

WHEN MY HEART IS  
**OVERWHELMED**

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*Twelve Steps to Mental  
and Emotional Freedom*

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For the sake of clarity, all Scripture quotations and parenthesized Scripture references have been placed in italics.

## *Introduction*

Feeling overwhelmed by the circumstances and responsibilities of life isn't a pleasant experience. Sometimes we feel like we literally can't catch our breath. Our minds race a thousand miles per hour, and we find it difficult to slow those incessant thoughts down. Our family, work, school, community, and even church responsibilities cause us to live at a pace that most of us just can't handle. Like a hamster on a wheel, the faster we run, the faster we have to run just to keep up.

Certainly God never intended for our lives to be lived at such a hectic pace. After all, our ancestors, Adam and Eve, lived in a peaceful garden. Their lives had a certain rhythm and ease. They worked during the day, walked with God at evening time, and slept at night. Theirs was a simple, yet rewarding life...until sin came along. And if you think about it, once they sinned everything became more difficult. God told Adam that his work would be much harder than it had been before he ate the forbidden fruit. And He told Eve that giving birth would be a very difficult and painful process because she had succumbed to Satan's temptation. The first couple was banished from the garden of Eden so they wouldn't eat from the tree of life and live forever in their fallen,

sinful state. That expulsion from the garden was actually an act of grace in and of itself, but the fact remains that their tranquil lives in God's paradise on earth were interrupted and ultimately ended because of their sin.

I remind you of that Old Testament story to make this point: *God's original intention was for His children to live in the peacefulness and tranquility of a garden, but with the emergence of sin, that all changed.* Sin always has unpleasant consequences. Sin always complicates things. It makes life harder, not easier. And after thousands of years of human sin, not to mention our own personal sin, we are so far removed from "garden-type living" that we don't even know what that lifestyle feels like. We don't live in a garden; we live on a busy highway. On the highways of our lives, things move fast, and accidents take place. And yet, deep in our hearts, we long to live in the garden. That desire for peaceful living is still present. It's actually God-given.

Common sense tells us that when we desire one thing and experience something else that frustration is the natural result. So not only are we often stressed out by the circumstances and responsibilities of life, but we are also

frustrated that we're not experiencing the peacefulness which we so desperately crave.

Why do you think so many people want to retire and move to the country? What is it they are seeking? Is it just the beauty of the Texas Hill Country or the wide-open spaces of country living they are looking for? Or is it something more? I can assure you that it's something more. It's the slower pace, the uncrowded neighborhoods, the country roads, the smaller grocery stores, the large back porch, the pond out back, the deer, the trees, the quietness of the evening, and the bright stars in the clear night sky. All of that is very appealing. In a nutshell, it's the slower, simpler life that causes people to leave the rush of the city and seek the solace of the country. And I don't blame them. I understand. I grew up in East Tennessee, so I love the beauty of God's creation as much as anybody. I find the Smoky Mountains to be very relaxing.

But here's the question: *Do we have to quit our jobs and move to one of those places in order to relax?* Is that our only option? If so, then we had better pray for our great uncle to leave us a nice inheritance because, short of that, most people simply can't afford to retire at

age forty-five and head for the hills. And thankfully, we don't have to. If God makes it possible for us to retire one day to our dream location then we'll be grateful to Him for that. But if not, we had better learn how to find tranquility in the city, with a job, with our family responsibilities, and with life happening in a hurry. And don't be naive, by the way, those people living in the Texas Hill Country and the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee get stressed out, too. They still have responsibilities. So wherever we live and whatever our scenery, let's learn to live a more peaceful life right where we are. Certainly that's what God wants for us, and such a life is possible. We don't have to feel overwhelmed by it all.

### *Assess the Situation*

If you are feeling overwhelmed by life, the first thing you need to do is to assess the situation. Why are you feeling this way? What has caused you to feel this way? Answering these questions is the first step toward making the changes you need to make. After all, you cannot properly "address" a situation until you first "assess" the situation.

Feeling overwhelmed by circumstances and responsibilities is just that...a feeling. But it's a feeling that leads to other feelings. Often when we're stressed out, we have physical sensations that accompany the stress. For example, our eyes might twitch, our heads might feel like they're in a vice-grip, and our stomachs might ache. Sometimes our chests hurt. The muscles surrounding our sternums can tighten up and cause us great pain. Sometimes we feel lightheaded. Sometimes we get dizzy.

When these things happen, our focus naturally turns to the physical issues we are dealing with that were brought on by the stress and that are now being made worse by a new wave of stress. We're talking about our heads, our chests, our stomachs, and our eyes, but we're not focusing on what caused those problems to begin with. If this stress continues, anxiety can creep in. We can then fall into a state of depression where all hope seems gone. The Bible says, "*Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression*" (*Proverbs 12:25*).

At this point, we are on a mission to resolve the physical problems, alleviate the anxiety, and deal with the depression. But we are ignoring the cause of it all. Perhaps this diagram will be helpful:

## The Circumstances and Responsibilities of Life



Stress



Unpleasant Physical  
Issues



Anxiety



Depression

Notice that the original problem is the circumstances and responsibilities of life. That's what causes the stress. And the stress is often what causes the physical problems and then leads to the anxiety. And the anxiety is often what causes the depression. So, if all we do is treat the physical problems, the anxiety, and the depression, then we're at least running the risk of only treating the symptoms of the problem instead of treating the problem itself.

