

rest.

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL FATIGUE

Marianne Howard

FOREWORD BY RON HUNTER JR.

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“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
—Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:28)

Marianne Howard

REST. Overcoming Spiritual Fatigue

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Endorsements

“In this timely work, my friend Marianne Howard, reminds us of the timeless truth of John 15:5, ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.’ *Rest* challenges its reader to surrender our ‘can do’ attitude and yield to the One who ‘can do’ immeasurably more (Ephesians 3:20). Every believer needs this book!”

–Shane Pruitt, national next gen director, North American Mission Board (NAMB), and author of *Calling Out the Called*

“No one who truly understands and answers the call to ministry leadership expects that Jesus’ mission is an easy one. What is often not understood is how to guard against the subtle, small, and sometimes silent enemies that can end ministry too soon for the hard-working, determined, and dedicated leader. Leaders who intend to serve well often don’t finish well—rest is last on the to-do list! Marianne Howard extends a compelling invitation to what and *Whom* is vital to lasting, effective, and refreshing ministry.”

–Jerry Zucha, lead pastor, FiveStone Community Church,
Garland, Texas

“Seriously? A book on rest?! What’s next, Marianne, a book titled *Eat*? Who needs to be convinced to rest?! As it turns out, pretty much every person I know needs to gobble this up this weekend. It’s so encouraging to read something that leaves you saying, ‘Wait,

other people feel this way too?’ With one hand on the real world and one on the Bible, *Rest* will challenge you in the most refreshing way.”

–Jon Forrest author of the books *Help! My Games Stink* and *Fight Like Your Life Depends On It*

“For a generation of self-inflicted busybody ministry leaders, *Rest* is a necessary read. Being a woman in ministry, I am far too familiar with the exhaustion that comes from serving in ministry. Marianne tells her story of burnout from an authentic and vulnerable place and offers practical steps to a healthier version of shepherding others. This kind of wisdom and insight can only be portrayed by someone who has done the hard work of discovery. You will find freedom from fatigue in these pages!”

–Jessica Castles, Inspired Ministry, X Church

“Marianne’s heart for Jesus and for leaders pours out onto every page of this sobering, yet much needed reminder that rest is a right given to us by God and not a reward for putting in the most office hours or getting the most check marks on our to do lists. If you are a leader, you need time to celebrate your wins, rest, and reload to run the race God has set before us. I am grateful for Marianne’s gentle—and sometimes not so gentle—way of shining a light on the truth that in many ways I have grown weary in my well doing. Thankfully she gives some incredibly valuable tools of how to prioritize rest in the daily rhythms of life. “

–Josh Wooten, lead pastor of next gen ministries, NorthField Church, Gallatin, Tennessee, and co-host of the *D6 Podcast*

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Foreword

We shamelessly pranked our coworker. Included in our team traveling to exhibit, promote, and speak at a Florida conference was a new hire who was familiar with most of our local team members but did not know Marianne, who was traveling from Dallas. We told our new team member that Marianne was a shy introvert who would need to be drawn out of her shell. He took the bait as our two planes landed in Orlando, nearly simultaneously. As we deplaned, we pointed him to Marianne just as she, in true Texas fashion, whirled an imaginary whip asking us if we were ready to go slay! His face quickly betrayed the shock as he knew Marianne was anything but a shy, reserved introvert. To this day, I envy Marianne and others who make instant besties with everyone they meet.

Marianne joined the D6 team in 2016 and immediately added expertise to marketing and customer relations. I got to know Marianne and her husband Chad through the years, and while Marianne and Chad are younger than my wife and me, I have learned so much from the way she lives as a ministry leader, wife, mom, and colleague. Marianne quickly took on more responsibility in our organization and is now a recognized voice as the cohost of the *D6 Podcast*. One of the great privileges of being at D6 Family Ministry via the D6 Conference or on the podcast includes being around high-capacity leaders. Most of the time, we interview and analyze leaders to share insights with people just like you. It did not take long to realize that Marianne also fits in the high-capacity category. We asked her to

consider writing a book, and *Rest. Overcoming Spiritual Fatigue* grew from her hesitant but prayerful consideration.

