

Rhythms of Grace

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Rhythms of Grace

Finding intimacy with God in a busy life

Tony Horsfall

Recommendations

This is one of those books which has had a profound influence on my life. Tony not only reminds us of our need to slow down and simply 'be' with God, he also illustrates how we can do this, by providing practical guidelines on meditation and contemplative prayer. This book can enrich your walk with God.

DEBBIE LOVELL-HAWKER, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, INTERHEALTH, LONDON

I have read, and read, and read again this wise and gentle book, and each read has only increased my hunger to know and to love God and to walk the ancient pathways and embrace the age-old practices which Tony unwraps for us in its pages. This is a book for those of us who are weary of disappointing short-cuts to intimacy, and who long for a rich and deep and transformative relationship with God. In this book Tony reminds us of God's yearning for the love of our hearts, and shows us ways by which we can respond to that love. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

MAGS DUGGAN, REDCLIFFE COLLEGE, GLOUCESTER

As a busy church leader, I find the invitation to experience the unforced rhythms of grace incredibly compelling. Yet to go beyond the invitation and actually walk in that intimate grace is another thing altogether. Tony Horsfall, a self-confessed activist, turns out to be perfect company for a busy Christian who wants to escape the destructive and depleting spiral of ever-increasing activity. Tony's book calls us to focus on the true Master of life—Jesus—who not only extends the invitation to this beautiful way of living, but has modelled it himself, and indeed offers to show us how on a daily basis. I hope this book finds its way into the hands of every active Christian, and in turn finds its way into their hearts and lives.

ERIK JESPERSEN, PASTOR, WOKING VINEYARD CHURCH

Reading this book was like drinking refreshing water. It satisfied a thirsty soul. It pointed me back to Jesus and his releasing rhythms of life. Too quickly we are working for him rather than walking with him. I believe this is one of the most important books written in recent years because it is about depth and intimacy. For over-busy Christians and leaders, this book is a must. It is about much more than pace in the race. It is about going deeper with Jesus.

THE RIGHT REVEREND KEN CLARKE, BISHOP OF KILMORE, ELPHIN AND ARDAGH, CHURCH OF IRELAND

The first edition of this book made me realise how hungry I was for God. I was a spiritual anorexic and I didn't even know how starved I was for something other than what I thought it meant to be a Christian. In England, at a retreat centre near Oxford, I absorbed the book walking fields, dangling hot feet in cold streams, sipping wine in pubs, and late at night huddled under warm blankets. Tony shares his experiences of becoming worn out following evangelical voices urging us to win the world for Christ and charismatic voices promising us to be able to do it faster and better. He found rest in the contemplative tradition. For the first time in many years I felt I could breathe and relax in God's company.

FRAN LOVE, SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATOR, ARIZONA

By reading this book in a little church group, we learned to practise God's contemplation rather than to do more and more. Taking time to hear and admire our God is the key to our development. As we studied we experienced the nearness of God and his love.

GENEVIÈVE UTERMANN, SWITZERLAND

Rhythms of Grace met the thirst of my heart and the longing of my spirit for guidance and direction in pursuing Christ's presence as opposed to continually trying to please him through performance. Instead of having to constantly work harder—the only response to salvation I'd previously understood—Tony helped me realise my

desperate need to rest, reflect and spend time alone with Jesus. This book is water on a faith gone dry. May it refresh and renew your faith as it has mine.

KEITH DODSON, DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES, MISSIONARY MAINTENANCE SERVICES AVIATION, OHIO

Drawing on the insights and disciplines of contemplative spirituality, Tony writes without legalism to help us engage and encounter God through Christ in meaningful ways. This book will significantly widen our worship experience as we present our real selves to a real God.

DAVE BILBROUGH, INTERNATIONAL SONGWRITER AND WORSHIP LEADER

Written in a readable style, this book has been a helpful introduction for me to contemplative spirituality and its practice. I have been challenged to live by it, and to please God by my being with him rather than my being busy for him. I commend this book to all who desire to be drawn closer to God because he is pleased with who we are more than what we do.

PAUL TAN, OVERSEAS MISSIONARY FELLOWSHIP, SINGAPORE

Tony Horsfall would be satisfied if we could all say, 'I've got rhythm,' because he believes that rhythm is the secret to Christian happiness and fruitfulness. It is a rhythm of advance and retreat, going out and going in, activity and time with God. Tony gives down-to-earth guidance on how we build that rhythm into our lives. Seldom do writers make these great lessons so easily available to the average reader, but Tony does it. This is a wonderful book.

