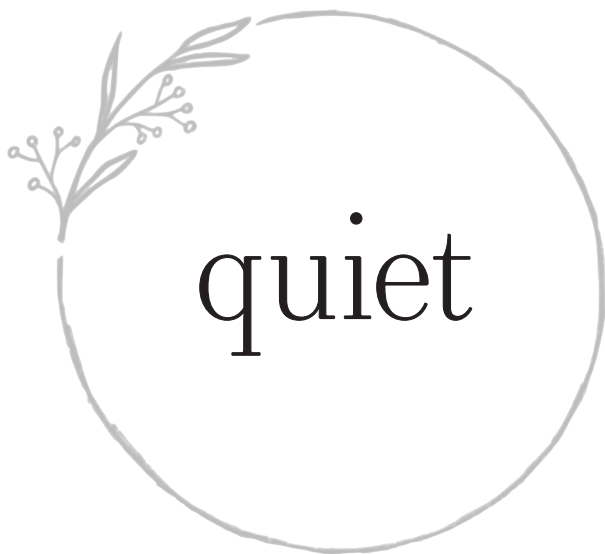
We need God, yet most of us are fumbling through how to find him these days as the world tilts. This book is that hand from a friend—outstretched, ready to hold ours and walk us through how to find him in his Word . . . again or for the first time. What a gift!

SARA HAGERTY

Bestselling author of *Unseen: The Gift of Being Hidden in a World that Loves to Be Noticed* and *Adore: A Simple Practice for Experiencing God in the Middle Minutes of Your Day*



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Naomi Vacaro
Creator of the Wholehearted Community



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To Mom and Dad. Your daily faithfulness
is what led me to Christ.
And to Matt. Your servant-leadership is
what made this book possible.



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foreword



MY HIGH SCHOOL QUIET TIME was the stuff of legend. It was a war room before *War Room* was a movie. It had a (very trendy) CD player and a pile of Avalon albums, an entire wall of prayer request cards, and a basketful of Bible study materials, pens, and paper. Freshly devoted to Christ at age fifteen, I spent an hour each morning in my walk-in closet. My faith grew, my heart was opened to the Lord's work, and foundations were laid. I learned how to study the Bible for myself and how to talk to God as a father and a friend. That closet was my refuge, a safe place to grow.

Then I went to college. I got married. My career took off. I had a baby . . . then two . . . then three.

Life has changed drastically since those days in my walk-in closet. My "quiet time" now takes place on my living room couch. Sometimes I'm joined by one or more children, other times by my husband. Many times it's not quiet at all! There are days I don't get to it in the morning, so I'm bent over a Bible in the afternoon, pens and notebook spread across the

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dining room table. There have been times when all I did was whisper a prayer while collecting the eggs and sweeping the porch, my Bible opened to Psalms in a cookbook holder.

My time with God has morphed a hundred times over the years. Instead of losing quality as it loses perfection, our relationship has grown all the richer because of the changes. Since the first time I read through the whole Bible, I've seen how the truths of God's Word meet us in every season, transition, and change. Daily habits of study, prayer, and worship do not need perfect circumstances to survive; they only need a willing heart. As I approach the Lord day after day, season upon season, embracing—rather than resisting—the changes, I find a faith immovable. Firmly planted, like a tree.

My dad taught me a lot about the Bible as a child but only made me memorize one passage: Psalm 1. It's the passage I say under my breath when I'm anxious, angry, or afraid. The righteous are "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season" (verse 3). This image of a mighty oak reaching its roots into living water grants a glimpse of what the minutes in God's presence do to our hearts. His work is unseen. It's almost always slow. But isn't that how growth goes? It's an imperceptible expansion until—when the season is right—we bear fruit.

Our need for God is constant. Our circumstances, not so much. I've learned to embrace a quiet time that is less about the quiet of my house and more about the quiet of my spirit. Will I stop running long enough to listen? Will I still my soul

to hear his voice? Will I be like a tree (or like a branch on the Vine) and let him bear fruit in me?