Let me pause here and say that I am not, I repeat, I am not saying that a person should never go to the doctor or the emergency room.



A malignant tumor was once discovered on my left kidney when I was in an emergency room for a kidney stone. If in doubt, go to the doctor. Neither am I saying that a person should never take medication for anxiety or depression. First of all, I'm not qualified to say that. Second of all, in some cases, people probably do need (at least in the short term) some pharmaceutical help in their battle with anxiety and/or depression. If you are in that condition, I would encourage you to meet with your doctor (perhaps multiple doctors) about the situation, discuss it with the appropriate family members, pray about it, and make the decision you feel is best. The human body is complicated. Hormones can get out of balance, and sometimes a person needs help getting and even keeping them regulated. So make that decision with your doctor, your family, and with God, and don't feel as though you have let God down by taking a medication if you need that medication. You haven't. He understands.

All I'm saying is that in many cases a person doesn't need to be treated for anxiety or depression because often times they aren't the root problem. They are only the result of the problem. The problem is stress. That's often what leads to the anxiety and/or depression. But remember, there was something that caused the stress...and that's the circumstances and

responsibilities of life. So, in many cases, if we can figure out how to handle the circumstances and responsibilities of life then we can minimize the stress and prevent the anxiety and depression from developing in the first place. If they have already developed, they can often be dealt with and even alleviated by minimizing our stress as we learn how to more appropriately deal with the circumstances and responsibilities of life.

That's what I mean by "assessing the situation." Sometimes we may need a doctor to help us here, but often times we can assess the situation with a family member, a trusted friend, a good church family, and maybe a Christian counselor.

Since we know that the root cause of our stress, anxiety, and depression is often (not always, but often) the circumstances and responsibilities of life, let me ask you a few questions: Why do you think you feel so overwhelmed? What is happening in your life that is causing those feelings? Is there an illness? Has there been a death in the family? Have you recently experienced a painful break-up of some kind? Are you too busy? Do you have new stresses at work? Have you lost your job? Do you feel isolated and alone? Are you

an empty nester? Have you recently moved? Is there a pandemic?

Any of those things can cause stress. And then the stress can lead to the downward spiral of physical discomfort, anxiety, and depression. But if we can figure out what's causing the stress, we can then begin to deal with it in an appropriate way.

### *Address the Situation*

Hopefully, by this point, you have been able to identify what it is that's causing you to feel overwhelmed. There may be several things causing that feeling. In fact, more than likely there are. Once we've put our finger on the things that are overwhelming us, we are then ready to begin addressing them. *The premise of this booklet is that what most often causes us to feel overwhelmed is either a circumstance beyond our control or a responsibility that seems too great.* When circumstances like that surround us and when responsibilities like that mount up, feeling overwhelmed is inevitable. So what are we to do?

In the remainder of this booklet, I will attempt to answer that question. I want to lay out twelve steps you can take when your heart is overwhelmed. We could call it: *Twelve Steps to Mental and Emotional Freedom*. Let's take this journey together.

## *Twelve Steps to Mental and Emotional Freedom*

### **1. Take it to God in prayer.**

The title of this booklet was taken from a phrase in a prayer that David prayed to God in Psalm 61. You can feel David's emotion. Listen to his words: "*Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I*" (Psalm 61:1-2). Notice that David said "when" not "if" his heart was overwhelmed. None of us is immune from being overwhelmed by the circumstances and responsibilities of life. Even David came to a place in his life where he felt completely overwhelmed by it all.

David knew what it was like to feel overwhelmed by his work responsibilities. He was the king of a nation. He knew what it was

like to have family problems. (Did he ever!) David knew all too well what it was like to be surrounded by enemies who wanted nothing more than to destroy his life...even enemies from within his own family. If those issues weren't serious enough, David also knew what it was like to feel alienated and separated from God in the midst of those experiences. But David knew something else. He knew that prayer was his lifeline to God and to the help he so desperately needed. When David's heart was overwhelmed, the first thing he did was to pray. In so doing, he has given us a wonderful example to follow.

I don't know what might be overwhelming you at this time in your life, but I encourage you to pray about it. Spend a few minutes of uninterrupted time alone with God in the morning and then again before you go to bed at night. Talk to Him throughout the day. Tell Him how you feel. Ask for His help. And let His peace fill your heart.

I came across a Bible verse several years ago that has become a real blessing to me. The verse says this: "*Then King David went in and sat before the LORD*" (II Samuel 7:18). I read that verse one day when I was really stressed out and overwhelmed. So I began to do what David did. Several times each week I would

literally “sit before the LORD” for thirty minutes. During most of those “silent sessions,” I didn’t really say much to God. I would just sit there and be quiet. Those were therapeutic times for me. As I sat before the Lord, I began to relax. I began to feel more peaceful. My mind slowed down. I almost felt “spiritually sedated.” And I learned an important truth: *While part of prayer is asking God to help us, another part of prayer is sitting quietly in His presence.* Whether we call it “meditation” or just “sitting quietly before the Lord,” there is something powerful about being in His presence without really saying anything. If you are super stressed out, I would recommend this practice to you. This would be in addition to your actual “quiet time.” Just designate thirty minutes a day (the time it takes to watch a sitcom on TV) and use that time to sit quietly before the Lord. In His presence there is peace. Try it and see what happens.

