



UNBURDENED

the secret to letting God carry the things that weigh you down

chris tiegreen



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Unburdened: The Secret to Letting God Carry the Things That Weigh You Down

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tiegreen, Chris.

Unburdened : the secret to letting God carry the things that weigh you down /
Chris Tiegreen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-1-4143-2173-8 (sc)

1. Christian life. 2. Liberty—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4509.5.T53 2010

248.8'6—dc22

2010004054

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

THE MOOD OVER Jerusalem was tense. The Jesus sect was inviting uncircumcised Gentiles into their allegedly “Jewish” gatherings, and Jerusalem’s religious leaders weren’t happy about it. So King Herod, always interested in appearing as Hebrew as possible—it helped compensate for his mixed heritage and his obvious Roman sympathies—took advantage of the opportunity. He arrested James the son of Zebedee and had him killed. The Jewish leaders were pleased.

They were so pleased, in fact, that Herod decided to take it a step further. He arrested Peter, an even higher-profile leader of the Jesus sect. Jews from across the empire were in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, and a public trial of a key

figure in this controversial movement could turn into a huge political asset. Peter would be executed right after the feast while the city was still crowded with visitors. The sect would be shamed, its adherents would learn a valuable lesson about the dangers of unsettling a holy city, and Herod would be praised for taking decisive action.

Christians gathered in the home of Mary, mother of John Mark, and prayed their hearts out—with the kind of intensity and passion Jesus prayed with in Gethsemane, according to the language of the text.¹ They were desperate. Their leaders were being targeted, and their faith was rapidly dropping in the public's esteem. If Peter was killed, who would be next? These were frightening times.

Meanwhile, Peter was being guarded closely. He had escaped from prison years earlier, and Herod made sure he wouldn't escape again. This unarmed spiritual leader was guarded by four squads of four soldiers each who rotated six-hour shifts. Peter's wrists were constantly chained to a guard on each side of him while two other guards stood at the door. It would have been virtually impossible to find a physically comfortable position, and even more unlikely to be mentally or emotionally at peace. For all he knew, his days on earth were numbered.

Finally the Passover feast drew to a close. The night before Peter's trial—and probably his execution, too—the believers in Mary's house were praying as intensely as ever. God heard their prayers and sent an angel to the cell where Peter lay chained between two guards, sleeping. Not worrying about

his trial, not replaying his defense over and over again in his mind, not wondering how the church would survive without him, but sleeping. In chains. On a stone floor.

A bright light shone in the room when the angel appeared. Still, Peter slept. The angel had to strike him on his side to get him to wake up. Even then, Peter thought he might be seeing a vision. Not until he was led out into the street and the angel left did he come to his senses. He went to Mary's house, where his friends seemed completely shocked that their desperate prayers had been answered. In spite of their fears, God demonstrated his ability to handle a crisis.

I've tried to imagine how I would feel the night before my impending trial and execution, and somehow I can't envision sleep entering the picture. I would be thinking obsessively about what I needed to say the next day, how I would respond to each and every possible twist in the trial, how my family and friends would handle the trauma, how they would get by without me, and what it's really like the moment you die. The weight of the situation would be heavy enough to emotionally paralyze me and to give me stomach cramps and heart palpitations. I would pray for a miracle almost constantly, pouring out my heart to God and explaining all the reasons it would make sense for him to deliver me. I would try to plan my last words to those I love and figure out how to get the messages to them. The one thing I would not do is sleep.

Somehow, Peter slept. He wasn't worried about his trial or its outcome. He was well acquainted with God's ability

to rescue a prisoner, but he also knew that God had very recently decided not to rescue James. Still, he rested. He was at peace.

That would not have been possible if Peter was focused on his own agenda, concerned for his rights, worried about his future, or stressed about all the people who looked to him for leadership. Somehow he was able to put those concerns aside and trust God to do whatever God wanted to do. Peter faced one of life's most challenging, burdensome moments with a heart that was completely unburdened.

I would love to have the ability to do that. I've thought a lot about what it would take to approach life with that sense of freedom, and I think I've made progress in some areas. But like all of us, certain issues and events have an uncanny ability to push my buttons or get me wrapped up in my own concerns and anxieties. I can be remarkably unburdened about

Living in freedom from unnecessary strain is a universal craving.

some things and alarmingly stressed about others. But a lifestyle of consistently being unencumbered by weighty matters eludes me more often than I would like.

Even so, I felt an irresistible urge to write this book. The idea fascinates me. Is it really possible to go through all of the ups and downs of life and deal with all of its responsibilities and challenges with a sense of freedom? Is it realistic to think we can live weightlessly without detaching from the world or rejecting responsibility? Can we live real lives with real

families and jobs and still not get loaded down with stress over our obligations? I think we can. Living in freedom from unnecessary strain is a universal craving. I think God gives us biblical examples of how to do it. I believe he designed us for just such a life.

The Unburdened Life

I figured I would write this book at a mountain retreat or in a beach condo—no distractions, nothing else on the calendar, no monumental to-do list hanging over my head. After all, it seems like writing about the unburdened life should best be done while having no burdens, right? Sadly, God didn't cooperate with my agenda. For some reason, he thought it would be best for me to write this book while life was screaming at me to be stressed out: while to-do lists grew out of control and deadlines shouted relentlessly and relationships needed serious attention and major life decisions hovered over my head and the economy was diving downward and people all around me were getting laid off and . . . well, you get the picture. Apparently, God doesn't think a discussion on "the unburdened life" is for people who are cruising. It's for people who are weighed down and about to buckle.

