

# The Laziness Trap



by ANDY FARMER

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When I was growing up, I had a fixation with the Frankenstein monster. It started by watching old Boris Karloff films on Saturday afternoon TV. But I would feed the fixation by saving up my money to buy monster magazines at the local five-and-ten-cent store. I remember sitting at my desk for hours, carefully copying the pictures in the magazine, trying to draw Frankenstein in exact and frightening detail.

I loved to lay awake at night and plot escape plans out of my house if Frankenstein ever made it to my neighborhood. I imagined hearing him bursting through the front door while I was alone in my house. I had just enough time to run downstairs to the basement, taking advantage of the fact that Frankenstein didn't know the layout of my house like I did. Then, I'd run out the basement door, jump the fence into my neighbor's yard, and run down to the creek at the bottom of the hill. From there I would crawl through the drainage culvert under the street and emerge on the other side, safe under the cover of the woods. The key to my whole plan was to never

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let myself get trapped where I didn't have a way of escape.

I think back on those idyllic days when all I had to worry about was being trapped by fake monsters. But as we grow, we realize that there are plenty of real things around us that can feel like traps. Pressures and responsibilities in life. Health concerns. Family trials. Financial burdens. To feel trapped means we see no means of escape or release, and little hope for anything to change. As I do pastoral counseling, I often meet people who feel trapped in their problems, relationships or bad habits. And, true confession: I myself have been trapped. This article is about one trap I know inside and out—the laziness trap.

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## People caught in the laziness trap know its dark side.

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The laziness trap may seem pretty benign compared to other traps, such as addiction to alcohol or pornography. But it is no fake monster. In its own way, laziness ensnares and controls people in habits that span decades. It lays waste to people's potential in life. As one writer described it, "Laziness grows on people; it begins in cobwebs and ends in iron chains."<sup>1</sup> People caught in the laziness trap know its dark side. They know the gnawing despair of regret—a life of unfulfilled dreams, failed plans, and disappointed loved ones. They feel stuck and weighed down, like prisoners of their own lives.

That's how I felt. I knew I was lazy and I knew it was a problem, but it just felt like it would be too hard to change. I felt hopeless. But I finally got to a point when I decided that wasting my life isn't living. It's just getting used to being stuck.

But how do you get out of the laziness trap? How do you even begin to change when you feel so stuck? I will outline the path to freedom that I walked and have helped others walk along as well. To do that, I will show how the Bible reframed my understanding of laziness and suggest a way forward based on key passages in Hebrews and Romans.

<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Sir Matthew Hale in *Day's Collacon: An Encyclopedia of Prose Quotations*, ed., Edward Parsons Day, published 1883 and available on Google Books, 497.

## Laziness Can Hide in Plain Sight

It's not always obvious to see who struggles with laziness. If you observed my life over time, you might not have said, "That's a lazy guy." I was a busy pastor working six days a week, caring for the needs of hundreds of people along with the daily administrative tasks of running a church, with nary a golf-outing in sight. I was a husband and father of four, riding herd on the competing agendas of church activities, school, sports, and the management of home and family life. On the surface I might have seemed busy, even productive. But for years I wasted gifts and opportunities in the pursuit of comfort and ease. Though my days were filled with activity, my heart was committed to idleness. I wanted to keep up with my responsibilities, but I also wanted to kick back and do nothing. This tug-of-war permeated my daily life.

If you were to get a close-up view of it you would see the disarray of a heart committed to procrastination. Lazy people are skilled at avoiding things that feel like pressure or duty. I survived college because the only class details that mattered were due dates and the day before due dates. Tardiness, a telltale sign of laziness, is a frontier I've spent a lifetime exploring. And I am very familiar with what the monks in the early Christian era called "the noontime demon," the tendency to seek relaxation when you should be working. I have two favorite recliners in my house—and one is right next to my bed.

