

ROOM FOR THE SINGING OF ANGELS

BY JIM MERSEREAU

“There must be always remaining in every man’s life some place for the singing of angels.” So wrote Howard Thurman in his book Deep Is the Hunger. What a compelling thought. If we listen closely can we hear traces of angelic singing? Perhaps as a soft undercurrent just behind the wind as it whistles through the pines, or maybe it’s the barely audible melody playing backup to the singing of starlings as they greet the new day. The profound quiet experienced in deep woods could be an ideal setting for detecting the sweet sounds of music from the heavenly realm.

Such thoughts inspire me to consider if I’ve left room in my own life for the singing of angels. Or have I, like so many Christians, allowed my life to become so busy, so over-scheduled, so enveloped in a cocoon of noisy distractions, that it’s no longer possible to sense the soft distant strains of angelic melodies?

In their book Boundaries, Henry Cloud and John Townsend argue for the necessity of taking control of our time by clearly staking-out the activities or events we will allow into our lives, and those which we won’t. Doing that allows us to establish what I call “buffer zones of quiet inactivity.” Picture a peaceful ring of solitude that encircles your life. It creates a quiet buffer zone between the outer-edge of how much you could possibly squeeze into your life, verses the maximum level of activity you will accept. There you should find your buffer zone.

The analogy may not be perfect but the concept is sound. This is advice many Christians need to hear and heed. The typical Christian is committed at a deep level to spouse, children, church, profession, friends, hobbies, and much more. With enthusiasm and dedication we give ourselves fully to the people and activities that are important to us. And if we’re not careful, we fill our lives right to the outer edges, leaving no room for the singing of angels, no buffer zones of quiet inactivity.

In “Today’s English Version” of the Bible, Ecclesiastes chapter 7, verse 29 reads: “God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated.” I’m tempted to think Solomon must have had me in mind when he wrote those words. In the midst of my busy life I often find myself longing for those buffer zones of quiet inactivity. I want to hear the singing of angels.

Some years ago I came across a wonderful little book written by Chuck Swindoll entitled, Intimacy with the Almighty. The subtitle reads, “Encountering Christ in the Secret Places of Your Life.” The title intrigued me and the book itself proved to be extremely rich and helpful.

In it Swindoll wrote of how, after thirty years as a successful pastor, author, and television personality, he was at that time in a brief (two year) time of transition in his life. It was a season that allowed him the opportunity to catch his breath and spend extra time in solitude and reflection. He wrote of how, when from hindsight he was able to consider what his own life had been like for all those years, he realized how extremely busy he had allowed himself to be. And as he discussed the subject with other Christians he was struck by how many people, especially those in professional Christian ministry, were in the same situation. He kept hearing comments

like, “I’m strung out, impatient, occasionally resentful, and even worse, empty.”

One pastor he spoke with said, “Nobody around me knows this, but I’m operating on fumes. I am lonely, hollow, shallow, and enslaved to a schedule that never lets up.”

As I read those words I realized with a start that they described me. That was exactly how I felt at that moment, dedicated to ministry; passionate about serving the Lord and His people; a heart that was truly after God; and empty. Tired, drained, emotionally and physically spent and wondering what went wrong. How could something so good and right (Christian ministry), leave me feeling so lousy and discouraged?

The problem, I discovered, was not necessarily my ministry activities. The bigger issue was what I had allowed to take place in the rest of my life. I was guilty of the very thing Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes - my life had become very complicated. For the most part the boundaries, the buffer zone of quiet inactivity, the room for the singing of angels, didn’t much exist in my life. Oh sure, each day I usually managed to set aside some time for prayer and Bible reading, I was a pastor after all. But doing so required discipline and determination. The rest of my life was so over-scheduled, so crammed full of activities and expectations, so busy and noisy, that the pressure never let up. What quiet time there was had to be squeezed in, fiercely protected, and jealously guarded. As a result it usually wasn’t very relaxing or refreshing. I often felt as if I was hunkering down inside my little spiritual fort and fending off the onslaught of the world.

That was more than a decade ago and I’m happy to report that things are much better now. Swindoll’s little book was helpful, as was Freedom of Simplicity by Richard Foster. It was the theme from the latter book, “simplicity” that most helped me establish some reasonable boundaries in my life.

“Simplicity” is an interesting concept. It’s the antithesis of “complexity” and in the context within which Solomon wrote it implies there’s a better way of living. Richard Foster teaches that the grace of Christian simplicity is a virtue which, “... once worked into our lives, will unify the demands of our life. It will prune and trim gently, and in the right places. It brings liberty of soul.”

Now there’s an attractive image, “liberty of soul.” I want that. I want a soul that’s free to float in those buffer zones of quiet inactivity, relax in the company of my Heavenly Father, and soak in the rich, soft music of angelic singing. But achieving that requires change. It means making choices to eliminate less important activities; it means saying “no” to some people and certain requests; and it means having the strength and courage to establish firm boundaries that I will stick to.

Foster asks the question, “What will set us free from this bondage to the ever spiraling demands that are placed upon us?” He concludes, “The answer is found in the grace of Christian simplicity.” He suggests we consider simplicity on three levels: inward, outward, and corporate.

Inward simplicity involves spending peaceful, restful time with God in silence, solitude, reflection and meditation. While Bible study, intercessory prayer, acts of service, and other faith-oriented activities all have their place in helping to develop our relationship with God, inward simplicity is, well, its simple. In fact it is beautiful in its simplicity. Inward simplicity frees us from feeling as if we always need to be “doing something” for God. It gives us the freedom to simply “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10). Foster says the inevitable result is we develop a “contentedness” deep in our soul.

Outward simplicity involves exactly what its name implies – the intentional simplification of the things and activities that fill our lives. It calls for a reduction in the quantity of material goods we consume and possess, as well as limits placed on the sheer volume of activities we involve ourselves in.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “There are two ways to get enough: one is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.” Outward simplicity takes a stand against the mindset of “conspicuous consumption” that so permeates our society. It also leads us away from the tendency to fill our lives to the outer limits with events, projects, and frantic hyperactivity. Outward simplicity moves us instead to a slower, quieter, less demanding, but more richly rewarding, way of life.

Finally, there is corporate simplicity. Here we make a focused effort, within our Christian communities, to respect the boundaries established by our brothers and sisters. We resist the temptation to pull them into ever more demanding levels of activity and service, supposedly for the good of the church. We plan joint efforts, rather than individual, for the specific purpose of helping each other carry our respective loads – thereby creating more room in all of our lives. And we ensure our faith communities are not over-scheduling – just planning activities and programs for the sake of creating the illusion that “there’s a lot happening at this church.” As a fellowship of believers we promote and teach the virtue of Christian simplicity and we then create an environment in which it flourishes.

A Country and Western song of a few years ago included the refrain, “I’m so busy being busy I don’t have any time left to enjoy my life.” That lyric paints a sad picture, and unfortunately it’s true of many of us. But the truth is, we all get the same amount of time – twenty-four hours in every day. The difference lies in what we choose to do with it. We can so structure our lives, we can simplify, prioritize, establish boundaries, and make the choices necessary to ensure that in our lives there will be “room for the singing of angels.”