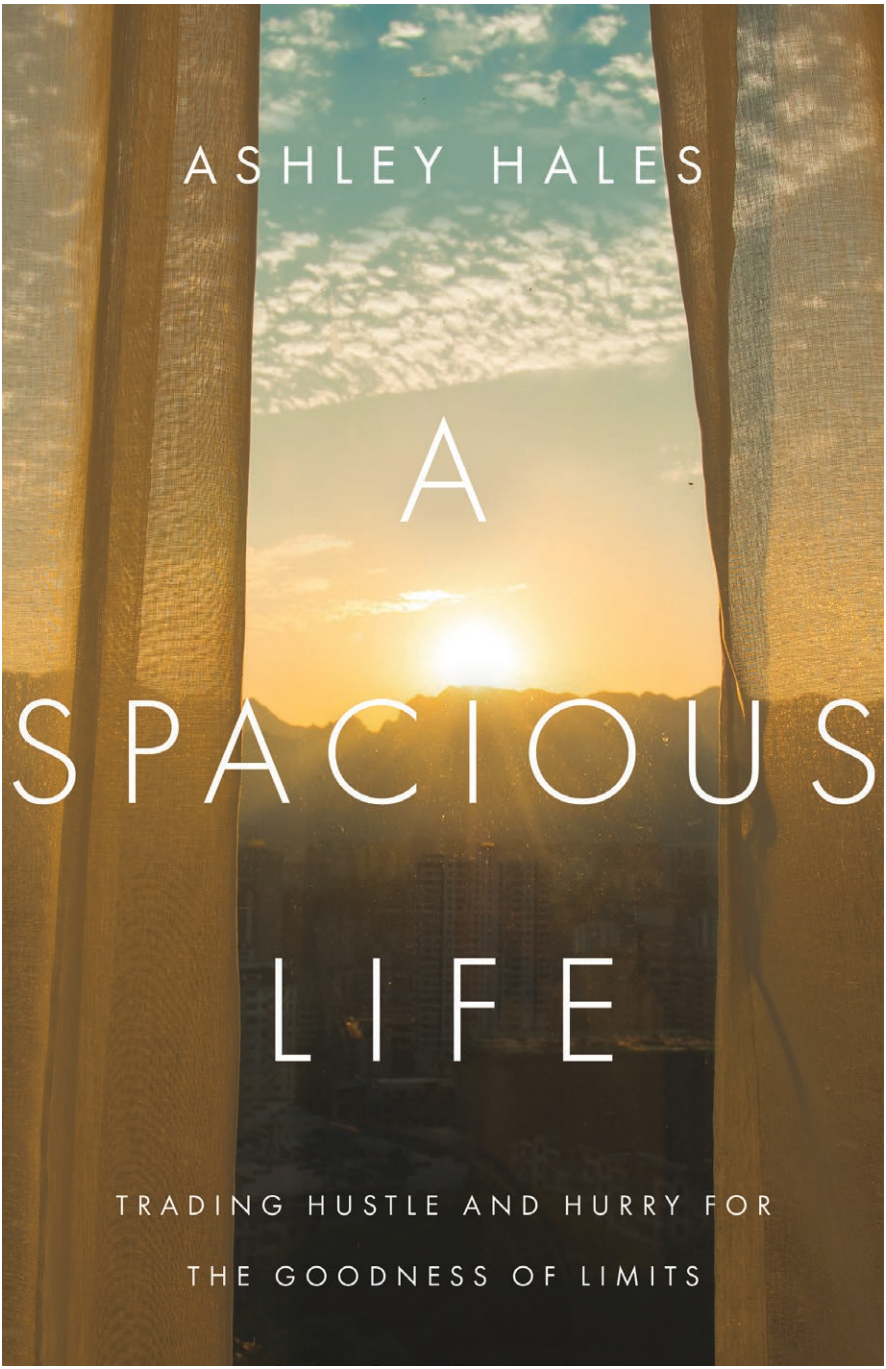

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

1

THE SUPERMARKET OF LIFE

An Invitation to Reconsider Freedom and Significance

My husband and I lived three glorious years in Edinburgh, Scotland—full of waning northerly light, ancient streets and castles, milky tea, hours spent among old books, and the sense that a full life was finally underway. We were poised between worlds—between the country we were from and the country in which we lived, between college and the fulfilling careers we imagined, newly married but not yet settled down or with children. We'd spend Friday nights bantering with other international grad school students; we watched American TV on DVD; we hosted twenty-five people for an American Thanksgiving and jumped into the rhythms of our parish in the Church of Scotland. Though our meals

were often simple, our choices few, it felt like the good life—or at least the beginning of the good life.

