

*Finding Holy in the Suburbs:
Living Faithfully in the Land of
Too Much*
Available October 23, 2018
\$16, 192 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4545-3

“Not just for suburbanites, this book is for anyone who wrestles against competition or control. Finding Holy in the Suburbs inverts our suburban sensibilities, nudging us away from self-preservation and toward the beautiful catastrophe of kingdom living. Masterfully weaving personal reflection, research, and robust theology, Ashley Hales takes our hand and walks us home.”

—Shannan Martin, author of
The Ministry of Ordinary Places
and *Falling Free*

Hungry in the Suburbs

This story of the prodigal sons can feel a bit tired and worn if you’ve been around church much. Yet we need to rehear it because the suburbs are full of younger brothers trying to clean up their act to be accepted – to work harder, be responsible, tone down impulse and pleasure to fit in to a buttoned-up world.

The suburbs are also full of elder brothers turning their nose up at the lavishness of grace, because, after all, the story goes, we’ve worked hard for what we’ve earned. Yet this is just one place in Scripture where God shows us who he is: a loving father and a gracious host.

This story shows us our deep hunger to belong, to find home, to root ourselves in place, and how, when we’re hungry, we fill ourselves up with other things that promise to sate our hungers instead of running home to our Father.

Our places are good gifts; home is how we begin to know who we are. Yet when we use the gifts of our places – when we use the suburbs – as “ultimate things,” like pastor Tim Keller is fond of saying, we worship them.

This book is a gentle call to all of us in the suburbs to come home, to find belonging not in what we buy or how we constantly center ourselves, but in loving God and our neighbor. If God is our host who prepares a table for us, and the bread of life we feast on, then he is intimately concerned with our hungers. He’s concerned about meeting our physical and existential rumblings.

Suburbs reach after good hungers and offer us ways to fill up those hungers with the suburban gods of consumerism, individualism, busyness, and safety. When we glut ourselves on the food of the suburbs, we are left with aching bellies. But graciously, God always meets our hungers with himself. Being hungry in the suburbs is a sign to point us home. Healing begins at the place of hunger.

The thing about hungers is that they are all best met in God alone.

Breathe easy, the story of God’s kingdom is not about morality and upright living. It’s not about a bigger house, more resources (even to give away), security, safety, or the next promotion. No, the story of the Bible is that we have a Father God who meets us in our lostness, in whatever form that takes: lost in our gluttony and lust, or in our upright behavior.

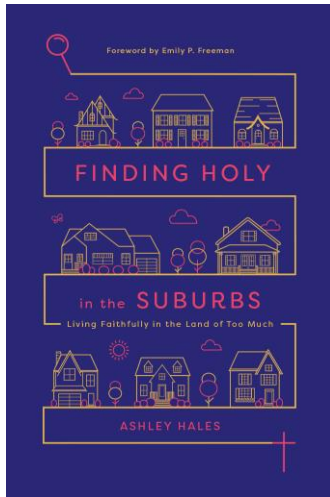
The story of the Bible is that there is no place or people too small for God to come and get you. We choose to forfeit the wildness of belonging to God when we settle for creating our own way in the suburbs.

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BOOK EXCERPT



“Ashley Hales writes about life in the suburbs with gentle wisdom, intellectual depth, and refreshing honesty. She offers hope where so many have offered only criticism or cynicism. By weaving clear advice and transformative practices with engaging personal stories, Ashley Hales helps us to become reoriented toward our true spiritual home while sinking our roots more deeply into the ground beneath our feet. Finding Holy in the Suburbs is good news and practical encouragement for all of us, in every place.”

—Christie Purifoy, author of *Roots and Sky: A Journey Home in Four Seasons*

Our souls suffer in the suburbs when we have the financial means to always fill our needs, where we sleep on featherbeds and eat rich food. If famines and failure do not lead us to see our bloated but starving souls, then, as people on the Way, we must practice the discipline of being curious about our small hunger pains. This hurts. It brings us to our knees when we realize our hungers have been numbed.

But until we take away all the fast-food fixes we don't realize our hunger is still there, and more than that, that there is a gift wrapped up in the unraveling. Not until we feel our hunger can we be propelled toward repentance, vulnerability, welcome, and belonging where we're held securely in a grip that is not our own.

Feeling our hunger is the first step toward remembering who we are.

We need a story to find home in the suburbs. Indeed, as Albert Hsu writes in *The Suburban Christian*, “God needs suburban Christians who are willing to take a sharp look at their environment, recognize the challenges of the suburban setting, and then *stay here* to do something about it.” This book is that story.

The impulse for building the suburbs was to create an idyll: the best of the country with access to the city, the leisure of a country manor, a place of safety, and strong, thriving communities. These are good hungers: to enjoy, to rest, to work well, to keep your family safe, and to grow a cohesive community. But when these hungers are met simply through shiny suburban packages, they come out sideways as consumerism, individualism, busyness, and exclusion. There is a better way for the suburbs.

This book is about coming home, about finding ourselves in the story of God and rooting ourselves in our places. It's a bold look at the culture of affluence as expressed in suburban life. My hope is that it challenges your idea of belonging and also shows you a more beautiful story to root yourself in. As individuals, families, and churches commit to love and sacrifice for our neighborhoods and subdivisions, we will find our place.

—Taken from the introduction



Ashley Hales

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Ashley Hales is a writer, speaker, pastor's wife, and mother of four. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, and after years away, she's back in the southern California suburbs helping her husband plant a church, Resurrection Orange County. Her writing has been featured in *Books & Culture*, *ThinkChristian*, *(in)courage*, *The Well*, *The Englewood Review of Books*, and other places.

