

**WORN OUT BY  
OBEDIENCE**

RECOVERING FROM  
SPIRITUAL FATIGUE

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**he Christian life is an exciting journey! Life with Christ transforms our hearts from the inside out and fills us with significance. But even though God provides us with spiritual blessings, life experiences can drag us down. We know that God can be trusted, that His timing is perfect, and that somehow He weaves all things together for our benefit.

But—in the battle, in real time—we become spiritually fatigued, worn down by resisting temptation, exhausted from dealing with difficult people, weary from the emotion of disappointment, tired of waiting. We become worn out by obedience.

The title *Worn Out by Obedience* may seem contradictory. If obeying Christ is the only way to run the Christian race, and if God ultimately blesses obedience, then you might be wondering, “How can one be worn down by the very thing that God rewards?” Although obedience is always the right path to take, that doesn’t mean it is the easiest path to take. Easy doesn’t always mean right. Right doesn’t always mean easy. A life of obedience involves discipline, training, and maneuvering obstacles. Even Jesus faced these challenges during His ministry on earth.

The writer of Hebrews wrote that “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though

he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:7–8). This may not be a popular message, but there is no way around it. Obedience, even for Jesus, was hard. Certainly it will be hard for us.

Spiritual fatigue is not a character flaw or a condition reserved for the immature or weak Christian. There are stretches of the journey—sometimes long, sometimes short—where we feel like we are just going through the motions, disconnected, distanced, stalled. We have not walked away from Jesus; we’re just not moving forward with Him. Greg Hawkins and Sally Parkinson conducted extensive research (more than a quarter of a million people in one thousand churches) to determine the spiritual process in the lives of believers. They discovered that believers are found in one of three stages—“Growing in Christ,” “Close to Christ,” or “Christ-Centered.”<sup>1</sup> Their research also revealed that regardless of which stage believers were in, 92 percent of those surveyed had been stalled at some point in their spiritual journey. Most every believer experiences times of soul weariness. This is an issue we need to be aware of and prepared for. The stalled state leaves a believer vulnerable.

This book is written for followers of Jesus who have grown weary, exhausted from the continued effort to do what’s right. I want to address the times when the battle becomes exhausting, when our love for God grows cold, when our passion for Christ has dwindled to smoldering embers.

We will learn that weary stretches are unavoidable . . . but we don’t have to remain there. We will seek to understand the danger of apathy toward God and how we can reignite our hearts with a burning passion to follow hard after Him.

This book began with a series of sermons I preached at The Bible Chapel, a church I have pastored for more than twenty-five years. I have delivered many series during my tenure, but few have resonated with our congregation like this one. The guiding text for the series was the story of David's fleeing to Ziklag—enemy territory—when Saul was pursuing him. At our church, “Ziklag” has become a term to describe the stretches of the spiritual journey where a person has become stalled or has strayed. Often I hear people describing a particular time in their life as “being in Ziklag” or “I am praying for my friend. She is in Ziklag.” Whether you find yourself in that lonely wilderness or are just feeling worn out (and therefore at risk for a Ziklag experience), my prayer is that this book will resonate with you as it did with our congregation.

PART 1

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# RUNNING HARD

WORN OUT  
BY OBEDIENCE



## CHAPTER 1

# RUNNING ON EMPTY

*Leaders in any realm of life, leaders who lead on empty don't lead well and for some time now I've been leading on empty. And so I believe that the best thing for me to do is to step aside. . . . I really need your prayers and I need your support. We've said that this is a church where it's OK to not be okay, and I'm not okay. I'm tired. I'm broken, and I just need some rest.<sup>1</sup> —PETE WILSON*

**A**ndrew\* loves leading small-group Bible studies. Or rather, he did. Now, after fifteen years of trying to balance a busy career, family life, coaching his children's sports teams, and using his gifts to teach high school students and couples at our church, Andrew is worn down, running on empty. He stepped aside from ministry in order to refill his spiritual tank. In his words: "I was tired of leading and needed to be in a situation where I was being led."

Andrew is attending a new group with his wife, Kathy, and he is beginning to feel God calling him to use his gifts in a more

significant way. Right now, he is resisting the urge. Here's how Andrew shared what's going on in his heart.

