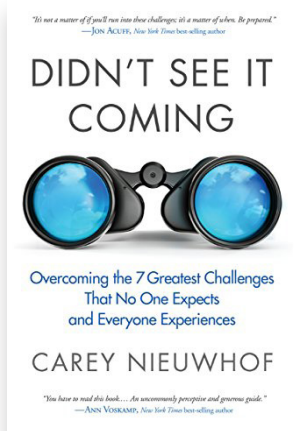


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carey Nieuwhof
Carey Nieuwhof is a speaker, podcaster, thought leader, and founding pastor of Connexus Church in Barrie, Ontario.

Didn't See it Coming

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction: Surprise

No one in his or her twenties sets out to end up feeling empty or cynical. At least I didn't. I can't imagine men and women at any age who want their personal relationships to collapse under the weight of pride or the lack of basic emotional intelligence. Yet each of those things happens every day to people we know. People we care about. People we love. Actually, it might be happening to you right now, though you remain completely unaware because that's exactly how it happens. The implosions often come as a surprise.

The way most people get into these unintended places is simple. They don't see it coming because they miss the warning signs. This book is for people who want to see the signs that there's a major life challenge ahead before it's too late. Neither cynicism, compromise, disconnection, irrelevance, pride, burnout nor emptiness needs to be your final story. You can see them coming. You can identify them when they arrive and when you name them, they lose some of their allure as well as their power.

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PART I: CYNICISM

Chapter 1: Find me a Happy Lawyer—How Cynicism Snuffs Out Hope

Cynicism is something you sense growing within you. While the time line may vary given your life experience, what many people discover is that the optimism of your teens and twenties gives way to realism. By the time you hit thirty, many of your once-in-love friends have split up, many of your once-enthusiastic co-workers hate their jobs, and many once-solid friendships have dissolved. So where does the realism of your thirties lead? Unchecked, it could lead you into the abyss that is cynicism.

Cynicism begins not because you don't care but because you do care. It starts because you poured your heart into something and got little in return. You fell in love, only to have that relationship dissolve. You threw your heart into your job, only to be told you were being let go. You were completely there for your mom, only to have her tell you you're such a disappointment. Most cynics are former optimists. You'd never know it now, but there was a time when they were hopeful, enthusiastic, and even cheerful. There's something inside the human spirit that wants to hope, wants to think things will get better. Nearly everyone starts life with a positive outlook. So what happens? How do you go from being so positive to so negative? At least three things happen to the human heart as it grows cynical.

You Know too Much. You've experienced heartbreak, betrayals, and backstabbing. You understand that people let you down. You've seen that some people can't be trusted. You know love hurts. You realize that people are fickle and selfish. You recognize that not everyone succeeds, despite good intentions and best efforts. The longer you live, the more you know which is why cynicism and age are frequent companions.

You Project the Past onto the Future. Many people are untrustworthy. Maybe the answer isn't joining another company, because no one seems happy at that place either. You also realize the pain of disappointment runs through many of your friends' marriages as deeply as it runs through yours. With age and experience, you become skilled at seeing patterns. You start to do what cynics do by instinct. You project past failures onto new situations.

You Decide to Stop Trusting, Hoping, and Believing. The problem with applying one particular situation to all situations is that the death of trust, hope, and belief is like a virus, infecting everything. You think you're protecting yourself from the future when, in reality, your new stance infects your present. The people you care about most in the here and now suffer. That's because as a cynic, you project your newfound suspicion on everyone and everything. Your current relationships stall out or dial back a few notches. The withdrawal isn't just from the future; you retreat from the present as well.

So you become numb to the people you claim to love most, even your spouse and kids. You find yourself predicting cynical endings to moments that used to fill you with joy. You might also find

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yourself becoming jaded at work. You don't really want to get to know the new guy because, well, you already know what he's like. Furthermore, the projects and goals that used to motivate and excite just don't anymore.

Perhaps most disturbingly cynicism begins to infect your relationship with God. When you close your heart to people, you close your heart to God. That shouldn't surprise us, but it does. It only makes sense that the very act of hardening your heart to people simply hardens your heart. The danger is when you close yourself off to people, you close yourself off to God.

It's a stifling progression from knowing too much, to projecting the past onto the future, to snuffing out trust, hope, and belief. But when this process occurs, you have the unmistakable ingredients for cynicism. Whether you're twenty-three or sixty-three, it's a sad—and unnecessary—way to live.

