

simplify.

ten practices to unclutter your soul

BILL HYBELS

bestselling author of *The Power of a Whisper* and *Too Busy Not to Pray*

Nobody could have written this book better than Bill Hybels. Full of practical advice, hard-won wisdom, and spiritual insights, *Simplify* contains everything you need to create a God-first schedule that will radically simplify your life. And when you do, you'll find a freedom you'd almost forgotten was possible.

ANDY STANLEY

Senior pastor of North Point Ministries

I learned a long time ago that if I didn't take control of my schedule and my money, they would always take control of me. Learning when and how to say no has given me more freedom than you can imagine. It's a word I always teach young leaders, and it's a message I'm glad Bill Hybels is bringing in *Simplify*.

DAVE RAMSEY

New York Times bestselling author and nationally syndicated radio show host

It has been said, "Beware when a naked man offers you a shirt." But Bill Hybels writing a book on simplicity is exactly the opposite, because he speaks from a well of experience. I treasure his perspective because he has led through complexity for several decades and echoes what great leaders always say: Simplicity is the key to making a complex life successful. Thank you, Bill.

DR. HENRY CLOUD

Leadership expert, psychologist, and bestselling author

My dad has always inspired me to live with more intention and clarity, and always helped me navigate the steps from here to there. I'm thrilled that his wisdom is now in a format that I can hand out to friends, and I will, because I don't know who doesn't need this kind of rich thinking about what it means to live with focus and sanity and peace. I love these ideas, and I can't wait to share this book.

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

Proud daughter, author of *Bread and Wine*, www.shaunaniequist.com

As a wife, mum, founder of an anti-trafficking organization, and church leader, it's quite easy to feel overwhelmed or frenetic at times. But I desire to be anchored in the truth of God's Word and lead a busy life well. In *Simplify*, Bill Hybels helps to guide us into a soul detox from being exhausted to energized, frenetic to faithful. Ultimately, it's taught me to be more by doing less, building a life on health and wholeness, not cluttered chaos.

CHRISTINE CAINE

Founder of The A21 Campaign and bestselling author of *Undaunted*

No one can truly impact a complex, broken outer world if they do not have a simple, healthy inner world. Bill has navigated exceedingly complex demands for many years; in *Simplify* he shares concrete steps into the "easy yoke" of Jesus, learned in the pressure cooker of real life.

JOHN ORTBERG

Senior pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church and author of *Who Is This Man?*

If you have ever ached inside because life is so complicated, this is the book for you. In *Simplify*, Bill Hybels walks you on a journey to redefine your perspective, realign your priorities, and reignite your faith in Christ. This book will not only give you hope, but also practical truths to live the life you always hoped was possible.

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Pastor of LifeChurch.tv and author of *Fight: Winning the Battles That Matter Most*

Bill Hybels's masterful and courageous work, *Simplify: Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul*, has again brought clear answers to questions we're all asking. Read and digest these principles. They have become my personal assignment for this next season.

WAYNE CORDEIRO

Pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship

BILL HYBELS

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chapter one

from exhausted to energized

Replenishing Your Energy Reserves

A GOOD PORTION of my work these days involves coaching and mentoring leaders, both here in the United States and around the world. Increasingly, whether I'm speaking with leaders at home or abroad, at Willow Creek or in other circles of my life, I hear the same words repeated over and over: *exhausted*, *overwhelmed*, *overscheduled*, *anxious*, *isolated*, *dissatisfied*. It's a bipartisan issue—young and old, rich and poor, professionals and parents, women and men, Republicans and Democrats. And it's a global issue—I've heard these words in English and in countless foreign languages.

It was startling to hear these words so often. I began to realize that, as leaders and Christ followers, we needed to address this situation. So whenever I had a chance, I began openly discussing burnout, stress, and dissatisfaction. My gut told me the topics might strike a chord with people, because they certainly struck a chord with me.

I grossly underestimated the impact.

