

**John  
Mark  
Comer**

**The  
Ruthless  
Elimination  
of  
~~Hurry~~**

**Foreword  
by  
John  
Ortberg**

**Praise for**

***The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry***

**“As someone all too familiar with ‘hurry sickness,’ I desperately needed this book.”**

**—Scott Harrison, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Thirst***

**“John Mark Comer is a hugely talented leader, speaker, and writer. You will find lots of wise advice here.”**

**—Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, London**

**“Necessary. Freeing.”**

**—Annie F. Downs, best-selling author of *100 Days to Brave***

**“Never has a generation needed a book as much as this. John Mark has beautifully written a remedy for our overworked and tired souls.”**

**—Jeremy and Audrey Roloff, *New York Times* best-selling authors of *A Love Letter Life***

**“Great guy; even better book!”**

**—Bob Goff, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Love Does* and *Everybody, Always***

**“*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* is refreshing, revitalizing, and a shock to the system. Beautifully and compellingly written, it is a prophetic message for our time.”**

—Pete Greig, founder of the 24-7 Prayer movement and senior pastor of Emmaus Rd, Guildford, UK

“We’ve found no better conversation or antidote to our culture’s problem of busyness and hurry than John Mark’s words in this book. Beyond helpful and encouraging!”

—Alyssa and Jefferson Bethke, *New York Times* best-selling authors of *Love That Lasts*

“John Mark Comer has given a gift to the church. This book is prophetic, practical, and profoundly life giving. He confronts the idolatry of speed that is causing so much emotional and relational trauma, and he provides a way forward that creates hope, hunger, and a vision of a beautiful life.”

—Jon Tyson, lead pastor of the Church of the City New York and author of *The Burden Is Light*

“John Mark Comer’s transparency invites us to reconsider how we live our lives by getting straight to the point: if we don’t eliminate our busyness, we just may eliminate our souls. *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* will inspire you to make the hard but practical choices that will utterly change your trajectory for the better.”

—Gabe Lyons, president of Q Ideas

“Living as a spiritually and mentally healthy follower of Jesus in our technological, calendar-driven culture is, it turns out, quite difficult. In this book John Mark Comer shares a practical, personal, and challenging call to imagine new ways that our lives can imitate Jesus.”

—Tim Mackie, cofounder of the Bible Project

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**WATERBROOK**



## THE RUTHLESS ELIMINATION OF HURRY

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Foreword by John Ortberg

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**Come to me,  
all you who are weary  
and burdened,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you  
and learn from me,  
for I am gentle  
and humble in heart,  
and you will find  
rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy  
and my burden is light.**

**-Jesus in  
Matthew 11v28-30**



# Foreword

The smartest and best man I have known jotted down some thoughts about hurry; I think they were posted in his kitchen when he died. “Hurry,” he wrote, “involves excessive haste or a state of urgency. It is associated with words such as *hurl*, *hurdle*, *hurly-burly* (meaning “uproar”), and *hurricane*.” He defined it as a “state of frantic effort one falls into in response to inadequacy, fear, and guilt.” The simple essence of hurry is *too much to do!* The good of being delivered from hurry is not simply pleasure but the ability to do calmly and effectively—with strength and joy—that which really matters. “We should take it as our aim,” he wrote, “to live our lives entirely without hurry. We should form a clear intention to live without hurry. One day at a time. Trying today.”

We should form a mental picture of our place in the world before God. This places us in a different context. Psalm 23 does not say “The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I gotta run faster.” Shepherds rarely run. Good ones, anyway. He said to begin to eliminate things you “have” to do. He said it was important to not be afraid of “doing nothing.” He said to plan on such times. He said it would be important to deal with the panic of not being busy. To allow

yourself to be in the panic, feeling it roll over you, and not going for the fix.

John Mark Comer has written a prophetic word for our day. He is engaging and honest and learned and fun and humble. He guides us to a great crossroads. To choose to live an unhurried life in our day is somewhat like taking a vow of poverty in earlier centuries; it is scary. It is an act of faith. But there are deeper riches on the other side. To be in the presence of a person where hurry has (like Elvis) “left the building” is to be inspired about the possibility of another kind of Life.