*I know that God wants me to step up and lead again, but I have resisted because frankly, I am just tired of the responsibility. I recognize that I am not some all-wise biblical scholar who has all kinds of profound knowledge to share, but God has equipped me with an ability to lead a group of men and women through Bible studies in a way that is relevant and engages the whole group.*

*So, I end up wrestling with the Holy Spirit, which leaves me exhausted . . . and I end up running away and trying to hide. Right now I don't look forward to going to our small group and intentionally don't prepare. I just want to quit . . . but I know that is not the answer.*

*\* Names have been changed*

I believe every Christian can relate to Andrew. I know I can. Whether it is the spiritual fatigue that inevitably comes from using our gifts over a long period of time, the soul weariness from resisting nagging temptations, the exhausting battle to do what's right when disobedience is much more attractive, or the draining circumstances that invade our lives—we become worn out by obedience.

*Worn out by obedience.* That phrase seems contradictory, doesn't it? Obedience, after all, is the Christian's heartbeat. It's the sincere demonstration of our love for Christ flowing from a heart of gratitude for His work on our behalf. Obedience, made possible by God's empowering presence, digs a deep foundation providing a rock-solid platform from which to launch a life of



meaning and purpose. We long to hear, “Well done!” when this life is over, but for now, we are moved by the Spirit’s motivating whispers, “Great job!” and “Way to go!”

So how can the very thing that provides meaning and purpose wear us down? How can we tire of that which brings deep satisfaction? How can the blessing of obedience become a dreaded duty? How can following Jesus exhaust us?

### **Exhilarating and Exhausting**

Recently my wife, Lori, and I went hiking in Virginia’s Shenandoah National Park. We learned that the “Whiteoak Canyon to Cedar Run Loop” was, according to our National Park app, “among the best hikes—if not the best hike—in Shenandoah.” So, we went for it. The trail was a scenic ten-mile loop through dense woods. Along the rocky path, several beautiful waterfalls cascaded into pools where hikers enjoyed a refreshing swim.

But this hike was not for those desiring a leisurely walk in the woods. The natural beauty of the trail was accompanied by a challenging ascent. Our legs were feeling the burn and our clothes were soaked with sweat as we climbed for three hours up a narrow path with several stretches of steep steps.

After one particularly difficult section, Lori, who was leading the way, looked back at me and said, “Tell me again, why do we think this is fun?” I couldn’t think of a good answer.

**Lori looked back at me and said, “Tell me again, why do we think this is fun?”**

As soon as we got to the top it was time to head back down.

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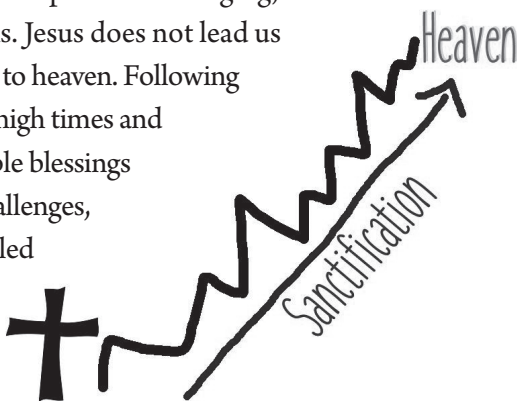
The descent was another kind of challenge, causing us to use a different set of muscles and forcing us to concentrate on the precarious footing of the steep downward trail.

The trip was exhilarating *and* exhausting! We enjoyed the magnificent scenery *and* wondered if the trail would ever end. When we finally reached our car, took off our packs, and finished what little water was left in our bottles, there was a great sense of accomplishment *and* we were beat.

Like our hiking trip, the spiritual journey is both exhilarating and exhausting. Following Christ is a moment-by-moment, day-by-day experience where we know that the living God is working in and through us. There is nothing more satisfying than that! At the same time, there are long, tiring, seemingly unending stretches when we *don't* feel Him working in and through us, when we question His presence. The right path is not always the easy path. The markings on the trees that indicate you are on the right trail and the signs that warn of challenging terrain often appear side by side.

