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Chapter 1



FINDING REST FOR YOUR SOUL

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

- MATTHEW 11:28–30

What crooked paths I trod! What dangers threatened my soul when it rashly hoped that by abandoning you it would find something better! Whichever way it turned, on front or back or sides, it lay on a bed that was hard, for in you alone the soul can rest.

- ST. AUGUSTINE

I SAT IN MY CAR in the Panera Bread parking lot with my phone held against my ear talking to my counselor. My twins were at preschool for a couple hours, while my youngest munched on Cheerios in his car seat

behind me. This setup became my regular rhythm that winter—phone appointments when I had to keep only child number three content.¹

A heaviness weighed me down, but I didn't know why. I'd been back in weekly counseling sessions for a few months. I felt stuck, as if I was treading water. I wasn't sure if I could ever stop treading and constantly feared I'd be asked to hold a brick. Even the smallest shift in our schedule, added responsibility, or interpersonal tension felt like that brick. I couldn't keep kicking my legs, and many days left me gasping for air. *What was wrong with me?*

On the outside, life seemed pretty good—three healthy kids, a warm home, family and friends who loved me. But on the inside, I was smothered by condemnation, worry, and despair. I felt lost and sad for a thousand reasons that seemed both completely ridiculous and utterly debilitating at the same time.

I tried to explain all this to my counselor, attempting to put my confusion and weariness into words. I felt like a terrible mother, insecure in my work, inadequate as a wife, joyless in everything. Motherhood and marriage are no cakewalk, sure, but these were gifts I asked for, gifts I prayed for. I had even prayed to have twins, and God said yes. *Why couldn't I escape this darkness when from the outside, my life looked pretty near perfect?*

"It's like there's a dark, windowless room," she said. "You used to be outside the room. But there's a battle going on for your mind, and every time you believe a lie, it's as if you've opened the door to that room a little further." As she spoke, I started to see how with every lie, I took one more step inside, until eventually the door slammed shut behind me—and there I was, unable to escape a darkness so heavy, so all-encompassing, I'd forgotten life outside even existed.

"Now, you're at the point where you need someone—God, counseling, your husband, friends—from outside to unlock the door and pull you out."

My eyes watered as I prayed that no one parked close enough to

witness me ugly cry. I could barely string a couple words together. Instead, I nodded my head and mumbled, “That’s it. That’s exactly it.”

I had been letting go of the truth and taking one shaky step after another toward the darkness. When I yelled at my kids, I would think, *You’re a terrible mom*. When an article I wrote got rejected, I believed, *Your writing is pointless*. When I saw someone else doing all the things I thought I should be doing, all the “more important” things, all the things I thought made a “real” difference in the world, I too easily fell for the lie that said, *You’re worthless*.

I’d been trapped in this dark, windowless room, and my attempts to fix the issue over the past year had been no more freeing than if I’d been rearranging furniture. At times it got more comfortable, but I was still in the room.

My call ended, and I rummaged through the car to find a napkin or tissue to wipe my mascara-streaked face. I drove home exhausted but sensing that there may be hope from this cycle of self-condemnation, this joyless living. The door to the metaphorical room seemed to be cracking open. I knew it wouldn’t be a quick and easy journey out, but for the first time in years, I felt a lightness to my soul.

WORN AND WEARY

You might know what it’s like to walk around with your shoulders sagging, your head down, and your eyes only half open.² Maybe sleep deprivation is to blame. Maybe it’s stressors at work, health concerns, life with a newborn, or the weariness that comes from sitting awake waiting for our teenager to come home.

But our exhaustion can run much deeper. Many of us are worn emotionally, spiritually, mentally. We’re burned out by the pressure to perform; we’re tired of fear grabbing us by the ankles; we wish we could stop constantly feeling like we’re letting people down. A solid night of

sleep or a weeklong vacation would help. But that only scratches the surface.

We need deep rest for our souls. We need to step out of the darkness, to let go of the burdens we were never meant to carry. We need to abandon the lies, fears, and unhealthy expectations. Only then can we carry what we *are* meant to carry with joy and endurance. Only then can we confidently step forward into what God *has* called us to do.

Our culture so often preaches a message telling us to do whatever makes us happy. But Christ has so much more for us. He calls us to not just build a life for our own gain. Rather, *He calls us to build for the kingdom of God*. We're given the task of loving God and loving others, of living lives that reflect His character and His kingdom. That's a weighty and good responsibility. It's work worth doing, a burden worth carrying.

But we will never be able to do that well if instead we're carrying a whole bunch of junk that trips us up and wears us out.

COME TO ME

In Matthew 11, Jesus preaches to the crowds gathered around Him. He speaks of giving rest to the weary, saying, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30).

