

5 Ways to Avoid Becoming Overwhelmed

It had been an especially difficult year for our church. A number of key long-standing members abruptly left our church in protest to the changes we had incorporated in our schedule in the hopes of reaching new people. At our monthly leadership meeting, we were discussing the issue when Carl stood up, grabbed his coat and surrendered with a shocking declaration. "I'm out. I've had enough of all this!"

As his pastor, no one was more surprised that I was. What had led him to this sudden outburst? After the meeting I called and asked him to meet me at a coffee shop nearby. Well into the night, I listened to him share his story. Carl had bottomed out and had nothing more to give. The demands of a new baby, a wife with postpartum depression, teaching a small group, coaching his son's soccer team and the constant care of his father in the late stages of Alzheimer's had so wearied him that his despair was unmanageable. I wept with him and realized that I had completely failed to put the pieces of his story together. It was a stern reminder to me that we are all strugglers. The storms of circumstance and over-commitment can send the best of us to the brink.

None of us are immune to the ravages of adversity. We all have stories of troubles that come in bunches mixed with the trap of over-commitment. This includes pastors, wives and all leaders. The choices we make will ultimately determine our success in surviving and thriving in the midst of a perfect storm.

By the way, if you are in one of those seasons where everything is manageable, you might want to bookmark this. Chances are, you're going to need it in the future.

These following five choices are lifesavers that you'll need to have on board when you feel overwhelmed and overextended.

▪ **Connect**

As believers, we often want to be that lone silent warrior holding everything together singlehandedly. Read this slowly: *This is not biblical*. There was a reason God created the church. The Bible implores us to connect and collaborate in a shared journey of discipleship. If you are struggling or feeling overwhelmed, tell someone. Phone a friend. Yes, pray. But pray with other men who will have your back and walk you through the fire. David, find your Jonathan. Moses, find your Aaron. Shadrach, find your Meshach and Abednego. Connect biblically, or you may be Samson looking for his Delilah and we know how that turned out!

▪ **Condition**

In other words, get moving. Make physical conditioning a part of your daily routine. Hit the gym. Take a walk. You might not feel like it when you are overwhelmed. If you get to the place where you are saying, "*I just don't have time to exercise*," then you probably need to more than ever. Keep the body working even when life isn't working. Drink lots of water. Stay away from food that's handed to you through your car window. Fast food will send you on the fast track to burnout.

▪ **Clear**

Prioritize the important responsibilities you have on your plate and clear the rest of it off your plate. I grew up believing that God was most pleased with me if I had more things to do than anyone else. In my forties, I had to create new neuro-pathways in my brain to fully accept that busyness is not next to godliness.

The following is NOT in the Bible.

Thus Jesus hurriedly got up realizing what an important day this was going to be. He ran to Galilee and there He created 13 lesson parchments, visited 15 lepers in one night. Exhausted, the disciples verily tried to keep up with the Son of God but nay, they could not. They marveled at his time management skills and his strength in persuasive skills. People flocked to him and stayed with him for they knew that if He could accomplish such management tasks with great haste, effort and fluidity that he knew the habits for being an effective person.

Nope. It never happened.

For me, living a clear life means spending some time clearing off my desk so that I can think. It also means that I need to look critically at my calendar and begin to say the most difficult two letter word in the English language. "No". I confess. I don't like the way it sounds when it comes out of my mouth. Especially when I have to say it to someone I love and admire.

Clear your schedule, clear your desk, and clear your mind. It's truly amazing how simpler life becomes when your clear it up.

▪ **Cool Down**

Take time to recover from a difficult meeting, hospital visit or funeral. Don't put tape over the dummy lights on your dashboard. If the pace of your life is overheating, take time to cool down. Start turning stuff off. Put your phone on silent mode and become mindful of what your body is saying to you. If you are overheating, you'll get nowhere fast.

▪ **Confess**

I'm not referring to making a confession of your sins, although that's a good thing we should constantly do. By confessing, I mean turning to God and confessing that you are

weak. I used to believe the following statement was scripture:

"God will never give you more than you can handle."