Lazy people aren't very time-conscious. I can amuse and distract myself through a traffic jam or flight delay without any sense of lost time. I don't even need a smart phone to do it. I am my own endless distraction. It's not hard for me to identify with Mark Twain's description of himself: "I have seen slower people than I am—and more deliberate . . . and even quieter, and more listless, and lazier people than I am. But they were dead."<sup>2</sup>

The first time I was aware of my laziness, I was reading about the tree sloth (itself a revealing window into my endless distractibility). I discovered that what the tree sloth does best is sleep. I love to sleep; in fact, it may be what I do best. I can sleep almost anywhere, any time. I once experimented to see

<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain, as quoted by James Edward Caron in *Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* (Columbia: The Curators of the University of Missouri, 2008), 287.

how comfortable I could make myself in the dentist's chair. The next thing I knew, I had fallen asleep to the grinding sound of a drill in my mouth! Anyway, back to the sloth. The only time he stirs is when the craving for food becomes stronger than the craving for sleep. Me too! If left alone, sloths are not unpleasant. That's me. They have a good sense of smell but they don't hear well. Verified by my wife. The sloth's main defense against predators is its almost constant inactivity. In the wild they are often mistaken for a big pile of dead leaves. Inadvertently I had discovered the answer to the party question, "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?"

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## Find a lazy person and you'll find someone with a highly developed skill (and appetite) for leisure and diversion.

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I've also discovered some reasons why the human sloth fails to register on the dysfunction meter. For one, lazy people rarely instigate conflict. You won't see us rant, verbally attack, or make outrageous demands. Conflict is just something else to avoid. I'd rather let you win an argument than put in the effort to win it myself.

In addition, lazy people are almost by definition dull to their problems. We are habitual escape artists. Find a lazy person and you'll find someone with a highly developed skill (and appetite) for leisure and diversion. The ability to divert stress into distraction can be handy in some ways. For example, I don't worry a whole lot and I don't tend to carry grudges—too much work. But I can be very dull to the needs of others. The trap of laziness lulls me into assuming that everything around me is okay, or at least it will be if I avoid it long enough. You can't be lazy without being inherently selfish.

Sensing the uncomfortable prodding of the Holy Spirit, I decided to study the issue. Some unfamiliar terms emerged from my study. The sloth was given its name based on the Old English word for slowness. Slothfulness has been defined as habitual disinclination to exertion. A lazy person is also known as a sluggard. Synonyms include such unappealing terms as

*ne'er-do-well, idler, loafer, and slacker.* Alongside these pejorative synonyms were wonderfully descriptive terms, such as *indolence* (causing no pain and relatively benign), *inertia* (having no inherent power of action), and my favorite, *torpor* (lethargic indifference). I confess I have lived a torporific life.

Based on my initial study, I was beginning to see the problem with my laziness, but I still couldn't see its destructive power. I turned to the Bible for insight. It has much to say about my sluggardly tendencies.

### **The Outer Ruin of the Sluggard's Life**

The Scriptures, particularly the book of Proverbs, speak with penetrating straightforwardness about the laziness trap. The first thing I noticed is that proverbs related to laziness or slothfulness show up more than once. That's probably a tip-off to how dense laziness makes us.

Yes, the sluggard—the lazy man—is a familiar character in the book of Proverbs. He is a tradi-comic figure, as you can see from this group of sayings:

The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road!  
There is a lion in the streets!"  
As a door turns on its hinges,  
so does a sluggard on his bed.  
The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;  
it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.  
(Prov 26:13–15)

These word pictures show us how far a sluggard will go to avoid doing what needs to be done. He'll make up excuses (There's a lion in the road!). He'll retreat into comfort. He'll leave things undone, even if it makes life harder than it would be if he just finished what he started.

Proverbs offers no hope for the sluggard. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman notes that "laziness is seen as the epitome of foolish behavior."<sup>3</sup> A sluggard is destined to a life of waste and could-have-beens. His life matters little to others, except perhaps as a nuisance or object lesson.