Here is a sketch that helps me picture what the spiritual journey looks like. The path is challenging, filled with ups and downs. Jesus does not lead us on one smooth trail to heaven. Following the Savior includes high times and low times, remarkable blessings and tremendous challenges, what C. S. Lewis called “troughs.”

Notice on the sketch that over



the long haul there is positive progress. This process of spiritual growth is called *sanctification*. When we become Christians the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, enabling us to do everything God calls us to do. *And* with that enabling power, we have the responsibility to obey, to do what's right when wrong seems easier and, sometimes, more appealing. In his classic work, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges uses the analogy of a farmer to explain God's sovereign power and man's responsibility for obedience. He writes:

*Farming is a joint venture between God and the farmer. The farmer cannot do what God must do, and God will not do what the farmer should do.*

*We can say just as accurately that the pursuit of holiness is a joint venture between God and the Christian. No one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, but just as surely, no one will attain it without effort on his own part. God has made it possible for us to walk in holiness. But He has given us the responsibility of doing the walking; He does not do that for us.<sup>2</sup>*

Together we want to consider our “responsibility of doing the walking.” Along with great blessing and times of inexpressible joy, the journey contains a plethora of real and raw emotions, uninvited circumstances, and constant encounters with particular temptations. Obedience is always the right path to take . . . and as we do the walking there are times when obedience is really hard.

- Ask the teenager committed to stay pure while experiencing hormonal explosions.

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- Ask the husband and wife who vowed, “for better, for worse” and are now experiencing a long stretch of “worse.”
- Ask the couple whose plea for a child continues to go unanswered.
- Ask the single parent trying to honor God while feeling the financial pressure of being the sole provider.
- Ask the young adult who is waiting (and waiting) for God to provide a godly spouse.
- Ask the person whose constant battle with a nagging temptation is wearing them out.
- Ask the person who feels like their sacrificial service goes unnoticed and unappreciated.
- Ask the Christian businessperson determined to do things God’s way while others get ahead with their cutthroat, corner-cutting practices.
- Ask the person fighting fear and discouragement while going through another round of treatment.
- Ask the couple serving as caregivers for aging parents.
- Ask the person trudging through the grueling journey of grief.
- Ask the person struggling with an addiction who knows that another relapse is only one weak moment away.
- Ask the parents who have loved and supported their child through years of substance abuse. One mom whose son had yet another relapse shared her heart

with a leader in our church. “She kept telling me last night how tired they are in every possible way. She said, “This feels like hell on earth.””

- Ask the person who is spiritually dry.

I was in the sound booth packing up my backpack after church when Sam spotted me and wanted to talk. He said he had been reluctant to go down front after the service and pray with one of our pastors. Sam is a mature believer and active in ministry but, with tears in his eyes, he confessed that he was “spiritually dry.” There was no fall into sin or particular circumstance that Sam could point to as the reason for his “trough.” But he was feeling disconnected from God and sensing a frightening vulnerability.

Maybe you have shared Sam’s experience. On the whole, life is good. You are not worn down from battling a particular temptation nor immersed in a depleting life circumstance. But your soul is dry, and you are frightened by the vulnerability of your spiritual state.

Spiritual fatigue is not reserved for the new or immature believer. It hits us all at various stages of our journey. When the reality of soul weariness is ignored, we slowly slide into dangerous times of spiritual disconnectedness, disappointment, and discouragement. It is during these vulnerable stretches when we are most susceptible to suspend the battle against temptation, lay down our armor, and surrender to sin. As a lion goes after worn-down prey, so Satan charges after the tired believer. We have to recognize the reality of spiritual fatigue, understand the danger, and take the steps to refresh our soul.

A Guide for Our Journey

Does God's Word address soul weariness? Is there a person in Scripture who experienced spiritual fatigue that we can learn from? The answer to both questions is yes.