Often, we read books that exude greatness, shrinking back in guilt with every page, knowing we do not quite measure up to the author or “The Great Oz,” who solves all problems. With each chapter, Marianne pulls back “the green curtain,” revealing in her own life the same issues we all face but fear admitting aloud. Have we gotten so busy doing ministry that we have neglected to routinely be still, rest, and connect with God? Do I feel guilty reading these pages? Yes, but my culpability comes from the Holy Spirit speaking through the author’s stories, illustrations, and biblical principles. When Marianne asked me to write her foreword, I resisted and suggested other names, knowing I did not rest enough.

While I spend time daily with God and in His Word, I felt some conviction a couple of years ago during an 18-month plan reading through the presidential biographies. I looked forward to reading, learning, and making leadership comparisons. God tapped me on the shoulder and asked, “Do you consistently read My Words to you (Scripture) with the same eager approach?” Sarcastically, I wanted to reply that Leviticus hardly compares to Lincoln. While we hold the Word in the highest regard, we could all slow down and take in more impressionable moments with God.

Even as Christians, we all tend to inebriate in something that either gives us a high or an escape. What is your drug of choice? Marianne names many escapes that disguise themselves as the appearance of a successful, busy ministry. We hide behind the excuses—there is so much to be done or people need our help.

Remember the instruction flight attendants give us to put on our masks before assisting our kids with theirs? These chapters remind us how limited we are without caring for ourselves. Marianne captured my ministry leadership ear when she argued that we cultivate incredible vineyards in the name of our calling, all the while ne-

glecting our own vineyards, failing to hear His still, small voice. Jesus modeled extended moments of rejuvenation with His Father before re-engaging in further ministry. God modeled rest in Creation. Marianne worded it best when she said, “God did not choose to rest on the seventh day because He was worn out from the first six.... Rest is an essential part of God’s creative activity (Genesis 2:2)... Isn’t it interesting that the first thing in all creation that is made holy is not a person or an object, but a day?” Great reminder, Marianne. Thank you.

Let me introduce you to other insightful “Marianne-isms” she offers in the chapters ahead to get you started:

“On the surface, it seems we are suffering an identity crisis. Yet, I believe what we are experiencing is an intimacy crisis.”

“Intimacy is not the same as proximity.”

“... there’s a good possibility we are putting our hope in our own competency and efficiency.... Has your competency become your sufficiency?”

“We can’t be effective leaders when we’re leading from isolation or insulation.”

“I will either get my identity vertically from who I am in Christ, or I will shop for it horizontally in situations, experiences, and relationships in my daily life.”

“A leader’s effectiveness in ministry is measured not solely based on their skills or knowledge but by the depth of their spiritual vitality.”

And if I had a favorite—one, like others, that convicts my soul—it might be this one:

“In a world full of connectivity, we forget how to be alone. In a world filled with noise, we forget how to hear. In a world full of hurry, we forget how to be still. In a world full of control, we forget how to live with open hands of surrender.”

Her words, from the quotes above, should give you a surface-level taste of the depths she inked through the pages. Marianne, thank you for authoring a whole book just for me. Your words called me to pause and evaluate my rest. It's time we all stop and ask, “Am I arriving at my daily destination at the risk of forgetting to appreciate the journey?” Results often distract us from actual ministry. Busyness, compliments, achievements, productivity, follows, or likes will never offer intimacy with God and care for our own souls. Bottom line, this book will help us determine where we find our worth. It's not how we work; it's how we rest.

—Ron Hunter Jr., Ph.D.

D6 Family Ministry CEO, D6 Conference director, and author

Introduction

I'm exhausted! My constant response to every well-meaning friend who asks how I am doing is "I'm tired but great," "I'm worn out, but good," or "I'm just plain tired." I can't remember the last time I felt rested and motivated. In many ways, ministry fatigue has defined my leadership over the years. I was busy. I was busy with spiritual stuff—good stuff. I was giving, pouring, and working for God, but not replenishing my soul. I was running on empty. The inevitable result is a constant *desert* experience. I had a meeting every night of the week, and people came to my house daily to get guidance or encouragement. Even on my day off, I could squeeze in a few more coffee appointments and check off a few more things from my to-do list. Yet my emotional state was turbulent. My closest and most valuable relationships were distant.