In a strange sort of way, that's good news. God always comes to us in our need. He doesn't show himself as our Deliverer when we're free or as our Healer when we're well. Our ability to see his love and his gracious attributes kicks in

only when we're contending with the contradictions to them. His promise to deal with our worries isn't very precious to us when we don't have any. If there's ever a time to write or read or talk about the unburdened life, it's when the burdens are overwhelming.

We find ourselves in that condition more often than we'd like to admit. I've recently taken a silent inventory of responses when I ask people how they are doing, and they fall into two categories: "I'm way too busy" and "I desperately need more work." People in the first group are stressed by their workload, and people in the second are stressed by mounting financial debt. But hardly anyone says, "Life is great! I've got just the right amount of things to do, and it's all going well." The people of God have fallen in line with the rest of Western society and become a kingdom of jugglers. We've got issues—plenty of them—and while our theology tells us God will take care of us, our practical behaviors and attitudes don't exactly model that truth.

Think about that. What "good news" are we demonstrating for the world to see? Most of us go through seasons during which we're as stressed out as anyone. We have hope for the distant future—our eternity, for example—but the distant future isn't very compelling to people who are struggling to get by right now. Joy is supposed to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of the gospel, but I wonder how many Christians actually live in that reality. We who are allegedly empowered by the life of Another often seem strangely powerless to overcome the winds and waves of life.

Though twenty-first-century society intensifies our stress, carrying burdens is not a new phenomenon. Jesus told his followers not to worry about their lives and to bring their burdens to him—presumably because the human tendency even then was to worry and carry extra weight. In fact, I’m convinced that the fiasco in Eden long ago cut us off from a relationship of trust in God, and we’ve carried stress and anxiety ever since. We’ll dig into that a little more later, but this is why faith and trust are such prominent themes in Scripture. The Psalms are full of exhortations to trust in God because it isn’t our natural tendency to do so. Throughout history, people have sought remedies ranging from Hindu meditation to psychiatric medication. Burdensome issues are universal.

So is the desire to live with a light heart, and virtually every religion attempts to tell us how to do that. The normal Christian approaches to the unburdened life rightly center on trust and faith in God. That’s what Jesus taught, and that’s perfectly in line with the rest of Scripture too. Human beings, Christians included, have a fundamental trust problem—an endless capacity to second-guess what God has clearly spoken and to ask “what if?” about virtually every possible variable in our future. If you’re like me, you can read a thousand promises from the very Bible we call

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“infallible” and “inerrant” and still ask, “Lord, is that what you really mean?”

Christian thinkers and writers focus on this trust issue, albeit from different angles. Approaches that have helped me over the years include François Fénelon’s *Let Go*; the “exchanged life” principle of *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secret* and other figures of faith from his era; and Andrew Murray’s *Absolute Surrender*. All had major responsibilities and accomplished great things, but they learned to handle their burdens without undue urgency and strain. Their writings aren’t always directly aimed at issues of stress and worry, but in focusing on the heart of the matter—surrendering self-will and dying to self—they cut away at the root of our problem. Though I think there’s more to the issue than that, I’ve learned from their perspectives.

I’ve often wondered what would happen if we followed their counsel and simply let go of our concerns. Would the world fall apart? Would situations worsen because we aren’t stressed about them anymore? Would all our dreams and desires fall into God’s trash pile if we were no longer pestering him about them? Why don’t we just “let go”? I don’t know. We would certainly lose a sense of control, but maybe that’s the point. Perhaps that’s our fundamental problem—our false sense of control. It’s an illusion, and it wreaks havoc on our sense of peace. But we desperately try to maintain it anyway. Why? Because we have a hard time trusting God.

That has certainly been true in my experience. I’ve been accused of being a little “intense.” I’m driven by certain goals

and desires—and probably quite a few past wounds—and have a really hard time letting up or relaxing for very long. I feel the weight of life's burdens more deeply than a lot of people I know. I have a few friends who are laid-back and relatively carefree, and I envy them. They would probably look at me in astonishment and say, "You're writing a book about being unburdened? Really? Umm . . . are you sure you're the right guy for that?" And they wouldn't be asking anything I haven't already asked myself. In a lot of ways, as I mentioned, I'm the least qualified person to write on this subject.

One of my pastors asked me what my next book was going to be about. I was embarrassed to even speak the title of this one, but I managed to mumble it—adding the part about how I'm the wrong guy to write it. "I think you're exactly the right person to write that book," this pastor said. "Only someone who has had to carry a lot could say anything meaningful on that topic."

There's a lot of truth in that perspective. I mean, do you really want to hear from one of those rare people who never seem to have a care—who have a naturally laid-back approach to life? Most of us aren't given the gift of a mellow nature, and we can't relate to those who are. The reasons I'm qualified to write about this are the exact same reasons I would think I'm not. I've fought epic battles in this area, and I know some strategies that work. I'm a guy with broken dreams scattered throughout my past, a long history of depression in my lineage, a fair share of struggles against

family dysfunction, a brain-injured son, off-and-on financial pressures, a deadline-driven job, and an inability to say no until I'm hopelessly trapped under a heavy workload. I've stared into the piercing eyes of anxiety and fear. I've borne burdens that nearly crushed me to death. Like many people, I've suffered enormously from my own mistakes and the mistakes of others, and I've come up standing, sometimes even flying. I know many sides of this issue.

