

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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RENEWING OUR STRENGTH

by Silas Shotwell

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Isaiah 40:28-31 *"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

I saw a recent survey concerning the mental state of "born again Christians." It was certainly not limited to our folks and I don't even know how accurate it was. But it raised some issues that each of us would have to answer for ourselves.

It stated that:

- 48% of those who consider themselves "born-again" were searching for purpose. Would that be true of you?
- 40% were in too much debt. Sound familiar?
- 50% needed new friends. You?
- 31% totally stressed out, near the breaking point. You?
- 49% said "Too Busy." You?

The Isaiah text remarks that even youths get tired and weary. Contrast our world to then and wonder if it's not much worse? We may not work nearly as hard physically, but are so much more labored emotionally and mentally.

No matter how much we're doing, many of us want to do even more. And we certainly want to serve God. Why else would we come to a meeting like this? And maybe some of us are here because we need renewal.

How long has it been since you flew on eagle's wings?

And incidentally, there is a progression in Isaiah 40 that we often miss. When I was a kid we spent lots of time in cold winter months looking at Sears Roebuck and “Monkey Wards” catalogs. They usually gave options on products, showing you “good, better, and best.” In Isaiah 40 eagle’s wings are only the “good.” Wouldn’t it be “good” to be able to fly above it all, to soar on eagle’s wings and look down at the problems below that cannot reach up to us? That would be “good,” but there is something “better.”

Even better than flying above our problems would be to be down among them, but be able to run right past them. “Faster than a speeding bullet” would make us Supermen if we could outrun anything that might drag us down. That would be “better.”

But that’s not the “best.” The “best” would be to be among our problems but not even to have to run. We could just “walk,” calmly and confidently. Jesus calls us to a confident “walk” with Him, with a sense of victory, and confidence. That’s what we want, and what He wants us to have.

So our goal should be able to walk through this world . . . with strength!

Does that describe you?

I hope so. But even if it doesn’t, it CAN!

I run a retreat center called “Higher Ground.” It is at the foot of Mt. Hood and is a place of calm, and healing, and renewal. Hundreds of people have come there from all over the world in recent years. I think most of them have been helped in the process.

We study, and pray, and relax, and work, and meditate. These are born-again Christians. Church leaders and their families. Those who come are often broken, and scarred, and tired. But they find strength in the Lord, and walk away with new power.

In a sense, what we do at Higher Ground is rediscover the blessing of “keeping the Sabbath.”

In the creation story, God finished His work in six days and on the seventh day He rested!

Now it wasn’t that He was tired. God never gets tired!

I believe He rested for US! Not because He was tired and needed rest, but because He is a sensitive and compassionate Lord and He wanted to teach us to find strength in Him.

How many of us work ourselves to the bone, and even take pride in it? How many ignore the principle of the Sabbath?

Because we live under the new covenant and because we meet together on the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, do we think that we don’t need to rest any more?

I think that in the fourth of the Ten Commandments, God is saying, “I want you to rest!” “I command you to take one vacation day every week, just to rest and relax with me. Be close to me.”

That is so beneficial, in every way: spiritually, mentally, and even physically.

Let me tell you about another recent survey. In a broad-based medical study, it was suggested that people in Great Britain, on average, live six years longer than Americans. That’s significant.

Why?

Is it their wonderful diet? (Heaven forbid. There may not be a worse diet in the world.)

Is it because they get more exercise? (Nothing indicates that.)

Is it because they have less pollution? (Hardly.)

Do they have better doctors and medical facilities? (No.)

Then what, on average, makes the life spans of Brits longer than Americans?

The conclusion of the physicians and psychologists who took the survey, was that Americans don’t know how to relax! Brits go to the pub, they go to the beach, they take holidays, they walk in the park, etc. Now don’t go home from here and tell your wife that I suggested that you start going to the pub!!! But I will tell you to relax! Chill! Take it easy. Stress is killing us!

God gave our bodies the wonderful ability to get suddenly tense when we need to fight or flee. Adrenalin rushes throughout the body in a split second and we’re ready for action. That is an intended mechanism to help us meet danger quickly. But we have come to live that way!!

We need to keep the Sabbath!

In the scriptures God calls us to complete and total renewal. Renewal of body, mind and spirit. That is the whole essence and purpose of the Sabbath. Knowing our needs and wanting to provide for us, He began by legislating a day of rest for His people. Did your mother ever make you take a nap, or go to bed at a certain hour even though you protested, “But I’m not sleepy.”?

The body NEEDS time to lie down and relax.

The mind NEEDS some time without the stresses, the worries and responsibilities that surround us.

The spirit NEEDS renewal. It needs to draw strength and energy from God. It gets that by fellowshiping with Him. And it needs to happen regularly.

Mark 2:27, "...*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" -Jesus

I think we need to realize that God is serious about providing for our personal renewal, and we need to get serious about it too!