It's not in there and it's not true. God will often give us more than we can handle for the expressed purpose of showing us that we must confess our weakness. However, God will never give us more than **He** can handle. And that's good news.

So what happened with my deacon friend, Carl? Our amazing group of deacons rallied around him, and stood in the gap as he navigated through the storms and recalibrated his life. He learned that he didn't have to do everything. He's still serving today but this time with more focus and support. His perfect storm served as a reminder of God's grace in our times of weakness and over-commitment.

Modern Lamentations I

The image that swirls freely in perilous realms between
sleeping and awake

my banner of fullness in grief embodies every impulse.

Fissures on the surface unveil the aspects of consequence

And echoes of confusion and understanding.

That feeling of helplessness when tragedy is unstoppable

Regret stands in the foreground

How could things have been different?

(But these wonderings are barren tables built for food.)

Madness filled the spaces between clarity and fogs of

dementia.

Shouting across the lake, I knew I could not be heard, nor was I ever.

O the ugliness of There-is-nothing-we-can-do-

The anger of lost years when things that could be reconciled were not.

Truth elusive and yet garish

These mysteries rise in a silent season and whisper their cold commentary

But still there is more, (though I dare not guess).

I stand by the unmarked graves of both thanksgiving and deep wounds-

now scars.

These are the moments when you wonder if you failed even as you survived.

And what is left, is an unseen mist.

There is no fixing when peace and truth are shrouded beneath the strong arm of will.

Like the unraveling of precepts when the narrative spins a tale of dissonant perplexity.

May the dawn of all things reconcile the pieces like glass stained in grief

assembled in the aperture of the soul.

Communion: Avoiding the Awkward and Encountering the

Amazing

Growing up in the church, the Lord's Supper often seemed mechanical, cold and unfamiliar to me. Why? Because it was done in a mechanical, cold, and unfamiliar way. The subtext of many of these celebrations seemed to be, "We only do this once every three months and so we barely know how this will go. Let's not mess it up by forgetting something. So it's ironic that the theme of the Lord's Supper is actually remembering!

The Lord's Supper should be the most powerful, transforming, intimate act of worship we do together as the church. There have been times recently when these moments have been so powerful that I've saved my cup and keep it in my office days after the event. I just didn't want to forget that moment.

So how can we exile the awkwardness and set the mysterious table for worship?

First, suggestions:

- Get together to plan the Lord's Supper so that everyone knows how it will go. Don't meet days in advance. The best planning happens a few hours before worship.
- However you plan to celebrate the Lord's Supper, don't rush in the preparation. Fill the cups, get the table set? Yes. But also prepare by praying during this time. Think about the people in your church who will be there. Pray for those that come to mind. Ask God to inhabit the experience.
- During the celebration, make sure you fulfill your duties but have an attitude of blessing those you serve! How do you do this? Simply focus on each person you serve with a heart of love and compassion. Trust me. You'll have moments of improvisation where you'll see someone who doesn't get served and you'll have to

backtrack or give direction to your fellow deacons, but don't allow these moments to steal *the* moment. I'll never forget Julian, a 72 year old deacon who was a soft-spoken man, well respected and loved by our church but certainly a man of few words. I was sitting near the back of the church since I wasn't needed for serving that Sunday night. When he brought the plate to my aisle, he looked me in the eye and whispered, "Love you, Matt." That simple blessing over me transformed that night. He understood that it wasn't about the details. The Lord's Supper is always about love.

Now let's consider a few ideas for celebrating the Lord's Supper. While the fundamental elements of the Lord's Supper remain constant we can make this time elemental and unique. None of the following ideas or should be done every time the Lord's Supper is taken but, trust me, these experiential ideas had a deep impact on me as a believer and a deacon.