Chapter 2: Kicking Cynicism in the Teeth—Practical Ways to Defeat Your Inner Cynic

How do you battle cynicism on the days when discouragement and despair are once again knocking at your door? An incredibly effective antidote to cynicism is curiosity. One thing I've noticed again and again is this reality: curious people are never cynical, and cynical people are never curious. If curiosity is the discipline that kills cynicism and keeps hope alive, how do you become more curious? Like most things, curiosity is a habit that can be nurtured and developed. Feed your curiosity, and it grows. Starve it, and it withers. Here are five keys I've discovered to help anyone become more curious and stay curious throughout life.

Schedule Thinking Time. Busyness is the enemy of wonder, and many people feel frantically busy these days. When was the last time you felt curious while you were in a hurry? Curiosity needs time to breathe and explore. Hurry looks for shortcuts. Worse, it cuts people off. It asks for a summary or synopsis, not a fully developed story or explanation. So schedule time to ponder and process. Write it in your calendar. Then pick up a book on a subject you know nothing about and start reading. Go for coffee with a friend and ask a dozen really good questions. Or Google something until your brain fires up a whole new sequence of neurons.

Ask Open-Ended Questions. Questions spark curiosity. The curious go into the deep end of question asking by asking broad, probing questions and then they sit back and listen. Next time, when it sounds like the other person is finishing an answer, just wait. You'll be surprised at where that leads. Many people will offer more. I can't tell you how often that's led to pure-gold insight and conversation. If you listen longer than most people listen, you'll hear things most people never hear.

Give Fewer Answers. In addition to being skilled at asking broad questions, the curious also try to refrain from always giving an answer. If you need to be the authority on everything, you'll kill conversation. Even when curious people have an answer or a response to a question, they'll often volley back with a question like "Those are my thoughts, but what do you think?" Like a good game of tennis, the rally continues.

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Dream More. Curious people dream. They wonder. They imagine. If you spend more time dreaming, you'll find your cynicism fades.

Ask Two Pivotal Questions. The curious come back to two questions again and again. "Why?" and "Why not?" Why not do it differently? Why not say yes? Why not try it? Why not try a new way? Widen your universe when other people seem to be narrowing theirs.

Curiosity is a discipline, and it's a viewpoint. If you can adopt a curious outlook day after day, you will discover that cynicism never gets a toehold. Remember, the cynics are never curious, and the curious are never cynical.

PART II: COMPROMISE

Chapter 3: Successful (On the Outside)—Why Character Determines Your True Capacity

Nothing in the world can compensate for a lack of character. Even in a work place that wouldn't espouse any religious affiliation at all, character is the great leveler. You may be smart, but if people don't like you, they won't want to work with you. You may be the best software developer in your field, but if you lie, people won't trust you. You may be able to bring reams of cash into the company, but if you mistreat the people who work with you, they'll leave, or they'll make sure you do.

Lack of character kills careers, shatters families, ruins friendships, and destroys influence. Even if you never get fired or divorced over the compromises you make, your lack of character will limit the intimacy, joy, and depth you experience with God and with people. Like it or not, character, not competency, determines capacity.

Developing your character is never easy, which is why so many people abandon the pursuit. Still, character matters more than anything because you bring who you are into everything you do. Your character determines the kind of spouse, parent, friend, employee, and leader you are. No matter how hard you try, you can't escape you. Your character is compromised when you can no longer tell the world the truth. Watch for any gap you see between your words and your deeds. When you talk grace, but snap at your spouse, kids, and staff, that's a gap. When you talk financial responsibility with your colleagues, but your personal finances are a mess, that's a gap. When you say people matter, but you make zero time for anyone in need, that's a gap.

As the gap grows between your real self and the projection of your false self, you won't want anyone to discover the truth about you. Compromise eventually leads to cover-up. Cover-up is almost daily fodder for newspapers because it's so common in business and politics. It's typical in those fields because it's so common everywhere. We all start misleading and misinforming others whenever we feel ashamed of what we've done or who we've become. It's just that most of us never make the news.

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Another sign of compromise is when you commit to things that you never end up doing. That may be a common human condition, but it intensifies as you compromise more and more. There's a certain point when you compromise regularly enough that you decide to stop apologizing and instead start justifying. There's a reason you are the way you are. When you start justifying your bad behavior and decisions, you begin to believe your condition is inevitable and shift blame to circumstances "beyond your control." You convince yourself that if others were in your shoes, they would be just as cynical, unhappy, and compromised as you are.