We thank God for His provision of food and shelter, for our jobs, our families, and our salvation. But then we are too stressed and too tired to enjoy these blessings!

Let's rely on His grace for more than our salvation. We serve a God who never tires, and we draw our energy and strength from Him. He is our source. God never tires... "*He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*"

So how does He do it? How can we find some peace and calm in the midst of our lives that often resemble busy, confusing whirlwinds?

If we look back at Isaiah, his solution is this: verse 31: "*those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*" I believe the term "hope in the Lord" is a bit more accurate than the term to "wait" on the Lord. But let's not quibble over words. The point is, your source for renewal is The Lord!

If that's true, then why are so many Christians so tired and so burned out? If we're busy at work, and with our families, and in service to the Lord, the natural result is to be tired. Right?

Wrong!

Being busy can actually energize us. Good work is fulfilling and urges us to do more.

So what causes a Christian to lose his strength?

In a moment I want to suggest three things that wear us down and rob us of our desire and ability to do more.

Before we even list those things, we've got to think about PRIORITIES. There's a priority problem somewhere in the Christian life today. We make the mistake of putting work and even play, before God. That's a huge mistake because we draw our strength from the Lord, don't we? If we're too busy drawing from the wrong sources, we lose our strength.

Even if your work is Christian ministry, you can be busy in that work and not be communing and walking with the Lord. He wants to know you. Remember Mary and

Martha? One was so busy working “for” Him that she was missing the opportunity to be “with” Him. You know what I’m talking about.

And no matter how hard you work in the world, nor how hard you play, nor even how hard you work in the church, they don’t pay you back with more strength! They just drain you. They expect it of you, and when you give to them, they just take it and say you owe more.

I deal with burned-out people all the time. And I have concluded that burnout doesn’t come because you do too much, but because you do a lot and are not appreciated! If it’s simply a duty, if it’s an obligation, if it is expected of you, that drains you. But when you are cherished and appreciated, that gives you the heart to go on.

And I believe that no one appreciates the good you do more than God! He notices. Even a cup of cold water given in His Name. I think that heaven will be a rewards ceremony with some of the main recipients being people who were unnoticed by the world during their years of Christian service on earth. When you care like Jesus, and do things like Jesus, you are going to be rewarded.

But not necessarily now.

But I do know this. Right now, when you work for God, He renews your strength! But you’re not just doing a job FOR Him; you’re involved WITH Him. God renews your strength when you’re involved WITH Him!

I have elders, and preachers, and missionaries, and professors from Christian colleges come to my place. Most of them have served God for years. They KNOW many things. They have DONE many things. But no matter who they are, no matter what their problems or concerns, I begin with an emphasis on “knowing God.” We focus on His Names, His majesty, and His glory. We seek to know Him. We spend hours praying, and praising, and confessing, and listening.

And the result is STRENGTH. He energizes! He empowers! He renews!

The people who come to me don’t need me, they need God! I don’t have the answers. He does! I don’t give advice. I just turn people back to God. And I turn back with them. That’s why they’re helped.

You would be shocked to know how many Christian men and women have stopped praying! Preachers. Elders. Missionaries. Their spouses. They say they believe in prayer, they can teach lessons about prayer, but they have gotten too hurt to pray, or too discouraged to pray, or too busy to pray. And brothers, we’re too busy NOT to pray!

Let’s get real basic here.

There is a principle that we cannot forget. YOU MUST FIRST GIVE IN ORDER TO RECEIVE!

That's true financially.

It's true with effort.

It's true spiritually.

It's true in everything.

The Kingdom principle is give TO God, and then receive FROM God. We reap what we sow. If we sow into self, we reap from self. If we sow into the world, we reap from the world. If we sow into a relationship with God, we receive from God.

I want to speak specifically today to any Christian here that is tired, run down, uninterested, or unenthused about your Christian life.

There's a lot of spiritual burnout. And it's caused by at least three different factors.

Let's call the first one OVERDRIVE. We are too busy for God, and He is the Source of our strength.

Think of driving a car that has stick shift: 5 speed. You're at a stop light in a car with stick shift, and the light turns green, you start out in first gear, and progress through the gears till you reach the posted speed limit.

What if you take that car and drive it onto the freeway at 65 miles per hour, in second gear? Say you drive for an hour at 65 miles an hour, in second gear. What's going to happen? You're going to burn up that engine because you're working it too hard and too fast: burnout.

Or you're driving over a steep mountain pass and there are signs that say: "Turn off the A/C."

Why do they care if you have on the A/C?

Because the A/C puts a load on the engine and that additional stress can cause burnout.

That's why there are water stations on mountain passes, where you can put fresh, cool water in the radiator: for refreshing and renewal.

That's why there are rest stops, where a person can renew their strength.