For even greater results, I encourage you to limit the amount of “media noise” you listen to. While television, the internet, and social media all have their place in our culture, if we are constantly being bombarded by the breaking news, the latest political development, recent celebrity gossip, sports highlights, and what our friends just posted on Facebook, how will we ever be able to hear the voice of God? It is in

the stillness and in the quietness that God usually speaks. It is in the quietness that we become more aware of His presence. It is in the quietness that our faith grows and our stress diminishes. That's why the Bible says: "*In quietness and confidence shall be your strength*" (Isaiah 30:15). So, as much as possible, limit the noise so you can more easily listen to God.

**2. *Accept those things in life that you cannot control and control those things in life that you can.***

One of the things that overwhelms us in life is circumstances beyond our ability to control. Whether it's a health crisis, a financial reversal, a broken relationship, or the death of someone we deeply love, we have to come to grips with the fact that we simply cannot control every aspect of our health, the direction of the stock market, the will of another person, or how long our loved ones live. These, and many other issues in life, are beyond our ability to control.

An important part of dealing effectively with stress is identifying what we can control and what we cannot control. We've all heard the expression "control freak." That, of course, refers to a person who wants to control every situation and every person they encounter.

While some people truly are “control freaks,” the fact of the matter is that most of us have some “control issues.” We want to at least feel like we’re in control of something. The loss of control can be very frightening. This is why some people refuse to fly in an airplane. The thought of being 30,000 feet in the air with no control of the outcome of the flight is more than they can bear. So look at it this way: *If you can fly in an airplane then you have learned to relinquish control!* You can do it! Your time in the skies proves that you’ve got what it takes. Now how did you relinquish that control? You trusted a pilot whom you have never met to take you safely from one place to another. Trust was the key.

The same is true in life. Whether it’s a health crisis, a financial reversal, a broken relationship, or the death of someone you dearly love, you have to trust God to see you through. He, not you, is in control. He has allowed whatever you are facing to happen in the first place. So, if you know in your heart of hearts that you can’t do anything to remedy the problem, you have to trust God with it. The difference between God and the airplane pilot is that you know God, and He knows you. And He only has your best interest in mind. So trust Him with those things that you cannot control.



Now let's flip the coin and look at the other side. What about those things in life that we can control? Well, God expects us to control them and not just passively meander through life.

One of the things we can control, at least to some extent, is our daily and weekly schedule. Many people are overwhelmed by life because they have refused to establish healthy boundaries and take control of how they spend their time. If they are asked to do something on a night they had planned to spend at home with their family, they do it. If their kids want to sign up to be in a sports league that will totally disrupt all semblance of "family time," they let them. These are the ways we get overwhelmed. This is how our lives get out of control. We're no longer in control of our schedules or even of our lives; other people are. And not only have we given away our precious time at home, but we have also exhausted ourselves in the process. So fatigue sets in, and those overwhelming feelings only get worse.

I'm not suggesting that we be overly rigid and never allow our schedules to be changed. I'm a minister. I live in the world of interruptions. Things happen that no one can plan for in advance. So I'm not suggesting that we say, "Here's my weekly schedule, and

nobody can touch it.” That’s not realistic, nor is it even thoughtful. I’m just saying that we don’t have to go to the other extreme and say, “Here I am, world. Tell me what to do. I have no schedule or plans of my own.” How silly that would be.

One thing I try to do is to spend my mornings with God. Dr. W.A. Criswell, the longtime and legendary pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, used to say to young pastors, “Spend your mornings with God. Pray. Study. Let God speak to your heart. Prepare your sermons.” He did that for decades. He would wake up and go to his study at home and spend the first half of his day alone with God. He stayed in his home study until about lunchtime. He didn’t even clean up until then. He said he didn’t want to spend the most important part of his day showering and shaving. He wanted to study first.

I once heard Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, a godly man who pastored the Hollywood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles for twenty-three years before becoming chaplain of the United States Senate, say that while he was familiar with Dr. Criswell’s routine that he actually did something different. He said that on “study days” he would rather study all day long and

not stop at noon. He said that at noon he was just getting into a good study groove. So he continued studying all day.

I have created something of a “hybrid schedule” between what Dr. Criswell did and what Dr. Ogilvie did that seems to work well for me. It, of course, gets interrupted at times, but at least I have a weekly schedule in place.

I encourage you to have a schedule, too. If you’re married, discuss it with your spouse. Set a daily and weekly schedule that works for you and control it as much as possible. It will help reduce the stress you’re experiencing.

### **3. *Identify your calling and stay in your anointing.***

One of the primary reasons we get stressed out and overwhelmed is that we do things we were never intended to do. We take on responsibilities that God never intended for us to take on.

Everyone has a calling of some kind on his or her life. And with that calling comes an anointing. By “anointing,” I am referring to the power of God that enables us to do things with effectiveness, ease, and calmness. When I’m “in my anointing,” things flow. I enjoy it. I’m

productive. I have peace. Conversely, if I step “out of my anointing,” things don’t flow. I don’t enjoy it. I’m not productive. I don’t have peace.