These are the questions Naomi asks in this book. On the following pages you will be gently led toward a time with God that is sustainable but also beautiful, fulfilling, and built to last. Many books will tell you to read the Bible more; Naomi will show you how. She will walk with you every step of the way. I hope you're blessed, like I was, to learn the sweetness of quietness in Christ—even when your life is anything but quiet.

Phylicia Masonheimer

Founder and CEO, Every Woman a Theologian





introduction

THE MORNING LIGHT IS JUST ARRIVING as I sit at my dining room table and write these words. It's the rainy season here in Florida, and yesterday brought torrential downpours for hours on end. Today the sky has cleared, and the sun is starting to peek over the horizon. The birds are beginning to sing as the humidity slowly evaporates from the windows, revealing a scene of sparkling leaves and vibrant blossoms outside.

All around our little home stand massive oak trees. Their branches extend toward the heavens while their roots spread beneath the neighborhood, holding together the soil and pushing up against the brick and pavement. These trees have

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been here for decades, some for more than a hundred years. Every year they seem to grow a little taller, a little wider, and a little greener. When I look at these trees, I think of Jeremiah 17:7-8:

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green and they never stop producing fruit. (NLT)

I have always wanted to be a deeply rooted Christian. Ever since I read this passage as a child, I've prayed that I would be like the tree in Jeremiah 17, quietly unwavering in my faithfulness to the Lord. I have seen examples of this steadfastness firsthand in the hard-working believers I grew up with on the mission field in Mongolia, the women who attend my Thursday-night prayer group, the older members of my church who arrive to worship with tattered Bibles, and especially my own mother, father, sisters, and brothers. These believers seem like trees to me, planted next to the stream of life, flourishing more every year as their hope in the Lord grows and deepens.

I've often wondered though: What is it that sets these saints apart?

Deep Roots

In late 2017, Hurricane Irma tore through our city in Florida. I'll never forget that night. My husband, Matt, and I, along with my siblings and their spouses, gathered at my parents' home and slept on the living room floor as the wind howled outside and nearby branches groaned and then cracked like shots in the dark. When we emerged the following morning, the world looked like a war zone. The streets were so littered with debris that you could hardly see the pavement. Lines were down, electricity was out, and an eerie quiet had settled over the neighborhood.

But what I remember most were the felled trees. Trees that had stood four stories high the day before now lay vertical, their entire root systems torn up and exposed. These downed monsters were now blocking roads, upturning sidewalks, and crushing houses. However, not every tree had fallen. Many of the trees in our neighborhood remained standing, including the giant oak just outside our front door.

Shortly after the hurricane, my older sister, Emily, wrote a blog post explaining the difference between the felled trees and the trees that remained standing:

There are two types of oak trees [in Central Florida]: live oaks and water oaks. They both grow to about eighty feet tall, host a variety of birds and animals in their sturdy branches, and provide more than enough shade with their leafy limbs. On the surface

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it's hard to tell the difference, until a hurricane comes along. Water oaks like the sun and take the rain for granted. Why grow deep roots when water is plentiful? They shoot up quickly and stand alone, tall and magnificent. Live oaks grow slower and focus their energy on sending their roots deep into the ground.¹

The depth of their roots had made the difference between life and death for these trees, and after Hurricane Irma, it became clear which had shallow roots and which had roots that were secure enough to weather the storm.

These water oaks and live oaks, with their shallow or deep roots, reflect the life of our Christian faith. If we're water-oak Christians, then we are planted in the shallow soil of cultural Christianity. We may look like we're flourishing on the outside, but time and testing eventually reveal that the soil beneath us is nothing but the shifting sands of worldly trends. A water-oak Christian seeks nourishment in things that will never satisfy, like success, popularity, outward appearance, or momentary pleasure. We might go through the motions of faith, but ultimately we lack a genuine and transformative relationship with the person of Jesus. When the winds of persecution or the seductive breeze of temptation blow, we become uprooted, just like the water oaks did.