When you keep compromising, eventually you craft a life that is almost entirely self-centered and that's the opposite of who you know you should be. Any value system worth having is focused on others, not self. The problem, of course, is that people take time, attention and love. That requires time and energy you don't have. When you tackle your character things get uncomfortable. The blaming stops. The excuses get pushed to the side. Painful honesty is required. You finally have to deal with you.

Chapter 4: Taking Your Soul off the Market—Practical Ways to Deepen Your Character

If you go through the deep journey Jesus invites you to take, you'll stop compromising. Your outside will begin to look like your inside. You won't need to hide because there will be nothing left to hide. You'll be so consistent that there will be no distinction between who you are publicly and who you are privately. Keeping your word will be easy because your yes means yes and your no means no. That's what working on your character does. That's what getting your soul back looks like.

Obviously, it's a lifelong journey. The ancients called it sanctification, or the process of being made holy by separating yourself from the things that murder your soul. It's the sometimes-painful work God does in your life, not because he hates you, but because he loves you. So how do you begin that reconstruction? How do you reverse the compromises and start working on your character? The process of changing your character from the inside out could fill this entire book, but here are three ways to get started.

Take Responsibility. There's a simple reason we blame circumstances and other people rather than own up to our faults and failures. It's easier than dealing with ourselves. Blame is the opposite of responsibility. Every time you blame others, invent justifications, or craft a fresh excuse, you evade responsibility. As soon as you start to admit that you're the problem, you start to make progress. You can blame your team, your board, your spouse, your kids, the economy, your profession, or even gravity, but none of that is going to reshape your character.

Make your Talk Match your Walk. Every time I line up my public talk to match my private walk, it makes my private walk better. Words have that kind of power if they're honest. The shame and humiliation of admitting who you really are to people you respect and admire will motivate a big shift in behavior. If you simply make your talk match your walk, the gap between who you are and who you

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want to he becomes smaller almost instantly. It's just too embarrassing to tell the truth, so you make the truth better. One of the best things you can do to overcome your hypocrisy is to humble your talk and accelerate your walk.

Put Yourself First When It Comes to Personal Growth. You need to understand that it is not selfish to put yourself first when it comes to personal growth. Since nobody is going to give you extra time to become a better person, you need to take it. It means you won't be available to others 24/7. It means you're going to steal away to pray, study, and work on your character. It means you're going to read a book, study the Scriptures, meet with a mentor, take a course, or see a counselor. The time you spend working on your character is an investment in yourself and in the people who matter most to you. It's an investment that pays back in every aspect of your life.

Competency gets you in the room. Character keeps you in the room. For all of us, it's our character that determines how we'll be remembered. More important, it's our character that God is most interested in. Reverse the compromise that's happening in your life, and you will finally close the gap between who you are and who you want to be. Your interior life will finally begin to sync with your exterior life. Not only will you experience a newfound peace and even deepened humility and self-respect, but you will change your legacy. The people closest to you will become the people most grateful for you.

PART III: DISCONNECTION

Chapter 5: Is Anyone Out There—Why So Many of Us Feel So Alone

We live in a world where you can have five hundred friends and still feel isolated and abandoned. Solitude is a gift from God. Isolation is a tool of the Enemy. As a culture, the more connected we've become, the more isolated we've grown. This is our strange twenty-first-century paradox: we're connected to more people than ever before and we've never felt more alone. In my lifetime, I've noticed the decline of two vital things. Their demise may be part of the reason people feel so distant from others.

Great conversation is a beautiful art. It involves the exchange of ideas between two or more people who care enough about one another to listen as well as speak. Sadly, conversations seem to be devolving into an exchange of monologues among people who don't seem terribly interested in one another. People today appear to be talking at one another more than they're talking with one another.

So where does this decline come from? My theory is that we've grown used to posting status updates, telling the world what's on our mind. Social media has made us all mini-broadcasters. As "social" as social media is, it's still largely a monologue. Most people tell rather than ask. If you jump into the fray with a comment, it's usually only to air your point, idea, or current state of mind.

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I think we've now taken what we do on social media and transported it to live human interactions. We have started assuming other people are infinitely interested in our lives the way they appear to be online. In our self-absorbed minds, we're all Hollywood figures whose lives are endlessly interesting to others, or at least we're too insecure to admit otherwise. Conversation has become a press conference with whoever happens to be listening.