At first glance, His words sound like a quick fix or a magic spell we can utter to feel energized and less stressed out. Or these verses become cliché, a phrase used as a pick-me-up, void of the real meaning and depth they carry.

Jesus doesn't offer pithy sayings or shallow optimism. *He offers Himself*. He offers deep relief that we cannot find anywhere else. He tells us that true rest is found when we take up the yoke of Christ, coming to Him instead of forging our own path.

Jesus doesn't slap a fresh coat of paint on a tired and tattered world. He remakes us. He offers a different way of living that doesn't hide our pain or sorrow. It doesn't gloss over our scars or even our failures. He offers the only way that is *good* and that allows us to live with joy and endurance, come what may.

Before Jesus gives His invitation for listeners to come to Him, He has choice words for others in the crowd. He denounces the cities where He's done the most miracles. He proclaims "woes" on the people who didn't repent. He says scary stuff to the people rejecting the truth of who He is and the kingdom He's building: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you" (Matt. 11:20–22).

Yikes. No wonder some people hate Him. He's just pronounced judgment on the places where He's shown up in the greatest ways. Yet the people in these cities rejected Him—and Jesus rebukes them for it. They, of all people, should know better. They should have recognized the Son of God when they saw all He'd done so far.

But then, Jesus goes on to say this:

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Matt. 11:25–27)

Do you hear the contrast between these two scenes? The "woes" are spoken to those who rejected Jesus, those who should have believed. They saw His miracles; they saw all He was doing—yet they chose to

go their own way. But then Jesus thanks the Father for those who have heard. He says “little children” here, meaning those who are humble and acknowledge their dependence on God.³

The Jewish leaders would have been considered “the wise.” They were the learned who thought they had God’s approval and supposedly knew all about the Messiah. In those days, Jewish tradition said that obtaining wisdom involved learning the law and all its finer points. You needed to be a scholar. For the average Jew that was like being a rocket scientist. It was unattainable.

But here, Jesus says, *No. It’s not the so-called wise who will understand what God is doing. It’s the humble; it’s those who know they don’t have it all together. Those who know Me are the ones who know the Father.*

For the original listeners, this would have been scandalous. Jesus is saying that those who know *Him* know Yahweh. He claims He knows God the Father. That is not a passing comment or a statement listeners could be on the fence about. They had to decide either, *This is true, and now I have to live my life like it’s true.* Or, *This guy is dangerous and out of His mind, and we have to get rid of Him.*

That choice to reject or accept the truth of God runs from cover to cover in Scripture. In His teaching in Matthew, Jesus alludes to Jeremiah 6. In that passage, the prophet Jeremiah warned Jerusalem of disaster to come. The people rejected God and turned to their own ways—and there were consequences. Then the Lord said in Jeremiah 6:16:

“Stand by the roads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is; and walk in it,
and *find rest for your souls.*
But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”

The people in Jeremiah’s day rejected God and chose to walk a different way. And Jesus reminds His hearers in no uncertain terms

that many of them are doing the exact same thing. They could have had rest for their souls. But they said no.

Are we doing the same?

Finally, Jesus gives His invitation, the words many of us know and love—but words I often struggle to believe: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30).

Usually, animals carried yokes, a beam attaching two animals pulling a cart or a plow. Sometimes, if a person was poor, they would carry that yoke on their own shoulders.⁴ In Jesus’ day, the Jews often spoke of

carrying “the yoke of God’s law and the yoke of his kingdom, which one accepted by acknowledging that God was one and by keeping His commandments.”⁵ Being a good Jew required you to carry this burden and subject yourself to the detailed restrictions laid out in the law.

While using similar language, Jesus offers a different way. He rejected the legalism and pride evident in many of the Jewish leaders. In Matthew 23:4, He even calls out the scribes and Pharisees when He says, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders.” But the yoke of Jesus does not do this. The yoke of Jesus comes not from an attempt at performance or perfectionism. It comes from mercy and love. Jesus calls His listeners to give up the burdens they’re carrying, to stop hitching themselves to exhausting and impossible standards of the law and of the culture. Instead, He’s saying,

The yoke of Jesus comes not from an attempt at performance or perfectionism. It comes from mercy and love.

Here, I have something better. Hitch yourself to Me, and when you take up My yoke, when you go My way, you'll find what you need.

For those who want to listen, for those who want to understand, Jesus doesn't pronounce "woes" on them. It's as though He turns to this group, to the people so often overlooked, to the weary and humble and dependent, and He urges *them* to come. He invites them to receive all they need from the source itself—from Him.

Like the Lord said through Jeremiah, Jesus says here, *There's another way! You don't have to be so broken down in spirit, so soul-weary. Look where the good way is, and walk those paths. And there you'll find rest for your souls.*

LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT

In the darkest days of battling depression, every day felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. I couldn't believe life with Christ meant carrying a burden that was easy and light. But through the help of counseling, medication, encouragement from friends, being reminded of truth by my husband, crying out to God, and digging into His Word, I started to release the burdens that weighed me down. I started to let them go little by little, and even when outside circumstances did not change, God lightened the load pressing against my soul.