There would be time for proper jobs—my husband was training for the pastorate, and I was getting my PhD—and I imagined life a beautiful symphony of ideas. Maybe we'd start a church in Edinburgh, or maybe somewhere else. Maybe I'd get hired to do a postdoctoral fellowship in Europe. Children might come and we'd slot them into a world of poetry, travel, and the life-changing significance of gospel ministry. All was possible.

Yet, when we found ourselves back in Pasadena for work (on the same block we'd lived on three years prior), then a few months later found ourselves expecting our first child, the possibilities narrowed—our lives looked nothing like my rosy-colored, outwardly stretching ideal.

I imagined we could fit our children into the life we had, as if I could file them into one of those black metal tiered inboxes, so that all my early goals—travel, adventure, intellectual pursuits, time to sit in quiet with a cup of tea or to ponder a painting—would not be disturbed. My file-folder life would expand but essentially remain untouched.

What I didn't know, at least not then in a deep-in-your-bones sort of way, was that these limitations on my time, body, and affections were actually an invitation. Instead, I fought them.

For years I fought God about the gap between my imagined life and my given one. My crash course in acknowledging my limits was parenthood. But it seems that God uses many things—a failed job, an angst you can't shake in middle age, a move, a rift in a friendship—to show us our limits. It's easy to take a nostalgic look backward: surely I'd left the good life back

in a world of dreams around Edinburgh Castle. Now I was stuck in a hazy world of infant spit-up, a dissertation to finish writing, and no clear sense of God's calling.

Where had the good life gone? Where had *I* gone? Sometimes I railed at God about why the options had dried up, but more often I just ignored him. I'd go to church but not read my Bible; my perfunctory prayers were more out of duty than interest in God's response. I felt constrained, boxed into a new role. I was tethered to people, to a place, to new responsibilities, to a child who needed feeding every three hours. This surely didn't feel like freedom.

It felt like a very small circle in which to move. I wanted big circles, grand vistas, and a life that went up and to the right.

I wish someone had told me to begin to pay careful attention to my limits—that there was a spacious life in there too. That God could be found in the small mustard seed and grain of wheat as well as the sublime sunset or lengthy quiet time. Or maybe they did—and perhaps this is the journey out of youth and into adulthood that we each take—but the only way I could conceive of transformation was with careers and titles, passports and ideas.

• • •

Several years into parenthood an average evening might look like this: I kick the dishwasher closed with a baby strapped to me, all while trying to stir the spaghetti sauce. Having had little adult interaction, I'm hungry to hear about my husband's day and the delightful cacophony of ideas he's had, so I do my best to carry on a coherent conversation amid the cooking and tidying up (maybe we could even have a glass of wine and

listen to some music?). Then, a toddler comes into the kitchen, tears and snot running down his face because a toy has gone missing, or he's been asked to help and he doesn't want to, or it's too cold or too hot and he can't find his artistic creation which I thought was just a cardboard box and is now at the bottom of the recycling.

I respond to the urgent. I redirect. I try to extend the grace that I am jealous of, but my anger bubbles. I am tired of always giving. I want control. The pasta water boils over. The moment of conversation is gone, and I realize I simply cannot do it all.

This leads me into a lovely little shame spiral. If I don't just blame my circumstances or anyone within striking distance (tactic one), I think the problem isn't with my life but with how I've ordered it (tactic two). I vow to try harder, get a new dinner routine, and find a new parenting book. And if that doesn't work, I'll sit in my shame, concluding I'm not worth it (tactic three). A mantra of "you do you" doesn't solve shame or loneliness.