MAJOR PETER FARTHING, SALVATION ARMY, SYDNEY

The words of Jesus

'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.'

MATTHEW 11:28–30 (THE MESSAGE)

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Foreword

*You've placed a hunger in my heart...
You've caused a thirst that I cannot ignore;
You've stirred a passion that will drive me
into Your presence
And I won't rest until You've heard
My cry for more.¹*

That verse from one of Stuart Townend's worship songs describes so accurately the hunger that is gnawing at many hearts in these days when the pace of life seems to accelerate year by year. I have heard that heart-hunger being expressed in many parts of the world, from Singapore and Malaysia to England and North America. I heard it being expressed some years ago by the author of this book when he first came to our home to make a retreat towards the end of his sabbatical leave.

During that retreat and since, Tony Horsfall has tasted and seen for himself that 'the Lord is good'. Many readers and would-be contemplatives will be grateful to him for the time he has spent sharing with us some of the fruit of his own exploration into a form of prayer that has set him free to enjoy an ever-deepening intimacy with God.

The way the contents of the book have been spread out reminds me of an appetising buffet. Every chapter spreads before us a variety of tempting titbits. Sample them and they simply whet your appetite so that you find yourself going back for more—and more, and more. Take Chapter 8, for example. Here we read, 'If we seek him, we shall find him; if we have a longing for him, it will eventually be satisfied.' Such sentences are to be savoured and reflected on. As we reflect, God's Spirit may well stir up in us a

desire for more—more stillness, more sustenance, more of God’s love, more of God himself.

The author makes this claim: ‘When we meet God in the person of Jesus, we experience beauty—sheer loveliness, tenderness, compassion, charm and grace’ (p. 68). That has been my experience as I have read and prayed with the contents of this book. That is why it is a joy for me to recommend the following pages to those who can no longer ignore or push away the passion for God’s presence that has been planted in their hearts by God’s Spirit. In particular, I warmly recommend it to those who find their hearts echoing the kind of sentiments that are voiced in Stuart Townend’s song but who come from a church background that has never taught or understood the value of a more still approach to God.

As I have read, reread and prayed with each chapter of this book, there have been occasions when I have sensed the anointing of God’s Spirit on the insights shared. My prayer as this little gem goes to print again is that through its pages and by the grace of God, readers will find themselves enriched and enlightened and that they will be nourished as they feast from the banquet spread before them. Whenever this happens, the author will be rewarded for the hard work he has poured into this book and God will be glorified. For this I pray.

Joyce Huggett

Introduction

‘Don’t stand still! Keep moving!’

I can still hear the sergeant-major-like voice of my Physical Education teacher booming across the playground. He loved to have us young boys running around on our toes, his own passion for physical fitness expressed in his fierce determination to develop our athletic prowess. No chance of dawdling while he was around! We learnt to keep moving, or else!

I guess that much of my adult life has been lived at a similar tempo. The world around us fears to stand still, and so do we. We are drawn into its motion, caught up in its activity, anxious lest we be left behind. Even as a Christian my life has been lived at pace. There has always been so much to be done, so many needs to be met, so many opportunities, and always so little time.

With these words I began my introduction to the first edition of *Rhythms of Grace*, published in 2004. The book began life in 2001 as *The Call to Intimacy*, published in Singapore by my good friend Alan Chew. I had just completed a short sabbatical from my work with the Equip missions training programme based at Bawtry Hall, a conference centre in the north of England. The book was the result of my exploration into contemplative spirituality. Coming from an evangelical and charismatic background, I had begun my search because of two key factors: firstly, an increasing desire within me to know God more deeply, and a sense of dissatisfaction with my own spiritual life; and secondly, a growing alarm at the number of highly qualified and gifted people involved in Christian ministry who experience burn-out. It seemed to me that contemplative spirituality, with its emphasis on realising our identity as God’s beloved children and its focus on being rather than doing, had something significant to offer in showing us how to discover

intimacy with God, and in making ministry more enjoyable and sustainable.