So the challenge for each of us is to identify our calling and stay in our anointing. In my particular case, my calling is to be a minister. But if I’m not careful, I can just lump everything I’m asked to do under the category of “ministry” and assume that as long as I’m helping somebody that I’m in my anointing. As the years have passed, though, I’ve learned that my anointing in the ministry is centered in the areas of preaching, leading, encouraging, writing, ministering to those who are going through difficult times, and sharing Christ with people. That’s what I’m called and anointed to do. So if I stray very far from those areas of ministry, I start to feel overwhelmed. I lose my sense of peace.

What has God called you to do? Are you a housewife? Are you a teacher? Are you both? Are you a businessman? Are you a coach? Are you a doctor? Are you an attorney? Are you a husband? Do you have a family? Well, that’s all a major part of your calling in life, and in order for you to stay in your anointing, you can’t start doing fourteen other things along with that. Spend some time meditating

on this. Identify your calling and stay in your anointing. You won't be so overwhelmed.

**4. *Accept your limitations and learn the fine art of saying, "No."***

This step is closely related to the previous one, but I include it here to expand upon what I've already said. Just as each of us has a calling and an anointing to do something, none of us has a calling and an anointing to do everything. We all have limitations, and sometimes we have to say, "No."

Sometimes we have to say, "No" to others, and sometimes we have to say, "No" to ourselves. There are some things in life that we would like to do, but it's not always possible for us to do them.

In my case, I wish I could turn more of the sermons I preach into these little booklets. I really do. I think they are an effective way to get the gospel beyond the walls of our church. I wish I could write ten or twenty of them each year, but it's just not possible. I don't have that kind of extra time in my schedule. As I write these words in my study at home, I currently have eleven other booklets I want to write. My highly-motivated, semi-obsessive, Type A personality says, "Write them all

today!” But again, it’s just not possible. I have to accept the fact that it will take a few years to write the ones I currently want to write and that there will be others I add to the list that will have to wait their turn.

If I can accept my own limitations, I’ll be content. If not, I’ll be frustrated. If I try to do more than I can do, I’ll get overwhelmed. Since I’d rather be content than frustrated and overwhelmed, I’m trying to practice what I preach. I’m trying to accept my own limitations.

You have limitations, too. You can’t do everything that other people want you to do, and you can’t do everything that you want to do. So accept your limitations and learn to say, “No,” even if you have to say, “No” to yourself. You’ll be less overwhelmed if you can learn to do that.

### 5. *Strive to live a balanced life.*

If you’ve ever had vertigo, you know how important balance is. Without balance, we become disoriented and have great difficulty moving forward. Doctors tell us that our inner ears contain little crystals that help us stay balanced. If one of those crystals gets out of

place, though, we can quickly lose our balance. It can be a frightening experience.

A similar thing often happens in life. Sometimes our “crystals” get out of place, and we lose our “equilibrium.” We get out of balance, out of rhythm, out of step, and stress naturally follows.

I have a good friend who is a medical doctor at MD Anderson Hospital in Houston. Several years ago, he made a statement that is still fresh in my mind. In a conversation we were having about health, he said these words: “Balanced people tend to do better in life.” When I asked him what he meant by that, he explained that people who work eight hours a day, spend eight hours a day engaged in enjoyable and rewarding activities, and sleep eight hours a night are, by and large, healthier people than those who work more and relax and sleep less. Most of us are putting in the time at work, so let’s think for a moment about our sleep and our leisure time.

Isn’t it interesting that God designed the human body to need sleep? He could have just as easily made it where we never needed sleep. An adjustment here or there when God created human beings and there you would have it: human bodies that required no sleep. We could

live for eighty or ninety years and never even get tired. Wouldn't that be great? But not even Adam and Eve were designed like that. Even before sin entered the world their bodies required sleep. That's why God made the daytime and the nighttime on the first day of creation. He made the daytime for working and the nighttime for sleeping. In heaven, "*there shall be no night*" (*Revelation 21:25*). Our resurrected bodies won't need sleep, but our earthly bodies certainly do. For now, nighttime is still a very important part of our lives.

Sometimes we feel overwhelmed, stressed out, anxious, and even depressed, and the problem is as simple as this: *We are tired and in need of sleep*. I've always loved the Old Testament story of Elijah. This courageous prophet of God challenged and ultimately executed four hundred and fifty prophets of a false god named Baal on Mount Carmel in northern Israel (*see I Kings 18:20-40*). He is the man who prayed that it wouldn't rain, and his prayer led to a three-and-a-half-year drought. He later prayed that it would rain, and God sent a heavy rain that ended the drought (*see James 5:17-18*). Elijah was a strong and powerful man. And yet, in spite of his strengths and successes, he found himself running for his life. The wicked king Ahab's wife, Jezebel, had pledged to kill Elijah. The



prophet grew so exhausted and so depressed that he asked God to take his life (*see I Kings 19:4*). Do you know what happened next? It's quite interesting. He lay down and took a nap and then woke up and ate some cake. Then he took another nap and ate again (*see I Kings 19:5-8*). Elijah didn't need to die. He needed to sleep! And that may be all you need as well.