While we'll consider many passages from Scripture, I want to use a well-known Old Testament king as our primary guide. This king was a warrior, poet, songwriter, and leader. All these roles provided him with a unique mix of experiences ranging from the nightmares of leading men into bloody battles to the tranquility of writing the Twenty-third Psalm. His name was David, and his life was an open book. His prayers and praises, frustrations and questions are journaled in the Psalms. God declared that David was a "man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), an enviable description used for no other human in the Bible. God's heart and David's heart beat in synchronized

**When David's heart was beating with God, he was an unstoppable force.**

rhythm. David was a man of passion, drive, and desire. When his heart was beating with God, he was an unstoppable force. But periods of irregular spiritual heartbeats allowed that same passion to fuel times

of blatant sin. He was, at the same time, deeply spiritual and disgustingly human. David was the person we want to be and the person we are.

We will focus on a particular period when David's soul weariness led him to doubt God and His promises. Worn out by obedience, he made a fateful choice to settle in the land of the enemy.

### **The Anointing and the Escape**

David was a teenager, minding his father's sheep and minding his own business when he was summoned from the fields for a special meeting with the prophet Samuel. Israel's first king, Saul, had disqualified himself by a life of disobedience. While Saul remained the official leader, God prepared Saul's replacement. He sent Samuel to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse to anoint the new king.

Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel and God let the prophet know that none was His man. Finally, almost as an afterthought, the baby of the family was called to appear before the prophet. No one was more surprised than David when Samuel said (as I imagine), "You will be the next king of Israel." The prophet "took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David" (1 Sam. 16:13).

From that time, David's life changed dramatically. With God's empowerment, the young man stood up to the Philistine giant, Goliath, who had been taunting Israel's army with an invitation to a one-on-one duel, winner take all. Using his slingshot, David planted a stone into Goliath's big forehead, cut off the giant's head with the giant's sword, and kept both as trophies. Soon David was leading Israel's army in victorious battles. He was given Saul's daughter in marriage and became a kindred spirit with Saul's son Jonathan. Songs were written about David and sung by all the young girls. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7) were the lyrics set to the popular tunes of the day. David enjoyed rock-star status in everyone's eyes . . . except King Saul.

Saul's jealousy led him to a dark place. He decided to kill David. One day when David was in the king's presence he looked up to see a spear coming toward his head. He ducked just in time. With the spear embedded and vibrating in the wall behind him, David escaped from the man obsessed with jealousy. And David ran from Saul for the next eight-and-a-half years!

### **Life on the Run**

During David's time on the run, the anointing by Samuel became a dull memory; he wondered if he had misunderstood what the prophet told him about being the next king. The fight with Goliath and the victories in battle seemed to be part of another lifetime. David wondered if God's promise would ever come true. David had trusted God, followed God, obeyed God, but after almost a decade of running he became worn out in body and soul.

David convinced himself that one day Saul would kill him. Knowing that the king would not pursue him into enemy territory, David decided to cross the border into Philistia, the land of the enemy. There he gained favor with one of the five Philistine kings. David and his soldiers settled with their families in a little city called Ziklag. In Ziklag, David disengaged from God and lived a life of lies and cover-up.

### **Ziklag: Short Visits, Extended Stays, Settling In**

Sooner or later, every believer experiences spiritual fatigue. Like David, we can become worn out by years of service. We can feel used or unappreciated when our identity is found in



serving rather than in the One we serve. We are worn down by harassing temptations that constantly nip at our heels and trip us up. We are overwhelmed by the weight of expectations placed on us by the Christian community and unrealistic expectations we place on ourselves. Life circumstances hit us like a rogue wave and send us tumbling in the sea of disappointment. When we are worn out, Ziklag looks inviting.

The time we spend in Ziklag may last for a few minutes, a few months, or a few years. The short jaunt into enemy territory may be a conversation of regrettable gossip, an outburst of anger, a quick click to a raunchy website, a social media connection that surfaces unhealthy emotions. In these cases, conviction is swift and heavy. Realizing the danger, we quickly turn around and head back home, seeking God's forgiveness and sustaining grace.

Sometimes the stay is much longer. Our spiritual fatigue makes us believe we need a short vacation from God. As a tourist explores the sights of a city, we explore Ziklag's alluring attractions. We fall back into old sinful patterns, ignoring the danger and embracing the sin. The gossip becomes a juicy morsel we continue to enjoy. The relationship with our spouse remains tense. We cross the line of sexual purity. The social media message becomes an ongoing conversation. We choose to remain disconnected from God. Then, one day through a confrontation from a friend, an encounter with God's Word, or an experience that produces a sudden sense of the danger, we pack up and move back to the land of obedience.