In contrast, when we are living as live-oak Christians, we sink our roots into the bedrock of Jesus Christ. We grow slowly and steadily, and we build our lives on the foundation

of God's Word. We are quietly committed to following Jesus Christ no matter what. When persecution arrives, we only grow stronger in the faith. When temptation knocks, we refuse to be uprooted by lies and misguided loves.

These deeply rooted followers of Jesus can be found all across the globe. They have different personalities, backgrounds, cultures, ages, life stages, and experiences. But there's one thing they all have in common: they read the Bible and pray.

I would venture to say that there is no mature believer in Christ who does not read their Bible and pray on a regular basis. While a relationship with Jesus is definitely *more* than a daily quiet time, it is certainly not *less*.

While a relationship with Jesus is definitely more than a daily quiet time, it is certainly not less.

The primary way we become rooted, live-oak Christians is by spending time with Jesus. We can't grow in our understanding of and love for God without reading the Bible, and we can't develop a genuine closeness with Christ if we don't communicate with him in prayer. Without the regular habit of a quiet time, we will become spiritually malnourished and eventually starve. Just as trees need soil and water to grow, we need spiritual nutrients for our faith to mature and deepen.

The truth is, we have all been shallow-rooted, water-oak Christians at some point in our lives. Deep roots take time to grow, and the consistent habits of Bible reading and prayer simply don't happen overnight. But no matter how dried

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up we may feel in our current season, Jesus can deepen our roots and bring us—and our love for spending time with him—back to life.

I know it's true, because I've lived it.

Grace-Based Quiet Time

Maybe you've always struggled to read your Bible and pray. Maybe having a daily quiet time is a brand-new idea to you. Maybe this is something you used to do consistently but the circumstances of your life have changed, and now it feels like your relationship with Jesus is falling apart. Maybe every time you hear the words *quiet time*, you bristle with unspoken shame.

Or maybe it's the *quiet* part of “quiet time” that makes your hands get sweaty. In this season of your life, you'd be happy to squeeze in a shower without someone needing you, and the idea of doing anything that resembles stillness seems far-fetched. If *quiet* is a requirement, then you feel like you've failed.

Trust me, I get it.

Having a daily quiet time is something I've struggled with all my life. Growing up in a Christian home taught me *why* it was important to read the Bible and pray, but for some reason, I just couldn't form the regular habit. I saw my lack of consistency as spiritual disobedience, and as a result, guilt gnawed at my soul for years.

Things got better in college when my quiet time became

more consistent. Reading the Bible and praying every day became a routine I genuinely enjoyed and even looked forward to. The habit survived my transition into married life a couple of years after graduation. With a flexible schedule and lots of free time on my hands, it was easier than ever to read the Bible and pray.

Then I became a mother.

Once I had a baby in my arms, my habit of Bible reading and prayer completely fell apart. Instead of reading three chapters a day, I barely opened my Bible once a week. Instead of hour-long conversations with Jesus, my prayer time consisted of impromptu breakdowns as I bounced a crying baby on my hip. At first I found this alarming. Where had all my hard-earned consistency disappeared to? I was tempted to despair, but the Lord was teaching me yet another profound lesson about grace.

Even before I became a mother, I was starting to realize I'd been treating my relationship with God like a performance. Deep down, I'd been viewing Bible reading and prayer as a way to earn God's approval instead of a way to nourish my own soul. Instead of leading me closer to Jesus, my guilt was making it harder for me to come to the Lord. By the time I became a mother and my quiet time had to be completely restructured, I was ready to silence the voice of shame in my soul and embrace the quiet waters of grace.

God doesn't keep a tally of all the days, weeks, and months you haven't spent time with him.

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I was ready to have a grace-based quiet time.

Having a quiet time that's built on grace means your Bible will still be available to read tomorrow morning even if you don't get to read it today. It means you don't have to play catch-up in order to get back on track with your quiet time. It means God doesn't keep a tally of all the days, weeks, and months you've failed to spend time with him. It means there will be seasons when coming to Jesus is more difficult—and he delights in you anyway. It means that yesterday's failure does not diminish today's opportunity to know and enjoy Jesus.