Invited to Singapore to teach on this theme of intimacy with God, I discovered a great hunger for the message of the book. The church there has grown rapidly in size and influence. It is dynamic and outward-looking, reaching out effectively in mission to its own people as well as to all corners of the world. It is also very driven, and highly demanding of its leaders and lay people. Not surprisingly, the invitation of Jesus to slow down and discover the rest he offers has resonated with many. I continue to visit regularly to lead retreats, conduct training seminars and mentor people in the rhythms of grace. It is a country I have come to love dearly.

In 2004 I was just starting out on a path that has changed my life. I wrote in the first edition, ‘In my journey of faith, evangelicalism got me started, and the charismatic movement took me further. What I am feeling now is the need to journey on, to find the kind of spirituality that will take me deeper into God. The contemplative tradition seems to offer such a possibility. It provides what I call the third strand in the “rope” of an integrated approach to Christian spirituality.’

Well, I have journeyed on, both in my experience of contemplative spirituality and in my discipleship, following as closely as I can the leadership of Jesus in my life. Soon after my sabbatical, it became apparent that it was time to move on from Bawtry Hall and establish my own ministry (Charis Training), with a view to being more available to teach the insights in the book, and to lead retreats and Quiet Days for those taking their first steps in contemplative spirituality. I have been amazed at the opportunities that have opened up for me. I have also become involved in the pastoral care of missionaries and church leaders, both in the United Kingdom and overseas, and have had the opportunity over several years to put into practice in my own life the principles I teach to others. I would describe myself now as a ‘contemplative activist’.

I am still on the move. I live a purpose-driven life (although I

prefer the term ‘purpose-led’) and am still an achiever, but I think I am learning to pace myself better and to operate out of a place of rest. I am still an extravert, but I have discovered my introvert side and delight in silence and stillness and solitude. I am more secure in myself, too, knowing more deeply than ever that I am loved by God; I am finding my identity and worth increasingly in who I am in Christ. It’s not that I don’t wobble occasionally or sometimes allow myself to get overloaded and too busy, but integrating a contemplative strand into my evangelical and charismatic background has transformed me. I say that sincerely and without any exaggeration.

What has thrilled me just as much is the way I have seen others benefit from a similar integration. Stressed-out church leaders, overburdened mission partners, hardworking lay people—I have seen them all encouraged and uplifted as the truth of Christ’s invitation to rest dawns on their weary souls. It has been such a privilege to lead so many on retreats and Quiet Days and to see the transforming work of the Spirit in the lives of those who are willing to slow down and encounter God afresh.

This is why I am so keen for *Rhythms of Grace* to be available again. My intended audience is the same as before, and my purpose remains unaltered. I have updated the 2004 edition and added a study guide so that churches and groups can learn to practise some of the spiritual disciplines I write about. Therefore the closing part of my original introduction seems just as appropriate now.

I am writing primarily for the many activists within the evangelical/charismatic section of the church. You may be a mission partner energetically serving God in a cross-cultural location. You could be a minister or pastor, busily seeking to build the church in a postmodern world. Or you might be one of that great legion of faithful church members, toiling away tirelessly at the heart of your local congregation. Whoever you are, I want to encourage you to open yourself up to new things, to explore and experiment with tried and tested ways of developing the spiritual life, some of which

may be new to you. Above all, I want to encourage you to respond to the voice of the Spirit as he calls us to greater intimacy with God, and offers you a place of rest within his all-embracing love.

Nowhere is that call more clearly heard than in the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28–30. Here the Saviour offers to take our burdens from us, to exchange our wearisome labour for his divine rest. Eugene Peterson’s vibrant paraphrase in *The Message* (quoted at the beginning of this book) expresses exactly the radical nature of what is involved.

Those worn out by constant activity, burned out by the demands of legalistic religion, are invited to find true rest and recovery of life by coming to Jesus. As they enter into relationship with him, they discover that he is no overbearing taskmaster, but rather one who loves them unconditionally and without reservation. This experience of grace leads them to a place of rest and acceptance where it becomes natural to want to keep company with Jesus, and to develop a rhythm of life that makes it possible to remain in that love and to grow in intimacy with him. Thus they begin to learn how to live lightly and freely, and how to serve from a place of rest.

That means a whole new way of living—a way of following Jesus that sounds both attractive and attainable.

Come to me

The two great gospel words are 'come' and 'go', the one a word of invitation, the other of command. The first speaks of intimacy, and the second of activity. Both are important in the Christian life, but our coming to Jesus must always precede our going out from him. For many of us, there has been too much 'going' and not enough 'coming', resulting in lives that are spiritually impoverished and lacking in both depth and passion. At this time the Spirit is reminding us that the gracious invitation of Jesus to intimacy with himself remains his priority and is the foundation of everything else in the Christian life.