As I explored the concerns that leave people feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and exhausted, and as I sought to formulate a framework for how to tackle the diverse complexities of these issues, I began using the term *simplify*. How do we *simplify* our lives? The term stuck. The very word seemed to energize people.

Perhaps they hoped I would unveil a closely held secret, a key to the universe that would help them uncomplicate their frazzled lives. Perhaps they assumed I was well beyond these issues in my own experience and hoped I might whisk some crumbs of wisdom off the mahogany table of my life into their waiting and eagerly cupped hands.

Not so! Those who know me well can tell you I've spent the majority of my adult life wrestling with the same dark swarm of words I've lately been hearing from leaders across the globe. I am nowhere near immune. I know far too much about being overwhelmed and over-scheduled and exhausted. I know all too well what it feels like to be anxious, dissatisfied, wounded, and spent. As I've talked about these issues, I have been both a student and a teacher, to be sure. You'll see in the pages you're about to read that I'm a serious fellow learner on the topic of simplifying our lives.

Simplified living is about more than doing less. It's being who God called us to be.

I am not naturally inclined to lead a simple life. I feel a strong sense of responsibility to the calling God has entrusted to me—not just at work, but also with my family, the relationships I invest in, the recreation I need for my mental health, and the travel my work requires.

I don't foresee my life slowing to a lounge-by-the-pool pace anytime soon, if ever. Can you relate?

Simplified living is about more than doing less. It's being who God called us to be, with a wholehearted, single-minded focus. It's walking away from innumerable lesser opportunities in favor of the few to which we've been called and for which we've been created. It's

a lifestyle that allows us, when our heads hit the pillow at night, to reflect with gratitude that our day was well invested and the varied responsibilities of our lives are in order.

If we don't change how we live, our overcomplicated world will begin to feel frighteningly normal. We will become accustomed to life at a frantic pace, no longer able to discriminate between the important and the unessential. And that's the danger: When we fritter away our one and only life doing things that don't *really* matter, we sacrifice the things that do matter. Through more misses than hits, I have experienced the high cost of allowing my life to get out of control. My desire is to spare you some of the pain of learning these lessons as I did—the hard way.

What if your life could be different? What if you could be certain you were living the life God called you to live and building a legacy for those you love? If you crave a simpler life anchored by the priorities that matter most, roll up your sleeves:

Simplified living requires more than just organizing your closets or cleaning out your desk drawer. It requires *uncluttering your soul*. By examining core issues that lure you into frenetic living, and by eradicating the barriers that leave you exhausted and overwhelmed, you can stop doing the stuff that doesn't matter and build your life on the stuff that does.

Simplified living requires more than just organizing your closets or cleaning out your desk drawer. It requires *uncluttering your soul*.

In my experience, a handful of key practices are vital to keeping my soul clutter-free. These practices help me overcome the barriers that keep me from living the life “to the full” that Jesus promises in John 10:10. In each chapter of this book, I invite you to examine one of these practices, assess what Scripture has to say about it, hold up a mirror to your own life, and then take action.

There are no shortcuts to simplified living. Untangling yourself

from the overscheduled, overwhelming web of your current life is not for the faint of heart. It's honest, rigorous work. As I tell leaders whenever I speak on the subject, action *is* required. That's why each chapter of this book concludes with Action Steps—questions about what keeps you in bondage to such frenetic, cluttered patterns, as well as hands-on practices for eradicating clutter from your soul and moving toward a simplified life. I challenge you to go beyond reading each chapter merely for theory. Don't let an intellectual nod to the concept of simplified living inoculate you against making actual changes in your actual life. Rather, *apply* what you read with *courage* and *grit*.

I can tell you from my own experience that simplifying your life will produce immediate rewards. Each day will have a clear purpose, and each relationship will receive the investment it's due. And without the needless clutter clanging around in your soul, you'll be able to hear—and respond to—each whisper from God.

This is what I know: *Change is possible*. Whether you're teetering on the edge of a cluttered collapse or you're just starting to realize that some minor life adjustments are in order, you *can* simplify. You may well *have to* simplify to live the life God is inviting you to live. As you begin to implement these key practices, they will become habits that create simplified days, then months, then years, and eventually a lifetime that brings satisfaction and fulfillment. Making these course corrections will produce a life you'll be glad to have lived when you look in the rearview mirror.