Have you experienced seasons like this? Where every part of your life seems complicated. All aspects of living become a chore. Engaging people becomes a chore. Returning emails becomes a chore. Ministry becomes a chore. Being a good spouse, parent, and friend becomes a chore. And as the list of chores grew, so did my fatigue. I wish to believe the people around me didn't notice, but I am sure they did. Though they wanted to provide relief, they couldn't. No one could provide relief because something even deeper than tiredness had set in. All I could see were the demands in front of me. I lost sight of my purpose, my calling, and my hope.

Living in this state led to ministry fatigue like I had never known. People were irritating. Numbers mattered more than stories of life change. My joy was depleted, frustration was driving me, and a critical spirit was the filter through which everything and everyone would pass.

The weight of ministry is heavy. As we juggle the tasks of managing programs, budgets, schedules, teaching, and navigating ever-present opinions, we can quickly lose sight of our priorities—spiritually, personally, and professionally. Forgetting we are stewards and servants of God’s ministry; we start to rely more on our own skills and abilities rather than the wisdom and power of God. In these moments, we subtly move away from abundant leading and living into leading and living out of complacency, distraction, and apathy. Spiritual fatigue and burnout leave us content with shallow living. We settle for spiritual shortcuts and begin to allow our identity to define our leadership role rather than Jesus Himself. We subtly get addicted to the need to be needed rather than the need to be desperate for God to move.

You can ask my closest friends, 90 percent of the time when you get into my car, the gaslight stays on or near empty. Literally to the point where the digital light just feverishly blinks for many miles because the gas is beyond empty (you will hear more about this later), running solely on fumes, yes, fumes. It thoroughly stresses out my passengers not knowing if we will make it to our destination. I’m just too busy to stop and refuel so I can go the distance. The same can be true of leading while neglecting your soul. Some of you may have been leading from an empty place or running on fumes for a long time. Others have been surviving on a limited tank, but for sure, you are not regularly filling it. You have been driving your ministry that way for longer than you would like to admit. Leaders are adaptable. We have learned how to lead from empty.

And when we adapt to an empty tank rather than adjusting our heart to refuel or fill up, leading from emptiness becomes normal.

I'm not sure about you, but I have never been able to manage my emotional state, make wise decisions, or lead with integrity when my soul is empty. Daily leading is draining, and the demand to give, lead, and serve people can deplete us. An empty leader is not a healthy leader.

There is a pressing need for soul care in the lives of leaders. We are seeing leaders abandon the ministry in record numbers due to disillusionment, weariness, overbearing scrutiny, and personal scandals. On the surface, it seems we are suffering an identity crisis. Yet I believe what we are experiencing is an intimacy crisis. This crisis arises from a lack of intimate fellowship with God—the close friendship He desires for us to have with Him.¹

Intimacy with God is available to you. Christ has done all the work on the cross to make that possible for you. Without the Spirit's involvement, we are in danger of becoming leaders who know how to lead well but don't know God well. When we neglect intimacy with God, we lose sight of our true identity, not vice versa. When I know God, I know who I am as a spouse, parent, ministry leader, and friend. When I become disconnected from intimacy, my identity—who I am—gets very distorted.

Even though I long to lead well, I allow the subtle yet rigorous work of shepherding to rob me of hope and lead my heart into distracted and divided places. Many times, with great intentions, I neglect my soul at the expense of the ones I am leading. As life gets busier, my priorities change, my confidence wanes, and my heart grows distracted. As life gets more complicated, I grow less satisfied with Jesus.

This book is all about the leader. Who is a leader? If you seek to inspire or influence others, then you are a leader. This means parents, grandparents, people in the marketplace, and ministry leaders.