Sadly, it's soul deadening not only to our hearers but also to you and me as speakers. If you converse only in monologues, you will eventually feel deep loss. You'll never discover the joy of truly engaging another human. You'll miss out on other ideas, opposing points of view, and fascinating perspectives you've never considered. You'll never discover how the people you supposedly care about are doing. You'll miss out on the love and delight of one another.

Beyond the death of genuine conversation, there's an even deeper loss happening. Confession seems to be disappearing. Confession is the part of prayer and life where we come before God and one another to admit our shortcomings, our intentional sins, and myriad unintentional sins. When we confess our brokenness, we admit that we are not all we pretend to be, hope to be, or could be. We own up to the fact that we are a mess.

Confession is hard for many reasons in the best of circumstances. We have developed a collective allergy to the application of the word sin to our lives. After all, nobody really makes mistakes anymore. There's always a scapegoat such as your tough upbringing or your absent father or your overbearing mother or your boss who didn't like you. It might have been your first spouse and, more recently, your second who's causing all the angst in your life. It's definitely not you.

Here's what I've realized in my life: confession and progress are inexorably linked. You won't address what you don't confess. If you think about this more deeply, it's the things that you refuse to confess that grate on the relationships that matter to you. Your unwillingness to address your critical words drives a wedge down the center of your marriage. Your self-absorption builds a wall between you and your kids, not to mention your friends. Jealousy and envy make it impossible to celebrate the accomplishments of anyone else, and your friendships stay shallow or dissolve as a result. It's like our culture has created the perfect storm for disconnection. We all carry the illusion that we're deeply connected through our devices, yet at the same time our obsession with our own stories is leading us to ignore others and to refuse to confess our root problems. It's no wonder we feel so disconnected.

Chapter 6: Ditching Your Phone Won't Help—Why You Need to Solve the Human Problem

You might think that the cure for disconnection is just to put down your phone but ditching technology is not the real solution to our problems. It's like living in the early twentieth century and thinking you'll always keep your horse and carriage. As people of that generation learned, the internal combustion engine wasn't going away anytime soon. Neither are the internet and the electronic devices in our day. The challenge is not to resist change but to learn how to thrive in the

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midst of it. Disconnection is a human problem. Technology just makes it worse. The challenge is to stop blaming others and to take responsibility for your own sins. Blame is insidious, as it will keep showing up in your mind to convince you that nothing is your fault.

Once you begin confessing your sins, you'll begin to see yourself as the problem and God's transformation of you as the solution in your relationships. It will also reduce your self-absorption and self-justification. You will begin to develop a heart for others, which should transform your conversations and begin to foster better relationships. Life-giving conversation is a back-and-forth exchange in which people take an active interest in one another. Think of it as a Ping-Pong match. If you hold the ball too long, you're not really playing.

Several other things will happen when you elevate the level of conversation with the people around you. First, you'll genuinely learn about how others are, which will foster a meaningful connection with them. Second, people are starved for real conversation. You'll discover that your relationships become far more life giving. Third, you'll soon move beyond the "How are you?" kind of conversation and start talking about deeper things. You'll move beyond people and events and start to have life-giving conversations about ideas, possibilities, truth, dreams, hopes, and ambitions. Your level of thinking will elevate. Finally, you may even find yourself being sought after as a friend, confidant, or mentor. The skill of meaningful conversation is so rare these days that when people find it, it's like they've discovered a treasure, which, of course, they have.

You might be like me in this way: I love to run hard, push the limits, and squeeze the most out of every day. Our connected world has made that possible in a way that previous generations couldn't have imagined. The speed at which we travel is exciting but also problematic. I have discovered that a hurried life leads to an unexamined and disconnected life. Hurry kills intimacy with God, with family, and with friends. Slowing down your pace is the only way you can pause long enough to confess the mess you are in and the mess you've created. It's the only way you can engage the people around you. It's the only way you can be truly present with your family.

PART IV: IRRELEVANCE

Chapter 7: Change Never Asks Permission—The Silent Creep of Irrelevance

Irrelevance happens when the language, methods, or styles you use no longer connect to the culture and people around you. Essentially, you end up speaking a language people no longer understand or appreciate. Irrelevant people eventually lose the ability to communicate meaningfully with the people they care about and to contribute to the causes they're passionate about. Sometimes it leaves them frustrated and confused as to why no one gets them anymore. In other cases, irrelevance leaves them surprisingly unaware that their influence is eroded or just plain gone.