You've been warned: This process is not for the faint of heart. Action on your part *is* required. Still game? Let's dive in.

“TELL HER TO HELP ME!”

Of all the people Jesus interacted with during His three-year teaching ministry, Scripture records only one person whom He redirected in the area of simplicity: a good friend of His, a woman named Martha.

Jesus had hundreds of followers during His ministry—not just

the twelve disciples—but He chose only a handful to be in His inner friendship circle. Three were His disciples: Peter, James, and John. And there were three others: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, siblings who were faithful supporters of His ministry. They lived in a little suburb of Jerusalem called Bethany, which still exists today. Jesus stayed with them from time to time and deeply valued their hospitality.

The incident I'm about to describe took place as the demands on Jesus were growing. The more He taught, the more people wanted from Him—more healings, more miracles, more of everything He could offer. His days were increasingly packed. So occasionally, Jesus called a time-out and retreated to the serenity of the guest quarters in Bethany, where He could wind down for a day or two and refuel in the company of His closest friends. Here's how Luke describes one such visit:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."¹

You can see the dynamics of this situation shaping up from a mile away. Mary and Martha have had no time to prepare for this drop-in visit by Jesus and twelve dusty disciples. But Jesus feels comfortable

enough in His friendship with them that He stops by for some replenishing time.

Mary decides to go with the flow and pulls up a chair. Perhaps she says something to Jesus like, “I’m so glad You stopped by. How’s it been going on the road? How big a pain have the Pharisees been lately? You can tell us; we’re friends. What You share in Bethany stays in Bethany.”

Meanwhile, Martha has busied herself in the kitchen getting a meal going. She is frantically trying to play the role of accommodating hostess, tending to the physical needs of Jesus and His disciples—appetizers, entrées, and drinks. It begins to grate on her that Mary is simply lounging in the other room with Jesus, catching up on the latest events.

After a while, Martha snaps. She loses it. She’s clearly ticked. Perhaps she had already attempted some subtle cues to get her sister to give her a hand with the food. First she may have peeked around the corner and given Mary the stink-eye—the look that says, *Get in here and help me!* Then maybe she started dropping pans to get Mary’s attention. My wife, Lynne, used to do that with me. When she thought I wasn’t helping enough, she’d “accidentally” let a few pans crash to the kitchen floor. After about the fifth pan—I was a little slow on the draw—I would catch a clue: “That’s the signal!” And I’d head for the kitchen to pitch in.

We don’t know whether Mary has missed, or has chosen to ignore, her sister’s hints that she needs help, but at a certain point, Martha bursts into the room and interrupts the conversation Mary is having with Jesus. She doesn’t address Mary; she addresses Jesus directly with an opening salvo: “Lord, don’t You care?”

The irony here is thick. “Don’t You care?” she asks the Lord of the universe, the one who left heaven’s splendor to put on human flesh and descend into first-century Palestine; who has been out on the road, teaching and healing and serving others until He’s absolutely

exhausted; and who will soon bleed and die for the redemption of everyone in the world, including Martha.

“Don’t You care?”

I picture Martha in this scene with a wooden spoon in her hand. She gets right up in Jesus’ face: “You tell her to help me! Order that lazy sister of mine into the kitchen before I do something with this spoon!”

If I were Jesus, I would have had several ideas running through my mind about what Martha could do with that spoon. But Jesus doesn’t escalate the conflict. He doesn’t power up on Martha. He doesn’t say, “How dare you speak to the Son of God this way . . .” According to the text, He simply says her name twice: “Martha, Martha.” In other words, “Easy does it, Martha. Take a chill pill.”

Jesus doesn’t
escalate the conflict.
He doesn’t say,
“How dare you speak
to the Son of God
this way . . .”

Then, with genuine kindness, He makes an observation: “You are worried and upset about many things.”