If you are influencing, you are leading. Much of what you will read in these pages comes from my own personal struggle with spiritual fatigue and neglect. My insecurity, ambition, and drive to be more, do more, and have more at the expense of my soul. This is a journey to understanding rest, soul rest, and knowing where to find it. The chapters are divided into two sections, the first four chapters will identify areas in a leader's life that reveal resistance to rest, and the second half of the book is considered the restorative chapters, where we gain an understanding of what the Bible says to us about God's rest and how we lead out of that rest. At the conclusion of each chapter you will also notice a few questions for reflection and discussion. You can use them in conversation with a trusted friend or in discussion with your team.

The intent of this book is to invite you into deeper intimacy with Jesus, the giver of rest. Jesus invites the weary and burdened to come to Him. It's that simple. It's hard to believe He invites the weary, don't-feel-like-praying, beat-down, burdened, and worried versions of us. He wants nothing more than to welcome us just as we are and to pour out His rest on us. We can find true rest when we accept His invitation to come, no matter what circumstance or spiritual condition we are in. Getting attentive to our soul will require us to pull back the curtain and decide to look at the state of our soul, the place where God is present to us. Your soul is a sacred place created by God for God. When your soul is disregarded, it doesn't eventually fix itself. Only Jesus can mend and restore the weary places in you. I pray these pages will spark honest, helpful, and hopeful conversations about how to care for your soul and develop rhythms of rest with Jesus. May your intimacy with Jesus exceed all of the ministry madness, busyness, and noise. I pray you are reminded that your ministry is not your life. Jesus is your life.

Are you looking for relief from the daily demands of leadership? Are you feeling strung out by the relentless pace of ministry? Do

you feel empty? Are you operating on fumes? Lonely, shallow, near empty, and held captive to a schedule that never stops? These chapters are devoted to helping us pay attention to what is compromising our rest and how to lead from a place of rest. As you read about these symptoms, you may notice you are teetering on the brink of burnout; or you might realize you are already over the edge. This can be a painful realization. But what would happen if, rather than shaming yourself, you lingered with your awareness, noticing the weariness many of us in leadership have come to accept as the norm? What if you allowed yourself to question your exhaustion just a bit and opened it up in God's presence, "Wow, I am exhausted; I'm not sure I was aware of just how tired I am. What is that all about?"

Rather than trying to ignore it and push through, what if you chose to stay in God's presence with your tiredness and talk to Him about it, acknowledging it as a child with a parent who cares and can help?

Maybe you are stretched thin with weariness, and perhaps you are desperate for God's presence and deep intimacy with Him. Will you ask God to give you a heart like David's, who prays in Psalm 63:1-3 these words:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you (Psalm 63:1-3).

rest. Overcoming Spiritual Fatigue

Will you join me as we press into aggressive attentiveness to the presence of God so the world around us, the people we serve, the children we raise, and the families we impact will be hungry for their own deeper experience of Christ?

Chapter 1

Spiritual Neglect

Once we clearly acknowledge the soul,
we can learn to hear its cries.² —Dallas Willard

Our soul is the most essential part of us. Yet because it is invisible, we tend to overlook its existence and health. Left alone, it shrivels. Each of us is responsible for the care of our own souls. Spiritual leadership emerges from our willingness to stay involved with our own souls—that place where God’s Spirit is at work inside of us.

With the pace of ministry, challenges, and opportunities facing ministry leaders today, it is no small task to stay spiritually and emotionally healthy. The value of a leader’s soul health rarely gets mentioned much in churches, and we will never grow healthy churches with depleted, unhealthy leaders. Jesus taught that the Christian life is inside out—the private informs the public; out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. He taught that the root (private life) determines the fruit (public life). I am struck by a question Jesus raised regarding the condition and priority of our souls. He asked, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). Let me rephrase the question to

apply to us as Christian leaders. “What good is it for a minister to build a great church or a great ministry and lose their soul?”

So what tends to surface in the life of a person who neglects their soul? What symptoms arise? What are the signs of soul neglect?

The Distraction Dilemma

One of the first signs of spiritual neglect is distraction—seeking satisfaction in other people, places, or things. Let’s be honest: we prefer distraction. The more distracted we are, the less present we are to our souls’ various hurts, needs, disappointments, and fears.

