



EXCERPT



A Spacious Life

Trading Hustle and Hurry for the Goodness of Limits

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Society constantly tells us to follow our dreams and live our best lives. But contrary to what we've been told, the good life we crave is not accomplished through limitless possibilities or even hustle and hurry—it can only be found in the confines of God's loving limits. Inviting us to discover a better way, Ashley Hales shows us a spacious life filled with purpose, joy, and rest.

Finding Guardrails of Love

Hustle and hurry are not just what we do: they have become states of the soul. When we can effectively opt in or out (like plugging in technology) to any form of community (in person or virtual), any place, any job, any spouse, or almost anybody, we are not free. When every option is open to us, we are trapped in our so-called freedom. We are crushed under the pressure of trying to be God: to create—at every moment—a state of happiness.

When we live our lives by the story of unlimitedness, we look at the invitation to smallness and believe small equals powerlessness. Not wanting to lose control, if we have the resources and personality, we puff ourselves up like an exotic bird pulling out the stops to attract attention. It's a dance that's ridiculous, but we seem to know no other way. Or we slink back into the shadows, become a target for exploitation, and find ourselves in a vortex of shame that cuts us off from others.

But what if the guardrails of love drew us to find our proper place—not exploited, not stepping on others to make our significance known? Jesus dignifies the ordinary, material world. Perhaps because he simply didn't need to clothe himself in the forms of worldly ambition or power, Jesus chose to enter small—through the womb of a young girl; his attendants were shepherds and animals.

He shows us how in the story of God, small things are valuable and effective. Might recovering our limits help us to recover our common humanity?

We are the created ones, under the power and authority of an unlimited God. God's power and authority expresses itself in self-limiting and self-giving love, not in an exploitative power. So, as we meditate on how the incarnate Christ willingly took on our limits because of love, we see our limited humanity as something to be embraced. Something both cherished and needing rescue.

A small, practical step toward embracing a more spacious life is to recognize that we are human: bodies, souls, minds, with natural limits. You may need nine hours of sleep and hate Brussels sprouts. You may have an autoimmune disease, which limits your energy and what you can do. You may be tall or short, large or small, extroverted or introverted, with a shade of skin unlike your neighbor's.

Bottom line: if the second person of the Trinity took on flesh, then all your particularities matter. Your limits create your own unique path, and Jesus meets you in *this* moment in time and to live in *this* world.

Jesus invites us to see our bodies as good, the material world as part of God's kingdom. If the gates of hell cannot prevail against God's kingdom, our limits are not barriers that God cannot work through. Our limits, rather, invite us into a proper relationship with God.

Here we remember ourselves as we are: beloved children. In God's kingdom, small is a gift.



Tara Burns, print and online publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or tburns@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, author interviews
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com



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Ashley Hales (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is a writer, speaker, and host of the *Finding Holy* podcast. She is the author of *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* and her writing has been featured in *Christianity Today*, *Books and Culture*, and The Gospel Coalition. Ashley is married to a pastor and the mother to four children.

We are invited to name our limits with God. We bring them to our unlimited God and ask that he would work in and through them. I practice thanking him for my local life (even as I struggle with wanderlust) and for the ways that the limits of ministry have helped me love Jesus and his church even when I didn't feel like it. My biggest growth point in parenting is realizing that though parenting has narrowed my free time, attention, and availability, it has also helped me to grow in empathy and to practice asking for forgiveness. It has reminded me that I cannot meet everyone's needs. This is a gift.

A "do more" life drains us of energy, compassion, mission, and peace. The magazines and self-help books tell us this is the good life, but the kingdom of God says otherwise. The kingdom of God is a net, a pearl of great price. It is yeast, a hidden treasure, small as a mustard seed. These are small, limited things created to do something: to feed, to create beauty, to transform ordinary elements into what they are supposed to be. To get this spacious life in us, we start by reckoning with our own designed smallness and thanking God for it. Jesus embraces the small and dignifies it.

We are invited to practice being small. We are invited to name our limits—the ones we feel and the ones we don't—and to ask for eyes to see the limits we're blind to.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel are an invitation to all of us: "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." On the threshold of a more spacious life, will you keep coming back here: laying down hustle and hurry for the wide expanse of "the unforced rhythms of grace"?

A more spacious life always starts and ends with grace, with the strong and powerful vows spoken into the fabric of creation and woven through the life of Jesus. And so I'll leave you, my dear readers, with a little prayer: the hesitant words of an uttered "yes" into this spacious life that looks small and homely from the outside. Even still, we choose to pin our audacious hopes that the inside is bigger than the outside, that there are worlds upon worlds in the smallness.

Triune God who is both entirely other and also intimate,

I can't imagine my way into the incarnation. My mind and comprehension are small. What I do know is my anxiety, my overwhelm, and the way talk of "the good life" presses in from each side. I'm worn out with hurry and I speak about hustle with the language of virtue. Forgive me for going beyond the limits you intend for me.

Give me courage, Jesus, to find my deepest identity in you—to practice naming my limits and giving them to you.

I'm opening the door to the small and faithful story of God. I'm afraid: What am I doing? Will I be swallowed up, spit out, or made invisible?

Yet, here we go! Spirit, comfort me, direct my steps.

Amen.

—Adapted from chapter two, "And Limits Were Good, Very Good"



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