The sluggard is a fool ambling aimlessly along at a slacker's pace. And

<sup>3</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 122.

this is where it gets serious. Foolishness in the Bible is a category of sin, an expression of living absent of the fear of God. So the sluggard is burdened by more than selfishness; he is burdened by sin. The laziness trap is far more spiritually deadly than we might imagine.

By looking at some particular proverbs related to sloth, you can see the long-term damage of a life of laziness. Consider the following three clusters of proverbs and the implications they raise.

***The damage of fruitlessness.*** The sluggard wastes good opportunities.

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing,  
while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

(Prov 13:4)

The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;  
he will seek at harvest and have nothing. (Prov 20:4)

While the diligent is richly supplied, the sluggard squanders opportunities and gets “nothing” in return. For some this may mean a true lack of provision—no work, so no harvest (money/future).

This passage also convicted me about my procrastination. We use the word *procrastination* to describe the tendency to put things off, which may not seem like that big of a problem. But if procrastination is how you manage your life, then you have a serious problem. You know the experience of lowering your standards when you don’t do what you set out to do. You know what it’s like to fret over the “could haves, should haves, would haves” of life. At some point you know what it’s like to come to harvest time and have nothing, or far less than you had hoped.

***The damage of fitfulness.*** The sluggard doesn’t know true rest.

The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns,  
but the path of the upright is a level highway.

(Prov 15:19)

The desire of the sluggard kills him,  
for his hands refuse to labor. (Prov 21:25)

Laziness is frustrating because it’s impossible to get the one thing that sluggards crave—an escape from pressure and stress in life. But pressure and stress are part of life and avoidance actually leads to more stress, not less.

One thing I noticed about myself is that I was always making resolu-

tions, turning over a new leaf, rolling up my sleeves, but rarely seeing true change. These “big push, no finish” efforts were primarily intended to get whatever was pressuring me far enough away so that I could return to my normal gear of lazy life. I lived with a constant sense of failure that was inescapable—because it was true. Often my failures were in areas that mattered most to me: marriage, parenting and faithfulness in ministry.

***The damage of faithlessness.*** The sluggard’s lifestyle is costly to others.

Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,  
 so is the sluggard to those who send him. (Prov 10:26)  
 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes  
 than seven men who can answer sensibly. (Prov 26:16)

I used to think my laziness problem was just a personal problem. I had no idea how much it affected those around me. I was blind to how my lazy habits often made me faithless as a friend and family member.

## The sluggard’s lifestyle is costly to others.

Does your laziness take a toll on others? If you are married, has your spouse adopted a work-around approach to life with you? If you are a parent, are your children accustomed to accepting your “meant well” for what should be a “did well”? Have those around you simply lowered their expectations for what you will deliver on your promises? Far from being a victimless crime, your slothfulness steadily erodes others’ confidence in you. Your presence brings them suffering and discomfort, like smoke does to the eyes. In so doing, it shrivels your potential for godly influence in their lives.

Proverbs provides us with these pithy but penetrating diagnostic pictures to bring laziness into the light. The following section of Proverbs was most helpful in battling the sin of sloth in my life.

I passed by the field of a sluggard,  
 by the vineyard of a man lacking sense,  
 and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns;  
 the ground was covered with nettles,  
 and its stone wall was broken down.

Then I saw and considered it;  
I looked and received instruction.  
A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the hands to rest,  
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
and want like an armed man. (Prov 24:30–34)

This passage is an extended meditation on the life of the sluggard. It is almost as if a father is taking a child on a field trip, pointing out wisdom and foolishness in the world around them. As they pass the sluggard's field, he stops and gives a chilling and sober warning.

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## When sloth rules our hearts, poverty eventually rules our lives.