Exchanging of the cup

After the bread has been served and you move toward the taking of the cup, the pastor would ask the Church to stand with cup in hand and explain that the Lord's Supper is a symbol of love, reconciliation and unity. The pastor explains this to the church and then invites them to exchange their cup with another member (or more) of the church as a silent expression of their love for that person. This requires them to move around the auditorium and so you'll want to give them some time to do this. The pastor should direct them that they should do this in silence. Once as pastor, several years ago, I watched in amazement as two men, without words, reconciled simply through exchanging cups. I've often wondered if this would have happened in any other moment. The Lord's Supper broke down the wall of disagreement they had been harboring. They reconciled without saying another word and in the following weeks I was stunned to see a friendship developing between them.

Communion at Midnight

Another experience to consider calendaring is a prayer event. Members would gather that evening around 8 PM. We would do this on a selected Friday night. We would pray at the church alone, in groups and all together for four hours. I know it sounds lengthy, but with a well-conceived schedule you'll be amazed at how the time flies! Because fewer people come to events like these, you'll experience an intimacy with the people that you don't get in a one-hour worship service. At the end of the night, we'd prepare a table with candles and the elements of the Lord's Supper. A couple of deacons did this while other activities were going on. At midnight I invited the group to follow me to the room. We walked into a room with a large table and the elements. It was the closest I've ever felt to being a part of an early Church experience. We sang familiar choruses and we shared what the Lord's Supper meant to each of us and then at the end we took communion. This became one of the most anticipated events on the church calendar.

Other ideas:

- **The Nails:** Before passing the elements, pass nails to each row and invite the worshipers to press the nail against their palm to remember the suffering of Christ and then pass it to the next person of the row.
- **Planned Spontaneity:** Before passing the bread have someone stand in the congregation and sing, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Then before passing the cups, have another singer sing "Were You There When the Crucified my Lord" As the benediction the congregation is led to sing the last verse of "Were You There" (Where you there when He rose up from the grave.)
- **Family Communion:** Invite people to come to the front as families or as groups to share the elements together. As

Deacons make sure to include singles and people away from their family to join *your* family so no one takes the Lord's Supper Alone.

- **Deyanu:** Use the following responsive reading adapted from an ancient Hebrew litany called "Deyanu." The congregation only has to repeat after each phrase. "It would have been enough."

If we knew Jesus as Savior but we were never promised me eternal life.

It would have been enough us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life and never knew that He experienced our pain

It would have been enough for us

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain but were not given His words and strength.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that he experienced our pain, were given His words and strength and never knew Him as friend.

It would have been enough for us.

If we knew Jesus as Savior, were promised eternal life, knew that He experienced our pain, were given His words and strength, knew Him as friend but never had a chance to have a spiritual family.

It would have been enough for us.

But we do and He did.

Jesus wanted us to remember. My prayer is that we will remember and experience the power of His sacrifice and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we get a little closer to the glory of Christ.

The Most Surprising Thing about Family

Perhaps the most *surprising* thing about our journey as a family is that it *is* so *surprising*. The most predictable thing about life is its singular unpredictability. Think about all the things that you've experienced in your family that caused you to shake your head and say, "Well, I didn't see that coming."

I'd venture to say that most of us who grew up watching TV dramas where the dog was lost and then found, or the misunderstanding finally clarified, or the seemingly impossible rescue was attained in 59 minutes with room for ten minutes of Madison Avenue's best pitches to boot. But then we encounter the glorious, sometimes maddening concept of REAL LIFE.

We look back on this adventure and discover that instead of

2.5 kids, including male and female actually turned into all boys or all girls or one adopted, or one magical downs syndrome child, or no biological kids but three international adoptions. We look back on our journey and say, "Wow, I didn't see that coming."

We head off for that planned paradise at Wally World with all bags neatly packed, prepared for every eventuality and then find ourselves holed up in the hotel room riding out the storm of the century, having the time of our lives playing board games and eating cheese nips.

Ah yes! These are the moments that we look back on and say, "Wow God, I didn't see that coming but help me remember how incredibly, astoundingly grand it was. We realize that the greatest joy of our small, fleeting adventure is often what happens on the journey rather than the destination. Our agendas are often blown to kingdom come and all we have is a story. And the story is far more transcendent than our pseudo-sacred agenda that we so carefully crafted in our imagination.

