



Busy

TACKLING THE PROBLEM OF AN
OVERLOADED CHRISTIAN LIFE

Ian Carmichael

Feeling overworked?
Too much on your plate?
Hoping that there must be a better way?
Then surely you need greater efficiency,
better time management techniques,
the right apps, the resolve to simply
push through, guidance from a guru
or influencer ...

But what if the change we really crave is
found somewhere entirely different?

As we make our way in this hectic, confused culture, our greatest need is the practical, life-changing wisdom that only our Creator can provide. We need to pause and look to God—who he is, who he has made us to be, and how the good news of Jesus can genuinely reorder our daily lives for the better.

Join Ian Carmichael as he explores the Bible in search of a better way to handle our busy lives.

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ISBN 978-1-925424-84-3



Ian Carmichael speaks into our common slavery to busyness, and charts the only road to freedom—not by providing more tips on time management, but by thinking deeply about who we are as humans, and understanding God’s busyness in his plan of redemption. Ian shows us that we are slaves to busyness because we don’t believe the gospel. He is disarmingly honest, confronting and warmly conversational at the same time, anticipating our questions and objections. He provides very practical reflections for personal change towards godly busyness for employees, church members, parents, children, husbands, wives and siblings. I can see radical implications for how we think about retirement. This book is comprehensive.

Colin Marshall

Author, *Growth Groups* and *Passing the Baton*

Co-author, *The Trellis and the Vine* and *The Vine Project*

Ian Carmichael’s book *Busy* is refreshingly clear and to the point. It helps us re-examine the purpose of life while we wait for the new creation—that is, Christ-directed busyness and rest. Ian’s relationship audit exercise is insightful and practical for applying the biblical principles given in the first half of the book:

Step 1: Identify our key relationships.

Step 2: Reflect on how we can be more intentional in seeing these precious people transferred into God’s kingdom and transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

Medical experts recommend booking annual health checks. I recommend buying and reading this book as an excellent yearly spiritual health check.

Carmelina Read

Dean of Women, Christ College, Sydney

Ian Carmichael's *Busy* is a wonderful read. It's full of biblical wisdom, warmth, humour and grace. Most importantly it will help you think about how God's kindness in Jesus re-arranges our priorities and helps us be busy in a healthy way for God. It's a book born of a life lived serving Jesus and putting the Bible into practice. It's a book that will encourage you to rest in God, work hard for Christ, and put busyness into perspective. I encourage you to grab a copy, read it, and live it! It might just turn 'busy' into joyful service.

Paul Grimmond

Dean of Students and Lecturer in Ministry and
Mission, Moore Theological College, Sydney

Busy is not what I expected but it's exactly what I needed, and I suspect it's what many of us need. Challenging me to rethink not only Monday-Fridays, Ian also really pushed me to think again about my Sundays (and I say this as a pastor!). I pray this book will be given to every Christian, from new to mature, with the hope that all of them will consider how they themselves are answers to the prayer of Matthew 9:37-38—a call to be busy with work for the harvest.

Marty Sweeney

Pastor of Training, Old North Church, Ohio
Executive Director, Matthias Media, USA



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 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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ISBN 978 1 925424 84 3

Cover design by Georgia Condie.

Typesetting by Lankshear Design.

~ For Steph, Lauren and Glen ~
with the prayer that they will continue to rest in,
but be busy with, God's work.

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Introduction



I wonder why you picked up this book.

I'm reasonably sure it's not because you saw my name on the front cover. Given this is my first book, I'm unlikely to feature on your list of favourite authors.¹

More likely the word 'busy' caught your eye.

Is that because you're not particularly busy, and you're a little worried that you may have meandered into laziness?

I guess that's *possible*. And if that's why you picked up this book, you'll be glad to know it will help you. It's not a book just for busy people.

But my hunch is that this is actually going to be an uncommon reason for picking up the book.

More likely, you picked it up because you feel like the word in big letters on the cover is a somewhat overused one in your vocabulary. When people ask, "How are you?", the word 'busy' is one you regularly offer in response. Perhaps you say, "Really busy" or "Crazy busy". Or even "Flat out like a lizard drinking!", to quote one of my favourite

1 But feel free to reassess this at the end of the book!

Aussie colloquialisms.

If so, do you see ‘busy’ as a good thing to be? Or when you say it, is there a sense of “I actually wish my life wasn’t this busy”? Perhaps there’s a slight discontent brewing within you about the way your life is panning out? Or even a desire for change but with no obvious way to achieve it?

And if you do have a sense that your life is too busy, how do you think about it *as a Christian*?

Is being a follower of Jesus, and your involvement in church life, part of the problem or part of the solution?

Does being a Christian add an extra layer of activity and responsibility to an already full life?²

Do you ever secretly daydream about what your life would be like if you *weren’t* a Christian, and how much less busy you might feel? You’d certainly have more time to relax on a Sunday. Maybe on weekdays you could also sleep in an extra 20 minutes instead of getting up early to read the Bible and pray. Or you could relax and watch more Netflix in the evenings instead of diligently teaching the Bible to your kids and then preparing for your Bible study group on Wednesday night.