Yesterday's failure does not diminish today's opportunity to know and enjoy Jesus.

If this idea of a grace-based quiet time sounds good to you, then you're reading the right book. Wherever you

happen to be right now in your relationship with Jesus, I want you to know that this isn't about dredging up your shortcomings or convincing you of what a failure you are for not reading your Bible every day. This book is about restoring your eagerness to walk with Jesus. It's about equipping you to create spiritual rhythms that have the power to transform your life.

These pages are filled with stories from my own journey, along with lessons I've learned about spending time with Jesus over the years. Sprinkled throughout the chapters, you'll find sidebars with quiet-time stories from women in various walks of life. I have also included practical ideas to help you create and maintain a quiet time yourself, no matter what season you happen to be in. For those who want to

dig deeper, each chapter also includes questions to reflect on, ways to grow, and prayers to pray.

I didn't write this book because I have all the answers or because I perfectly practice the habit of a quiet time. I wrote this book because I've experienced the crushing load of quiet-time guilt myself, and yet I've seen that it is possible, by the grace and power of God, to break free from frustration and failure and start enjoying a consistent and fruitful relationship with Jesus. The quiet our souls long for is well within reach.

Naomi Vacaro
SPRING 2022



where it all begins

Our Desperate Need for Jesus

“HAVE YOU HAD YOUR QUIET TIME YET TODAY?”

I looked up to see my mom’s face peering around the corner. I was a restless, homeschooled seven-year-old at the time. It was getting late in the afternoon, and I was trying to finish my assignments before the sun went down. Since my mom had made daily devotions a part of my curriculum, this question was one I had come to dread.

Had I had my quiet time yet? No. Would I? Yes, because only then would I be allowed to play outside, an activity I enjoyed far more than reading the Bible. I informed my mom that I was, in fact, just about to have my quiet time, and she smiled knowingly before leaving me to complete the task.

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Bible reading was the part of daily devotions I dreaded most, so I tackled it first to get it over with. I skimmed the pages of my children's Bible just enough to absorb the pictures and be ready to answer any questions my mom might ask later. Then I moved on to prayer. I'd been taught to close my eyes and bow my head, so that's what I did, mumbling words that only God now remembers. Then, with a final "Amen!" I opened my eyes and jumped to my feet. Freedom was waiting!

The Mongolian sun was just beginning to set over the dusty hills as I grabbed a dog leash and burst through the front door. The leash was unnecessary since I wasn't going anywhere and our yard was completely surrounded by a tall fence topped with barbed wire. Fences like this were typical for the Mongolian homes all around us, but the concept of walking a dog was definitely not. Dogs here were meant for guarding property, not parading around on a leash. That didn't matter to me, though. I had seen American movies that depicted people walking their dogs, and using a leash made me feel like a grown-up. So, I coaxed our scraggly mutt out of her doghouse and into a collar. As Poko and I made our way around the yard, the sun began to cast long shadows and paint the Mongolian dirt a deep shade of orange.

This dry patch of earth had been my home for two years. Before we moved here, my family and I had lived in a Soviet-style apartment building near the center of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city. Most of the buildings in Ulaanbaatar were Russian made, expressionless and efficient, a reminder of

who had built the city and who had, until recently, controlled the lives of its occupants. By the 1990s, most Russians had departed Mongolia. However, they left behind a Communist mentality that lingered for years to come. The country had been closed to outsiders for generations, and it wasn't until 1990 that Mongolia's doors swung open to allow foreigners to enter freely.

My parents were some of the first in line.