Pastor Adrian Rogers once said that sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is to take a nap. He's my kind of pastor! I mentioned W.A. Criswell earlier. I read somewhere that he used to take a brief nap every afternoon at 3:00pm in his office. We all need sleep. That's why the Bible says: "*It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep*" (*Psalm 127:2*).

Doctors tell us that most people need between seven and nine hours of sleep every night.<sup>1</sup> I heard that on the night before Peyton Manning led the Indianapolis Colts to win Super Bowl XLI that he slept eleven hours. No wonder he won the game and the Super Bowl MVP the next day. He was well rested!

I can't stress strongly enough the importance of getting a good night's sleep. When we sleep, healing and restoration take

place in our bodies. A good night's sleep is a major part of living a balanced life.

So is a little leisure time. We've all heard the saying: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." There's a lot of truth in that statement. After a hard day's work, we need to do something that replenishes our bodies and rejuvenates our minds. Exercise is great for this. When we exercise, our bodies release chemicals called "endorphins." These chemicals not only help to reduce pain, but they also make us actually feel better.<sup>2</sup> If possible, I would encourage you to take a brisk thirty-minute walk five to six times a week. If you can work out with weights, that would be a positive experience, too. Exercise is not only good for the body, but it's also great for the mind. It gives you a chance to decompress. Hobbies can help, too. Whether it's working a puzzle, playing a game, watching a ballgame, or playing golf, we have to find some enjoyable activity that relaxes and refreshes us. Sometimes there's a very practical solution to the stress we are facing. We don't always need a different job or a new set of circumstances. We just need to add a little balance to the life we already have.

If you have lost some of your "equilibrium," if a "crystal" has fallen out of place, I

encourage you to take a walk, take a deep breath, watch a movie, and try to get eight hours of sleep on most nights.

## 6. *Don't do too much.*

One day, when I was a freshman at Baylor University, I was sitting in a religion class in Tidwell Bible Building. My professor was a man named Dr. David Slover. In addition to being one of the godliest men I've ever known, Dr. Slover was a retired pastor. So when he spoke to us young ministerial students, he spoke with experience and authority. On this particular day, he was lecturing about all the different responsibilities a pastor has. He was discussing things like sermons to prepare, funerals to preach, weddings to officiate, meetings to lead, budgets to manage, people to visit, community events to attend, and on and on he went. In the middle of the lecture, he was warning us not to overcommit or overextend ourselves. He then made a statement that has remained in my mind for well over thirty years now. He said, "Start out like you can hold out." He explained that if we couldn't maintain something for the long haul then we shouldn't begin it in the first place. That's some of the best advice I've ever received.

There's a story in the Bible that teaches the same lesson. In Exodus 18, we read that Moses was judging disputes amongst the Israelites all day long...from sunup to sundown. One day, his father-in-law, Jethro, watched these proceedings and then told Moses that what he was doing wasn't good. Jethro went on to explain that Moses was going to wear himself and the people out by trying to judge all the disputes himself. After all, the people had to wait a very long time to get to Moses, and by the time they got to him, he was completely exhausted. Jethro then instructed Moses to get other leaders to judge the small and simple cases and advised that Moses himself should only get involved with the major cases. He told Moses that if he would make that adjustment that it would be much easier for him and that he would be able to endure for the long haul. Thankfully, Moses took Jethro's advice and, interestingly enough, Moses went on to live to be one hundred and twenty years old. Amazingly, at the end of all those years, he was still full of strength and energy (*see Deuteronomy 34:7*). We can only imagine what would have happened to Moses had Jethro not advised him to slow down and do less.

That's why I'm saying here that one of the most important things we can do in life when we're overwhelmed is to do less. I have a

friend who says, “If you’ll do less of what you do then you can do what you do longer.” He’s right on that.

Even good things, like reading the Bible, can become burdensome if we overdo it. There have been times in my life when I have probably read “too much” Bible at one time. I have discovered that when you read too much of the Bible in one sitting that it is difficult to meditate on what you have read. Additionally, if your Bible reading plan is too extensive and you get a few days behind, it can be overwhelming trying to catch up. So now I’m reading at a slightly slower pace and trying to meditate more on what I have read. My goal is no longer to “get finished” with the Bible each year. Instead, my goal is to “get fed” from the Bible each day.

Whether it’s work responsibilities, Bible reading, exercise, or anything else, I encourage you to “start out like you can hold out.” If you’ll take that advice, I’m convinced that things will be easier for you and that you will be able to endure for the long haul.

## **7. Don’t be in a hurry.**

Hurry is a killer. When we get in a hurry, we make mistakes. When we get in a hurry, we

drop a plate or a cup. When people get in a hurry while driving, they sometimes get in an accident. Would you want your dentist, your surgeon, or your CPA to be in a hurry? I wouldn't. I would want those people to take their sweet time when they're working on me or my taxes.

When we hurry, our bodies tense up. When we hurry, our adrenaline rushes, our hearts pound, and our stress increases. Unless the house is on fire, I would encourage you not to hurry. My maternal grandfather used to say to my grandmother, "Please don't make me hurry." He just couldn't handle hurrying.