I know there are many well-intentioned Christians who give superficial advice on this topic, but I have no illusion that this is a superficial process. This book isn't a don't-worry-be-happy, God-is-in-control pep talk. You'll probably find the bumper-sticker message to "let go and let God" somewhere in these pages, but never in such blithe terms. The human psyche is a lot more complex than that, and God's solution for us goes a lot deeper.

Years ago, someone who had never met me before and had no information about my past or present circumstances felt led by the Spirit to give me a message. "I see you as a freight train," she said. "You're made of steel, and though you've taken a while to build up speed, God has given you the ability to pull a ton of weight." And I just kind of filed that message away. It rang true—I felt like I was pulling a ton of weight at the time—but there wasn't any instruction or guidance in it. I didn't know what to do with that picture.

But now that I've thought about it, I realize what it means. A freight train isn't unburdened when it starts rolling, straining so much that you can hardly imagine it pushing through

a moderate breeze. But once it gets going, it looks and feels effortless. It just cruises through the countryside as if the journey is more valuable than the destination.

That's true of our burdened lives too. We struggle under the weight sometimes, but once we're rolling down the tracks, it doesn't matter how much freight we're pulling. In fact, the freight can work to our advantage, pushing us forward with its momentum. We may have trouble stopping, but we don't have to worry about holding up our cargo. It just comes along for the ride.

So now when I think about the unburdened life, I realize it's less about getting rid of our baggage than it is about carrying our loads with ease. It's true that we cast our burdens on the

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Lord, but think about where they actually go: on the Lord who lives within us. The issues of our lives don't normally disappear when we cast our burdens on him. They simply get a lot lighter. The Spirit within us carries them as easily and breezily as a charging locomotive cruises through the countryside.

That's what this book is about. It won't teach you how to avoid responsibility or insulate yourself against serious issues by becoming detached and uncaring. Neither is it about how to escape and go live on a beach—at least not physically, though I've found that having a couple of palm trees

in my spirit never hurts. It's about taking the burdens you currently carry and making them much, much lighter. It's about transferring the weight of your responsibilities from the weak shoulders of your flesh to the strong fingertips of God. It's about living in deep-down, heart-level freedom.

This book won't come across as a "how-to" manual. I've already declared how unqualified I am to approach the subject that way. No, this is more like a series of personal reflections on what it's like to struggle with heavy baggage and, more important, what it's like to release the weight of that baggage to someone much more capable of handling it. These words express the deep wrestling of a lifetime. And as I've freely admitted, this isn't an issue I've mastered. It's an ongoing process. But it's a process that most of us need to learn to share with each other. What follows is my attempt to do just that—to share where I've been. I hope you'll read it simply as one freight train telling other freight trains about the track he's been traveling.

CHAPTER I

FREEDOM

I REMEMBER THE feeling clearly. I had just completed a very difficult term and was driving home from college with an entire summer ahead of me. There were no more oppressive exams or papers hanging over my head, no messy relationship issues lingering in the background, no financial pressures in the foreseeable future, no nagging health problems. The windows were rolled down, and the fresh air of early summer washed over me at highway speed. Life felt good.

In a way, it's sad that I can remember that particular moment so many years ago. I wish it was one of many such moments, but it was unique—a brief haven in time, a last vestige of childhood—and I haven't felt that way since. That's

why it sticks out in my memory. It was a very rare exception to normal life.

I want that feeling back. I didn't have it very often in childhood, and I certainly haven't had it since that summer break in college. But it seems to me that this is how we were designed to live—with hearts that aren't stressed out by the burdens of life but are free to soar and enjoy and dream. We feel alive when we aren't weighed down by burdens, and we instinctively know something's wrong when we are. It seems that we have an inherent desire to go through life weightlessly.

You know that desire. I know you do; everyone does. You get a glimpse of it every time you look forward to Friday or

We have an inherent desire to go through life weightlessly.

plan that desperately needed getaway. Whenever you get a brief respite, you kick back and enjoy the quietness and wish life were always so hassle free. Every desire to unwind,

to take a break, to carve out some quiet time from a busy schedule, to escape into a book or movie, to dream about the day you retire, to laugh and forget about the demands on your life for a moment—it's all a hint of that craving to be as free as God intended for you to be. You want—we all want—to live without feeling like we're under extreme pressure.

I can hear the objections already. "That isn't realistic." "God didn't intend for us to live without responsibilities." "You're describing childhood, not adulthood." And that's all

true—to a degree, which we’ll discuss later. But the Bible undeniably offers us a certain weightlessness to life, and most Christians aren’t living in it. Though life in a broken world is full of concerns and problems, the “Good News” is supposed to actually be good. There are answers. There’s a better way to live. Through God’s promises and the hope and faith he stirs up within us, we can have a level of freedom that people who don’t know him can’t have. We don’t have to submit to the oppression of our concerns. We are called “overcomers” and “more than conquerors” for a reason. No matter how heavy the weights on our shoulders are, we can’t ultimately be defeated by them. The rest of the world can’t say that. We have resources others don’t have.