Tom and Lynn Suchy felt called to become missionaries to this cold, developing nation, so they packed their belongings and their children and boarded a flight to Mongolia in 1993. There were only four of us back then: my mom and dad, my almost-three-year-old sister, and nine-month-old me. Within six years, two more kids were added to our family. In 1998 we left the Soviet-style

Judy's Quiet-Time Story

My quiet times have looked different in different seasons. When I had small children, I learned that God didn't care if my quiet time didn't look the way I thought it should. I placed Bibles in several key places around the house—I even had one in my car! More often than not, my quiet time consisted of standing in my kitchen with a Bible open, surrounded by a mess and a couple of kids. I stopped thinking there was only one way to have a quiet time. Sometimes it wasn't very quiet! Other days my time with the Lord was long and truly quieting for my soul. Sometimes I study deeply and read and pray, and other days my quiet time is brief. I know God doesn't judge me for how I experience time with him. I can't imagine how much more difficult the past three decades would have been if not for the ability to cry out to God and hold on to him in the midst of my challenges and sorrows.

apartment building in the city and moved into a new home—a house made of straw bales covered with stucco.

The Straw Bale House, as we called it, was tucked away among the hills, about four miles northeast of the city. My dad had built our home himself with the help of several Mongolian friends, and now it was our own little sanctuary. We planted a modest garden by the front entrance, dug an outhouse near the far corner of the property, and built a woodshed to store the never-ending supply of logs needed to keep our house warm during the winter, when temperatures reached negative thirty degrees and colder.

As foreigners, we were not allowed to own property, so a Mongolian family let us build the Straw Bale House on their land. The area was nearly a half-acre and a dream for an imaginative, rambunctious child like me.

It didn't take long for my siblings and me to discover that the Straw Bale House stood on land that was filled with treasures. The property had once been used as a slaughter ground for animals, and we delightedly dug up bones and other unidentifiable objects to store in secret places. One summer we pretended we were archaeologists and set our treasures on display in a "museum" for our parents and their occasional visitors to look at for the thoughtfully calculated price of one hundred Tugrik. (At the time, one hundred Tugrik would have been the equivalent of eleven cents in US currency.)

The Straw Bale House quickly became my beloved childhood home.

A Sunset Stroll

That evening when I was marching our reluctant dog around on her leash, I suffered no guilt about having rushed through my quiet time moments earlier. I didn't know why I needed to read the Bible and pray in the first place—I thought of it as merely an expectation my parents had of me.

My mom and dad took their role as parents even more seriously than their calling as missionaries. If there was one thing they persistently taught us kids, it was that spending time with Jesus was a necessary part of everyday life. Since I was a natural-born people pleaser, I tried my best to comply with their desires, albeit with an abundance of grumbling.

I wore the label “missionary kid” proudly. I enjoyed the unique story of my life, along with the wide-eyed looks people gave me in America when I told them where I lived. Most significantly, though, I was convinced that being a missionary kid gave me spiritual value. I assumed that my parents' self-sacrifice and passion for the gospel somehow secured my own spot in the lineup of saints who would one day go marching into glory. Our role as missionaries became my identity. Having a daily quiet time came with the territory, and it was a small price to pay for me to be the missionary kid I was supposed to be.

So there I was, seven years old and proud as could be, strolling around in my Mongolian yard. I was entirely unaware that I was lacking a genuine relationship with Jesus

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Christ. But God wasn't about to let me stay comfortable in my own delusions.

As I dragged a confused but happy Poko around the corner of our storage container, the sunset suddenly captured my gaze and forced my feet to an abrupt halt. My breath left me as rays of light caught the dust around the yard, transforming the particles into tiny flecks of floating gold. The summer breeze brushed against my arms and face, filling my nose with the scent of distant wildflowers. The heavens were lit up in rich reds and yellows, and the clouds painted a celestial city in the sky. I was overwhelmed by a sense of awe.

As I stood transfixed, I knew instinctively that the beauty before me was not a *what* but a *who*. For the first time in my young life, I felt the presence of Jesus as an undeniable reality. Though my eyes didn't see him, Christ shone before my soul as clearly as the sunset. Instantly, the awareness of my great need rushed through me and I perceived my sinfulness clearly for the first time. Though I felt completely exposed before the Holy One, I also knew instinctively that I was *fully loved*. A desperate longing overtook me, and at the same time, contentment spread through me like a sigh of relief. I sensed that Jesus was presenting himself as the answer to my soul's thirst, the definition of my identity, and the purpose for my future. Jesus was beckoning.