That's why the previous step to mental and emotional wholeness dealt with not doing too much. When we do too much, we have to hurry to get it done. When you find yourself in a hurry, that should be like a red light appearing on your dashboard. Hurry is an indication that something is wrong. Perhaps it was poor planning or poor time management that led you to hurry. Maybe it was simply trying to do too much too fast. But the next time you feel in a hurry, pull over, as it were, and park the car. Ask yourself why you're hurrying and then ask what changes you need to make so you won't have to hurry next time.

I went to a lady's birthday party many years ago. She was turning ninety. I asked her the secret of living so long and doing so well. I thought she was going to talk about eating oatmeal and broccoli and cauliflower. She didn't mention her diet. She, of course, credited God for her long life, but then said, taking responsibility for her part in the accomplishment, "I don't worry, and I don't hurry." What great counsel! We would all do well to follow her example. So slow down a little bit. It would be better to be late to wherever you're going than to get in a hurry and have an accident on the way.

#### **8. Don't take yourself too seriously.**

If you take yourself too seriously then you're going to be uptight and stressed out more often than not. In addition, nobody is really going to enjoy being around you. When a person takes himself too seriously, everyone else can tell. We should all lighten up a little.

Don't get me wrong. We should certainly take God seriously. We should take life seriously. We should take our family seriously. We should take our work responsibilities seriously. We should take our health seriously. But we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously.

One of the advantages I have had in life is that I'm a second-generation minister. That means I've been able to watch the ministries of many of the pastors whom my father admired...the generation of ministers ahead of him. I heard them preach, watched them lead, learned from their example, then saw them either retire or die, and saw their churches continue on. Some of them didn't continue on quite as strong as they were before. Some of them actually became stronger. But they all continued on nonetheless. Then I witnessed the same thing with many of the pastors in my dad's generation. So I have a perspective on ministry that I probably wouldn't have if my father hadn't been a pastor. And that perspective has taught me this: *Life goes on after we're gone.* I have learned from experience, from a lifetime of watching the lives and ministries of pastors, that the world doesn't rise and fall on us. We, like everyone else, are here today and gone tomorrow. Somehow that keeps me from taking myself too seriously. Pastors much wiser, better, more charismatic, and more well known than I am came before me and will come after me. I'm here until God calls me home. I'm one of almost eight billion people on the planet. I'm unknown to well over 99.9% of them, but I'm known to God, and that's all that matters to me. I'm not trying to climb the ranks, nor do I seek



“ecclesiastical promotion.”<sup>3</sup> I’d much rather be “*hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:3).

What’s true for pastors is true for everyone else. None of us is the center of the universe. Jesus is. When we take ourselves too seriously, we have a great burden to bear. I encourage you not to carry the weight of the world upon your shoulders. Let Jesus do that. Besides, if everything in your world depends on you then you’re living in a rather small world anyway.

Be humble. Be content to be unknown to well over 99.9% of the world. Be grateful that God knows who you are. And don’t be like the arrogant rooster who thought the sun came up every morning because he crowed. Remember that the only reason we “crow” is because the sun already came up...and it came up without our assistance.

**9. Give your mind time to recharge and refresh.**

The human brain is, without a doubt, the most complex thing in the world. While our brains are organs, they function very much like muscles. They need to be exercised, and they need to rest.

We spend most of our time exercising our brains. We have them in what some have called the “active mode.” When our brains are in the “active mode,” they are processing information.<sup>4</sup> This is what happens when we read, study, have serious conversations, lead meetings, solve problems, prepare for a test, or give a presentation at work. Our minds spend a lot of time in the “active mode.”

While that is natural and normal (and even healthy), if we keep our minds in the “active mode” constantly then we are not giving them the rest they need. Sometimes we need to shift our minds to the “default mode.” This is when we let our minds be passive and relax. This is when we give our minds a chance to rest.<sup>5</sup> And this is when our minds “grow.” Just like muscles grow more “after” the workout than “during” the workout, so do our minds. Our minds yearn for rest. That’s when they recharge and function at optimal capacity.

We can shift our minds into the “default mode” by daydreaming, taking a walk, talking to a friend on the phone, sitting on the back porch, playing golf, or riding a bike. Anything that gives our minds a break from the constant processing of information is good for us. Throughout the day, we should give our minds little breaks. Instead of working for three to

four hours at a time, if we will take a “breather” every hour or so, we will give our minds a chance to rest. And it is during that “rest time” that our minds become creative. If we keep our minds in a constant state of processing information, our creative juices will cease to flow. Creativity is always the result of having given our minds a chance to rest and relax.

I started writing this booklet on a Monday. The Sunday before was a very relaxing day for me. Other than preaching the morning online service at church (during the Covid-19 pandemic), I had no responsibilities. My mind took a break. The next day I prayed about writing this booklet. I said, “God, if You want me to write it, I’m going to just sit in a chair and see if anything comes to mind. If it does, I’ll interpret that as coming from You, and I’ll start a booklet. If nothing comes to mind, no booklet will be written.” As soon as I finished praying that prayer, God gave me a structure for this booklet. Ideas were coming into my mind so quickly that I couldn’t write them down fast enough. The ideas came from God, but they came into a relaxed mind that had spent much of the previous day resting.