That's why there are emergency telephones along freeways in Los Angeles and San Francisco, so a person can communicate with someone who can help them in case of an emergency, or a burnout.

Are we getting the idea?

Overdrive causes people, even Christians, to BURN OUT!

Each of us needs to do some personal assessment here. We may resent it if our wives nag us, or our doctors lecture us, or if a speaker at Yamhill Men's Retreat chastises us! But we need to do some personal assessment!

What drives my life?!

Am I too concerned about money, or job, or having a good time, or church work? If your personal walk with God is falling by the wayside it's no wonder you're so tired! Because the more you invest in the world, the more the world will take from you. The world will take, and take, and take again until there's nothing left to take from you.

Life will drain you of all the energy you have, and then some. It will leave you thirsty and dry every time. Burnout is assured.

With the apostle Paul, I want to urge you to FIX YOUR EYES UPON JESUS! He is our source. He is our strength and our agenda. Not anything else! Don't let anything stand between you and your walk with God!

So there's a strength-sapping phenomenon called OVERDRIVE, and it will cause BURNOUT in your life.

But there are some other things to. And one of them could be called UNDERDRIVE.

Underdrive: life on cruise control, boredom: too much of the same old thing.

This is when you're uninvolved in God's work. Pew sitting. Taking up space in God's family without contributing anything.

Not enough RPM's... The engine isn't working hard enough.

Let's put ourselves back out on the highway... We're driving in our beautiful state. It's gorgeous, plush and green... but also very mountainous. Ahead is a steep mountain grade. You're in 5th gear as you start up a steep grade. You press hard on that gas peddle, all the way to the floorboard...but the further up the hill you go, the slower the car goes. You've got that pedal jammed into the floorboard, but the car slows down even more now. The engine stalls under the pressure.

What went wrong?

Not enough RPM's! 5th gear is too low-strung to carry that much torque. If you want to make it over the top of a steep mountain, you have to shift into a lower gear, increase the engine RPM's, work the engine a little harder, or you'll stall.

This is the fate of Christians in underdrive. They never work hard enough to get over their personal mountains in life. They've got the pedal to the metal, but they lack the strength to press on because they're drawing their power from the wrong source. They're relying on past victories, or spiritual experiences they had years ago, or even the experiences of their parents. Instead of working on a right relationship with God today and serving Him personally.

People in underdrive are the non-contributors and the critics in every congregation. They too, are in danger of burnout because they are plugged into the wrong source.

This goes for everyone here, whatever your age or status: God has a place for you to minister in the house of God, in the workplace, and your personal life. Age (whether young or old) is no excuse not to contribute to Kingdom growth.

Remember, you've got to give to receive!

But I won't say more about this because I believe that in this group, the first problem is more prevalent than the second.

Then there's one more reason for burnout. It can be disabling, and even fatal. ***The most dangerous, absolutely disabling and debilitating element in a person's life is SIN.***

Sin is the greatest contributor in the lives of tired, weak and weary Christians: compromise. The most damaging thing to an engine is the friction inside the engine block.

If you don't believe me, allow even a little dirt to remain in your engine oil and see how long it takes before your engine experiences burnout. Sin is the grit in our spiritual motors that causes friction and damage. Sin wears us down and tears us apart, from the inside out. I guarantee you, your performance and even your existence as a Christian will be significantly reduced by the continued presence of sin in your life

Get rid of the sin in your life, and be ruthless in doing so!

The Bible says SIN hinders and entangles.

Sin causes Christians to lose their strength. It saps us of all our energy. It separates us from our source of strength and leaves us caught in the web of destruction. Without the help of Jesus Christ, there is no escape from this web of sin.

Why do people sin? Why put dirt in the engine?

We sin because we see an immediate reward: something we want fulfilled at that moment. Unfortunately, the wage of sin is death... So why not quit that job before the paycheck comes?

Sin seeks rewards with no renewal factor involved, only temporal gain. But the Christian draws his strength from God, not . . . (fill in the blank).

THEREFORE, THROW OFF SIN! GET AN OIL CHANGE! GET THAT JUNK OUTTA THERE!

One of my favorite lines is in a song that says,
*“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in His wonderful face,
and the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of His glory and grace.”*

If you do that, the Lord will give you strength, day by day.

Ps 84:5-7, “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.”

Heb 12:1-3, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Ps 103:2-5, “Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

Eph 4:22-24, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

How do you receive new strength?

My friends, if you want to receive renewed strength, you have to pour yourself out. Then He will renew your strength like the eagle’s, and one that can run and not be weary, can walk and not faint. Jesus is the power to transform the old, bored, tired, burnt out,

overdriven, under-driven, sin-filled man into a young, excited, productive, relaxed servant of God.

God bless you!

(Thanks to Brad Froese for his inspiration in this message.)

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