I was struck by the gifts of wisdom studded throughout this book: “All my worst moments...are when I’m in a hurry.” “Love, joy, and peace...are incompatible with hurry.” “The average iPhone user touches his or her phone 2,617 times *a day*.” (By way of contrast, the psalmist said, “I have set the LORD always before me” [Psalm 16v8, ESV]. What would my life be like if God touched my mind as frequently as I touch my phone?) Freedom perhaps never comes without great cost. And John Mark is someone who has made choices that involved a price, to pursue the life that is beyond price. He knows both the struggle and the choice, and so can speak to those of us who hunger and thirst.

Twenty centuries ago another wise man said, “[Make] the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5v16, ESV). I used to think that meant the days are full of sensuality and fleshly temptation. And of course, they are. But I think it mostly means that the life we were intended to live must be lived in time. And we are so used to spiritually mediocre days—days lived in irritation and fear and self-preoccupation and frenzy—that we throw our lives away in a hurry.

So, in these pages lies the Great Invitation. Take a deep breath. Put your cell phone away. Let your heart slow down. Let God take care of the world.

—John Ortberg

# Prologue: Autobiography of an epidemic

It's a Sunday night, 10 p.m. Head up against the glass of an Uber, too tired to even sit up straight. I taught six times today—yes, *six*. The church I pastor just added *another* gathering. That's what you do, right? Make room for people? I made it until about talk number four; I don't remember anything after that. I'm well beyond tired—emotionally, mentally, even spiritually.

When we first went to six, I called up this megachurch pastor in California who'd been doing six for a while.

"How do you do it?" I asked.

"Easy," he said. "It's just like running a marathon once a week."

"Okay, thanks."

Click.

Wait...isn't a marathon really hard?

I take up long-distance running.

He has an affair and drops out of church.

That does not bode well for my future.

Home now, late dinner. Can't sleep; that dead-tired-but-wired feeling. Crack open a beer. On the couch, watching an obscure kung fu movie nobody's ever heard of. Chinese, with subtitles. Keanu Reeves is the bad guy.<sup>1</sup> Love Keanu. I sigh; lately, I'm ending most nights this way, on the couch, long after the family has gone to bed. Never been remotely into kung fu before; it makes me nervous. Is this the harbinger of mental illness on the horizon?

"It all started when he got obsessed with indie martial arts movies..."

But the thing is, I feel like a ghost. Half alive, half dead. More numb than anything else; flat, one dimensional. Emotionally I live with an undercurrent of a nonstop anxiety that rarely goes away, and a tinge of sadness, but mostly I just feel blaaah spiritually...empty. It's like my soul is hollow.

My life is so *fast*. And I like fast. I'm type A. Driven. A get-crap-done kind of guy. But we're well past that now. I work six days a week, early to late, and it's *still* not enough time to get it all done. Worse, I feel *hurried*. Like I'm tearing through each day, so busy with life that I'm missing out on the moment. And what is life but a series of moments?

Anybody? I can't be the only one...

Monday morning. Up early. In a hurry to get to the office. Always in a hurry. Another day of meetings. I freaking hate meetings. I'm introverted and creative, and like most millennials I get bored way too easily. Me in a lot of meetings is a terrible idea for all involved. But our church grew really fast, and that's part of the trouble. I hesitate to say this because, trust me, if anything, it's embarrassing:



we grew by over a thousand people a year for seven years straight. I thought this was what I wanted. I mean, a fast-growing church is every pastor's dream. But some lessons are best learned the hard way: turns out, I don't actually *want* to be the CEO/executive director of a nonprofit/HR expert/strategy guru/leader of leaders of leaders, etc.

I got into this thing to teach the way of Jesus.

Is *this* the way of Jesus?

Speaking of Jesus, I have this terrifying thought lurking at the back of my mind. This nagging question of conscience that won't go away.

*Who am I becoming?*

I just hit thirty (level three!), so I have a little time under my belt. Enough to chart a trajectory to plot the character arc of my life a few decades down the road.

I stop.

Breathe.

Envision myself at forty. Fifty. Sixty.

It's not pretty.