Sometimes it takes car crashes, health crises, diaper disasters, canceled flights, split jeans and chicken pox to get us to where God wants us to be. And when we get there we dust ourselves off and do the dance.

My cautious nature, so attracted to spread sheets, games plans and satellite navigators is often reminded that life is a precarious narrative that is intricately woven together in a divine, sometimes dubious backstory of spiritual adventure. Even the small moments of surprise rise to the surface as signs that we aren't alone. We are being guided by Someone who sees the bigger story and knows exactly what we need. This is the very definition of family— a band of souls brought together through blood, blessing and bedtimes. We do life together and we find that there's always a place we can call home. It really doesn't have anything to do with brick and mortar. It's all about love and belonging. Unpredictable? Yes.

Unnecessary? Never!

And at the end of the road, with gray heads and crooked smiles, we can look back on it all and say to our beloved family, "Man, I didn't see that coming but I'm sure glad it came!"

Today is Most Noble

God holds the future and redeems all of yesterday.

But today is closer to me.

What an amazing concept today, right now, really is. Today- I hope you aren't planning a siege on your enemy. I hope you aren't judging the person in the room. I hope you aren't swallowed up in regret. I hope you aren't poisoning your time with trivial, toxic thoughts of your own wealth, vanity or scheming revenge. I hope you are in the moment for this moment fashions eternity.

Today is a gift which is moving forward faster than thoughts or plans

Today is where i am right here and right now.

Today is an opportunity to change the little things

Today is closer. tomorrow is a promise and yesterday is an eternity from anything I could attain.

Today is most noble!

The World's First Smart Phone

Siri and I are having issues. I believe I lean too much on her and I forget that she does *not* have the capability of an administrative assistant, as most commercials would assume. She'll take me to Cracker Barrel when I want to go to Kroger. She'll call my blood donation center when I ask her to call my wife. She scheduled me for a dental appointment for April 17th 2086 when I asked her to put it on my calendar for April 7th, 2018. It embarrasses Darlene. She says that shouting at it will not make it better, especially at the church welcome center. I've tried all the hacks I've heard of. Checking my settings, powering down the phone, tilting the phone at a 40-degree angle, reciting the pledge of allegiance to it ten times. But the phone remains as mystified by me as I am of it.

There's a smart phone in the Bible. Sort of... I found it in Numbers 22 without the aid of the "find-my-phone" app on my computer. Actually it was a donkey-an upgraded smart donkey to be exact. For a few moments, this Shrek-like donkey spoke when his navigation was questioned. The owner of this *smart donkey*, Balaam was commissioned to place a curse on the people of God, but evidently the smart-donkey knew better and refused to go a step forward. He wouldn't cooperate- much like my smart-phone in downtown Dallas.

Balaam shouted words similar to the words I have said to my phone a thousand times:

"You made me look like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, I'd kill you now!"

Numbers 22:29 (CSB)

And for the first time in the history of the animal kingdom, a *donkey* replied,

“But the donkey said, “Am I not the donkey you’ve ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?” (Verse 30)

Just a note here- This is exactly the kind of sentence structure Siri uses when I realize that she led me down a dead end road on the wrong side of town. Who knew that a donkey’s first sentence would be so grammatically correct? This causes me to conclude that donkeys are smarter than we give them credit. The next time someone calls me a donkey or other words synonymous to *donkey* during rush hour traffic, I’m going to take it as a compliment.

The entire story is proof me that the real inventor of the smart phone is God. It just came in the form of a donkey 3500 years earlier.

Grace is on a Family Tree

My friend loves Jesus.

That sounds commonplace, doesn’t it?

It becomes less pedestrian when I tell you that his Mom died a drug addict and his father was a devout atheist. My friend was gloriously saved at the age of 10 at a Vacation Bible School

event and never looked back. This. Makes. No. Sense. They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree but this apple fell off the tree rolled down the hill, was picked up by a pilot and flew across the ocean! (Figuratively speaking, of course.) And believe me, I don't have enough white space here to chronicle the entire sordid tale. His story is a monument to the fact that God can save anybody He wants to save, no matter how messed up the family tree.