Again, my hunch is that living as a Christian, for most of us, feels like it adds to the problem.

Or maybe you picked up this book not because of the *quantity* of your busyness, but the *quality*. Perhaps many of your routine activities feel somewhat like trivial pursuits, and it’s hard to find any deep satisfaction or fulfilment in

2 I’m pretty sure that’s not what Jesus had in mind when he said “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10, NIV).

them. Maybe you want to attach a generator to the hamster wheel of your life so that all that running around gives a greater sense of actually achieving something.

Or maybe you're on the edge of burnout, or recovering from it and wanting to make sure you don't end up there again. Or maybe there is someone in your life you are worried about and want to help.

Whatever your reasons, why not pause here for a moment and pray that God will use this book to help address the issues you're concerned about?

Not the magic bullet

Now, I've read enough self-help books and the advertising for them to know how the normal schtick ought to go for a book about busyness:

I was too busy to write this book. Every day was spent madly trying to juggle too many balls in the air at once—and failing. *But now*, after years of research, experimentation and deep reflection, I've discovered a method to get an astounding amount done, leaving you with a 3-hour work week and plenty of leisure time. As a one-time special offer, you get the full method, plus a collection of dubious-but-inspirational anecdotes, all for the crazy, never-to-be-repeated price of just ~~\$499.00~~ \$29.99.

In other words, the magic bullet offered is generally a quick fix methodology for you to implement. You're given tips on time management, productivity, learning how to

say ‘no’, delegation, keeping your email inbox under control, and so on. Perhaps with a bit of reassuring pop psychology thrown in for good measure.

The better books might go a little bit deeper. They might ask you to think about what you *want* out of life. What lifestyle are you looking for? What do you want to achieve? Then they give you the techniques and strategies designed to help you achieve those life goals (no matter what they are).

But what I want to do is a bit different again.

I want to avoid magic bullets and instead look with you at what *God* has to say in the Bible about busyness.

By which I don’t mean looking for a verse in the book of Proverbs that says something vaguely connected with productivity and using it as a pretext to say what I wanted to say about productivity anyway.

No, I mean going to the Bible in search of answers to some of the most fundamental questions about our life’s meaning and purpose—what God created us to *do*—and seeing what implications that has for our lives.

Warning

Now I have to warn you, as we explore some of these big Bible truths, you might at times wonder how on earth it’s all connected to your daily struggles with overwhelming busyness (or your lack of struggle).

Stick with me at those points.

Ultimately the riches of God’s word will greatly help us, not just in explaining our experience of life, but in wisely shaping the way we live it. That well-worn Bible

verse on the poster is in fact profoundly true: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105).

In the end, what we discover from the Bible will provide you with a much deeper and clearer picture—a better framework for making decisions. It will help you make the mind-numbing number of choices you need to make each week about what to do with your time.

I promise all these big thoughts *will* ultimately get very practical ... just not necessarily in quite the way you might be expecting!³

For some people, busyness is a useful smokescreen: “My life must be meaningful and of high value—look how busy and in demand I am!” Being busy can cover up a deep existential hollowness.

For Christians, that shouldn’t be the case. We know a purpose and a meaning that comes from our Creator and his plan for our world. It’s a meaning that gives our lives direction and value.

But it’s still possible for us to be so busy as to lose sight of that bigger picture. Or, for that matter, to ‘not see the forest for the trees’ as we engage with God’s word, the Bible.

So my prayer is that as you keep turning the pages of this book, you will see—with new or renewed clarity—the biblical bigger picture of which you are a part. And that you will then be equipped to prayerfully make wise changes to your life, for your own good, for the good of others around you, and to the glory of God.

3 But what have you got to lose? This book costs even less than \$29.99.

Some housekeeping

Three quick things to point out to you as you get started:

1. At the end of each chapter there are reflection questions for you to do to push you to personally apply what you are reading. I know it's easy to skip past the questions. But I urge you to invest the time in them to get the most benefit.
2. I don't know about you, but when I read a book, by the time I get to chapter 5, I've largely forgotten what the main points were in chapters 1, 2, 3 and even 4. So I've also included a summary statement at the end of each chapter—a summary we'll add to as we go along. Hopefully that will help you follow the logic of the book.
3. I worked for 33 years for Matthias Media, the publisher of this book, and I am still involved in their ministry in an honorary capacity. Naturally I know their books and resources extremely well. So when I suggest further reading on a topic, I almost always recommend something from Matthias Media. Please bear with me on that. I know it's even less subtle than Apple's product placement in movies, but these are the resources I know and the ones that theologically connect well with the ideas in this book. I don't get any kickback, I assure you.

1. Made in God's image



No self-respecting evangelical book with any credibility fails to quote John Calvin at some point. So let's get it done nice and early:

But though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie, due arrangement requires that we treat of the former in the first place, and then descend to the latter.⁴

In other words, to understand ourselves, Calvin suggests we start with an understanding of our Creator—his character and his purposes. For reasons we will see, God provides the right foundation for developing an accurate self-understanding.