He can tell she’s overwhelmed, overscheduled, and exhausted—the very words that define our culture. And He invites her to put down her spoon and take a couple of deep breaths.

“So many things are occupying your mind right now,” He says. “They’re churning you up inside. You’re making My visit much more complicated than I want it to be.”

I picture Jesus clarifying the lines, taking advantage of a teachable moment for everyone in the room: “Martha, can I simplify something for you? Whenever I stop by, it’s not for the food. If I wanted a five-star dinner, I could arrange for one—I just fed five thousand people a couple of weeks ago, you know. And I made some awesome chardonnay at a wedding reception once. I can arrange for food and drink anywhere, anytime. When I stop by to visit, it’s for friendship, for connection, to be with you. I come

here for the life-giving, life-exchanging engagement, for fellowship. That's all, really."

In Luke's text, Jesus tells Martha something that I, too, often need to be reminded of: "*Few things are needed—indeed only one.*"

Martha was missing what mattered most; but not Mary. She got it.

"Mary has chosen the good part," Jesus says, "and I'm not going to take it away from her. I will not send her into the kitchen to do a dozen things that don't really matter in the big picture."

By affirming Mary's choice, Jesus invites Martha to set down her spoon and follow her sister's example.

Your heart and mine yearn for an antidote to all the drivenness and busyness in our lives. The antidote isn't getting it all done in the kitchen—or the office, or the mall. The antidote is leaving that stuff—sometimes undone—to sit down for an unrushed conversation with Jesus.

Your heart and mine
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What a terrific story. In a few short words, Jesus teaches us about His values and priorities.

I also find it fascinating that the Gospel of Luke juxtaposes the Mary and Martha story with the parable of the Good Samaritan.² On the heels of teaching His followers to be active and help those in need, Jesus strikes a different note in His response to Martha's activism. "In all your activity," He says, "don't lose sight of relationship."

Unrushed. Unhurried. Let's sit down and get caught up with each other.

Relationship.

WAKE-UP CALL

Some years back, I had a "moment" that was far uglier than Martha's ugly moment. At the time, I had felt depleted not just for days, not

just for weeks, but for *months*. Things had gotten so bad that, one by one, my wife and kids had subtly suggested that maybe I should spend some time at our family cottage in Michigan. *Alone*. Their unanimous, unspoken message was loud and clear: *You're over the edge. You're no fun around here. Go inflict yourself on yourself for a few days. In another state!*

It didn't take a genius to crack the code. So I packed my duffel bag.

As I walked down the long hallway to our garage, our little dog saw me coming—and he dove out of the way into the laundry room. Even the dog knew I was on edge. It seemed I was the last to notice.

On my drive over to the cottage that day, I had my wooden spoon out, just like Martha, and I was giving God an earful. I complained about the elders of our church: “They have unrealistic expectations!” I complained about the staff: “They always want stuff from me, and they rarely thank me.” Then the spoon grew to the size of a canoe paddle, and I complained about our congregation: “They think I'm just a sermon machine, and they don't really care about me as a person.”

For the entire three-hour drive, I was shaking the spoon. When I arrived at the cottage, I deposited my duffel bag in the bedroom and headed to the kitchen to make something to eat. When I opened the fridge and discovered there was no food, my complaints continued: “Whoever stayed here last hasn't given any thought to the one who would be coming over next—*the one who pays the bills!* They don't give a rip about me either!”

So I drove to the little grocery store in town to pick up a bag of groceries. And I was none too happy about it, believe me.

After I paid the cashier, I walked toward the screen-door exit. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a guy I'd seen around town before—a wounded Vietnam vet in his wheelchair. I noticed he was also moving toward the door. I calculated his speed and compared it to mine. I calculated his angle and compared it to mine. And I remember thinking, *Are you kidding me? He and I are going to reach the door at exactly the*

same time. He's going to be moving slowly because he's in the wheelchair, and I suppose I should be courteous and help him. . . .