I encourage you to build into your schedule some time to daydream. Watch a movie. Call a friend. Play a round of golf. Do something

that gives your mind a break from processing information. You'll be much more creative if you'll do that. And you'll be much more relaxed as well.

### **10. Laugh a lot.**

The Bible says, "*A merry heart does good, like medicine*" (Proverbs 17:22). Think about that. There is something therapeutic and even healing about laughter.

Studies tell us that when we laugh we decrease the amount of stress hormones that our bodies would otherwise release. Additionally, laughter strengthens our immune system by increasing the amount of immune cells our bodies release and by increasing antibodies which fight infections and disease. If that's not reason enough to laugh, researchers tell us that laughter, like exercise, releases those feel-good chemicals called "endorphins" that make us feel good all over.<sup>6</sup> Think about that. Laughter reduces stress hormones, builds up the immune system, and makes us feel better. No wonder the Bible compares laughter to medicine. Laughter is truly powerful. It almost makes me want to throw in a little joke right now, just to make you healthier, but I'll resist the temptation!

When we're stressed out and overwhelmed, we don't tend to laugh very much. When we're doing too much and always in a hurry, we don't have time to laugh. When we take ourselves too seriously, we certainly don't laugh very often. So I want to give you an assignment: *Start laughing.* Whatever you have to do to start laughing (within reason, of course), I encourage you to do it. I once heard a person say that some doctors occasionally tell extremely sick patients to watch cartoons or something funny on television just to help bolster their immune systems. It wouldn't be for me to tell you what to watch or what to do to make you laugh because different people find different things funny, but take a break from the news and politics and watch something funny on television. Call a friend who makes you laugh. And learn to laugh at yourself. That's something most of us can do regularly!

### **11. Stay in today.**

When I start to get a little overwhelmed by the responsibilities I have ahead of me in the next few days, I have a friend who says to me: "Stay in today." That's good advice. Jesus gave the same instruction many years ago. In the Sermon on the Mount, He spoke these insightful words: "*Therefore do not worry*

*about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34).* Jesus knew that if we started worrying too much about tomorrow that we would miss the joy of today.

I suppose the main thing that causes me stress in life (and something I’ve just not mastered yet) is when I start to focus on all the things I have to do “tomorrow.” Sometimes I get in bed at night and start thinking about all the things I have to do the next day, and I can’t go to sleep. I’ve had more nights than I care to remember when thinking about “tomorrow” kept me up all night. It’s not that I was afraid, nor was it that I thought I couldn’t do whatever it was I was supposed to do, it’s just that I felt overwhelmed by it.

But I’ve experienced something else, too. Once I actually get into “tomorrow” (even if on little or no sleep), it’s never as overwhelming as I thought it would be. In fact, it isn’t difficult at all. It’s actually quite easy because God’s grace is there giving me the strength and mental clarity that I need to carry out my responsibilities. So, for me anyway, it’s not the responsibilities themselves that cause me stress because when I’m fulfilling the actual responsibilities, I’m stress free. It’s the “anticipation” of tomorrow’s responsibilities

that trips me up. And that's why Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34). Why not? Because we won't experience the grace we need for tomorrow until we get there. Trying to imagine what tomorrow will be like can be very overwhelming because we aren't factoring in the grace of God that will inevitably be there. So don't worry about tomorrow until you get there. "Stay in today." Enjoy God's grace in this moment, and rest assured that when you wake up tomorrow morning His grace will be more than adequate to see you through.

**12. Focus on Jesus...not on the circumstances and responsibilities that seem so great.**

We have come now to the twelfth and final step we have to take if we are going to experience mental and emotional freedom. And I can assure you that it's the most important one of all!

We must learn to keep our focus on Jesus no matter what we are experiencing in life. Have you ever noticed that whatever you focus on tends to become larger and larger in your mind? Whether it's a person, a problem, a project, or a phobia, if you focus on it long enough, it can completely overwhelm you.

The same thing is true with God. If we can learn to focus on Him, instead of on the circumstances we are facing, then He will begin to dominate our thoughts, and the challenges we face will become smaller and smaller in our minds.

Let's face it. Sometimes we get overwhelmed, and it's not because we're trying to do too much, nor because our lives are out of balance, nor because we're taking ourselves too seriously. Sometimes we get overwhelmed because the circumstances themselves are literally overwhelming. A cancer diagnosis (of yourself or of someone you love). A broken heart. The loss of a job. The death of a family member. These are the true stressors in life. And when you experience a situation like that you need to do more than simply adjust your schedule, watch a movie, or go to the gym. You need God to get you through. The good news is that He always does. The key, though, is that we must focus on Him.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is in the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah said this to God: *"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You"* (Isaiah 26:3). Notice that it is God's responsibility to keep us at peace. It is His job to keep us from feeling overwhelmed. But it is



our job to focus on Him and to trust Him completely. That is easier said than done, but it's nonetheless where the victory is found.

When we start to feel overwhelmed by the circumstances that threaten to take us under, the best thing we can do is to immediately turn our focus onto the Lord and say, "Jesus, I'm trusting You. I'm trusting You with this situation. I'm trusting You with this diagnosis. I'm trusting You with my future. With all of my heart, Jesus, I'm trusting You." When we do that, He has promised to fill our hearts with peace, "perfect peace," literally "shalom shalom" in the Hebrew text. He will give us a "double portion" of His peace.