There in that dusty yard, beneath a Mongolian sunset, with tiny hands clutching a dog leash, I gave my life to Jesus. It felt like he had caught me up in his arms and claimed me as his own. Although my seven-year-old mind couldn't grasp

the magnitude of that moment, I knew Jesus had completely swept me away and nothing would ever be the same.

Budding Faith

A year after that soul-transforming moment, I was living in Wisconsin. Our family had recently packed our belongings, boarded up the Straw Bale House, and flown to America for a year. We had churches to visit and support to raise if we were going to continue our work as missionaries.

I was reeling from the transition. We had been living in America for several months, and I longed for the familiar sights and smells of home. I deeply missed the friends I'd left behind in Mongolia. A year may not be long for an adult, but it feels like an eternity for an eight-year-old.

Rachel's Quiet-Time Story

I struggle with thinking that I have to spend a certain amount of time praying or reading the Bible every day, or that a quiet time is just another item on a long list of things I need to do to have a good day. I buy into the lie that if I can't do it well enough, it's not worth doing at all. The burden I carry when I fall short is not what God wants for me. But through it all, I have experienced so much grace. God is patient to take all my mess and turn it into something beautiful. He assures me that his righteousness alone is what I must rest in—it's not my acts, but the Holy Spirit cleansing me. His grace is irresistible!

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Wisconsin looked like the rest of America to me. Every town had the same McDonald's on the corner, the same residential neighborhoods with manicured lawns, and the same endless stretches of highway in between. The air smelled clean and fresh—so unlike the scents of dust, smoke, and mutton back home.

I clung to my siblings wherever we went. I especially dreaded Sunday mornings, when the four of us were sent off to various classrooms for children's services. In the halls of megachurches and the pews of chapels, I was stared at not for the color of my skin, as I had been in Mongolia, but for being the missionary kid whose father would be giving a talk after the main service ended.

While part of me enjoyed the attention, I mostly felt exotic, strange, and unable to relate to the other children. It didn't take long for me to decide that I much preferred standing out as a white person in an Asian country than as a stranger in an American youth group.

At the time, the routine of Bible reading and prayer was still mostly a chore for me. The one activity I consistently enjoyed was journaling. I loved writing in my diary—a book that locked on the outside and shimmered with glitter that never quite left my fingers. Within those pages, I recorded my deepest and most private thoughts: my current crushes, my desperate longings, and my child-like prayers.

I believed that all was well in my relationship with Jesus. I thought that God cared for and loved me if I lived in

obedience to him. I knew I wasn't without sin, but I didn't think I had any major flaws that would keep me from approaching the Father. I thought his approval was based on my moral performance, particularly my faithfulness in having a quiet time—a spiritual duty I took very seriously. In my budding faith, I unconsciously created a system of give-and-take, and the system seemed to work.

Until it didn't.

Secret Shame

I'll never forget that quiet, seemingly harmless night in our Wisconsin home. I was sitting at the desk in our dining room, innocently exploring the internet on our family computer. Suddenly, an unsolicited image lit up the screen. No one else was around to explain what glowed in front of me or to help me make a quick and decisive exit. Although I was too young to understand what I saw, the image piqued a deep curiosity within me, as well as a faint nudge in my conscience.

I spent many evenings that year trying to sneak back onto the computer when no one was looking. As my addictive curiosity grew, so did the deep, aching guilt within my spirit. How could I pray or read my Bible when I'd just viewed something so inappropriate? How would Jesus accept me now? These questions revealed my true confusion over God's grace and my position in Christ.