The most dangerous problem with distraction is being distracted from God—our tendency to shift our attention away from the most significant Person in existence to countless lesser options. It’s a short-term relief with long-term consequences. What blows my mind is how normal this has become; it’s the new socially acceptable addiction. We’re becoming conditioned to distraction, and it is harming our ability to listen and think carefully, to be still, pray, meditate, and internalize truth. This means it is a spiritual danger, an evil from which we need God’s deliverance (Matthew 6:13). Distraction leads to aimlessness, uselessness, hopelessness, and powerlessness. Beware of “the cares of the world...” (Mark 4:19). They are the very things that produce neglect to our soul. It is incredible what enormous power there is in simple things to distract our attention from God. Refuse to be consumed by “the cares of the world.” Where do the “cares of the world” come from?

Satan is the accuser, the father of lies, the father of this world, and the adversary of God’s people. He remains aggressively opposed to all God is and is doing. He aims to tear down all God has built and done. And he hates you. He is deceptive in his craft, and he’s relentless. Paul gives us the intel briefing on the enemy; he writes, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against

the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). This is a battle against Satan and all of his demonic forces. It is against all of the forces of darkness and evil in the world today. Our enemies are invisible, spiritual, powerful, supernatural, organized, tireless, and committed to this battle. This should have our attention. One of the tactical maneuvers of the enemy is to distract and confuse us. “A sleepy soul is already an ensnared soul. That soul that will not watch against temptations will certainly fall before the power of temptations. Satan works most strongly on the imagination when the soul is drowsy.”—Thomas Brooks³

When our soul is fatigued, we are more vulnerable to the enemy’s weapons of mass distraction, and we cannot engage in this fight with nerf guns. Our adversary is predictable and uses the same old tricks repeatedly. It is up to us to stay alert, so we don’t fall prey to his schemes. Distraction is destroyed with our devotion. Our soul devotion to Christ and His living, active Word, the weapon of truth. Throw truth in Satan’s face! Remind him that he’s been defeated. Scripture encourages us to resist the devil, and he will flee from us (James 4:7). While the world pushes us toward instant sound bites and noise, fight the enemy with aggressive attentiveness to knowing God intimately.

The Danger of Complacency

Complacency is the feeling of being satisfied but unaware of actual dangers or deficiencies in oneself or a situation. It has to do with self-satisfaction, a sense of contentment regarding the state of things. Now, most of us would say, “I am anything but complacent!”

That’s the problem with complacency: no one thinks they are complacent. We live in a culture of self-reliance. “I can handle life

and what it brings me,” is what we say. Every day, we trust in our own ability to understand, decide, and act, believing that constant dependence on God is a distant dream. It seems impossible.

Complacency in the Christian life is a dangerous landmine because we become far too easily satisfied, comfortable, and no longer teachable. Complacency keeps us in one place for so long that we are too afraid to take a single step of faith forward. We don't realize that the tank of our passion for God has gone below empty. We don't realize the deep ache to see people come to Christ has waned. We don't realize that the hurtful comment has turned into a root of bitterness or that we are relying on old victories. We don't notice our lost gratitude or that we might have taken his many blessings for granted. We've lost our reverence for what matters and no longer have any heart behind the things done in his name and for his glory. We've lost our sense of wonder at who he is. It just happened. It happens subtly and without intent.

We are spiritually satisfied without real spiritual awareness. Jesus saved us, but we don't desire life and connection with Him. We live like forgiveness of sin is a one-time transaction, but we don't live in constant repentance and confession. Complacency is dangerous because it is easy. All you have to do is sit back, go with the flow, and do nothing. To go against the flow requires work and intentionality. Complacency doesn't require discipline. It doesn't demand accountability. It doesn't require action. And because of that, it is all too often appealing to us.

But we can't be complacent. We are commanded to discipline, action, and accountability. We are commanded to watch ourselves and our doctrine closely. Hebrews 2:1 urges us, “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” We need to pay much closer attention to what we know to be true so we can live accordingly and not be in a complacent drift.

