



### **About the Author**

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## **The Summary**

How do you lead when you don't feel like leading? And how do you sail through the dead waters when the wind has died down and that which was a *festival* now demands the *intentional*? When *exhilaration* turns to *perspiration*? Like pages torn out of my journal, this book chronicles my collision with burnout and my subsequent journey to a newly defined life.

During this winter season, the only things I had to hold on to were the disciplines I had *already built* into my life. In the night, a sailor cannot see land, nor can he get his bearings from the coastline. He must navigate by trusting the dimly lit buoys already set in place. In the same way, when you go through dark seasons, you will be restricted by, or released to, what has already been established within your soul. This book will reveal those disciplines leaders must build before navigating open seas, and if you are storm-tossed, it will give you practical helps that will buoy up your resilience.

### **Chapter 1: When the Needle Points to Empty**

Not long ago I was asked to meet with two dozen of our nation's brightest and best emerging leaders. The men who gathered were all around forty years old with congregations of more than 3,000 members. Observing the lives of many of these forty-something leaders, I saw the unmistakable signs of burnout already emerging.

*When the first signs of burnout appear, it's time for a break.*

As a senior pastor, my life was book-ended with weekend services. I had developed the discipline of *image management*, but on the inside I was experiencing a slow-motion implosion. Pastors are expected to lead even when the desire or inclination to do so is severely challenged. I knew others loved me, but living up to the expectations systematically ingrained into the fabric of who I was became the person I could not escape.

For over 30 years my drive for excellence propelled me. I wasn't compulsive; I simply had a deep desire to do my best. I drove hard on all cylinders, not realizing that being an entrepreneur means that everything you initiate, by default you must add to your maintenance list. I pioneered a church, so I became its senior pastor. Starting several other churches made me the director of church planting. And on it goes. Eventually I found myself managing more than leading and dropping as many plates as I was spinning.

Slowly the unwelcome symptoms began to surface. Ministry became more arduous. My daily tasks seemed unending. Decisions—even small ones—seemed to paralyze me. Gradually my creativity began to flag and I found it easier to imitate rather than innovate. People I deeply cared about became problems to be avoided, and deliberating new vision no longer stirred my soul. What began as a joy that filled me became a load that drained me. But I didn't know where I could trim. People were coming to Christ and lives were being changed. How could this all be wrong?

It all came to a head while out on a run. One minute I was jogging, and the next I was sitting on the curb, sobbing uncontrollably. As days went on, I developed physical symptoms: erratic heartbeat, difficulty breathing, and insomnia. Fearing the worst, I saw a doctor and a psychologist, who confirmed my suspicions.

"You have depleted your system," he said. "Your serotonin levels are completely exhausted." He went on to explain. "Serotonin is a chemical like an endorphin. It replenishes during times of rest and then fuels you while you're working. But if you drive yourself without replenishing, your store of serotonin will be depleted, and your body will be forced to use adrenaline in its place. The problem is that adrenaline is designed for emergency use, and it will burn out your system on the inside if you keep running on it."

"Serotonin gets depleted when you live with a cadence that doesn't allow it to get replenished. When that happens, depression often takes the place of initiative; indecision and anxiety increase. You begin to feel a greater need for aloneness and isolation, among other things. Once depleted, it must be replenished, and that will take six months to a year."

I had crashed enough to know he was serious. Over the following three years would come a season of epic proportions. "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Worst, because I would suffer setbacks, struggles, depression, and imbalance. Best, because I learned more about myself than at any other time in my life, and grew in ways I never imagined were possible.

## **Chapter 2: Forced to Failure**

Over the years of shepherding people, I found that giving myself permission to heal came hard. I'm not sure what it was—maybe being raised by a strict military father—but I always felt guilty when I took a break. But now....I had to find permission to heal.

Pastoring is a high-risk profession. The numbers of pastors who struggle emotionally due to their job is incredibly high, and the negative effects on pastor's families is also significant.