Irrelevance can be cruel as it silently squanders your influence. Most of us spend considerable energy and effort in our younger years trying to influence the people we care about and advance the causes

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that matter to us. Irrelevance sabotages that influence. Without ever telling you why, people quietly dismiss you as someone who doesn't quite get it. They write you off as quaint, outdated, and even insignificant.

Why is irrelevance a natural drift in almost all our lives? The problem is that culture never asks permission to change. It just changes. If you think about all the change in your lifetime, it's staggering. No one had the courtesy to ask you if it was okay, which is exactly how irrelevance happens. Before you know it, you're the person on the team who gets mocked by the newbies at the watercooler. You've seen a few people roll their eyes when they thought you weren't looking. You're told you just don't have the skill set for the job, and you wonder why the things that worked a decade ago aren't good enough anymore. You sense that talking to your kids is harder than ever, and you can't quite put your finger on why. Something has shifted, and you were the last to know. Welcome to irrelevance.

Chapter 8: Craving Different—How Regular (and Radical) Change Keeps You in the Game

In light of the fact that the next generation will almost always be better/faster/stronger, how do you fight irrelevance? Plain and simple, you keep changing, learning, and evolving. Change staves off irrelevance. I know this sounds simple, but it's not, which is why so many people struggle with change. The older you get, the harder it is to change. If you're young and your native language is current culture, you may be able to navigate the culture in all its nuances without much thought today. Then your twenties give way to your thirties, your forties and beyond. The culture keeps changing. Do you?

The barrier to change is that anything that deviates from your normal will feel unfamiliar, challenging, and sometimes even threatening. Every decade, the gap grows between where culture has gone and what you're hardwired to view as "normal." It's not that hard to feel like a stranger in the world you live in. Consequently, change is the only thing that bridges the gap between who you are and who you need to be. Change keeps your job skills fresh and your language up to date. It keeps you connected to your kids and, eventually, grandkids. Here are four insights and strategies to make sure you stay current.

Love the Mission More Than the Methods. Most of what you do can be divided into two categories: mission and methods. The mission is about what you want to accomplish. Methods should be subservient to mission. Your methods are what help you achieve your mission. To be successful in life, methods need to serve your mission. Mission and methods often work in harmony, but just as often you'll see the two competing. If you're missing the goals you have for your mission, change your methods. The challenge, of course, is that far too many people love their methods more than they love their mission.

Get Radical. The problem with minimal effort is that incremental change brings about incremental results and inspires no one. Radical change brings about radical results. If you're in a rapidly changing world, small amounts of personal incremental change are likely not enough.

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Become a Student of Culture. Regardless of your personal preferences, and even if you don't like today's culture, you can still be a student of it. People who don't understand today's culture will never be able to speak into it. Whether you agree with the culture or not, understanding it is a prerequisite to being able to influence it.

Surround Yourself with Younger People. Another way to make sure you stay relevant is to have younger people in your life. If you're a parent, don't just hang out with your kids, explore their world and take a keen interest in it. Try to understand them rather than just criticize them. Similarly, at work, whenever you build a team, make sure you invite and include young adults into the mix.

You know that change isn't easy at all, and there's something deep inside you that will keep resisting it. That's understandable. When you resist the status quo, embrace radical ideas and approaches, study the culture, and surround yourself with younger people, change becomes a way of life. At first change feels strange, difficult, and foreign, and to some extent, those feelings never go away. But something profound happens if you stick with change and decide you're not going to stop evolving. Eventually, change becomes transformation. It won't happen right away, but after a number of years, you'll realize that you've been transformed.

The key to seeing transformation take root is to keep changing, keep experimenting and keep risking. You won't feel the shift immediately, but at some point you'll wake up and realize you don't want things to be the way they used to be. You'll begin to feel that "the good old days" should be left behind and that your best days are ahead of you. That ushers in hope, excitement, and joy.

PART V: PRIDE

Chapter 9: It's Not Just the Narcissists—How Pride Gets the Best of Us

Pride is an obsession with self. It generates the desire you feel to protect, project, manipulate, jockey, advance, pretend, inflate, and brag. It's so pervasive that, as Benjamin Franklin observed, if you ever reached the point of becoming humble, you might find yourself wanting to boast about how meek you are. Pride is the hallmark of fools as well. Foolishness is simply unapplied knowledge. Fools know; they just don't care. They've figured it out. Their way is better, and if they end up in the ditch, it wasn't their fault.