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He notes the field. It is a prized piece of property, walled around and used for the highest value cash crop in the economy, a vineyard. But rather than seeing well-tended rows of grapes, they see weeds and thorns. A wall is falling down through disrepair. It is a sad and wasteful sight, made all the more tragic by the fact that the owner is apparently somewhere nearby. The problem with this field is not that it has been abandoned by an absentee owner. It has been neglected by someone nearby—someone who seems oblivious to the loss he is incurring, someone who is more concerned with his ease than his responsibility.

What is the foolishness of the sluggard? The sluggard has something good (his field) and he doesn't protect it. Not only that, he wastes the potential of his field. The result is that where he should have something, he has nothing—and that's foolish.

What is the take-home point from this visit to the wasted field? "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a robber and want like an armed man." The wise teacher indicates the bottom line: Whether you lose something by violent crime or lazy indifference, whether it is taken suddenly or dwindles slowly over time, when it's gone, it's gone. This is where I saw the real tragedy of the laziness

trap. When sloth rules our hearts, poverty eventually rules our lives.<sup>4</sup> The warning of Proverbs 24:30–34 continues to serve its purpose in my life. I must soberly remind myself that these losses don't need to happen, but will surely come if I chronically fold my hands to rest.

### **The Inner Rebellion of the Sluggard's Life**

Still, it's one thing to see the outer ruin of sloth and another to trace that bad effect to the sin in my heart, the place where all traps need to be addressed. Sloth simply never feels like sin to me—it just feels like my personality. So I began to ask the Lord to show me the willful sin in it. Not simply the consequences, but the devoted idolatry underneath the easygoing lifestyle. Keying off Proverbs, I began to consider the fact that the sluggard doesn't really submit to anybody. He might go along, might not raise a ruckus, but he's not going to yield his way of doing life to anyone for anything. He is—I am—a passive rebel. With this thought in mind, I've developed this personal definition of sloth:

Sloth is a determined bent of my heart that stubbornly insists on its own way. It is aggressive disobedience to God's rule through passive means. It is a trap that demands I sacrifice what's best for what's most comfortable. Laziness is a daily bondage that, if not fought, will leave me uninspired by and, therefore, unprepared for the adventure of faith.

This description helped me to accurately name my rebellion. Other depictions of lazy people helped me see the rebellious nature of laziness as well.

Perhaps nobody ever embodied the willful trap of sloth like *Bartleby the Scrivener*. I first read this classic Herman Melville short story in high school and it unsettled me for reasons I couldn't understand at the time. I happened to pick it up and read it again during my study on sloth, and God used it to profoundly confront my heart.

The story is set in New York during the 1800s. The title character is a law office clerk whose skill is making handwritten copies of legal documents. When he is first hired, Bartleby is a fine addition to the office, performing his job well. But as his employer begins to discover, Bartleby

<sup>4</sup> There are many forms of poverty: spiritual, relational, emotional, and material.

is very diligent in the things he wants to do, but increasingly resistant to requests to do anything else. His reply to any request outside his preference is a pleasant, “I prefer not to.” At first this is seen as a quirk in an otherwise diligent employee. But soon the employer finds that Bartleby only does what he wants to do, and his myopic commitment to that end pits him in a battle of wits and wills with his employer. Bartleby never attacks, but his obsession with what he wants to do ultimately dominates everything and everyone around him. He simply will not give over his right to do what he wants, no matter what the consequence. Unable to persuade Bartleby to do anything other than what he prefers, the owner eventually moves the business itself, leaving Bartleby just as he wants to be. The story ends with Bartleby in a shelter for vagrants called the Tombs, where his life ebbs away to nothing. The final scene has the employer stooped over the wasted life of a man who did what he preferred but lost everything in the process.

“I prefer not to.” It’s one thing to say it to a boss. It’s another thing entirely to take this posture in the face of the holy God and Ruler of the Cosmos. Yet it is so familiar; I’ve said the same thing with my words and actions a thousand different ways. Through the lens of Scripture we see that Bartleby’s chief problem is sloth—evil rebellion masked in benign preferences. I know Bartleby in my soul. What I needed was a different way to live, and I needed God to show it to me. Blogger Paul Maxwell has put it this way.