Let me say again: *It is God's job to keep us peaceful. It is our job to trust Him.* Peace follows faith as surely as day follows night. So trust Him, right now, in the darkness of your situation, and begin to walk in the light of His peace.

### *What If I'm Overwhelmed By My Own Sin?*

The focus of this booklet has been the multiple steps we need to take when we find

ourselves overwhelmed by life. But as we come to the end, it may be that you are overwhelmed by something else. Maybe you are overwhelmed by your own sin. What are you supposed to do if that is the case?

Well, the good news is that you don't have to work yourself through twelve steps in order for the load of sin and guilt to be lifted. There's only one step you need to take. You need to confess those sins to God and let the blood of Jesus Christ wash them all away.

In Psalm 61, King David told us what he did when his heart was overwhelmed by circumstances...he prayed. In Psalm 51, the same man told us what he did when his heart was overwhelmed by sin...he confessed those sins to God. Listen to his prayer: *"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin"* (Psalm 51:1-2). Did God answer that prayer? You better believe it! Listen to what David said in Psalm 32 (which was written after Psalm 51): *"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered"* (Psalm 32:1). Through repentance and forgiveness, David's sins were forgiven, and his guilt was lifted.

You can have the same experience. Whatever it is that you have done, God's grace is strong enough to forgive that sin. There's no sin that the blood of Jesus cannot completely cleanse. Remember, David was guilty of adultery and murder, yet God's grace totally removed those sins.

If you would like to be forgiven of your sins, I encourage you to pray this prayer from your heart to God's heart right now:

*“Dear Jesus,*

*I'm so sorry for my sins. I'm overwhelmed by them. I need forgiveness.*

*I believe You died on the cross to pay for my sins and that You rose again conquering not only sin but also death and the grave.*

*I ask You now to come into my heart, forgive my sins, and make me a Christian. I ask You to save me, and I trust You to do it. Welcome to my heart, Jesus. Thank You that You'll never leave me. Begin now to make me the person You want me to be.*

*In Your Name I Pray,  
Amen.”*

Friend, if you just prayed that prayer, God heard and answered it. The Bible says, “*For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*” (Romans 10:13). And that word “whoever” includes you! I encourage you to share your decision with a friend and then to make it public in a good Bible-believing church.

My prayer is that God will bring us all to the place where we are overwhelmed by Him (by His presence, His love, His grace, His mercy, His sufficiency, His provision, and His goodness) instead of being overwhelmed by the circumstances we face and the responsibilities we have. Overwhelmed by God...what a liberating thought. It's possible...if we'll keep our focus on Him and take the steps we've discussed here. Let's make a commitment to do that, and let's begin to live a more peaceful life. Certainly that's God's will for each of us, and we don't have to move to the hills or the mountains to experience it. We can live a calm, relaxed life wherever we might be geographically or circumstantially. That's God's promise to us. So slow down a little bit. Don't push yourself too hard. Don't try to do too much too fast. Spend some time sitting in God's presence. Be still. Be quiet. Trust Him. His peace will come, and those feelings of being overwhelmed will begin to melt away.

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<sup>1</sup> Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson, and Robert Segal, M.A., “Sleep Needs,” HelpGuide.org, Updated June 2019, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/sleep-needs-get-the-sleep-you-need.htm#:~:text=While%20sleep%20requirements%20vary%20slightly,least%207%20hours%20of%20sleep>. (accessed 8/18/2020).

<sup>2</sup> Smitha Bhandari, MD, “Exercise and Depression,” reviewed February 18, 2020, <https://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/exercise-depression#1>. (accessed July 27, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Dimitris Gkiokas, “How to Utilize Both Brain’s Thinking Modes: Focused vs. Diffused,” Mar 8, 2018, Brain Function, <https://www.themetalearners.com/how-to-utilize-both-brains-thinking-modes-focused-vs-diffuse/#:~:text=The%20focused%20mode%20is%20the,the%20concept%20of%20deliberate%20practice>. (accessed July 27, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> “Default Mode Network,” Wikipedia, July 11, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Default\\_mode\\_network#:~:text=The%20default%20mode%20network%20is%200active%20during%20passive%20rest%20and,than%200the%20task%20being%20performed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Default_mode_network#:~:text=The%20default%20mode%20network%20is%200active%20during%20passive%20rest%20and,than%200the%20task%20being%20performed). (accessed July 27, 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Welsh, “Why Laughter May Be the Best Pain Medicine,” September 14, 2011, *LiveScience*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-laughter-may-be-the-best-pain-medicine/>. (accessed July 27, 2020).

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## *Booklets by Jon Redmond*

- \*How to be a Happy Christian*
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- \*Finding Freedom Through Forgiveness*
- \*Never Alone*
- \*How to Make Heaven Your Home*
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- \*When God Says, "Wait"*
- \*How to Have a Peaceful Heart*
- \*In the Twinkling of an Eye*
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- \*The Problem With Procrastination*
- \*The Lord's Prayer*
- \*Lessons from the Lions' Den*
- \*How to Survive a Satanic Attack*
- \*Lessons I Learned From My Mother*

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- \*When My Heart is Overwhelmed*
  - \*Don't Take the Bitter Pill*
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