Pride even lives in the hearts of the insecure people who aren't sure they're all that great and secretly doubt they ever will be. Honestly, pride shows up all over the place in our lives, and every time it does, it's deadly. So why pay attention to pride? Unaddressed, pride will destroy many of the things you care about or know you should care about. It will leave a trail of destruction strewn with things you used to value or that a better version of you would treasure. Pride will snuff out your empathy, stifle your compassion, create division, suffocate love, foster jealousy, deaden your soul, and make you think all this is normal. It can turn you into the kind of person you loathe. Even if it doesn't do that, it will infect your relationships with a toxin that may not be fatal but is poisonous enough to ruin your joy.

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In many ways, pride is related to everything else covered in this book. Pride will lead to cynicism and accelerate burnout. It will leave you feeling disconnected and can cause you to become irrelevant. By the time it has run its course, pride will leave you feeling empty, despite everything you've accomplished. Pride will cost you friendships, intimacy, respect, lost opportunities, rest, peace of mind, wisdom, and even money. It's hard to imagine the stakes being much higher.

The biggest challenge with pride is that for most of us, it's everywhere. Sure, you don't spend most of your day thinking you're great; you spend most of your day with a gnawing sense that you're not. But that, too, can lead to an obsession with self. That self-obsession is another way to invite pride to run right through the middle of your soul. This is a threat I often face in my life. Let pride run its course, and it will deaden your heart. Pride inoculates you from the counsel of others and the stirrings of your conscience. It makes you think that the rules don't apply to you or that you can violate them without repercussion.

Chapter 10: Habits of the Humble—Only Humility Will Get You Out of What Pride Got You Into

Nothing kills pride like humility does. Only humility can get you out of what pride got you into. The humble act differently than the proud do. If you adopt the action, the attitude may well follow. Even if your heart continues to be a mix of pride and humility, your actions will demonstrate humility to the people around you.

Never Lose Your Gratitude. Gratitude fosters humility because it moves you out of the role of the star in your story. Express your thankfulness regularly. If you pray, offer prayers of gratitude. Fall more in love with the giver than you ever do with his gifts. Never claim full credit for your story. Acknowledge the role of grace and providence publicly when you talk. What are you grateful for? What should you be grateful for?

Take the Low Place. Proud leaders enjoy titles, corner offices, and the praise and perks that come with a position. The proud take the high place. They always want something better and more. The humble, by contrast, take the low place, intent on serving rather than being served. They shake off titles and don't mind washing the dishes or sweeping the floor. They're happy to take out the trash or offer someone their seat on the bus or subway. They volunteer for the grunt work, the projects no one else wants to do. Nothing is below them when they adopt a humble stance.

Open Your Notebook. Pride fueled by insecurity blocks an attitude of teachability, and an openness to guidance. You'll stop learning from people you think are smarter than you or more successful than you. Jealousy kills learning and shuts down instructive conversations. Humility learns from anyone, anywhere. It keeps its notebook open. That may take the form of a physical notebook, or it might simply mean you take notes on your phone. Whatever your method, glean insights from others.

Push Other People into the Spotlight. Pride wants to be acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated. Sometimes pride will have you believing you deserve it. Sometimes it will convince you you've been

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overlooked, and the world should recognize the treasure that is you. Humility doesn't think or act that way at all. It willingly pushes other people into the spotlight. It's never jealous. It delights in the success of others. In fact, sometimes humble people even enjoy others' success more than their own success.

Get Ridiculously Honest with Yourself (and God). One of the best ways to win the war against pride is to get ridiculously honest with yourself and with God. Check your motives constantly. Pray about them. Ask other people for a reality check (sometimes they see motivations you're blind to). If you feel a hint of selfishness, confess it and lay the ugliness out before God. Of all the lies we tell, the ones we tell ourselves are the deadliest. Unconfessed and unaddressed, they will continue to damage the people around us (and us) indefinitely. Level with yourself and with God. Everyone else knows your weakness. So does God. Why not admit it? It's so easy to spot pride in others. But people who spot it in themselves and cultivate humility develop a much richer, much more fulfilling life.