The Destruction of Apathy

Apathy is another indicator of spiritual neglect and possibly the most volatile. The Cambridge Dictionary defines apathy as the following: “lack of interest, or the attitude of not caring resulting from it. Behavior that shows no interest or energy and shows that someone is unwilling to take action, especially over something important.”⁴ Does my heart respond with anticipation at the sound of my Savior’s voice? Or is its response a mere shrug of the shoulders or indifference to His voice? Apathy is rampant. Apathy means *I don’t care*. It’s not the same as ignorance (*I don’t know*), complacency (*I am satisfied with my current status*), or laziness (*I don’t want to do anything*). But spiritual apathy (*I couldn’t care less*) is deadly for the soul. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God rebuked the Israelites for spiritual apathy: “But when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot me” (Hosea 13:6).

How could they forget the God who delivered them from Egypt and fed them in the wilderness? It seems spiritual apathy can creep in unnoticed, even when God is working in powerful ways. In the New Testament, James reveals the problem of spiritual apathy when He says, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17). Notice that the problem is not ignorance, since he knows what to do, but apathy—he doesn’t care. To get comfortable. To get entangled in worldly pursuits. To get away from serving your King and the hope of Heaven. To lose sight of the mission and vision. Apathy is a dangerous component of spiritual fatigue.

The Drift of Wandering Affections

Finally, distraction, complacency, and apathy lead our hearts to wandering affections, other loves, and lovers that divert, divide, and

capture our affections. Pretty soon, those distractions will seduce our heart's affections. They become idols we have to have. We can't live without them. The heart begins to demand them. Then, we believe we deserve them, and the lover of our soul must provide them. God becomes an end to a means rather than the end itself. This is how idolatry is born in our hearts. Most of the culprits in spiritual negligence are not poor doctrine or discipline—initially—but rather diminished affection.

I often ponder the verse in the opening paragraph of the Song of Songs where the bride says, “They made me the keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept” (Song of Solomon 1:6). Does your heart resonate with that lament? It's a picture of what it's often like for those active in ministry. We're constantly tending the vineyards of others—counseling, teaching, encouraging, exhorting, serving, giving, praying for others—while neglecting our spiritual well-being. I'm talking about the failure to cultivate and prioritize our own walk with the Lord, taking shortcuts spiritually.

This has played out in my life. I lived through a demanding and chaotic ministry season a few years ago. I was showing up to serve at every possible church program, attempting to meet a plethora of needs (both parents and teenagers), throwing baby showers, showing up to weddings, leading a thriving girls' ministry, and working hard to be an attentive and intentional friend (are you tired yet?). Beyond all the ministry work, I was trying to ensure my kids were cared for and staying connected with my husband (a pastor whose ministry demands consistently separated us). Sound familiar? I was trying to be loving and present, actively listening and offering wisdom. I was trying to make disciples without allowing myself to be a disciple. I was neglecting the soul-refreshing time of intimate fellowship with Jesus.

In my busyness, I realized days and months had passed, and I had not spent intentional time with the Lord I was trying to serve.

And let's say my life was coming apart at the seams, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Over time, symptoms of soul neglect and fatigue would look like shame, fear, overworking, emotional disengagement, insecurity, comparing myself to others, frustration toward my kids, unspoken expectations from my spouse and friends, bitterness, projecting other people's expectations of me, lack of connection with people, restlessness, isolation, and a critical spirit—to name a few. The impact of service without devotion may not have been detected initially, but we cannot stay faithful and fruitful in ministry over the long haul if we try to live on past experiences with God.

I often have to take a soul inventory because I've found in my own life that neglect of my soul creeps in the same way neglect of my body does. It happens slowly. When I start to feel restless or when I have to fight for a sense of peace, alarm bells begin to go off. If I am fighting for things that are rightfully mine as a believer—joy, peace, patience, a sense of worth—there are dust bunnies on my soul. And I must take a step back to reevaluate some things. You may be navigating a season where it feels like the keeping and care of your soul can wait, but it cannot! Your ministry in every season flows out of your connection with the Lord.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "No amount of activity in the King's service will make up for neglect of the King Himself."⁵ One of the greatest dangers we face daily is neglecting to cultivate intimacy with Christ.