Don’t Worry

For the most part, the crowds who were gathered around Jesus weren’t very wealthy. They were people who got by on the basic necessities and who depended on seasonal rains for survival. They worked a full six days a week, generally from sunrise to sundown. They farmed, fished, worked with their hands in fabrics, metals, and woods, maintained simple homes, and trained and cared for their children. It was a simple life but not an easy one. Their welfare depended not only on weather patterns, but on compliance with Rome and the impulses of tax collectors. Their entire well-being could suddenly be threatened by an unexpected disease or a common thief. Many of their children didn’t survive childhood.

They were familiar with hard economic and political realities and the fragile nature of life.

Like all of us, Jesus' listeners tended to preoccupy themselves with surviving and earning a decent living. They looked forward to God's Kingdom, but they spent most of their waking hours thinking about immediate needs. So what did Jesus tell this group of subsistence-minded people? "I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear."¹ Why? Because that isn't what life is about. All they had to do was look at the birds of the air and the flowers in the field. God is in the business of taking care of little, insignificant creatures. How much more will he take care of human beings, the pinnacle of creation on earth? If he has invested his attention in the relatively small matters, won't he be much more committed to us?

These are such familiar verses that we often lose the impact of them. Try to read Jesus' words as though you are seeing them for the first time. Hear what he is saying. He isn't giving this crowd of people a slap on the back and telling them to eat, drink, and be merry today because they'll die soon enough anyway. He isn't telling them that they can't do anything about their fate, so they might as well not worry about it. He isn't just encouraging them to keep a stiff upper lip or to look at the bright side of things. He is telling them that they have a very well-founded reason not to worry. The Father is diligently, actively looking out for their interests.

Peter knew that. The same apostle who slept in prison one tumultuous night quoted a well-known psalm in one of his letters several years later: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”² He had heard Jesus command the disciples not to worry, he had been delivered out of several storms by Jesus’ word, he had been miraculously rescued from prison twice, and he had seen God’s sovereign hand guiding the church’s affairs. But he had also suffered persecution and seen fellow believers die, so he wasn’t naive about the costs of faith. Still, he trusted God. He knew from experience that in every situation, at every moment, in every way, God was taking care of his children because Jesus had said emphatically that he would.

Do you see the absurdity of our stress? We are very busy and anxious about the very things God has already said he’s taking care of. We are relentless in our pursuit of what he has already promised to deliver. We micromanage the concerns we’ve allegedly asked him to handle. That’s about as ludicrous as a confirmed lottery winner anxiously watching the news to see if his number will come up. God has already guaranteed what we need. What are we worried about?

I know where our minds frequently go from here. We know deep down inside that Jesus has promised that God will give us what we need, but we want so much more. We want to maintain a reasonably comfortable lifestyle, send our kids to the right schools, achieve great things for God and his glory, take a decent vacation, get a better job, and so on. We don’t want the assurances that a bunch of subsistence

farmers and craftsmen received a couple thousand years ago. That essentially amounts to a guarantee of enough goat's milk and figs to keep us alive, and that doesn't exactly soothe our worries. We want the twenty-first-century version of the Sermon on the Mount, and we just aren't sure Jesus' promises translate to a Western, economically advanced culture. We want him to tell us that God will take care of our needs on a scale relative to the rest of our society, not on a scale relative to first-century Galilee. For the most part, we aren't traumatized by the threat of not surviving; we're traumatized by the threat of losing the status quo we've worked hard to maintain.

Even so, Jesus says not to worry. Period. Why? Because we have a very good reason not to. This is still a well-founded promise regardless of the economic conditions in which it was first presented. I happen to think, both from biblical evidence and my own experience, that Jesus' words translate to our culture, too, even though we aren't hanging on the edge of hardship quite as much as first-century Jews were. God understands that we want to achieve, to send our kids to great schools, to be salt and light in the suburbs as well as the inner city, and to get a higher degree or a better job. Sure, he may shift us out of our status quo sometimes, and we have to fully expect that he might. But only for great purposes ordained by him. If you read Jesus' teaching carefully enough, the gist of it isn't, "Don't worry; God will keep you alive by a thread"; it's, "Don't worry, your Father loves to bless his children, and he has his eye on you." After all,

God lavishes the miracle of flight and extraordinary beauty on small wildlife and plants. Surely he lavishes generosity on his children, too.

When we really get this, we relinquish our fear, which frees us up to seek God above all else. We can be totally pre-occupied with the things of his Kingdom because “all these things”—the necessities of life—will be added to those who fully invest themselves in eternity. We have to understand that he is devoted to putting us in the right places at the right times and stocking us with all we need for all he has called us to do. We have to be able to rest in that fact. Any stress about whether or not Jesus will take care of us is a stark rebuttal to his words. Somehow we got comfortable with being living contradictions: Christians who “believe” in the words of Jesus but worry anyway. That makes no sense.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't the only time Jesus urged us to live an unburdened life. Just as well known is his plea to the tired and burned-out: “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”³ Those words had less to do with the basic needs of life; they were directed more toward people stressed about having a right relationship with God. Religion can be a huge burden, placing demands on us that are clearly higher than our ability to accomplish. It puts ideals in front of us that we long to embrace but can never reach, at least not in our own effort. Striving to live a spiritually fruitful life in the strength of the flesh is a never-ending pursuit. Obedience, in its truest and fullest sense, eludes us. But even that, said Jesus, isn't a matter

for anxiety—not for those who come to him. He is gentle and humble. He gives rest for our souls.