To finish strong, you must learn to rejuvenate your spirit early in your ministry. Most of the people in our churches have no idea how demanding ministry can be—or even how demanding they are. When younger pastors begin in ministry, they think, "This feels right. People need me; they value me; I'm serving God; I'm right where I need to be." But as the years go by, always being on call can wear you down. A crisis is always just one phone call away, and when I was younger it made me feel needed and valuable. But eventually it made me feel imprisoned.

I met with my counselor several more times until I understood what was going on in my emotional state, but merely identifying something is not the same as getting it addressed and resolved. And I was far from having it resolved! At one point driving home from the

office I thought I was having a heart attack. It turned out to be an *anxiety* attack, but the doctor said if I kept up the pace I was going at, I would be having a heart attack—soon. I knew I had to do something, so, on a friend's advice I checked into a monastery for a week. That might seem drastic, but I knew I needed to do something.

Silence and solitude can renew and replenish a soul in drought, and it refreshed me. After rising at 5:00 am for morning prayers, I would return to my silent cabin to have my devotions. It wasn't easy—I found that in this monastic retreat there were no Internet hook-ups, no cell phones, and worst of all, no coffee! How could you even have devotions without coffee and a muffin?

The second day my system began to shut down; dropping adrenaline is like coming off heroin. There are obvious withdrawal symptoms, and I hit them. During those days at the monastery, I found myself separated from all the things that had held me together for years: my family, my schedule, my meetings, speaking engagements, even my exercise. I felt unnecessary, unneeded, and undone.

I wasn't sure I was still called to ministry; my reasoning capabilities were clouded. I needed time to heal, and most of all, time to rest. The only thing that I kept steady was my daily time at His feet. And it would be here that my answers, and my strength, would eventually appear. Wisdom and understanding are not built in a day; however they are built *daily*. And it was in my daily times with God I gained the resolve to not quit and to keep going.

### **Chapter 3: Power Perfected in Weakness**

"It could never happen to me." Those were my famous last words just before it happened to me. But often burnout doesn't arrive alone. One unlikely twin (for me) that accompanied my season of burnout was depression. They often go together, but they don't just happen upon you at random. There are several triggers that exacerbate the problem and bring it to a boiling point. No one is immune from depression when they are going through a season of burnout.

Depression haunts you with feelings of worthlessness and clouds your hope. It attacks your faith and it smothers your future. Bouts of crying, a general decrease of pleasure in life, and a lessened energy follow you like shadows increasing into dark days and long nights.

Part of the struggle is that many Christians don't believe strong, mature believers should even struggle with depression. However, throughout the centuries many of God's choicest saints have struggled with depression in seasons of their lives—people like Mother Teresa, Spurgeon, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr.

The more knowledge you have about the causes and symptoms of burnout and depression, the better equipped you will be to meet and resolve these situations. Let's take a look at where depression often begins. Here are some common triggers:

1. Long-term stress. While not detectable in the beginning, over time it depletes your emotional system, which includes depleting your serotonins (which then are replaced with adrenaline).
2. Great loss. The death of a loved one, a ministry failure, a church split, job loss, etc. can trigger depression.
3. Unresolved problems. They can sap your energy until an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and entrapment overshadows you.
4. Financial stress. More than 50% of marital difficulties stem from financial disagreements.

One person described depression as an ache in our soul that finds its way into our body, our life, our marriage, and our ministry. Depression isn't simply an emotional problem. It leaches into every area of life. Depression is a real illness that needs to be treated. Research has concluded that neurotransmitters in the brain are reduced in clinically depressed individuals. One of those, serotonin, is a chemical courier that connects individual brain cells so that thoughts and emotions can occur normally. Certain medications can allow serotonin to gradually replenish itself. Many medications and programs are available today, but each one will need to begin with an accurate understanding of depression, and what will best fit your situation.