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Finding Holy in the Suburbs

How has your perception of life in the suburbs changed over time?

Ashley Hales: Having grown up in suburban evangelicalism, I absorbed the message that a faithful Christian life meant doing big things for God. The shorthand for significance meant moving overseas or working in an impoverished city center. Even as my sense of missional living increased wherever I lived, it was always cities that came up as the place for the greatest human flourishing. My husband and I even went overseas and moved to Scotland for seminary and grad school.

Now, more than a decade later we find ourselves miles from where we grew up, planting a church in the suburbs. When we moved to the suburbs, I had to deal with the fact that this place wasn't originally what I wanted. It turns out I'm in good company: so many biblical characters (Abraham, Moses, Esther, and Jesus to name a few) moved from comfort to follow God. They longed for a home and yet dug into the place they were.

Why did you decide to write a book about living in suburbia?

Ashley: I wrote *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* to reckon with this disconnect many people have: that we're living rather ordinary lives but feel we were meant to live extraordinary lives for God. We've connected our sense of mission and calling often more to *where* we live than *how* we live where we do. Or, we're unaware of how our places form our loves, for good or ill.

What does *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* teach us about place?

Ashley: *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* shows how you can live a life of radical welcome and faithfulness right where you're placed. I hope and pray that *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* helps to wake people up to how, what, why, and whom they love is actually deeply affected by place. I pray that through it all—no matter if we're suburbanites or not—we will embody the glorious homecoming and welcome that Christ offers us to those around us.

What is the main message in your book?

Ashley: Places form our loves and tell us what to hunger for. When we hunger for what the suburbs say is the "good life" (individualism, consumerism, safety, etc.) we will always come up empty. When we repent and live out of our belovedness, we will move toward our neighbors in hospitality, generosity, and shalom.

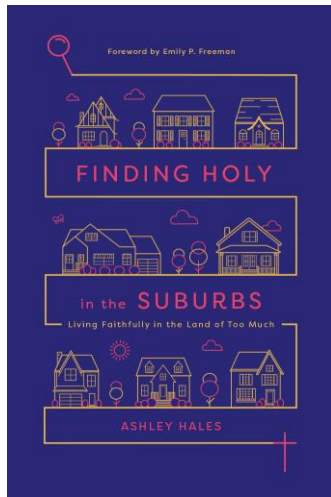
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What do you want readers to know and do about living holy lives where they are?

Ashley: I want readers to be empowered to stay put and start small right where they're placed. I want them to take a good, hard look at how they're being shaped by their places without even knowing it so that they can then see the goodness of God show up on their cul-de-sacs and in the school pickup line. I want readers to join together in book clubs to consider how to implement practices of welcome. I desire nothing less than transformation—not because my words are so great, but because God is a God who wants to meet all our hungers with himself right where we're at.

What do you hope readers do after reading *Finding Holy in the Suburbs*?

Ashley:

I hope they

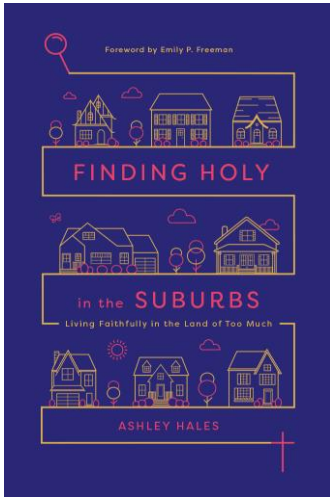
- start to question how their place informs their loves;
- read the book with others and discuss how it impacts their communities;
- grow in hospitality, living for others, and get a wider vision for the kingdom of God in their neighborhood; and
- commit to staying locally grounded in community, church, and witness.

“Hales takes on the near hopeless cause of waking up suburbanites like me to see God’s larger story for our lives. Finding Holy in the Suburbs is both thoughtful and practical, and I admire her fierce writing, challenging me to seek out what’s holy in my unremarkable suburban life.”

—Dave Goetz, author of *Death by Suburb*



ENDORSEMENTS



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We all live in a cul-de-sac of sorts, though it may not always be shaped like a circle. We all have spaces we fold ourselves around and allow to shape us, for better or worse. Ashley Hales is a woman who knows that we are always being spiritually formed, but the question is by what and for what purpose? Are we bending our lives around the spaces we occupy, the things we acquire, the homes we build, and the positions we're climbing toward? Or are we willing to let the triune God straighten out the narrative of safety and control, and pull us closer into his story of love and belonging, one that turns out looking way different than we always thought?

Finding the sacred in the midst of everyday things is not a new conversation. But the best books aren't the ones that have all brand new information. We don't have context for that. Instead, we need new voices telling us old things, retelling us the Story we believe but forget, reminding us of who we are and where we belong. We need voices that are willing to enter into those conversations we are already having, taking place in our churches, our classrooms, our sidewalks, and inside our own heads. We need strong voices willing to walk along the regular streets with us in our everyday corners of the kingdom of God.

Ashley Hales is one of these kind and insightful new voices.

For those of us who grew up in the "do big things for God" youth group culture, we step into this conversation as adults with some hesitancy, some skepticism, and the smallest bit of hope. Could it be possible that starting small and staying put is not only okay but could actually be a worthy and holy calling? Ashley Hales says yes.

Come and walk beside her through the streets of her California suburb. Discover how these mundane places have shaped her life and notice all the ways it will mirror and inform your own.

—Taken from the foreword by Emily P. Freeman,
Wall Street Journal bestselling author of *Simply Tuesday*