My soul was miserably stuck during that year in America,

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and I brought my soul sickness with me across the ocean when we returned to Mongolia. As the days turned into months, and as the months turned into years, the secret sin continued, and my spirituality became rooted in shame. When I experienced seasons of greater self-control, I would open my Bible and pray with peace of mind. I was winning the battle against sin! Surely this would make me thoroughly “quiet-time approved.” Eventually, though, the hidden door would creak open, and the subsequent shame would cause me to avoid prayer altogether. I wouldn’t even pick up my Bible until enough time had passed since my previous infraction. The best way I could think of to punish myself was by putting distance between God’s perfection and my filth. This pattern of pride and shame repeated itself for years.

I can see now that my understanding of Jesus was fundamentally skewed. I saw him as the hand I’d shaken to get through the door of salvation, but then I assumed that the rest of the Christian walk was up to me. I assumed it was my efforts that secured my position with God, whether that meant having a daily quiet time, going to church, or praying before dinner. This way of thinking also meant that every failure, large and small, was equally my responsibility. I began to wonder, *Am I really a Christian? What would God do to punish me for this sin?*

My enjoyment of Christ became entirely based on my own inconsistent performance. I was dying inside, knowing that all my efforts would never ever be enough.

The Lie of Self-Sufficiency

Perhaps you've been there yourself. The specifics of your situation may be different—maybe for you the struggle is with food or envy or control or the approval of others. But at some point you realize that as hard as you try, you can't muscle your way into God's favor. No matter how much discipline you can muster, self-sufficiency is nothing more than delusion.

We see this delusion play out in the opening pages of the Bible, when Adam and Eve, our first parents, listen to the lies of the serpent and rebel against their Creator. Though they were created perfectly good and were placed in a world full of wonderful possibilities, they decided to distrust and disobey God. The result was catastrophe . . . for *all* of us.

*As hard as we try,
we can't muscle our
way into God's favor.
Only grace can bring
us there.*

Just as we inherit the physical traits of our parents, we are born with the same spiritual condition of the generations before us. Just as our first parents chose self-sufficiency, we, too, buy the lie that we can manage life just fine without God and can handle guilt and shame through our own means.

Though I had accepted Jesus as my Savior, I still acted as though I could earn his approval through my own efforts. I couldn't admit my sin, because that would mean I'd failed, and that would mean I wouldn't make the cut with God. Just

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like Adam and Eve, I believed more in my own competence than in God's goodness. Just like Adam and Eve, I was trying to cover my shame and failure behind flimsy leaves.

But God didn't give up on the people who rebelled against him thousands of years ago. And he doesn't give up on us, either.

His Skin for Mine

Although God was no doubt heartbroken over Adam and Eve's rebellion, he responded with calmness and grace. While they hid in shame, God sought them out to address their disobedience, spell out the rightful consequences of their rebellion, and mercifully make provision for their nakedness.

The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

GENESIS 3:21, ESV

I was just a child when I first witnessed the slaughter and skinning of a sheep. It's a common occurrence in Mongolia, where people have been surviving off their animals for thousands of years. First, the sheep is tied up and dragged, wide eyed and panicked, to a designated spot, usually a grassy area. It's then methodically relieved of its life. I'll spare you the details, but I will say it's impossible not to get your hands dirty in the process.

It's humbling to imagine God himself entering into this bloody, messy business in the middle of his perfect Garden. Adam and Eve had just committed high treason by trying to usurp God's place as ruler of his world. While God slayed the animal, Adam and Eve stood nearby in shame, with a new awareness of their nakedness—a nakedness they tried to cover with leaves. Though they should have been killed on the spot, he showed them mercy and spared their lives. He killed an animal instead, skinned it, and covered Adam and Eve.

Thousands of years later, another bloody scene unfolded. Instead of an animal, God's perfect Son was stripped naked, whipped, tortured, and put to death on behalf of sinners like you and me. When Jesus died on the cross, he did so as our substitute, bearing the punishment that rightfully belonged to Adam, Eve, and all their offspring. Through Jesus' death, the greatness of God's love was displayed, and our sin and shame were dealt with once and for all. When Jesus rose from the dead three days later, sin was atoned for, the lying serpent was crushed, and the door to everlasting life was opened. God's goodness, love, and power were proven once and for all.