#### **Chapter 4: Early Warning Signs**

Early symptoms, if recognized, can signal the need to get help. A warning system doesn't necessarily prevent hitting the wall, but it will give you the edge and stamina to run through it. Paying attention to warning signs can help minimize the damage. The symptoms of depression can vary from person to person, but here are a few:

A sense of hopelessness, frequent tears or feeling like events are out of control, difficulty concentrating, and having a hard time making decisions. Irritability—symptoms of touchiness, a bad temper, and petulance accompany depression. These are further indications that a person needs rest, renewal, and a season to heal.

Depressed people have a decreased interest in group activities and a general lack of interest in life. Follow-through becomes increasingly difficult, and they find insufficient energy to solve problems. We can feel like no one understands us. Depression is also often accompanied by a decrease in libido and a disinterest in your spouse—but not necessarily for sex itself (which is a dangerous combination).

Note: with a growing desire for both isolation and release, a person becomes vulnerable to pornography or affairs with someone they have no history with--The lesser the commitment, the higher the attraction. This can obviously create problems in marriage and family relationships.

## Chapter 5: Solitary Refinement

When I returned from my little self-imposed exile, I knew that I would have to rearrange my life, learning what filled and what drained my tank. I also knew I had to determine—to really settle in my soul—what I would actually be held accountable for in my life.

In sorting these issues out, I came to understand the difference between a *concern* and a *personal responsibility*. Please pay attention to this— learning the difference between a concern and a personal responsibility may save your ministry, your family, and your sanity.

*Concerns* are things we should pray about, and then leave them with God. Treating them as responsibilities will end up with the world on our shoulders.

The things that are responsibilities are the things that only I can accomplish. They cannot be delegated, ignored, or sloughed off onto someone else. These are the responsibilities that, in the end, God will hold me accountable for.

If you and I are going to enjoy healing and rest at our very core, *we must discover and discern the top 5% of life*. 85% of what we do, anyone can do: checking email, attending meetings, making simple decisions. Those things don't require any expertise, and many of them can be easily delegated. 10% of what we do, someone with a modicum of training should be able to accomplish. After all, if we were trained to do what we do, someone else of like capability could learn to do it.

But 5% of what I do, only I can do. This is the most important 5% for me. I can't delegate them or hire someone to take my place because in any of these activities, I must be there; I must *be present*. This 5% will determine the effectiveness of the other 95%.

Here is the list I came up with (yours may be different):

1. A vibrant, growing relationship with my Lord
2. A healthy relationship with my spouse
3. A family that is close to God and each other
4. A God-pleasing ministry
5. A physically healthy body and a creative soul
6. Taking time to enjoy life with family and friends

These six require a daily investment of my time and heart. The condition of these six areas will, to a large extent, determine the state of my life. If these areas are compromised, the consequences will be felt in other areas.

We often fill our days with the 85% because it requires so little of us. We then dip into the next 10%. But during this season of burnout, even that drained me completely, and I had

nothing left for the crucial 5%. And that crucial 5% is what God will one day hold you accountable for.

With everything else demanding our time and attention, the 5% can get tangled up in a battle of choices. But there can be no competition for this. The trick is to raise one option so far above the others, the decision becomes easy. Nothing becomes a life change until you assign the highest value to it!

Your faith, your marriage, your family, and your health have to be not only priorities, but higher priorities than everything else, including work, money, promotion, or position.

## **Chapter 6: Finding the Still Waters**

I returned from my time at the monastery with a list of important changes to make in my life, but I hadn't really started yet. I could see my destination somewhere out there on the horizon, but I hadn't begun the journey. I knew the answers, but I still couldn't connect the dots.

My psychologist told me, "Your soul is like a battery that discharges each time you give life away, and it needs to be recharged regularly". He pressed me to take a year off, but that seemed impossible. Instead, he said for the next two months I needed to do as many things as possible that filled my tank.

Each of us has an emotional reservoir, with an input and a drain. Certain activities will fill you more than drain you, and others will drain you more than fill you. You need to know the difference. Here is the hard truth: the busier I became, the less time I had for activities that replenished me. I couldn't play sports because I had deadlines to meet. I couldn't read because I had sermons to prepare. I was leading on empty, but I couldn't continue that way much longer. You can get along for a while with "more drain than fill" but it will eventually catch up to you.