Thinking back to the vineyard, in a sense, every worker is a keeper of the Lord's vineyard. It takes much work to care appropriately for a vineyard, and as the vineyard grows, the labor increases. Keeping a vineyard requires going out early, pruning, cultivating, spraying, training the vines, and picking the grapes. If the crop is not gathered and cared for, it is lost. We are navigating a time in ministry where headlines and scandals are on full blast, but we nev-

er really consider the initial neglect of their soul. These leaders did not intend for moral failure or scandal to happen to them, but at some point, they stopped paying attention to what was happening inside them. “Rest assured of that; the best will become the worse if we neglect it. Neglect is all that is needed to produce evil.”—Charles Spurgeon⁶

Think about the simple lesson of how a mother bird feeds her chicks. The mother bird leaves her nest to find a worm for the baby birds to eat. Then, the mother chews the worm to make it easier for the baby birds to swallow and digest. Because of the work of the mother bird, the children are satisfied. Find the worm, chew the worm, and share the worm. Very simple. But this process doesn't provide any nourishment for the mother. After all her effort, the mother bird will still have to go and find food for herself. As the baby birds grow, the mother bird will teach her young how to find their own food. That training takes an extra level of energy beyond just doing it for them. How can we leave a legacy that matters and experience authentic discipleship where we can teach others how to spiritually feed themselves if we can barely sustain and nourish our own souls? We have essentially settled for a spiritual Happy Meal™, content with a kid-sized meal, when Jesus invites us to enjoy a multi-course feast at the table with Him.

The mother bird illustration explains why many can serve as leaders while simultaneously feeling empty, dry, and frustrated in their hearts. I've heard many stories about leaders who have written excellent books, preached dynamic sermons, sang terrific songs, and are incredible communicators about the way of Jesus. But away from the stage, their lives do not reflect the principles they speak and write about.

Recently, I have met with many ministry leaders who preach passionately, lead with kindness, counsel with empathy, and suffer from leadership fatigue. They have become so consumed with the

weight and responsibility of ministry they have neglected the care of their souls. Leaders can find the Word, consume the Word, and share the Word. If the one *pouring out* isn't receiving the necessary nourishment to sustain them spiritually, they will be weak and ineffective.

No one ever sets out to destroy the condition of their soul. Yet we often find ourselves in a spiritually downward spiral—facing ever-increasing ministry loads and burdens. We plow forward, assuming that our spiritual state, a neglected and empty soul, is part of the *deal* in a life devoted to ministry. Subtly, we have minimized the soul side of leadership. We have ignored that a ministry leader's most powerful leadership tool is a rested, healthy soul and a leader deeply connected to Christ. We have become so consumed with strategy, skill, and personal charisma that we have not emphasized the inner life of a leader. This results in an increasing number of men and women leading ministries who are spiritually dry and emotionally empty.

In ministry, there's always more to do. If I were to compile a list of the most complex parts of ministry, I'd top it with the fact that the work is never done. Most professions carry natural finish lines and time to pause to start new projects. Not for us; there is always more to do in the ministry world. When you lead other people—whether it's a staff, your children, or a team of volunteers—you tend to throw all your energy into their care and maintenance. And one day, you stop long enough to see that dust bunnies have formed on the things that are supposed to keep you healthy spiritually—spending time in prayer, perhaps, or putting effort into friendships that bring rest and nourishment to your soul. The devil would love to sift you like wheat (Luke 22:31). He would love to devour you like a lion rips into its prey (1 Peter 5:8). He would love for you to be so spiritually apathetic, complacent, and distracted with wandering affections so you are never useful to God's kingdom again. Neglectfulness breeds

barrenness, bitterness, and carelessness. How does this happen? We stop allowing Him to nourish, instruct, and correct us—and thus, begin to drift away.