That's what we're going to do in this chapter and the next two: start with God and see where that leads us in understanding ourselves.

4 J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (H Beveridge trans), book 1, chapter 1, Bonham Norton, 1599 (reformed.org/books/institutes/books/book1/bk1ch01.html).

And we can start at the very beginning, because as soon as we open our Bibles, right there on the opening pages, a profound truth is drilled into us over and over again: God is the Creator (Gen 1:1; cf. Rev 4:11; Ps 33:6-9; and many other places).

Straight away that tells us something very significant about ourselves: we are his creatures. He made us. We are made.

Difference

That means God is in a very different category to us. In this world there is a category of ‘all-powerful God’—and you and me, we’re not in that category.

That sounds obvious, I know. But it’s worth saying because—from Genesis 3 and the rest of the Bible, and also from personal experience—we know we have a hard time accepting that we’re *not* God. We keep rejecting him as the God who rightly rules his creation and ought to be obeyed. We keep pretending *we* are in charge. When you think about it, that’s pretty silly—not to mention offensive to God. But we’ll talk more about solving that problem in a future chapter.

The point for the moment is that there is a fundamental difference between us and God. As the apostle Paul puts it, it’s the stark difference between the potter and the clay (Rom 9:21). God is God; we are very much *not* God. He is the infinite, all-powerful, all-wise, all-knowing Creator of everything. We, on the other hand, are very finite creatures he has made for his own purposes. It is the potter who defines the nature and purpose of his clay

creation. The clay awaits the potter's hands and takes on the role the potter gives to it.

Similarity

But although there is a *very significant difference*, at the same time—and exclusively out of all of God's creation—there is also a very significant *similarity* between us and God. This particular creature—the human—is uniquely made in God's image, in his likeness:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:26-28)

Theologians have debated for years about what it means for man to be made “in the image of God”. But one meaning is pretty simple: an image of something reveals aspects of that something. The better the image, the more it reveals.

If I show you my holiday snap of the Grand Canyon, you and I both know that my 5x7-inch photo doesn't do

justice to the scale and wonder of the real thing. But it's undeniably still an image giving you at least *some* idea of what the Grand Canyon is like in real life.

So it's not my photo that gives meaning to the Grand Canyon; it's the canyon that gives meaning and significance to my photo. When you look at that photo and ask me "What's that?", I will say "It's the Grand Canyon", or, if I'm being particularly pedantic, "It's a photo of the Grand Canyon". If I say "It's a piece of paper with ink on it" you'll most likely just roll your eyes at me.

In the same way, as God's image-bearers we derive our meaning and significance from him. But in doing so, we reflect real truths about God, even with our fallen nature.⁵

As God's image-bearers we are uniquely designed and created to reveal aspects of God's own nature and purpose.⁶

I don't know if you've ever thought about it like this, but in Romans the apostle Paul says that the creation offers enough evidence to allow all people to clearly per-

5 It is worth noting that one of the issues theologians wrestle with is to what extent we continue to be in the image of God after the Fall in Genesis 3. Generally it is agreed that something of that image is retained, because it is referred to in post-Fall contexts like Genesis 5:3 (where Seth is in the image of Adam, who is in the image of God) and 9:6, 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9. But the image is certainly marred and corrupted by sin, and needs restoration (see Rom 8:29; Eph 4:22-24; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). In that sense, it is another point of difference between us and God: he is righteous, whereas our nature is to rebel and resist his will. It will become more and more obvious in this book why our reluctance to submit to God's sovereign control of the narrative is a problem for us.

6 Perhaps that's why one of the first jobs we were given was to "multiply"—a job we seem to have been unusually good at. How shrewd and generous of God to build in so much job satisfaction for that task.

ceive God’s “invisible attributes” (Rom 1:20). And we, as the only creatures made in God’s image and the pinnacle of his creation, are not only *part* of that testimony about God’s attributes; we could be considered the most *accurate* and *revealing* part.

In other words, although there is a fundamental *difference* between us and God, God has also built into his creation—and for the fulfilment of his divine purposes—an astonishing and profoundly significant *similarity* between us and God.

Both the differences and the similarities help us discover who we are and who we are meant to be.

Indeed, very helpfully to us as we explore our topic of busyness, the differences and similarities are very much at play in the areas of our work and rest. So we’re going to explore those areas in our next two chapters.

Reflection

1. When you reflect on the busyness of your life, what are some of the principles or values that you bring to the topic? Do you think there is a distinctly ‘Christian’ view of busyness, or as you start this book are you sceptical that the Bible really has very much to say on it?
2. We are “the only creatures made in God’s image and the pinnacle of his creation”. Read Psalm 8. About what does the psalmist express amazement (in terms of the relationship between us and God)? Does it amaze you?

3. Why do you think God chose to make part of his creation “in his own image” (Gen 1:27)?

Chapter by chapter summary	
1	God is our Creator and we are made in his image. We are like him, but also different.
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