1

Invitation to intimacy

Everyone longs for intimacy.

Whether we are young or old, male or female, we have an inbuilt need to love and be loved. There is a longing deep within each of us to be known and accepted for who we are, without having to pretend to be what we are not. We yearn for the freedom to be completely ourselves and to know that we are loved, respected and appreciated for who we are. We need to be able to fail and yet feel safe and secure, knowing that our acceptance remains intact, our value undiminished, even when our performance falters. We want to know that someone has seen the worst in us and yet loves us just the same. We ache for the freedom and wholeness that true intimacy brings.

Not surprisingly, most of us expect to find intimacy in human relationships. We assume that through friendship or marriage, our need for closeness, for unconditional love and acceptance, will be satisfied. Reality, however, tells us a different story.

Of course, human friendships can be sweet and do bring a measure of that for which we are yearning. Marriage, too, brings us closer to the oneness we crave, but even at its best it can never quite deliver that for which our innermost being cries out. Indeed, it was never intended to, for this inbuilt longing for intimacy is a God-given need, created within each one of us to draw us to the Creator of our souls. This is the 'God-shaped vacuum' of which a number of Christians have written over the centuries, which exists within every man, woman and child. Only in relationship with God can our need for intimacy begin to be fully met. Only

in the final communion of heaven will it be completely and totally satisfied.

Intimacy is ultimately a spiritual issue because only God can offer the unconditional love that allows us to be ourselves and know that we are accepted and valued as we are. It is expressed in 'grace', the unrestrained mercy of God flowing towards undeserving sinners. It means that God is the one who knows the worst about us and loves us just the same.

Our yearning for intimacy is an echo of Eden, for, there in the garden, Adam and Eve lived in unbroken fellowship with God day by day, until sin came into the world and spoiled everything. Having been born as descendants of Adam, we begin life out of fellowship with God. The reason Christ came into the world was to give himself as an offering for our sin and to reconcile us to the Father. When, by faith, we accept the benefits of his saving death, we are brought back into relationship with him. Friendship is restored and intimacy can begin.

Jesus invites us into this living relationship: that is why he says, 'Come to me.' The gospel invitation is a call to intimacy, to closeness, to oneness. This is what Jesus is offering to each of us. He presents us with an opportunity to get to know him, to walk with him and see, from close up, how he does things. We can learn from him by sharing personally in what he is doing—the most effective teaching method of all.

All this we can do without fear that he will take advantage of us or abuse us. Because he is full of grace and wants only what is best for us, he will never ask of us what we cannot deliver, but will always work with us to ensure that we can achieve what he has planned for us. He will not overwhelm us with the demands of legalistic religion. His call is to a relationship based on grace, grounded on his unconditional love for us and guaranteed by the unchanging nature of his character. We do not have to perform to gain or maintain his acceptance, because we are accepted already and for all time. In such a relationship, we can find true rest, the

freedom to be ourselves and the confidence to be at home in his presence.

Grace therefore leads us to intimacy, and intimacy is what the Christian life is all about. It is a love relationship, and we are called into friendship with the one who is the lover of our souls. Once we know that God is for us, that we have no need to fear him or dread his presence, we can approach him with confidence, and intimacy becomes wonderfully possible. As long as we are afraid of him, thinking him to be harsh and demanding, an unpredictable tyrant, we will want to keep our distance. As soon as we discover the depth and wonder of his love for us, we long to be with him, to know him more fully.

The understanding that the Christian life is essentially a love story is thoroughly biblical and totally transforming. God is the divine Lover, and we are his beloved, and the drama of redemption is the story of his relentless love, seeking us out. Of course he has plans and purposes for us, but they are the plans and purposes of a lover. Those who are one in heart inevitably share the same desires. Christian service, whether in terms of world mission, social involvement, environmental care or evangelism, is the inevitable outward expression of intimacy with a God whose love touches the whole world. It is not, however, the reason for the relationship. The relationship is, at heart, one of love; without that love, service becomes duty and obligation and is robbed of its passion and delight. If we forget this, our relationship with God will be nothing more than a business transaction, an employer–employee contract, when all the time God is looking for an explosive love affair.