The things we lose remain in the last place we left them. That isn't a very profound statement, but how true it is for the care and keeping of our souls. When we lose our passion or neglect our first love, God, in His tender mercy and grace, doesn't go anywhere. He doesn't abandon you. Instead, He weeps and grieves with you, welcoming you back with arms open wide, saying, with a gentle whisper, "I missed you."

Take a moment, even as you read this, to let God speak to you about the care and keeping of your soul. Maybe you need to create space and time to connect with God. Perhaps you need to build rhythms of rest into your life.

Have we become so busy working and serving the Lord that we have neglected our personal spiritual experiences? We can never move the world by our own power. Nothing but the power of God can accomplish the task before His people. That power is given to the man and woman who lingers long with God in the secret place, and through Him, it is communicated and poured out to the people. It is safe to say that the person who does not keep their own vineyard will never properly keep the vineyards of others. Jesus does not want us to do for Him at the expense of being with Him. Our Lord is sympathetic to the demands of leadership. Consider Jesus' few years of ministry: blind people wanted to see, lame people wanted to walk, sick people wanted to be healed. The Pharisees and Sadducees tried to debate with Him. The disciples wanted to promote Him. But how many just wanted to be with Him?

Jesus often went off by Himself to a quiet place to enjoy fellowship with His Father. He beckons us to do the same. Leader, make much of Jesus. Spend time with Him. Stay with Him and stare at Him until you can say, like David in the desert of Judah:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips (Psalm 63:1-5).

When we establish a rhythm of practicing intimacy and rest, we allow ourselves the opportunity to stop and consider the true condition of our soul. When we provide space for God to meet with us in spirit and in truth, our leadership comes from a place of rest and contentment. So let me end this chapter by asking you a question: Are you paying attention to the health and condition of your soul? May you refuse to settle for the status quo. Reengage your heart. We are prone to wander. God sees it, knows it, and continually makes a way for us to return to Him.

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are symptoms of soul neglect for you and what are symptoms of soul health.
- After taking time to reflect, would you say you are in a season of soul health or soul neglect? Why?

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- What would you say is one of your main barriers to intimacy with God? Is that barrier similar to the ones you face in other relationships? Why or why not?
- Re-read Psalm 63:1-5. Here David describes his longing for God. Would you describe your relationship this way? Why or why not?
- How can we cultivate this intense kind of longing?
- What image comes to mind when you hear “care for your soul?” How is God calling you to care better for yourself? What areas in your life are “collecting dust bunnies” and showing neglect?

Endnotes

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Are you looking for relief from the daily demands of leadership? Are you lonely, near empty, or held captive to a schedule that never stops? The weight of leadership is heavy. Juggling the tasks of managing programs, budgets, schedules, teaching, and navigating ever-present pressures, we can quickly lose sight of our priorities. We are seeing leaders abandon the ministry in record numbers due to disillusionment, weariness, and personal scandals.

Without the Spirit's involvement, we are in danger of becoming leaders who know how to lead well but don't know God well. There is an urgent need for soul care in the private lives of leaders. Jesus never called us to a life of ceaseless exhaustion. He calls us to come to Him for rest. Rest that realigns our soul to live and breathe in a posture of dwelling within God's presence. God's rest does not have to be as elusive as it seems. His rest is ours when we turn and begin to grasp what that means for our lives and our leadership.

In *Rest: Overcoming Spiritual Fatigue*, leaders will learn the skill of tending to their own souls and their soul's connection with God. This book will spark honest, helpful, and hopeful conversations about how to care for the soul and develop rhythms of rest with Jesus. When leaders press into an aggressive attentiveness to the presence of God, the world around us, the people we serve, the children we raise, and the families we impact will be hungry for their own deeper experience of Christ.



Over the past 20 years, Marianne Howard's humor, warmth, and transparency helps her teach, equip, mentor, and invest in generational discipleship. Her experience as a minister's wife allows her to see the toll spiritual fatigue takes on gifted ministry leaders. She values the incredible work of life-on-life discipleship and regularly meets with students and women to cultivate a hunger for God's Word. Marianne is a co-host of the *D6 Podcast*, she regularly contributes to the D6 Family blog and is a passionate teacher of God's Word.

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