Most Christians love that verse, but it's yet another example of something we "believe" and still exhibit great stress over. We either strain to live a life of impact for God, or we assume that if he doesn't want us to worry about it, his calling must not be that extreme or compelling to begin with. Few of us get to a point of fully embracing both the radical nature of discipleship *and* the radical empowerment of the Spirit within us. But it's possible to be a Spirit-filled radical who isn't crushed under the weight of being a disciple and impacting the world for Christ. Those who come to Jesus in the way he calls can bear an enormous responsibility for changing the world and never be stressed about it.

Few of us get to a point of fully embracing both the radical nature of discipleship *and* the radical empowerment of the Spirit within us.

Scripture includes plenty of references to this kind of life. "Give your burdens to the LORD, and he will take care of you," said a psalmist.⁴ "Don't worry about anything," Paul exhorted.⁵ "Let us strip off every weight that slows us down . . . and

let us run with endurance the race God has set before us," the writer of the book of Hebrews urged.⁶ "Those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint," wrote a great prophet.⁷ In fact, the

sheer number of occurrences of “do not fear” and “do not worry” in the Bible is staggering. Clearly, there is some quality of life, some sense of freedom, some level of energy that people are meant to have. We were designed to soar.

Having Burdens without Bearing Them

This doesn't mean, of course, that the Christian life is like cruising down the highway on summer break with the wind in your hair. The feeling I described at the beginning of this chapter was based on my lack of obligations, not a supernatural energy to carry the ones I had. But I'm convinced that I can experience that same feeling of freedom in almost any situation now, at least to some degree. I believe we were meant to be unburdened.

Let me explain what I *don't* mean by that. Some people pursue the unburdened life by adopting a laid-back lifestyle and a “life's a beach” mentality. They refuse to get too attached to anyone or anything. They pursue pleasure and comfort with as little effort and concern as possible. They may work hard, but only so they can take time off and party harder. Responsibility is only a temporary necessity to put up with between the lighter moments of life. That is, in fact, one way to be unburdened, but it isn't a spiritual ideal.

Others pursue the unburdened life in a more spiritually sophisticated way. One of the major goals of Buddhism is detachment. Because human desires and passions are the source of pain and suffering, the way to “salvation” is to get

rid of all desires and passions. The path to enlightenment is to escape from individuality—a complete denial of self, though not in the Christian sense—a process that takes multiple lifetimes to achieve. That, too, is one way to become unburdened. But that isn't what Jesus was talking about either.

There are a lot of counterfeit ways to live with less weight, but they aren't ultimately satisfying. The gospel doesn't lead to a “don't worry, be happy” lifestyle. It isn't simply about shedding all responsibilities and obligations in order to be unencumbered—though God often leads us to streamline our lives for more single-minded service. It doesn't make us apathetic or uncaring. The unburdened life is not a matter of “chilling out” or becoming “laid-back” in pursuit of the ideal personality. And it isn't about having all the conveniences and comforts we can afford in order to take it easy—or about saving up for them so we can retire in peace. It's about a godly way to live life with less effort and under less weight.

But is that even feasible—or, for that matter, biblical? After all, we're told to bear one another's burdens.⁸ Paul was “burdened” for his churches.⁹ Prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah were weighed down with extremely serious messages from God to his people, and they suffered greatly to carry those messages. Jeremiah, for example, had two options: to let the fire in his bones burn with the unspoken warnings of God, or to speak the warnings and bear the wrath of his kinsmen. Ezekiel saw traumatic visions, acted out extremely uncomfortable prophecies, and watched his wife die for the

sake of God's message to his people. Were they missing out on the unburdened life they could have had?

Likewise, history is full of people who went to extraordinary lengths and endured extreme hardship to take the gospel to new places or to blaze new trails in the church's methods and ministries around the world. Many of them were ridiculed or even killed for confronting the world's sins or violating the religious traditions of the church. They suffered pain and rejection for the sake of God's Word. Were they missing out on a biblical ideal of living weightlessly?

Many Christians can testify to the pain of being "burdened" with prayers of intercession. They have withstood many sleepless nights and forgone numerous meals in order to do business in unseen realms for the sake of

the lost and the God who loves them. Are they just naive and spiritually immature enough to have missed a vital biblical truth of being unburdened?

No, of course not. Persecution and toil are not light matters in the Kingdom of God. But nearly every one of those people affirms that there's a difference between the kind of burden God places on a person's shoulders to carry in his strength and the kind of burden that overwhelms and crushes

There's a difference between the kind of burden God places on a person's shoulders to carry in his strength and the burden that overwhelms and crushes a person's spirit, miring him or her in futility.

a person's spirit, miring him or her in futility. Some burdens are oppressive, and some are supernaturally carried.

That's why it's possible for someone like Isaiah to preach a hard message to a stubborn nation, encounter oppressive resistance to it, and still talk about soaring with wings like an eagle's. That's why David could suffer the consequences of his own sin, endure the deepest pains of family dysfunction, fight for his life in numerous battles against a multitude of enemies, and still praise God for renewing his youth, setting him on high places, and fulfilling his heart's desires. And that's why Paul could write about all his shipwrecks and beatings and opponents and still break out in gratitude for the inexpressible joy of serving God and identifying with Jesus. These people were able to carry extraordinary weight because they had learned the principle of resting in a supernatural source, often by sheer necessity. They had borne burdens, but not without help. The unburdened life isn't so much about avoiding burdens as it is about carrying them with the strength of Another. The former leads to a life of purposelessness; the latter builds an eternal Kingdom. The first approach is a choice to be weak; the other is a choice to be supernaturally empowered. This isn't a matter simply of living with abandonment, but of living with abandonment *to God*.