PART VI: BURNOUT

Chapter 11: Like Falling Off A Cliff—How to Know When You're Burning Out

More than a few of you reading this know you are on the edge of the cliff we call burnout. Probably a few of you are in free fall right now. What's so perplexing about burnout (and especially low-grade burnout) is that more than a few of the symptoms strike people as "normal". So how do you know if you're heading for burnout?

I'll describe eleven signs and symptoms I personally experienced as I burned out. If you recognize one or two of them, you're likely not burned out. Consider them warning signs. If you show six to eight, you may be in low-grade burnout or heading for the cliff. If you resonate with most or all of them, you're likely in full-fledged burnout. I hope these signs can help you see the edge before you careen past it.

Your Passion Fades. Everybody struggles with lack of passion from time to time, but burnout moves you into a place of sustained motivation loss.

You No Longer Feel the Highs or Lows. If you're healthy, you feel things. You experience highs and lows. When I burned out, I couldn't feel either properly anymore. My main emotion was numbness.

Little Things Make You Disproportionally Emotional. Treating small things like big things and big things like small things are both signs that something deeper is wrong.

Everybody Drains You. People are a mixed bag for sure. Some energize you. Some don't. I get that. When nobody energizes you, they're not the problem. You are.

You're Becoming Cynical. If you find cynicism is advancing at a rapid rate, it may be a sign that you're burning out. Cynicism never finds a home in a healthy heart.

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Nothing Satisfies You. One of the hardest aspects of burnout was that nothing seemed to satisfy me anymore. That's a sign of depression, and it's also a sign you're burned out.

You Can't Think Straight. When you're burning out, your heart messes with your head and you lose the ability to think clearly.

Your Productivity Is Dropping. If you're working long hours but producing little of value, pay attention.

You're Self-Medicating. In the early stages of burnout, many people turn to self-medicating to numb the pain. This might involve overeating, overworking, sexual addictions, drinking, impulsive spending, or even drugs. When this occurs, you've chosen a path of self-medication instead of self-care to deal with the pain.

You Don't Laugh Anymore. This seems like such a small thing, but it's actually a very big thing. If you're burning out, you don't laugh like you used to.

Sleep and Time Off No Longer Refuel You. Not being refueled when you take time off is a major warning sign that you're burning out.

If you show any signs of burnout, I encourage you to seek immediate professional help. In my view, the best help will come from a combination of the care of a medical doctor and an excellent, trained Christian counselor. Your medical doctor will help you figure out how serious your symptoms are, and a skilled counselor will help you identify the reasons and conditions that caused you to burn out. If you're in a state of burnout or nearing it, I can guarantee that you have issues.

Chapter 12: Your New Normal—Figuring Out How to Live Today So You Will Thrive Tomorrow

Here are ten factors that helped me and many other people recover from burnout.

Tell Someone. It's tough but telling someone is the first step toward wellness. When you admit it to others, you also finally end up admitting it to yourself.

Develop a Circle Around You. You can't do this alone and often the simplest acts can make the biggest difference. You need people around you who believe in you when you've stopped believing in yourself.

Keep Leaning into God. In pivotal moments like these, you will either lean away from God or into him. Lean in, hard. Even if you feel nothing. Just because you can't feel God's love doesn't mean he doesn't love you.

Rest. Someone once said that 70 percent of discipleship is a good night's rest. If you're like me and most everyone else on the planet, you are kindest when you're most rested.

Didn't See it Coming

Find Something to Take Your Attention Away from Your Pain. Distractions can be a powerful tool to get your mind thinking about other things. Watch a movie. Go out to dinner. Hit a hiking trail.

Do What You Can. Doing what you can is a huge part of recovering from burnout. One physician said his instruction to patients can sometimes be as granular as “Today, I want you to brush your teeth.” That sounds so simple, but when depression and exhaustion have a grip on your life, even brushing your teeth can seem impossible. Keep moving. Do what you can.

Don't Make Any Big Decisions. Make your big decisions on a good day. If you have to make a big decision (like changing jobs or relocating), lean into your circle of friends and people close to you who can help you prayerfully make a decision you won't regret.

Grieve Your Losses. If you don't grieve your losses during your recovery, you're missing tremendous opportunities to put the past behind you. Otherwise, your past continues to sabotage your present and your future.

Reopen Your Heart. The symptoms of burnout include loss of passion, emotional numbness, and cynicism, so chances are your heart has closed significantly during your burnout. It's vital that you reopen it.