This shift didn't happen overnight, and it wasn't easy. It was a battle—and often still is. For me, fighting that battle included getting help from a doctor and counselor. If you are struggling with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues, *please get professional help*. This book addresses many of the spiritual burdens that weigh us down, but I am acutely aware that our mental health and physical health play a huge role. It's all related, and I had to seek help to get my mind and emotions to a place where I could fight the spiritual battles I talk about in this book.

We have a God who doesn't leave us to our own devices, and He promises to provide what we need. Sometimes that means He gives us the help of skilled professionals, and we have the freedom to wisely and thoughtfully use those resources (more on this in chapter 5).

Looking back, I remember thinking those dark days felt as though Satan had thrown me to the ground and was pressing his foot into my back, shoving me into the earth. I faced a battle between truth and lies, a battle to fend Satan off from standing haughtily over me as though he had some kind of victory over my life, a battle to stop carrying burdens far too heavy for me.

The truth is that there is no lighter burden than what Christ gives us. Even so, we heap weight after weight upon our backs—burdens we were never meant to carry. *And we're exhausted because of it.*

It's time to take those off. Our souls are weary from carrying worry, carrying self-condemnation, carrying perfectionism. What would it look like if we threw off all those weights? What would it look like to live life *knowing*—beyond the shadow of a doubt—who God is and trusting what He says is true?

I think we'd experience a lot more joy, even in heartache. We'd experience a lot more freedom, even when we have work to do. We'd experience a lot more contentment, even in times of need.

Letting go of our burdens doesn't mean we will never have suffering and sorrow. We will mourn and lament. We will grow tired in this life because we are finite people living in a fallen world. But this is what Paul was getting at when he wrote from prison, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:12–13).

There is no easier burden, no lighter yoke, than to be able to walk through life fully assured of the truth of who God is, what He says about you, and what He has called you to do.

NO LIGHTER BURDEN

A few years ago, my dad wrote an update for family and friends about my mom, Charlotte. It was right before Christmas, and at the time, she was dying of cancer. He wrote this:

Charlotte is sleeping quietly now as I try to keep occupied with the day in and day out routine of being a caregiver. . . . I must admit I'm struggling. Winning and losing on the athletic field in high school and college, USMC boot camp, one year in the middle of an ugly war, raising six kids, trying to calm hurting fellow believers at church, ten years of business financial struggles—nothing hurts as much as watching the love of your life slowly deteriorate.

I don't know how else to express it. Each day Charlotte needs a little more help with some of the very basics. One day she gave me a quote from C. S. Lewis, "We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be."⁶ I wonder what He is doing, but I know He has the best in store for us. There is the greatest comfort of all. . . .

How painful will the best turn out to be? I don't know, but I'm so glad that both Charlotte and I have that assurance that He knows, He cares, and He loves us with an infinite love.⁷

That is what letting go of our unnecessary burdens looks like. It looks like letting go of fear and worry and clinging desperately—even through tears—to the assurance that God knows, He cares, and He loves us with an infinite love. It looks like supernatural peace and abiding trust in our Father. It's believing, as Charles Spurgeon said, "We have all things and abound; not because I have a good store of money in

the bank, not because I have skill and wit with which to win my bread, but because the Lord is my shepherd.”⁸

Jesus invites us—the weary, the tired, the discouraged, the broken down—to come to Him and place our burdens at His feet. In the following chapters, we’ll look at how we can do this. How can we begin to let go of what’s weighing us down? Then in the final chapter, we’ll see that when we rid ourselves of those unnecessary burdens, we can fully—and even joyfully—bear what we *are* meant to carry. When we let go of what’s tangling us up, we can run with endurance, carrying our cross and carrying each other’s burdens as we are called to do.

As Jeremiah wrote, *that* is the good way. That is the path we can walk, the way we find rest for our souls.

REFLECT

1. What’s wearing you down right now? What burdens weigh heavy on your soul? Family struggles? Insecurity? Health problems? Injustice? Fear for a loved one? Your own failure? Bring those things before God. If you need help putting your cries into words, read and pray through passages such as Psalms 27, 55, or 130.
2. Consider your answer to question one. Envision being able to throw off those burdens, not in careless apathy, but in a way that entrusts them to God. Do you think anything would change in your day-to-day life? Would you be able to sleep better? Feel less stressed? Start taking care of yourself? Begin asking for help?

The point is not that we can guarantee outcomes or dream our wishes into reality. But we can often get so wrapped up in the burdens we’re carrying now that we lose sight of the available peace, joy, rest, and strength we *could* be experiencing.