The New Testament begins with a family tree that had a number of ugly branches. Matthew 1 tells us that in Jesus' lineage are a number shady characters including a prostitute, daughter of incest, an adulterer, a lying brother, lots of cautionary tales and ultimately an scandalous unwed pregnancy. It's almost like God wanted to say from the start that this Gospel is all about grace and not about our upbringing. God isn't as interested in your family history. He's interested in what happens next. And when it comes to transformation, what happens next is glorious. He flips the script with grace. It's His specialty. Never count yourself or your family out because of what happened yesterday. It's an insult to the power of God when you do.

The Two Questions that He Keeps Asking

After the resurrection, Jesus returns to the disciples and sets his attention on Peter. You remember Peter. He's the cussing disciple. The sword wheeling, water stumbling, denier

whose tongue sprinted a few miles ahead of his brain on any given Sunday.

Jesus gives the disciples a little fishing advice that produces a record catch and then Peter jumps out of the boat leaving the haul to his buddies. That is **SO** Peter, isn't it?

In the middle of this breakfast He asks Peter three times: "Peter, son of Jonah? Do you love me?"

The first time he asks, "Do you love me more than these?"

This is where I could have used a little more narrative information from the writer John. He obviously must have been gesturing to the fish, or the boats, his favorite lures, the disciples, or the water. We don't know. But I like that we don't know. It leaves a mystery and every time I think about it, I think about my own "more than these" things.

I open up my retirement balance sheet. And I hear Him whisper, "Do you love me more than these?"

I open the refrigerator. He whispers again, "Do you love me more than these?"

I think about my family and friends. It gets deadly serious as He whispers, "Do you love me more than these?"

Just the question, "Do you love me?" What a soul searching question it is! Do I really love Him. I mean, hail or high water, do I love Him? Do I love Him when I am broke, mistreated, demoted, deleted, disparaged, rejected... Do I love Him?

The second question comes after Jesus infers that he (Peter) is going to die. (Note to reader: You, too, will die) Peter looks over at John, perhaps hoping to change the subject. No one wants to talk about their own death. He turns to John and asks, "Hey Jesus, what about John?"

Jesus then says, "What is that to you?" In other words, "Peter, stop looking around. I'm talking about you and you only right now." I think the question inside the question is this: "Do you trust me?"

Jesus is asking me that same question. "Do you trust me?"

Those two questions:

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Those are the questions he whispers to me and you every day.

When He sees us fretting, anxious, conflicted, and disappointed by our careers, our lives, our future, our kids, our marriage, our finances, EVERYTHING.

He's asking those two questions.

Stop reading this for a moment and hear Him whisper to you:

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

Do you love me?

Do you trust me?

I don't know where you are, but your love and trust fascinates Him. It's why He created you. He created you so that He could love You and take care of You. I want to see you and me grow

up so that we can enter into a relationship of love and trust. He wants both of those from you, more than He wants you to sing beautifully, speak in tongues, heal the sick, or achieve greatness in His Name. Getting your theology right about free-will, Calvinism, or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin— none of that is in the same area code of these two important questions.

He wants our love and He wants our trust.

So do you love Him?

Do you trust Him?

It's Friday

It's Friday and He's there... Suffering unimaginable traumas. He is deserted by fearful disciples, surrounded by tormentors, thieves, murderers, and religious provocateurs. Soldiers gaming over the final scant possessions of the Master of creation, ignore the darkening sky.

Jesus cries out: "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?"

On this holy day, God's beloved Son embodies the weight of every sin from the slightest trespass to our greatest of atrocities.

And during this bloody sacrifice, a Holy God turns His back.

"He who knew no sin has become sin."

Jesus receives enough sour wine to moisten his tongue so that He could make *one grand and final announcement*. In the darkness of a cruel hill, Jesus shouts:

IT IS FINISHED!