And here was my next thought: *What else could go wrong for me today, God? What else could go wrong?*

In that same split second, God took the scales off my eyes, and I looked into the cesspool of resentment, exhaustion, and darkness that filled my heart. And I'm not kidding you—when I saw it in all its ugliness, I felt my knees grow weak. I thought I might vomit right there in the store.

God took the scales off my eyes, and I looked into the cesspool of resentment, exhaustion, and darkness that filled my heart.

I pulled it together enough to help the guy navigate the doorway, but the moment I exited that tiny grocery store, I had to admit to God and to myself that I was more concerned about the *fifteen seconds* longer it had taken me to get through the door than I was about the *fifteen years* that soldier had spent in a wheelchair after injuries sustained while serving our country.

Reeling from that realization, I walked to my truck, climbed in, put my head on the steering wheel, and lost it: *What has happened to me? Who have I become?*

I had to admit: *I hate who I've become.* And then I begged, “God, help me. God, help me. God, help me.”

That was my rock-bottom moment, when I finally realized the price of depletion. Coming to my senses in the parking lot of that little grocery store was like when an alcoholic wakes up in his neighbor's wheelbarrow at three o'clock in the morning and finally admits, “I drink too much. How did this happen?” I just sat there, asking God, “How did this happen? How did I become this overwhelmed, overscheduled, exhausted person who is devoid of compassion and angry at everybody? How did this happen?”

Before I left the parking lot that day, I made a vow: *Never again*

will I allow myself to get this depleted. The cost is too high. Never again. And to this day, I have a maniacal aversion to depletion. I know what I'm like when I get to the edge. I know what I'm capable of. And I'm not going there again.

I know I disappoint a lot of people when they ask me to do things for them and I feel I must say no:

“Please do my wedding.”

“Would you please mentor my son?”

“Can you please get behind my cause?”

“Will you please . . . ?”

As a pastor and as a friend, it's hard for me to say no to the many wonderful people I'd like to help and the many wonderful things I'd like to do around our church and around the world. But I have learned the hard way how important it is to not let myself get completely spent. I've already bottomed out once, and that was more than enough. Depletion harms the people around me, and it damages my soul.

When you decide that you never want to live on empty again, you start paying more attention to the replenishment side of the equation. If you choose to live with more energy reserves in your life, you will without a doubt disappoint some people. Trust me, you have to *fight* to keep your life replenished. No one else can keep your tank full. It's up to you to protect your energy reserves and priorities.

When you decide that you never want to live on empty again, you start paying more attention to the replenishment side of the equation.

I don't know if you've ever hit rock bottom like I did, but I know I'm not alone in the exhaustion game. A depleted dad from Willow Creek told me recently that he almost took a swing at his fifteen-year-old son. The dad had been running on fumes for about six months, and when he and his son got into an argument a few weeks back, he very nearly did the unthinkable. Thankfully, he caught himself about mid-swing and

was so horrified by his anger that he called me to talk about it; he also called a Christian counselor. That dad was in shock: “I was this close to punching *my son*. What has happened to me?” Depletion can be costly.

Another guy told me, “I’m suing a business friend out of sheer anger. I don’t care if I win the case; I just want to mess with his life.” I told him, “Uh, I think you’re a little over the edge. I think you’re on empty, friend. If you’re doing lawsuits for sport, you’ve been at the bottom of your energy reserves for far too long.”

And then a Willow Creek couple I know filed for bankruptcy. Both husband and wife overspend when they’re depleted—and they’ve been depleted for a long time, so they’ve just been going to the mall and racking up charges. Now their credit cards are maxed out and they’re behind on their mortgage, and if something doesn’t change soon, they will lose everything.

Suing for sport or overspending to the point of bankruptcy? That’s depleted living.

HOW FULL IS YOUR BUCKET?

I warned you: The path to simplicity is not for the faint of heart. It’s a process that requires total honesty. So let me pose the question: How depleted are you? How long has it been since you have felt fully replenished?

Jesus told Martha that her only hope was to pull up a chair, unplug from all the busyness, and begin a conversation with the only one who could restore her frenetic heart, settle her spirit, and get her heading back to true north. Is the same true for you?