Live Today in a Way That Will Help You Thrive Tomorrow. If I've found an antidote to burnout, it's best summarized for me in a single sentence I developed as I worked through my recovery. Live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow. If I'm going to maintain wellness and avoid burnout again, I need to live in a way today that spiritually, emotionally, relationally, physically, and financially will help me thrive tomorrow.

Nobody else is responsible for your health. You are. Pray, read your Bible, seek life-giving friendships, replenish your energy, eat right, work out, love deeply. These things nourish your soul. If you don't do them, nobody will.

PART VII: EMPTINESS

Chapter 13: When All Your Dreams Come True—Why Money, Power, and Success Leave Your Feeling Empty

A long time ago someone shared with me a progression to success and accumulation. Almost all of us engage in it in some form, and the more money we have, the truer it is. Once you understand it, you'll see it everywhere:

- More
- Better
- Different

Didn't See it Coming

That's the progression. You start with more, move to better, and end up at different. Let me explain.

The first thing you do when you start making enough cash to move beyond just paying the mortgage and buying groceries is accumulate more. Your four-cylinder gas miser becomes your second car, and you add an SUV for the family. You get out of your starter home and into bigger square footage. The first step into success is more.

Soon you notice everyone has a little more, and you wonder how to differentiate yourself. So you move from more to better. You kiss your domestic SUV goodbye for some German engineering. Your bigger home gives way to a custom home. It's still not quite enough because your friends also have better things now too.

The final rung on the ladder is different. Others may have more and better, but this is unique, special, and rare. You can't just join this golf club; you have to be invited. If you do different well, everything in your life is scarce or custom. Even your dog has a bespoke doghouse. Underneath the constant pursuit of more is an appetite. Your appetite makes you discontent with what you have. Then it convinces you that what's next will satisfy it. It seduces you into believing that you will be satisfied next time. The challenge with more is there's no finish line. There's no end. How much work is enough? How many promotions? How much food, sex, money, or power will it take? How many pills? How much alcohol? If your answer is simply more, you need a better answer.

Chapter 14: My Kingdom Come—Getting over Yourself Isn't as Scary as You Think

Why is it that trying to satisfy our needs is so unsatisfying in the end? I believe it has to do with the very purpose of life. Jesus got to the essence of the frustration we all feel and proposed a rather radical solution. "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." In other words, the very thing we fear most—surrendering control of our lives—is the key to life.

In the process of trying to find life we lose it if the goal is self-fulfillment. But in the very act of surrender, of giving up our lives, we find life. These words of Jesus have meaning on more than a few levels. First, this is clearly an invitation to trust your life to him as Savior. It's his invitation to make him the savior and leader of your life. In my view, that's the most important decision you can make in your life. The real you is found only in a life-giving relationship with Christ.

But His words move beyond that. If we simply trust him and become Christians, you and I will quickly slide back into the Kingdom of Me. Our relationship with Christ and our approach to life will be about what we can get out of it. What's God done for me lately? What's Christ going to give me next? It's so easy to love the gift more than we love the giver and to turn our lives into quests for happiness, with God as one more weapon in our arsenal. It explains why so many Christians grow disillusioned and walk away. God as a vending machine is bad theology, especially when you drop your dollar in and the candy bar doesn't come out.

Didn't See it Coming

Wherever you find yourself spiritually, ask yourself this question: Which kingdom am I living for? Left unchecked, I will always live for the Kingdom of Me. Even as a Christian, I can let my prayer life and my overall life quickly become “My kingdom come; my will be done.” If I pray for my will to be done, I get more of me. If I pray for God’s will to be done, I get more of God. In all honesty, whose kingdom are you pursuing? Conversely, when you die to yourself something greater rises. When you are no longer all about you, you’re finally in a position for God to use you and for others to see the joy in being with you.

I encourage you to put Christ at the center of your mission. Maybe you already do that, or maybe you’re not quite there yet. I know the emptiness inside you will go away only when you decide to stop making life all about you. You need a mission bigger than you. Whatever that is, when you die to yourself, something far greater will emerge. The silence won’t be haunting anymore; it will be exciting. You’ll have time to reflect, pray, dream, and imagine a better world.

Your interactions with people will improve greatly as you begin to think about what you can give rather than what you can get. Self-care will become far more attractive than self-medication. The possessions you have will be less about using them for personal enjoyment and more about using them to help others. Even your accomplishments will be far more closely tied to fulfilling a mission than they used to be. Then, in the process of giving your life away, you’ll find it.