Sometimes our Ziklag experience is more than a quick stop or a short visit. Our spiritual weariness leads to relocation. We

conclude that the land of obedience is a place of discouragement and disappointment. So we pack up our heart and settle in our personal Ziklag.

### **The Reality of Soul Weariness**

This book is for believers—those whose lives have been transformed by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; those who are committed to follow hard after Jesus; those who are engaged in the spiritual battle; those who live to make an impact in their generation for Christ. Too many professing Christians stand on the sidelines hardly breaking a sweat, but those in the game spend themselves for the things of eternal significance. They desire to honor God at home, at work, in the classroom, and among their network of friends. With God's strength they fight badgering temptations, use their spiritual gifts to serve God and others, and trust God through the inevitable challenges of life. They live with the weight of expectations—sometimes unreasonably placed on them by others, sometimes burning from an inward desire to move faster and further in their spiritual walk. These serious believers—those in the game—can become worn out.

In my twenty-five years of pastoring a church, I have seen it happen too many times: soul-weary believers drop out of service, leave the church, isolate themselves from caring friends, and settle for a time in Ziklag—dangerously distanced from God. This book is written to address the issue of soul weariness—what it looks like, the dangers it brings, and how, by God's grace, we can recover and resume the great adventure of following hard after Christ.

Recently, Lori and I were out for dinner with another couple when our friends asked if we had heard about the latest pastoral casualty. I recited the long list of well-known pastors who had resigned or been asked to resign from ministry. But the one they had just heard about was a new one. They texted me a YouTube link to a short video where the pastor explained why he was stepping down. He did not mention an affair or inappropriate relationship. There was no mishandling of money or an overbearing personality that had been driving staff from the church. The pastor had not been charged with plagiarizing; nor had he rejected a theological tenet of the faith. He said that he was simply spiritually exhausted.

In a heartfelt message the pastor explained how and why he had started the church a decade earlier. He reported how the church had grown to almost ten thousand people and how he had poured his life into making that happen. But he admitted that while he was busy doing ministry and seeing great progress take place, he had ignored a growing spiritual fatigue. While he was obediently doing the things it takes to grow a church, he did not prioritize important heart issues. He explained,

*Leaders in any realm of life, leaders who lead on empty don't lead well and for some time now I've been leading on empty. And so I believe the best thing for me to do is to step aside. . . .*

*And now, more than ever before—I really need your prayers and I need your support. We've said that this is a church where it's OK to not be okay, and I'm not okay. I'm tired. I'm broken, and I just need some rest.<sup>3</sup>*

Spiritual fatigue is something every believer will experience. Sometimes we run out of gas while serving. Sometimes expectations wear us down. Sometimes disappointments deplete our spiritual drive. It is foolish and dangerous to ignore these spiritual realities. It's okay to admit you're not okay. It's okay to acknowledge that you are running on empty. It's okay to admit that you are tired, broken, vulnerable, and need some rest. But it's not okay to settle for a life in Ziklag.

Through the following chapters we will discover the things that wear us down, the dangers of Ziklag, and God's grace and power to recover from spiritual fatigue. Jesus knew that along

the way we would get tired.

**Jesus knew that  
along the way we  
would get tired.**

That's why He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am

gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28–29). Let's take a journey together and find refreshment and rest for our souls.

**Reflect**

1. Andrew described a time when he was running on empty. Describe a time when you experienced this same soul weariness.
2. What were the circumstances that led to your spiritual exhaustion?

3. When David wore down he decided to cross over into enemy territory and settle in Ziklag. When you become weary, where are you tempted to escape? Why do you think “Ziklag” is so attractive to us?

4. Check out the sketch on page 22. Where would you place your present experience on the up-and-down continuum?

5. Read Matthew 11:28–29. Why does Jesus invite us to a place of rest?

Take a moment to tell God about the things that wear you down spiritually. Ask for His wisdom in dealing with these vulnerable times.