Allow me to ask a follow-up question: Would an honest conversation with Jesus, in an unrushed setting, help you, too?

Of all the leaders I’ve had the opportunity to meet—from CEOs to nonprofit execs to politicians to church leaders—guess which type is most likely to have a problem with being overwhelmed, over-scheduled, and exhausted?

Senior pastors! Card-carrying, seminary-graduated women and men of the cloth. Exhaustion runs rampant among pastors. This subject comes up in every city, every country, every culture, and every language group in which I've had the privilege of doing some mentoring and training. It's a universal theme.

Here's what I often do with my exhausted pastor friends: First, I draw a simple picture of a bucket, on a whiteboard or a napkin, depending on the setting. I ask, "What does your life feel like when your energy bucket is filled to the brim? What does it feel like when you're filled up with God, when you're connected to Jesus Christ, when things in your family are running on all cylinders, when your schedule is sane, when you're eating right and exercising and sleeping properly? How does it feel to be filled up and replenished?"

Here's how they describe full-bucket living:

- "I'm at my best when I'm filled up."
- "I pray my best prayers."
- "I feel the presence of God more consistently."
- "I'm more attentive to the whispers of the Holy Spirit."
- "I hear the voice of God more often than when I'm depleted."
- "I love my spouse and my family well."
- "I love perfect strangers. Heck, I even love Packer fans!"³
(When I hear this in Chicago, it's impressive!)
- "When I'm filled up, I make better decisions about my schedule. I'm careful not to overcommit."
- "I make better food choices and rest choices."
- "I feel more creative, more soulful."
- "I feel eager to do God's bidding."

Sometimes, a pastor will get real quiet for a minute and then say, "When I'm all filled up, I live the life that Jesus desires for me: life in all its fullness, a life characterized by that peace that passes human

understanding.” With a nostalgic nod, these pastors reflect fondly on times when they were all filled up, living a life-to-the-full kind of life.

How about you? Can you recall a time when you were living that way? When you were replenished and filled up? When you were living soulfully, restfully, creatively, lovingly, playfully, prayerfully? My guess is you can recall a handful of such times in your life. (If not, keep reading—there’s hope!) I can recall such times too—and increasingly they are becoming the norm rather than the exception, as I seek to master the art of simplified living. It can be done.

Hold on to that image for a second, and let’s switch gears. Let’s talk about times when you’re depleted—toxically depleted. Your bucket is empty. You have nothing left to give. What does that feel like?

When I ask people this question, no matter where I am in the world, the first word that comes out of their mouths is *resentment*. They resent someone or something—just like Martha coming out of the kitchen shaking a wooden spoon at Mary and Jesus. She was resentful. “Jesus, don’t You care? My sister’s a deadbeat. We can’t order takeout. Your disciples are mooches. And they never help with the dishes.”

Resentment. Ever feel it? I do.

Another word I hear frequently is *irritated*. Some of us are easily irritated when we get depleted. Something minor goes wrong, and it sets us off, all out of proportion. We snap at our spouse, we lose our temper at work, we kick the dog.

Some of us withdraw and become passive.

Some of us isolate and become loners.

Some of us overeat, overdrink, or overmedicate.

Some of us overwork.

I feel horrible admitting it, but overwork is *my* approach. My colleagues know it’s true. When I’m depleted, I put my shoulder to the wheel and work like a mad banshee, pushing myself and everyone around me mercilessly.

And let me confess something that makes me extra lovable: When I'm in one of my overworking spells, I get mad at anyone who *isn't* overworking. I get irritated if someone is whistling in the hallways at Willow. I think, *What are you whistling about? You should be working harder instead of whistling! You're clearly under-challenged. Step into my office and I'll straighten that out!*

Sometimes when we get depleted, we get scattered. We lose our ability to focus, and we jump from one distraction to the next with little to show for it. We confuse *motion* with *progress*.

Some of us over-rev. We get all the plates spinning at some ridiculous RPM.