Transcending a Storm

Jesus made the disciples get in a boat and go to the other side of the lake.¹⁰ He compelled them, forced them, ordered

them, apparently against their will. Why didn't they want to go? We don't know. Maybe they knew the conditions were unstable. Perhaps they were perfectly willing to get into the boat but wanted him to come with them rather than head off to the hills to pray. Or maybe they were just tired after a long season of ministry and would have preferred to rest where they were. Regardless of the reason, Jesus made them go.

They probably weren't thrilled with his seeming lack of foresight when a storm came up. Such storms weren't unusual; the Sea of Galilee was known for its sudden squalls. And while this storm may not have been as bad as others the disciples had to endure, it still required quite a bit of effort to keep control of the boat. The wind was strong, the waves were heavy, and it was late at night. They had just absorbed the news of John the Baptist's death and dealt with thousands of people hungry for miracles and food. Now, likely exhausted, they were getting tossed around by merciless waves.

To make matters worse, they were accosted by a phantom, a specter hovering on the water at three in the morning. Fishermen have their tales—legends of spooky encounters from the unknown deeps—but these men weren't counting on being part of any such story. Nevertheless, the spirit neared. They literally screamed in terror.

Jesus spoke immediately to relieve their fears. He announced his presence, assured them that he was no ghost, and told them not to be afraid. Unconvinced, Peter asked for confirmation. "If it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water." It was a bizarre request. Perhaps he thought

he had nothing to lose; if it was really Jesus, the feat would prove it, and if this was a ghost, he might as well drown. Regardless, he had the nerve to ask, and Jesus honored his nerve with an answer. “Yes, come.”

It had to feel good at first. This mortal man of real flesh and blood and at least average weight was walking on a substance much less dense than he was. He had floated on water before with the help of a boat, but he had never transcended it. To him, as to nearly every Jew, deep water represented chaos and danger. It was to be feared by most and at least respected by those who had to earn their living on it. Unlike Phoenicians and other seafaring people of the ancient Near East, Jews considered the seas to be a dark mystery far from the Spirit of God.¹¹ Now the Son of God was walking on one, and so was a common fisherman. This was not only a miracle; it was a paradigm shift of epic proportions.

Sadly, the exhilaration was brief. Peter took his eyes off Jesus and stared instead at the chaos around him: strong wind and huge waves. In a dramatic picture featured prominently in the preaching of nearly every pulpit speaker since, Peter lost his focus. The results were immediate. While empowered by his gaze at the Savior, Peter defied physics. When fed instead by the threats around him, Peter plummeted. One mental posture set him on top of his circumstances; the other forced him to submit to them. Both before and after Peter’s descent, the circumstances were the same—nothing about the wind and waves changed. Jesus didn’t calm the storm so Peter could tread on water; the feat would have

been impossible in any weather conditions other than a deep freeze. No, the situation was the same throughout the entire story. The sea was tumultuous. The only things that changed were Peter's focus, his level of fear, and his ability to overcome his environment.

That's an accurate portrait of the contrast between the unburdened life and its discouraging alternative. The difference between them has nothing to do with getting our issues to go away. We aren't going to be able to have a carefree existence by getting rid of our cares. That isn't an option. The wind and the waves are inevitable. Our only choice is whether to sink under our circumstances or rise above them. And according to biblical truth and the promises of God, rising above them is a very real possibility. Walking on water in the midst of a storm is a genuine alternative.

I've often wondered why God doesn't just give us the care-free life we dream of. Why doesn't he take away the issues and problems that plague us when we come to him in faith? Why do we still have to go through the same difficulties as before? As I was preparing to write this section, the father of a friend's friend died without ever having received Christ, even though he had been the subject of many prayers over many years. Isn't that a heavy burden worth grieving over? Another friend has a terminally ill mother who has needed extensive long-term care by family members who are pretty well exhausted by now. Is that not a cause for stress? Several of my colleagues were laid off recently because gifts to nonprofit ministries like ours drop dramatically during an economic crisis. These

kinds of things are the backdrop behind Jesus' promises and, if we're honest, the source of most of our doubts when we hear a seemingly blithe command like, "Do not worry about your life." Don't worry? Are you kidding, Lord? You never promise to take such excruciating pain away from us, and yet you tell us not to worry?

It seems unrealistic, doesn't it? And it would be—if God didn't step in with supernatural strength to be able to handle such circumstances. But I think that's one of the main reasons he doesn't just remove all adversity from us when we come to him in faith and ask for help. He leaves us in the midst of our adversity for a reason, not so we can be overcome by it, but so we can overcome it in him. There's a strange and remarkable interplay between our needs and God's supply in which he gets glorified by stepping into our circumstances and carrying our burdens for us. He doesn't take the burdens away, but he lightens them by his strength. He becomes the bearer as we present them to him. And in the process, he gets to show who he is.

Think about that. God was able to show himself as Israel's Deliverer only because he allowed his people to be slaves in Egypt in the first place. He showed himself as their Provider only because he led them into a wilderness that had no water or food to sustain them. He showed himself as Healer only when they were allowed to experience disease and as their Warrior only when they had an enemy. The overwhelming circumstances in the history of his chosen people became the platform for his revelation. We would not know who he is

today if somebody, somewhere, sometime had not had a deep need that he stepped in and met.