Brent Curtis and John Eldridge captured the essence of this idea in their excellent book *The Sacred Romance*.² As the title suggests, the book's intention is to call the church back to the heart of God and the discovery of the passionate nature of his love for us, so that we can learn to live again the adventure of faith from our hearts. Too many of us live from the outer life of duty ('I ought to') instead of the inner life of desire ('I want to'), because we have substituted

activity for intimacy. Although in every heart there is a longing for a 'sacred romance', most Christians have lost the life of their heart and, with it, their romance with God. Curtis and Eldridge write:

For many of us, the waves of first love ebbed away in the whirlwind of Christian service and activity, and we began to lose the Romance. Our faith began to feel more like a series of problems that needed to be solved or principles that had to be mastered before we could finally enter into the abundant life promised us by Christ. We moved our spiritual life into the outer world of activity, and internally we drifted.³

Their analysis of the situation is an accurate one, and perhaps you can identify with it. We are too busy for love. Life in general is busy and the Christian life has become just as hectic, increasing the tempo at which most of us live and leaving little time to develop our relationship with God. Intimacy in any relationship needs time to develop; spiritual intimacy, the cultivation of our inner life, is exactly the same. Like a couple who drift apart because they never have quality time together, many of us are in danger of drifting away from the lover of our souls. We have no time to talk, no opportunity to enjoy each other.

Notice the irony of the situation. It is the 'whirlwind of Christian service and activity' that is the root of the problem. Somehow we have shifted the emphasis away from the inner life to the outer life, from being with God to being busy for him. It is a subtle and plausible trap, for many churches applaud busyness and hyper-activity as spiritual zeal. In their eagerness to achieve their goals and reach their growth targets, individuals can become expendable and spiritual depth regarded as a luxury. Extreme busyness becomes a mark of distinction, stress a badge of honour. As Tom Sine has noted, we are in danger of drowning in a sea of busyness.⁴

This was brought home to me when I was leading a seminar in Singapore for a group of church leaders. The topic was 'Staying spiritually fresh' and about 30 people had gathered together. I

noticed one pastor, in the minutes before we began, animatedly talking into her mobile phone. She made no effort to relate to any of the other pastors there, but instead made one call after another for about ten minutes. Then, as soon as the seminar started, her head dropped to the table and she fell asleep. Feeling concern for her, I hoped to speak with her afterwards, but as soon as we finished she shot out of the room, dashing to her next appointment.

Clearly some people find a sense of self-worth in being busy, and even church leaders can derive their identity from their work rather than from Christ. To be busy is to feel important, but we can be busy doing the wrong things and miss the thing that is most strategic. ‘We miss God’s best,’ says Sine, ‘because we have little sense of how to find a direction and a rhythm for our lives that flows directly out of our faith.’⁵

This overemphasis on the outer life, which so characterises the contemporary church, means that we have few people who can help us understand and explore the inner life. Other Christian traditions have a history of spiritual direction and mentoring, but in the evangelical and charismatic context we have developed expertise in the more pragmatic expressions of our faith—such as how to build a bigger church, how to develop seeker-sensitive services, how to be more culturally relevant and so on. We are inclined to spend our time meditating on what form the church should take in a postmodern world or evaluating the latest ‘fresh expression’ of congregational life. These are important, but they often leave us little time for getting to know God more deeply. We may need, therefore, to look outside our own traditions if we are to learn about intimacy with God and become skilled at helping people develop their inner life.

What is encouraging, however, is the growing hunger in many people to be more at home in the inner life, to know how to abide in Christ and how to receive God’s love for themselves. Soul care is increasingly on the agenda, as is the longing for intimacy. As Steve McVey says:

There is an awakening amongst many believers today who are no longer satisfied with the hustle and bustle generally known as the Christian life. Call it the deeper life, the contemplative life, or whatever you will. By any name this quality of Christian life is conceived in divine intimacy and born in quiet moments spent between two lovers. Many Christians who are dissatisfied with the emptiness of the noise are hearing His gentle call to something deeper, richer.⁶

This is the divine invitation that Jesus makes when he says, 'Come to me.' He sees the need of his people even today. Many are tired. Large numbers are wearing out, burning out or, at best, living on the edge of exhaustion. His heart of compassion reaches out, for he knows that there is something better, something more. He longs to draw us to himself and surround us with his divine embrace. He longs to introduce us to the rhythms of his grace so that we can recover our lives.