I see a man who is "successful," but by all the wrong metrics: church size, book sales, speaking invites, social stats, etc., and the new American dream—your own Wikipedia page. In spite of all my talk about Jesus, I see a man who is emotionally unhealthy and spiritually shallow. I'm still in my marriage, but it's duty, not delight. My kids want nothing to do with the church; she was the mistress of choice for Dad, an illicit lover I ran to, to hide from the pain of my wound. I'm basically who I am today but older and worse: stressed

out, on edge, quick to snap at the people I love most, unhappy, preaching a way of life that sounds better than it actually is.

Oh, and always in a *hurry*.

Why am I in such a rush to become somebody I don't even like?

It hits me like a freight train: in America you can be a success as a pastor and a failure as an apprentice of Jesus; you can gain a church and lose your soul.

I don't want this to be my life...

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Fast-forward three months: flying home from London. Spent the week learning from my charismatic Anglican friends about life in the Spirit; it's like a whole other dimension to reality that I've been missing out on. But with each mile east, I'm flying back to a life I dread.

The night before we left, this guy Ken prayed for me in his posh English accent; he had a word for me about coming to a fork in the road. One road was paved and led to a city with lights. Another was a dirt road into a forest; it led into the dark, into the unknown. I'm to take the unpaved road.

I have absolutely no idea what it means. But it means *something*, I know. As he said it, I felt my soul tremor under God. But what is God saying to me?

Catching up on email; planes are good for that. I'm behind, as usual. Bad news again; a number of staff are upset with me. I'm starting to question the whole megachurch thing. Not so much the size of a church but the *way* of doing church.<sup>2</sup> Is this really it? A bunch of people coming to listen to a talk and then going back to their

overbusy lives? But my questions come off angry and arrogant. I'm so emotionally unhealthy, I'm just leaking chemical waste over our poor staff.

What's that leadership axiom?

"As go the leaders, so goes the church."<sup>3</sup>

Dang, I sure hope our church doesn't end up like me.

Sitting in aisle seat 21C, musing over how to answer another tense email, a virgin thought comes to the surface of my mind. Maybe it's the thin atmosphere of thirty thousand feet, but I don't think so. This thought has been trying to break out for months, if not years, but I've not let it. It's too dangerous. Too much of a threat to the status quo. But the time has come for it to be uncaged, let loose in the wild.

Here it is: *What if I changed my life?*

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Another three months and a thousand hard conversations later, dragging every pastor and mentor and friend and family member into the vortex of the most important decision I've ever made, I'm sitting in an elder meeting. Dinner is over. It's just me and our core leaders. This is the moment. From here on, my autobiography will fall into the "before" or "after" category.

I say it: "I resign."

Well, not resign per se. I'm not quitting. We're a multisite church. (As if one church isn't more than enough for a guy like me to lead.) Our largest church is in the suburbs; I've spent the last ten years of my life there, but my heart's always been in the city. All the way back to high school, I remember driving my '77 Volkswagen Bus up and down Twenty-Third Street and dreaming of church planting

downtown.<sup>4</sup> Our church in the city is smaller. Much smaller. On way harder ground; urban Portland is a secular wonderland—all the cards are against you down here. But that's where I feel the gravity of the Spirit weighing on me to touch down.

So not resign, more like demote myself. I want to lead one church at a time. Novel concept, right? My dream is to slow down, simplify my life around abiding. Walk to work. I want to reset the metrics for success, I say. I want to focus more on who I am becoming in apprenticeship to Jesus. Can I do that?

They say yes.

(Most likely they are thinking, *Finally.*)

People will talk; they always do: He couldn't hack it (true). Wasn't smart enough (not true). Wasn't tough enough (okay, mostly true). Or here's one I will get for months: He's turning his back on God's call on his life. Wasting his gift in obscurity. Farewell.

Let them talk; I have new metrics now.

I end my ten-year run at the church. My family and I take a sabbatical. It's a sheer act of grace. I spend the first half comatose, but slowly I wake back up to my soul. I come back to a much smaller church. We move into the city; I walk to work. I start therapy. One word: *wow*. Turns out, I need a lot of it. I focus on emotional health. Work fewer hours. Date my wife. Play Star Wars Legos with my kids. (It's for them, really.) Practice Sabbath. Detox from Netflix. Start reading fiction for the first time since high school. Walk the dog before bed. You know, *live*.