I made a list of both the things that drain me and the things that fill me. I encourage you to do the same. Include at least six items in each category. I encourage you to have your spouse do the same, and then share them. Help each other by encouraging each other to do what fills your tanks, and do what you can to alleviate the things that drain them.

## **Chapter 7: The New Perspective**

As much as I wanted to avoid the pain of depression and its accompanying de-motivation, God would use those very things to build within me an even stronger heart and lifestyle. Something wondrous happens when we draw aside and speak to God in our depressive state. When we are depressed, we often draw into ourselves, shutting everyone and everything out. Another option is to allow our depression to draw us nearer to God. That's where our healing comes from, as well as a new perspective.

When Jesus talks about our eye (Matthew 6:22-23), He refers to the way we perceive life's events. If we perceive them poorly and negatively, they will adversely affect us emotionally as well as physically. Depression isn't necessarily a sin, but we can indeed fall into sin by an inaccurate or distorted perception of God, others, or our circumstances. *The way we view our problem oftentimes is the problem!* If our perception is poor, opportunities become terrifying and invitations appear as threats.

In the turbulence of depression, when you do not know which way to turn, focus back on what God called you to do in the first place. It's the common denominator of life. Write it down, discuss it with your spouse; make it your target. It will give you back a sense of purpose, and hope will start to return.

What has God called you to do? What will He hold you accountable for at the end of your life? Write down the first, second, and third priorities of your calling. Place this list somewhere readily accessible so you can come back to it when needed. When depression hits, look at your divine commission and say, "This is where I need to start again."

Scripture says that suffering is a part of life. We have no choice about that. But we can choose what we suffer for. If the purpose of that suffering is to find God's best in my life, I can accept whatever comes my way. Until I began to see my depression as a constant reminder that I needed to stay close to God, it was simply an annoying pain that plagued me daily. My first step toward rehabilitation was to see my depression as a positive challenge that drew me close to Christ on a daily basis.

## **Chapter 8: Seven Lessons Hard-Learned**

I knew that I had to restructure my life. There was no other option. Healing from the anxiety is where I began, but restructuring the way I lived kept me for the long haul. The way I operated in the beginning would destroy me in the end. I had to revisit my motivations and everything that had brought me to this point. The battle would be overcoming the habits and subconscious patterns that were embedded in my soul.

A year after my burnout, I was feeling my oats again. I began to kick it in to high gear, and often consumed several cups of high-caffeine each morning to keep my energy level up. I was back—or so I thought. Then the heart trouble started, and I collapsed, ill and exhausted.

Here are seven lessons that grew out of that frightening collapse. These suggestions will help to get your resilience awakened and your engine running in the right direction.

**Lesson One: *Do Not Overproduce.*** I had to learn that I could say "no" or "come back tomorrow." I didn't have to be "on" 24/7; I could take time to recharge.

**Lesson Two: *Steward Your Energy.*** A leader's greatest asset is not necessarily time. It is *energy*. A person with energy can accomplish more in four hours than another would in four

days. I realized that I didn't have unlimited energy, and I had to invest my bursts of energy intentionally.

Lesson Three: *Rest Well, My Friend*. We are never more vulnerable to depression from burnout than when we are totally fatigued and overtired. One of the very first steps in reversing depression and regaining a sense of resilience is rest.

Schedule rests in *before* your calendar fills up. Rest is not an afterthought; it has to be a primary *responsibility*. It brings a rhythm back to life and a cadence that makes life sustainable. Lead out of a place of rest and you will be able to put your heart into everything God asks of you.

When does your day begin? A typical answer is "when I wake up." At creation, we find something different—"so the evening and the morning were the first day." In other words, God started each day in the evening, not the morning. Your day does not begin when you get up. It starts when you go to sleep. Rest begins your new day, not coffee.

Lesson Four: *Exercise Your Way to Recovery*. Exercise is important for your physical and mental health, and can help with recovery from depression. Try to be consistent—that is more important than how much you do in a particular workout.