This declaration is not a cry of defeat, despair and death. It is a glorious shout of victory! The masterpiece of redemption receives its final brushstroke. This is the pinnacle moment of grace that crushed the head of a conniving has-been and opened wide the passageway to salvation. The cross- once a vulgar, despicable symbol of shame, will soon top the roofs of churches and cathedrals. It will be displayed in homes and hospitals, bejeweled on necklaces and depicted in the greatest works of art and literature. And the three words Jesus shouted would now be the pronouncement of God's greatest transaction.

IT IS FINISHED.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace.”

There is peace once again in midst of the exchange.

It is dark.

It is unspeakable.

It is mysterious.

It is ENOUGH.

It is Friday.

The Gospel of Enough

I grew up under the theology of scarcity. It centered around the hear-tell rumours that I didn't have what it took

to be a “really good” Christian. There were those repetitive voices outside and inside my head that said, “try harder, do more, get better.” I gazed up at the impossible bar and counted myself out. My inadequacy labeled me, before I stepped on the scales.

My past haunted me
My scars mocked me.
My failures demoralized me,
My shame poisoned me.

I never would admit it, but I was certain that no one was as big of a poser as I was. I was weak and the more I tried to fix myself the more self-hatespeech would roll around in my head. And then one day I really did let go.

I raised a white flag and surrendered my efforts, my self-hope, self-punishment, and self-focus. I. JUST. LET. GO.

Then I discovered that the whole point of the gospel is that God is enough.

I just have to love him for being enough. It’s always been about God’s total sufficiency. What does it take to be held in the love of God? It takes a person willing to be still. This is the skill I need before everything else— to be still. He is so much stronger than I have acted like He was.

But I am learning that He is more than enough to carry a struggler. It’s what He does. It’s His specialty and it’s His passion. He’s not wringing his hands over your failures. He is ready to use each one to tell a story of grace and mercy.

It’s the same story that Mephibosheth experienced 2 Samuel 9. It’s an unfortunate name. It’s hard to say and spell so I call him Phiby. Phiby was the physically disabled grandson of a dead, vengeful King named Saul. When summoned, in his self-marinating humiliation he asked, “*What does the King want with a dog like me.*” He had nothing to offer the present king. But

the king sought him out and he was seated at the king's table out of mysterious grace.

King David said to Phibby:

Don't be afraid, for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table. 2 Samuel 9:7 (NIV)

In the same way God the Father says to us, "I will show you kindness for the sake of my Son Jesus."

John the Beloved put it this way: *Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called "children of God"—and that is not just what we are called, but what we are. 1 John 3:1 (Phillips Translation)*

Throughout my days of striving to be acceptable, walking with a spiritual limp, striving to find a place, there is a Good Father who has already accepted me, not as a good servant but a beloved son. And that is good enough for me. In fact, He is more than enough.

I've seen him among the children and anyone who loves kids like he does, can be trusted. He is merciful to those who need mercy and He is always just. He willing to sacrifice everything for you and He never sleeps.

He is a doctor who can diagnose an illness before the symptoms appear.

He is a baker and when you go to his house there is always the wonderful smell of bread.

But more than anything... He is a peacemaker.

He is available to you any time day or night.

He fights for the helpless

He makes time for the lonely

He is ready to step between you and your enemies

When you are befuddled confused and indecisive, He has a plan
When the walls are closing in, His doors will open wide.
He listens when no one else is around to hear you.
He consoles you when there are no arms to embrace you.
He weeps with you when all others curse at you
He is redeemer of your yesterdays and foreseer of your
tomorrows.
He been to hell and back and He is still standing strong.
When others doubt you, He says, "you can do it."
When no one knows you, He calls you by name
When few are truthful He will tell it to you straight.
He has set you apart and pulled you together
He lifts you up and He settles you down.
He's not insecure, detached or ruthless.
All His plans are above board.
He's written them all down in a book for you.
And nothing catches Him by surprise.
Many have tried to imitate him
And even more have tried to eliminate Him
But no one can intimidate Him
He is independent and self-sustaining and yet He longs for
your love.
He could turn the world on its end and yet he has loved you
from the beginning.
And He has invited you to come to His table.