This is an ongoing dynamic. God's character wasn't on display just for one season or among one group of people. He still reveals himself in our lives and in the lives of people around us, primarily through our needs and his ability to meet them. We may know him theoretically as Israel's Deliverer, Provider, Healer, and Warrior, but we know him personally only if he performs those roles in our lives when we need him to. And that's why he doesn't remove the wind and waves from our lives. We can sink and suffer among them, or we can find his strength and walk on them. But that carefree life we long for—that feeling I had on that drive home from college—can't be attained by perpetually calm waters. Not now, not in this world. The only way to live the unburdened life is by having difficulties and learning how to rely on God to deal with them.

That's why this kind of life seems so elusive. If you're like me, you keep looking for that season of calm waters, that ideal situation when no sticky relationships are clamoring for attention, no needs are pressing down on you, no deadlines are urgently screaming at you, no bills are mocking your inability to pay them, no health

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problems are nagging at you, and your workload is uncharacteristically sane. That season may come for brief moments and in varying degrees, but it will never be a way of life in this age. What *can* be a way of life is the ability to nearly effortlessly carry burdens that would be crushing to most people. How? By faith. By a refusal to worry and a commitment to prayer. By allowing the Spirit of God to live within you and not only give you strength but *be* your strength.

That's the goal. The rest of this book will focus on the means to the end. We'll examine the source of our burdens: why we have them, where they come from, and how deeply they've grown roots in our lives. We'll look at the many ways—some of them surprising—that we carry unnecessary weight, as well as what it really means to shift the responsibility of our baggage off our own shoulders and onto shoulders much greater and more capable than ours. We'll explore why it's so difficult to let go of the things we cling to, even the things we desperately want to get rid of. And we'll find out what freedom really means and how we can maintain it.

The unburdened life is a calling to carry exactly what God places on our shoulders—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else—in the strength that he gives us. It can look to others like a hard path to climb, but it can feel as effortless as a sailboat being blown by the wind. We can't do that unless we make some key decisions and shift the way we think. But it can be done. According to Jesus and the experience of many who know him, it's possible. In fact, it's necessary. It's the way we're designed to live.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. The word translated “fervently” or “earnestly” in Acts 12:5 (*ektenos*) is used very sparingly in the New Testament, and only twice in relation to prayer: here and in Luke 22:44, which describes the intensity of Jesus’ prayers and his sweat being like drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane.

CHAPTER 1: FREEDOM

1. Matthew 6:25
2. 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV), quoted from Psalm 55:22
3. Matthew 11:28
4. Psalm 55:22
5. Philippians 4:6
6. Hebrews 12:1
7. Isaiah 40:31
8. Galatians 6:2, NKJV
9. 2 Corinthians 11:28
10. Matthew 14:22-33
11. Even from the first words of Genesis, where the Spirit hovered over the dark and chaotic waters and had to tame them, the Jewish concept of the sea seemed to emphasize its mystery and turmoil. Hebrew Scripture speaks of “the deep” in terms of judgment (Noah’s flood), an obstacle that God must overcome for his people and that he uses to overcome his enemies (the Red Sea), a chasm as dark as the grave (Job 38:16-17), and, when stirred up, a sign of God’s disfavor (Jonah). Psalmists and prophets speak of the waters as a place of peril (Psalm 69:1, for example) and feel the need to remind us that God is present “even” there—as though there were

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some question about that. The deep was not normally considered friendly territory. A necessary part of creation, perhaps, but always potentially wild and unpredictable.

CHAPTER 2: ROOTS

1. Matthew 25:14-30, NIV
2. Some parents take their “love” a lot further than that and actually do seek self-fulfillment and healing through their children. That’s a problem and a certain path toward dysfunctional relationships. But even in perfectly healthy parent-child relationships, the parents will feel a certain weight of responsibility for the children and be burdened or stressed at times in their children’s lives.
3. Matthew 6:25, 31, 34; 10:19; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11, 22, 29
4. Romans 8:22
5. Ephesians 2:14, NIV
6. Romans 5:1; Philippians 4:7
7. Isaiah 9:6
8. 2 Corinthians 4:16
9. Romans 8:28
10. Peter Bourke, *A Better Way to Make a Living . . . and a Life: Thriving in the New World of Work* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2009), 39–40.

CHAPTER 3: LOADS

1. “Overchoice,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overchoice> (accessed March 12, 2009).
2. Matthew 13:44-46
3. Proverbs 3:5-6
4. John 10:27
5. Proverbs 16:9
6. Exodus 31:13-17; Leviticus 23:3
7. Philippians 4:19
8. Exodus 15:26
9. Psalm 84:11; James 1:17
10. Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5
11. Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 15:33; Isaiah 57:15; 66:2
12. John 11:3-6
13. Job 1:21
14. Genesis 50:20
15. John 8:36