Lesson Five: *Eating Your Way to a Good Life*. Food and mood are connected. Dietary changes can bring chemical as well as physiological changes.

Lesson Six: *Recharge Daily*. I recharge every day during my daily devotions. As He fills and refills my inner tank, I am able to reserve adequate time and energy for my family and my life.

Lesson Seven: *Fight For Your Family*. Nobody else is going to fight for your family. When your ministry days are over, there's only one place you can go—your family. If you don't build that home base, you'll have nothing to go to. Too many have sacrificed marital harmony and family on the altar of success. It's not worth it.

## **Chapter Nine: Finding the Way Back Home**

The sooner you wade out of the swampland of depression and back to solid ground again, the better. I'm not saying to jump back into life at the pace you were unable to sustain previously, or to find some quick fix. I'm simply saying that you can't wait for every loose end to be tied up before you start to move forward.

The journey out of depression and burnout may take a while, but remember this: most of the changes will happen along the way back home. You have to start moving forward. How you do that is very important. There are four basic courses by which we can live:

1. A life of reaction—we plod forward until something forces us to change direction.
2. A life of conformity—we live according to the view of the crowd.
3. A life of independence—we cherish the illusion of autonomy, but often are just conforming to others who are trying to be different from the previous generation.
4. A life of intentionality—this is the restructured life I chose.

When we were young, life happened as a matter of course—it just happened. Somewhere along the line, things change, and move from automatic to manual, from involuntary to intentional. You aren't told when the switch happens, but if you don't make the transition, you will always be behind the eight ball.

The key to living intentionally is to imagine a preferred future—and then commit to it. Commitments to a preferred future do not come randomly. They are intentionally established at times when you are thinking clearly and are close to God. In those times, imagine your ideal future. Write down that picture and how it can best be attained. *You must write it down.* Write down what your priority relationships will be that must remain healthy regardless of how you feel or what happens: your relationship with Christ and your spouse and family.

Writing down your preferred future helps when you hit times of tiredness or discouragement. They will come, but a written picture helps you not base your life on how you feel in the moment. It also produces hope, which is the quality that gives sustaining energy needed to accomplish your picture.

## Chapter Ten: The Intentional Life

Living an intentional life includes consistent monitoring and assessment. Entropy, or the gradual decline back into a mediocre lifestyle defined by habit and reaction, is natural. This chapter will suggest how to restructure your days in order to live an intentional life.

Sadly, what we do not observe willingly is often imposed upon us forcefully. Sickness, ministry fatigue, or an emotional breakdown will cause a compulsory stoppage or reduction in ministry. But often it seems more permissible if the time off is due to a breakdown rather than to the wisdom of avoiding it. I experienced that. You won't need to.

A healthy life cadence contributes a great deal to being a healthy pastor or Christian leader. It is that daily, weekly, and monthly regimen that can point you toward a life of abundance without regrets. Here is a rhythm, or life cadence, I try to maintain:

**Daily:** First, I make sure I am home. I try to avoid being out three nights in a row, and absolutely refuse to be gone four. There has to be a better way.

I also commit to doing some things *every day*, even if it is a small amount: Devotions, exercise, planning my time, and reading. Wisdom isn't built in a day, but it is built daily.

**Weekly:** I take a Sabbath day *every week*, and I fill it with things that fill my tank.

**Seasonal:** Take a monthly *Personal Retreat Day*, to get refocused on God's agenda. Make birthdays and holidays special, and celebrate often. That renews relationships and makes your faith something easy to live with.

**Seasons of Life:** After seven years of ministry, take a 3-month sabbatical to get renewed.

Note: A monthly personal retreat day has proven to be extremely helpful to me. It is a day out of the office where you can get the scattered pieces of your life back in order, and spend some prolonged time with God. It won't happen if you don't plan for it and schedule it—write it down on your calendar!