This is the Good News: we stand as naked and helpless as Adam and Eve, but in Jesus, we are offered a covering provided by God. When we acknowledge that we can never be good enough to be right with God on our own and choose instead to trust in the work of Christ, we are

When we acknowledge that we can never be good enough on our own, we are set free to come to Jesus as we are.

The Cross gives sinners the chance to be saints and orphans the opportunity to become daughters.

set free from guilt and can begin to experience God's transforming grace. Instead of hiding from God, we can run right to him! God welcomes us to come to him like little children who constantly admit to their Father how much they need his help. Praise the

Lord! The Cross gives sinners the chance to be saints, paupers the chance to be princes and princesses, and orphans the opportunity to become sons and daughters.

Broken Chains

As a teenager, I desperately needed to understand the gospel so I could apply it to my struggles. My faith was at a crossroads: either I could continue in secret sin and shame, or I could step out in faith and reveal my sin. The latter option was appalling to my people-pleasing mentality. But I was also miserable. I couldn't stand the thought of living in the darkness any longer.

It was six in the morning at the Straw Bale House when I stepped softly into the living room. Though it was still dark and the cold spring wind was blowing, I knew my mom would be up with a fire burning. Sure enough, she was sitting by the wood stove with her Bible and journal open, busily writing down what I knew were prayers for the many people she loved.

As I approached her, my heart thudded inside my chest and my feet threatened to turn back. Ignoring my nerves, I took a deep breath.

“Mom, can we talk?”

She immediately agreed. She asked no questions as she followed me into my bedroom. She sat beside me on my bed as I began to unlock the hidden door to my heart.

Tears ran down my face as I choked through my confession. As my words tumbled out, my soul began to stir with the sweet relief of an unburdened conscience.

My mom took my hands into hers, and the tears on her face matched my own. Her eyes glowed with an unconditional love that sent my fear fleeing. When she opened her mouth, words of grace, love, and assurance poured out. She told me that my act of confession was proof that the Holy Spirit was doing a great work in my heart that day. She also said that nothing would affect her love for me, regardless of what wrongs lay in my past or future.

In that moment I stepped into freedom, and the power of my secret sin was officially broken.

My mother, filled with the Holy Spirit, reflected God’s heart toward me that morning. The lie of shame and guilt no longer held me hostage. That day the gospel took on flesh in my life. My understanding of Jesus transformed from the image of a disapproving God into a loving Shepherd who sympathized with my weakness.

He stretched out his hand, accepted my brokenness, and promised to lead me, whether I was under a Mongolian sunset, in a suburban Wisconsin church, or on whatever path lay ahead.

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your turn



Read

1 John 1:5-10

Reflect

1. What tends to get in your way when it comes to spending time with God? (Consider both external and internal distractions.)
2. What is your biggest sin struggle right now? How is it holding you back from spending time with God?

Grow

1. Think through your day and determine when and where you can set aside some time to spend with God. This will look different for all of us, depending on our life stage, personality, and circumstances. The important thing is to make it a priority and guard it the way we would time with a treasured friend. Commit to spending time praying and reading the Bible each day this week, even if it's just for a few minutes at first.
2. Prayerfully consider who you can share your sin struggle with. Confess your struggle to that person as well as to the Lord, resting in the assurance that no sin is beyond the reach of his grace. If you're having trouble knowing where to begin, you may want to use the prayer below.

Pray

Dear Jesus, I confess today that I struggle with _____. I'm so sorry for my failure to love and obey you in this area. Please give me the courage to confess my sin to _____. Prepare the time and place for me to share my struggle honestly with them, and don't let me lose my nerve before then. Thank you for setting me free from guilt by dying for me on the cross! Thank you that I am covered by your blood and that I can approach your throne with confidence. Please don't let my sin keep me from coming to you. Help me to take this step forward in repentance and faith. Amen.