CHAPTER 4: TRUST

1. Mark 4:38
2. Mark 4:40
3. Psalm 3:3, 5-6
4. The story is told in 2 Samuel 15-18.
5. Psalm 9:10
6. Psalm 22:5, NIV
7. Psalm 25:3
8. Psalm 34:10
9. Psalm 56:4, 11
10. Psalm 112:7
11. Psalm 125:1
12. Psalm 31:19
13. Psalm 32:10
14. Psalm 34:22
15. Psalm 50:15
16. Psalm 37:9
17. Psalm 37:3
18. Psalm 84:12
19. Psalm 63:11
20. Psalm 52:8
21. Psalm 37:5
22. Psalm 111:5
23. Psalm 115:9-11
24. Psalm 34:8
25. I address this more fully in the book *Fixing Abraham* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2009).
26. Mark 11:24, NIV
27. If you wonder whether this is true, compare how deflating the previous paragraph seems relative to how inspiring the description of trust's blessings was a few paragraphs earlier. I've found that the majority of people need to read or hear at least ten positive affirmations to balance out one negative word. At all costs, don't let this section on the difficulties in trusting God outweigh the greater truth of how trustworthy he is.
28. Hebrews 11:1, NKJV
29. 2 Corinthians 4:18
30. 2 Corinthians 5:7, NKJV
31. Psalm 36:8, NKJV
32. Romans 8:28
33. Jeremiah 29:11

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34. There are numerous examples of this, including the crisis event that sent Joseph to Egypt; the plagues that made Israel's labor harder in Egypt—for a moment; the crisis of Goliath taunting Israel's armies; Daniel's mandatory dream interpretation; the threatened annihilation that prompted Esther to enter the king's court; and the Cross. In every case, God used a crisis as the stage for a reversal that further established or blessed his people.
35. Psalm 57:1
36. Proverbs 18:21
37. Mark 11:23
38. Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians 16:5-7; 1 Thessalonians 3:11
39. Philippians 1:6
40. Philippians 1:18
41. Philippians 1:20
42. Job 2:9
43. Job 19:25-27, NIV
44. Romans 4:20
45. Hebrews 11:10
46. Genesis 15:1, NKJV
47. Genesis 22:14
48. Genesis 12:3

CHAPTER 5: RELEASE

1. Psalm 55:22; 1 Peter 5:7
2. Matthew 16:24
3. Galatians 2:20, NIV
4. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 162–163.
5. Hebrews 1:3, NIV
6. Philippians 2:3
7. Luke 6:38

CHAPTER 6: PASSION

1. Galatians 2:20
2. Romans 6:4
3. Hebrews 11:9-10
4. Colossians 3:1-4
5. 2 Corinthians 4:18
6. Matthew 13:44
7. *City Slickers*, Columbia Pictures, 1991.
8. Matthew 6:25-34

9. Matthew 6:33, NIV
10. Galatians 5:16
11. Philippians 1:27; 3:20
12. Philippians 2:1-11
13. Philippians 2:17
14. Philippians 3:8
15. Philippians 3:13
16. Philippians 4:4
17. Philippians 4:5
18. Philippians 4:6-7
19. Philippians 4:8
20. Philippians 4:11-12
21. Philippians 4:13
22. Philippians 4:19
23. Philippians 3:4-6
24. Philippians 3:7-9
25. Acts 6:1-6
26. This would be similar to a Korean or Russian church in the United States—an ethnic community worshiping in its own language in a foreign land. In the case of this synagogue, these would be Greek-speaking Jews living in Jerusalem, in many cases furthering their education under Temple-based rabbis. This fits Paul's profile perfectly.
27. 1 Thessalonians 5:18
28. Luke 14:26-27
29. John 4:34

CHAPTER 7: PERSPECTIVE

1. Louis C.K., interview by Conan O'Brien, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, NBC, October 1, 2008.
2. 1 Corinthians 15:19
3. Hebrews 11:10
4. Romans 4:20
5. 1 Corinthians 2:9
6. 2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV
7. Matthew 19:16-24
8. Luke 12:13-21
9. John 17:22-23
10. Ephesians 2:6
11. 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6
12. Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 22:5

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13. Galatians 5:16
14. Romans 6:11
15. Galatians 6:2
16. Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).
17. See devotional for August 23 in Oswald Chambers, *Run This Race: The Complete Works of Oswald Chambers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2000).
18. Revelation 1:17

CHAPTER 8: PRAISE

1. Acts 16:25
2. John 15:7
3. Numbers 22
4. Genesis 1:3—and almost identical wording in 1:6-7, 9, 11, 14-15, and 24
5. Proverbs 18:21
6. James 3:2, 5-10
7. Ephesians 4:29, NIV
8. Matthew 12:36
9. More information on Merlin Carothers and his books can be found at <http://www.foundationofpraise.org>.
10. Psalm 103:2
11. Acts 5:1-11
12. Psalm 16:11, NKJV
13. Isaiah 54:17
14. Ephesians 3:20
15. Psalm 103:1-2, italics added
16. Psalm 9:1-2, italics added
17. Psalm 34:1-3, italics added
18. Psalm 91:2, NIV
19. Psalm 42:5, 9-11, NIV
20. Psalm 4:8

CHAPTER 9: PRESENCE

1. Galatians 2:20, NIV
2. John 17:22-23
3. Ephesians 2:6
4. Ephesians 3:19, NIV
5. Philippians 2:13, NIV

6. Proverbs 3:5-6
7. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 157.

CONCLUSION

1. Judah's unfaithfulness would get much worse over the next couple of centuries, but even in Jehoshaphat's day there was widespread idolatry and shrines on hilltops throughout the country.
2. 2 Chronicles 20:12
3. 2 Chronicles 20:21
4. 2 Chronicles 20:22
5. 2 Chronicles 20:27-30