I'm not alone. We imagine the shape of the good life as one with endless opportunities from which to choose. But under the heavy burden of "having it all," women, particularly in their thirties to fifties, are feeling the weight.

Ada Calhoun writes of this "experiment in crafting a higher-achieving, more fulfilled, more well-rounded version of the American woman." For women entering middle age, that "experiment" has brought on higher debt and increased pressure with work and family life. Throw in fluctuating hormones in midlife, and the results are more exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and sleeplessness. This is why Calhoun writes that by midlife, many of us "find the experiment is largely a failure." Not only

is the experiment a failure but we believe we are too. We've failed by not meeting our ideals, and we've also failed by being deeply unhappy.

If we say the good life is a happy one, and what makes a person happy is freedom, and we define freedom as unlimited autonomy, then all our unlimited autonomy should create happy, contented people. But our unlimited autonomy isn't bringing happiness; it's producing stasis, exhaustion, and hurry. David Brooks says it like this:

> In a culture of "I'm Free to Be Myself," individuals are lonely and loosely attached. Community is attenuated, connections are dissolved, and loneliness spreads. This situation makes it difficult to be good—to fulfill the deep human desires for love and connection. It's hard on people of all ages, but it's especially hard on young adults. They are thrown into a world that is unstructured and uncertain, with few authorities or guardrails except those they are expected to build on their own.

Our freedom narrative in the West—choosing your own destiny according to your own sense of autonomous freedom—is leaving us at sea in endless choice. We are lonely, exhausted, and unsure what success or joy even looks like anymore.

• • •

Does this sound familiar? If you're anxious and feel like you're always on a treadmill of hustle and hurry, I want to bring you along with me to the grocery store—specifically, to an American grocery store after our years in Scotland.

Not having had a car during our years in Edinburgh, we'd pop into the grocery store almost every day and carry our groceries home. We'd run down to a corner shop when the food staples ran out. We'd learned to make sure we had our Monday meal prep done by Saturday, since by Sunday, the stores were likely low on milk and bread (and the shops closed early).

When we walked into a large American grocery store after years away, I stopped, taking in the wide, shiny aisles. There were a hundred varieties of Cheerios and granola, half of them tagged with red sale tickets. I remember staring blankly at the condiments. There was avocado oil mayo, vegan mayo, regular full-fat mayo, fat-free mayo, off-brand mayo, and a hundred other permutations in every size imaginable. Why did we need a thousand options and two aisles for condiments? I dropped my basket and went home. It was simply too much. I couldn't choose.

When every option is available to us, we don't actually have freedom; we tend to shut down. I experienced what sociologists call choice overload (or paralysis) and decision fatigue. If you've ever tried to pick out a paint color for a wall, stood in your closet full of clothes with "nothing to wear," or found yourself trying to find the right word at the end of the day but your head is muddled from the thousands of decisions you've already sifted through, you know this doesn't feel like freedom. Like too many condiments to choose from, we don't need more choices to live the good life. We probably need less. We need instructions, a guide, and appropriately placed guardrails to show us the way forward.

The American grocery store—along with images of success like "climbing ladders"—showed me how I'd made the good life a cocktail of endless personal choice, ambition, and hurry. I'd shaken them all up and added Jesus as a cherry on top. The answer to this overwhelm wasn't that I simply needed a change of circumstances (like another brand of condiment) to make me happy.

The problem of my satisfaction didn't in fact rest on a curated life I could create from the ground up, where the issue was that all the stuff of life—relationships, work, my husband's career, the continent we lived on—got in the way.

The problem wasn't that I had to manage my time better, do more, or work harder to get what I wanted.

I had to upend my idea of the good life; the good life wasn't found in my power to choose whatever I wanted.

Jesus could not be a garnish on top of my unlimited autonomy. He was the gentle shepherd leading in the narrow way. The way into a more spacious life was through a doorway I didn't want to enter: right through my limits.

• • •

The gospel is the good news that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension accomplish for us what hustle and hurry never can. We do not have to push past limits to earn our perfection before a holy God; instead, God comes near, taking on our human limits to bring us into relationship with himself. When we place our trust in him, he exchanges our sin and shame for his beloved perfection. But how do we

The gospel is the good news that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension accomplish for us what hustle and hurry never can.

get that goodness in us? It starts by walking out of the grocery store, stepping down from the ladder, and replanting ourselves in this better story.