Before we can escape patterns of laziness, we need to understand patterns of laziness: We’re shackled by cycles of sin—retreat and repeat—and they’re not easy to escape. We need to know what we need—where and how God’s grace comes to the lazy man.<sup>5</sup>

It took time, but I’ve learned the patterns and where and how God’s grace comes to redeem the lazy man and bring him under the loving rule of Christ. Here’s how I got there.

### **The Sluggard’s Opportunity: A New Field**

By God’s grace, I began to see the foolish behaviors of my slothfulness.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Maxwell, “The Complicated Life of Lazy Boys, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-complicated-life-of-lazy-boys>.

God's Word exposed the roots of self-absorption and rebellion that drove me into the trap of laziness. But how would I change? I couldn't just make a new commitment to self-effort. I needed to acknowledge the sin of sloth in the face of a loving God who had made me for his purposes, not my own. I needed to turn my attention and affections away from selfish escape toward the freedom Jesus Christ had purchased for me on the cross. He has rescued me from the field of thorns and lost potential and placed me into a new field to cultivate new fruit. What about that field? The writer of Hebrews walks us past it.

Land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Heb 6:7–12)

This is a wonderful contrast to the overgrown field depicted in Proverbs 24. Here we see a field blessed by God. The possibility of the sluggard's wasted field still exists, but the writer says: "we feel sure of better things."

There are no encouragements in Proverbs for the sluggard, but here we find confident encouragement that things will be different because they are "things that belong to salvation." Though we have been sluggards in the flesh, the redemptive work of God transforms our lives and sets us on the path of sanctification. We see that God recognizes the faith of his redeemed people as true faith and the love of his redeemed people as true love. God gives good fields for us to till. And he promises the blessing of good fruit. These promises are activated because we have been redeemed from the tyranny of self. We have been supplied with grace working itself out in diligence from the heart.

Grace is the answer to sloth because grace is antithetical to sloth. It is God diligently working in redeemed sinners to make them desire fruitful lives. Grace, then, works so we can live out the salvation we have received (Phil 2:12–13). This grace is reality-based. It doesn't deny the temptation for us to turn away from grace and escape into laziness. But we need not live in fear of failure. Instead, as we look around us among the free people of God, we find courage to persevere in diligence. We have inherited fields filled with great promise—fields of mission, fields of family, fields of ministry, vocation, talent, and gifting. God's grace works to make us diligent to tend these fields, with the promise of his blessing always in view. We work against laziness and procrastination as we submit to and bring honor to the One who not only owns the field, but who owns us as well.

I was excited to know there was hope. I found even more in Romans 12.

### **Lazy People *Can* Change**

I distinctly remember a time when I confronted what lazy Christians fear most—repentance. Repentance is not what we do to right ourselves with God. Jesus has done that for us. Repentance is what we do because Jesus has made us right with God. It is a change in the direction of obedience. It moves toward what God desires for us. Repentance is intentional, grace-empowered change over time. Lazy people don't like focused effort over time. *We'd prefer not to.* But I came across a simple, straightforward verse in Scripture that galvanized faith in my heart for change and gave me an open pathway of repentance out of the laziness trap.

Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. (Rom 12:11)

This verse provides me with a three-fold goal: a targeted “put-off,” a challenging “put-on,” and a new sense of identity. These work together to combat my lifelong habits of laziness.

***Put off slothfulness.*** The gospel produces people who are ruined for anything less than what God has for them in Christ. Our passions (zeal) can only be satisfied in God himself. The slothful “I prefer not to” needs to be seen as the opposite of godly zeal. This isn't a one-time commitment to bold living. I've tried that and failed every time. It is a daily fight to “not be

slothful in zeal.” For example, sometimes the difference between sloth and zeal is whether I watch one football game and then engage my family, or whether I watch a football game and then take a nap. It’s whether I pick up a book or the remote. Do my work or surf the net. Go over and talk to my neighbor or just wave and go inside my house. It’s in those little daily “put-offs” that the battle for zeal rages.