Sounds great, right? Utopian even? Hardly. I feel more like a drug addict coming off meth. Who am I without the mega? A queue of people who want to meet with me? A late-night email flurry? A life of speed isn't easy to walk away from. But in time, I detox. Feel my soul open up. There are no fireworks in the sky. Change is slow, gradual,

and intermittent; three steps forward, a step or two back. Some days I nail it; others, I slip back into hurry. But for the first time in years, I'm moving toward maturity, one inch at a time. Becoming more like Jesus. And more like my best self.

Even better: I feel God again.

I feel my own soul.

I'm on the unpaved road with no clue where it leads, but that's okay. I honestly value who I'm becoming over where I end up. And for the first time in years, I'm smiling at the horizon.

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My Uber ride home to binge-watch Keanu Reeves was five years and as many lifetimes ago. So much has changed since then. This little book was born out of my short and mostly uneventful autobiography, my journey from a life of hurry to a life of, well, something else.

In a way, I'm the worst person to write about hurry. I'm the guy angling at the stoplight for the lane with two cars instead of three; the guy bragging about being the "first to the office, last to go home"; the fast-walking, fast-talking, chronic-multitasking speed addict (to clarify, not *that* kind of speed addict). Or at least I was. Not anymore. I found an off-ramp from that life. So maybe I'm the best person to write a book on hurry? You decide.

I don't know your story. The odds are, you aren't a former megachurch pastor who burned out and had a mid-life crisis at age thirty-three. It's more likely that you're a college student at USD or a twentysomething urbanite in Chicago or a full-time mom in Melbourne or a middle-aged insurance broker in Minnesota. Getting started in life or just trying to keep going.

The Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han ends his book *The Burnout Society* with a haunting observation of most people in the Western world: “They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.”<sup>5</sup>

That was me to the proverbial T.

Is it you? Even a little?

We all have our own story of trying to stay sane in the day and age of iPhones and Wi-Fi and the twenty-four-hour news cycle and urbanization and ten-lane freeways with soul-crushing traffic and nonstop noise and a frenetic ninety-miles-per-hour life of go, go, go...

Think of this book like you and me meeting up for a cup of Portland coffee (my favorite is a good Kenyan from Heart on Twelfth) and me downloading everything I’ve learned over the last few years about how to navigate the treacherous waters of what French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky calls the “hypermodern” world.<sup>6</sup>

But honestly: everything I have to offer you, I’m stealing from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, my rabbi, and so much more.

My favorite invitation of Jesus comes to us via Matthew’s gospel:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.<sup>7</sup>

Do you feel “weary”?

What about “burdened”?

Anybody feel a bone-deep tiredness not just in your mind or body but in your *soul*?

If so, you're not alone.

Jesus invites all of us to take up the “easy” yoke. He has—on offer to all—an easy way to shoulder the weight of life with his triumvirate of love, joy, and peace. As Eugene Peterson translated Jesus’ iconic line: “to live freely and lightly.”<sup>8</sup>

What if the secret to a happy life—and it is a secret, an open one but a secret nonetheless; how else do so few people know it?—what if the secret isn’t “out there” but much closer to home? What if all you had to do was slow down long enough for the merry-go-round blur of life to come into focus?

What if the secret to the life we crave is actually “easy”?

Now, let me clarify a few things before we begin:

First, I’m not you. While glaringly obvious, it needs to be said. I’m guessing this anti-hurry manifesto will grate on some of you; it did on me at first. It exposes the deep ache in all of us for a life that is different from the one we’re currently living. The temptation will be to write me off as unrealistic or out of touch:

*He has no idea what’s it’s like to be a single mom working two jobs just trying to pay off debt and make rent each week.*

You’re right; I don’t.

*He’s woefully out of touch with life as an executive in the social Darwinism of the marketplace.*

That might be true.

*He doesn’t get what it’s like in my city/nation/generation.*