Whether or not we call ourselves Christians, most of us do not practically live out this better story, the one lived under the rule and leading of Jesus. The good news of Jesus takes a stick of dynamite to our carefully ordered, autonomous lives on the right and the left, so that we're forced to reckon with this reminder from Fleming Rutledge: "If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, as John the Baptist says, then all our other kingdoms are called radically into question, including my own private kingdom, and yours." We are not the monarchs of our own lives.

Freedom is not simply freedom *from* constraints but *for* something—for love. Jesus models for us what this freedom for the sake of love looks like: for those who come weary and worn to Jesus, it looks like healing. It tastes like bread in hungry bellies and brings a justice and peace deeper than what a full bank account could offer. The freedom Jesus holds out is an entrance into something more beautiful than simply being turned loose in the condiment aisle or asked to curate our own lives. Limits are good.

Freedom is not simply freedom *from* constraints but *for* something—for love.

Wait, I can hear you asking, limits are . . . *good*, full stop? Like, not just something to push past or knock down? If you're a bit skeptical, perhaps you can relate to a conversation I had with my neighbor who, when I told her limits were good, guffawed: "You mean I don't have be good at it all—building multiple businesses and have them firing on all

cylinders, volunteering in my twins' kindergarten class, all while caring for my partner who has just been diagnosed with cancer?" "No, you don't," I told her. "You can be human."

These good, God-given limits are for all people in all times and places, not the sorts of societal limits imposed on others to oppress or silence. As God's creatures made in his image, we are all limited by our bodies, by our personalities, by our places, by our circles of relation, and by those for whom we are responsible. We are limited in our power and authority and by particular seasons of work, health, and faith. We are limited in our time, our attention, and our calling. Our God-given limits are the doorway into a more spacious life.

What might happen if we tried embracing our limits as gifts for our flourishing rather than barriers to our success? I think we'd find we were beginning to walk in the way of Jesus.

But what does this look like? It looks like love and feels just as disorienting. The missiologist Lesslie Newbigin wrote: "True freedom is not found by seeking to develop the powers of the self without limits, for the human person is not made for autonomy but for true relatedness in love and obedience; and this also entails the acceptance of limits as a necessary part of what it means to be human." Limits remind us we are but dust. Limits remind us too that we are made in God's image, "lower than the angels," the fragile and glorious crown of creation (Heb 2:7). We are made by Love for love, and love joyfully accepts constraints in order to love others particularly and fully.

Our God-given limits are the doorway into a more spacious life.

If you're a bit like Augustine, that patron saint of restless souls, and you're realizing that "the loss of guardrails only meant ending up in the ditch, [and] you start to wonder whether freedom is all it's cracked up to be—or whether freedom might be something other than the absence of constraint and the multiplication of options," I invite you along for the journey.

The doorway feels a little tight at first, but if today you're burned out from hurry and hustle, or you find yourself crushed under the weight of the "free" identity you must endlessly create, may I offer you another way? There is a spacious life waiting for you inside the narrow gate.

As we go on this journey together, we will follow the only person who is both perfect and limited, Jesus. As fully God and fully human, Jesus shows us how to embrace our limits under the loving reign of God, condescending as he does to leave heavenly glory to come to his creation as a human. All aspects of his coming—from his birth to his death and resurrection—were acts of particular love. Each chapter of this book moves deeper into this story, holding out an invitation to us from the life of Christ. Each offers a new way of seeing so we might begin to imagine how our own stories map onto the story of Jesus.

Each chapter also ends with a short prayer—a way to practice being with Jesus in the limits of your time, even as you read. If prayer is new for you, try these on for size. Take these with you into your hearts, homes, small groups, and churches as starting points.

Duck your head and walk through the narrow gate. Jesus is not only our good shepherd leading the way to an abundant

life, but he is also the gate: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture" (Jn 10:9 NIV). Just beyond is that pastureland you seek. Join me for a journey into internal landscapes. Here is a more spacious life.