While zeal for the Lord is never a natural state, it is always bubbling up from grace. According to Paul, we don’t need to go looking for it; we just need to stop quenching it. By God’s grace, I can do that.

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## The great deception of the laziness trap is that it promises freedom.

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*Put on a fervent spirit.* The “put-on” involves spiritual fervor. One commentator says,

A fervent spirit is the reverse of sloth, and always prompts to diligence and vigor of action. Christians ought to possess such a spirit in doing all their business, especially in the things of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

A fervent spirit isn’t an emotional state, or a personality type. Maybe the best way to describe it is stirred up in spirit and not content with a passive or dull approach to the things of God. Laziness not only produces spiritual dullness, but also feeds on it. Therefore, we need to stir ourselves away from things that matter to our flesh toward things that matter to God. There are any number of ways to do this. For some it might be through prayer, others by acts of service, and others by worship.

For me, the habit of reading for spiritual growth helps to feed a fervent spirit—and I recommend it to you. It takes effort to read for this purpose and it seems we have lost the art of doing so. We look for things that entertain us or comfort us in our struggles but give little time and focus to reading books for the goal of stirring spiritual fervor. So this is an appeal to

<sup>6</sup> Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill Air Force Base: MacDonald Publishing Co., 1958), 565.

rethink how you read. Commit yourself to reading hard things, important things, things that will cause you to think more about God and less about you. Read selectively. Read thoughtfully. Read aggressively. Read to stay fervent in spirit.

***Serve the Lord.*** The last phrase urges me to “serve the Lord.” The great deception of the laziness trap is that it promises freedom. But what feels like freedom is really the snare of worldly and fleshly self-comfort and self-absorption. The apostle Paul exposes this snare and offers a different way of freedom. “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).

Serving is an action, but it begins with a frame of mind—an identity. We have our identity as people who have been set free from the bondage of sin to live as servants of Christ. When I consider “I prefer not to” in light of my status as a redeemed servant of the Lord, it is a ludicrous thought. What is there that Christ has not given me? What do I have that he does not truly own? My time, my possessions, my rights? The glory of redemption is not that we are simply freed from sin. It is to belong, to have an identity and a status. Yes, it is as a servant, but what glory is that servitude! As John Stott writes, “True freedom is not freedom from responsibility to God and others in order to live for ourselves, but freedom from ourselves in order to live for God and others.”<sup>7</sup>

The way to stay out of the laziness trap is to stay in the servant mindset. Servants don’t procrastinate; they are busy with the work the Master has given them to do. Servants see time as valuable because it is a gift, and they want to use it wisely. They see their gifts and talents as tools to be developed and deployed to tend the field they have been given. A servant knows how to rest, but has learned the difference between rest and endless distraction. Rather than say with Bartleby the Scrivener, “I prefer not to,” servants say to their God, “What Thou will; when Thou will; how Thou will.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *Authentic Christianity* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 253.

<sup>8</sup> John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 189.

Perhaps most significantly, the servant knows that his or her time on earth is not for long. The rewards of slothfulness are temporary and fleeting. They will only last in this life. The rewards of the servant begin in this life but shower down in glory. What changed my life and freed me from the trap of laziness is a revolution born of redemption. More and more I want the distractions of this world to entice me less, and the hopes of heaven to entice me more. Do you want this as well?

In the last sentence of the preface to his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, John Bunyan issued a call to those who want to live for God's glory in this world in anticipation of eternal glory in the world to come: "My dear children. The milk and honey is beyond this wilderness. God be merciful to you, and grant that you be not slothful to go in to possess the land."<sup>9</sup>

May we have such a vision, and live in the good of it. Let's never be slothful in zeal, but be fervent in spirit to serve the Lord.

<sup>9</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 7, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://www.chapellibrary.org/files/4813/7642/2821/bunabounding.pdf>.

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