Don't wait to begin practicing this life cadence until after you crash. Start by honoring the daily, weekly, and seasonal calls to rest. *No one but you needs to give you permission to do that.*

## Chapter Eleven: Finding Solitude in Sabbaticals

In our fast-paced, full-scheduled world, taking extended breaks is a luxury afforded only the affluent, old, or sick. It has fallen out of consideration as a vital component to success. But in this chapter, let me persuade you to reconsider the imperative of Sabbath rest. Sabbaths and sabbaticals are biblically designed to increase our fruitfulness and deepen our faith along the way.

We have learned to rest when the work is done. But the fact of the matter is that the work will never be done. There will always be more to do. So the Sabbath rest becomes a command we respond to, not a result of nothing left to do. It is a part of our obedience, not a consequence of our expedience and industriousness.

There will be seasons when a sabbatical, or an extended season of rest, becomes crucial to sustaining the shelf life of a minister or Christian leader. It replenishes nutrients to our souls and restores our hunger for life and ministry. However, a common response to taking a sabbatical is "I just don't have the time." But I'd like you to consider this: "How deep is your hunger and how fruitful is your soul?" These are the critical issues.

During the course of my post-burnout life transition, I had to monitor my hunger level. My fuel gauge used to remain stuck on **Full**, but no longer. It seems the longer you are in ministry, the "fueling" becomes increasingly more expensive. And one of those investments may require you to break loose for a time. That might seem impossible to you; the roadblocks can seem pretty intimidating! Here are a few that come up most often:

1. Other people's expectations. There will be people who can't understand the need for a sabbatical, or don't believe it is appropriate. But your agenda shouldn't be driven by

the easily offended, and it is our responsibility to say when enough is enough. Only I can give myself permission to rest or to pace myself.

2. Finances. Taking a sabbatical can impact your income stream. The best way to address that is before it comes up. Negotiate ahead of time having the church provide a sabbatical. If it's past the point where you can do so, simply ask for it. Often there are other resources available that can minimize or eliminate the cost factor.
3. Who will lead while I am gone? There are people around you who can step in—board members, lay leaders, etc. If you invest in raising up leaders, this time gives them a great opportunity to test their wings.

When you go on a sabbatical, take life questions with you to ponder before God. Renewing your energy and revitalizing your life will require seasons of self-assessment. Not introspection, but rather times when you ask questions that will guide your future choices. Not negative questions that lead to self-defeating answers, but ones that enable you to think clearly about who you are and where you are going.

## **Afterword**

A friend of mine wrote me a note as I was seeking direction. In it he concluded:

*When a person actually burns out, he goes through a metamorphosis, a change in substance, character, and appearance. He cannot successfully go back to what he was doing. It seems to me that you have experienced actual burnout, and that is why simply taking six weeks off did not work.*

*It is time now to invest the rest of your life in what the Lord was preparing you for with the experience you have had. Your new work life should find you doing only those things that you feel very passionate about.*

Your past may be filled with trophies or checkered with failure, but either way, evaluate what you can yet improve on and what you can still accomplish. Imagine what would excite you and awaken you each morning. What cadence and what pace will help you attain and *maintain* joy?

When you begin to dream in this way, you will find a brand new hope. And as you discover, write it down and follow it. Find your potential. Through the vale of burnout, find out who you are. Surrender. Because when you do, your best days will await your arrival.



## From the Pastor's Perspective

I've experienced the kind of burnout that Cordeiro describes in *Leading on Empty*. It's not a fun experience! I appreciated his honesty and vulnerability in sharing his experience.

There were two things I particularly took hold of. I appreciated the distinction between concerns and responsibilities, and the importance of identifying that 5% that only I can do. I've never really thought of it in terms of being specifically accountable for those, but I think it makes sense.

The other was the idea that our day actually starts with the evening, and thus with rest. It completely changes how I look at my time. I like to plan my day the evening before. I can imagine myself planning my day, praying a bit, and then going to bed to start my day. Somehow this approach feels different, even though it isn't any different in my Day-timer. Starting with rest, and ministering out of a place of rest, is a different, but I think more healthy, approach.