When people look at us, they just shake their heads. *Whoa! This is going to end badly.*

Some of us, when we get depleted, escape into movies, cheesy novels, or television. We waste hour upon hour trolling Facebook, Pinterest, or Instagram, admiring others' lives instead of living our own.

Some of us overspend. When we get totally depleted, we go to the mall with credit cards, looking for the type of quick high that fits in a shopping bag.

Some of us turn to pornography. Those who don't have the energy or emotional health to pursue intimacy in a healthy way often go after it in the shadows. If you look at what's underneath the skyrocketing use of pornography these days, a lot of it is connected to depletion, isolation, and exhaustion. In the same way, some people have affairs. (Sometimes several.)

I think it's safe to say that none of us are at our best when we're depleted.

If you find yourself shaking that wooden spoon—or that canoe paddle—and you're telling God what to do, and you're mad at the

When we get depleted, we get scattered. We lose our ability to focus, and we jump from one distraction to the next with little to show for it.

world, maybe it's time for you to hear God say to you, "Let's sit down together. We've got some things to work out, you and Me. You've lost a connection with Me somewhere. You've lost your bearings on true north, and now you're just spinning. But I have a better plan."

REPLENISHING YOUR ENERGY RESERVES

Here's where things get fun. Not simple—in fact, a little bit complicated—but fun.

What sorts of things fill your bucket? What refuels you? What activities or engagements restore your energy levels? What do you need to do to start pouring new streams of replenishment into your badly depleted life? What relationships inspire you? What do you read that elevates your perspective? What in your life is actually a bucket-filler for you?

Quite often, people will say to me, "I have no idea. I haven't been replenished in so long that I don't even know what those things would be." Can you relate? Perhaps you've been

There's no point in
filling the bucket
without first
patching the holes.

empty for so long, you've forgotten what fills your bucket. You've forgotten what replenishes your soul. If that's you . . . no worries. We will explore what some of those things might be. And by the time

you finish the Action Steps in this chapter, I'm confident you will have a game plan for keeping your bucket filled.

PATCHING HOLES

Before you can formulate a plan for keeping your bucket filled, it's important to understand *why* you're so depleted in the first place. There's no point in filling the bucket without first patching the holes.

Sometimes, people are afraid to say no to their bosses or their spouses or their kids, so they say yes to another last-minute project or commitment that they know will deplete them beyond what is

wise. Sometimes, people derive a disproportionate amount of their self-worth from being overachievers. They keep doing and doing, thinking that what matters most is the end product, not the process. Sometimes, people feel an undercurrent of guilt for taking time to do things that fill their buckets, as if someone will judge them for having fun or for spending time doing something for *themselves* rather than for others. This is especially true of those who work in compassion-related fields.

But this is backward thinking. When your tank is empty, you have nothing to offer anyone else. You can't give what you don't have. Engaging in replenishment activities is not a form of selfish entertainment; it's vital to the end goal of living your one and only life at its best. Be unapologetic about it. Prioritize and protect these replenishment streams in your life.

When you get depleted, it's tempting to start looking around for someone to pull you out. But let me state with crystal clarity: It's *your* responsibility to fill your bucket—not your boss's, not your board's, not your church's, not your staff's, not your spouse's. It's your own responsibility to keep your own bucket filled, to identify streams of replenishing energy that will take you from a depleted state to where your tank is filled to the brim and overflowing.

Let's examine five bucket-filling streams.

FIVE KEYS TO REPLENISHMENT

Connecting with God

No doubt you've seen a picture of Michelangelo's most famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, "The Creation of Adam," in which he portrays God and Adam with their hands outstretched toward one another. God is leaning and straining toward Adam, and His fingertip almost touches Adam's hand, which is more relaxed, not nearly as intent on its mission.

The very hand of heaven reaching for the hand of man.

Now, imagine Adam's hand reaching out another six inches, grabbing firmly ahold of God's hand, and hanging on to it tightly. That image captures the single biggest bucket-filler in my life: *being firmly hand-in-hand with God.*

When I feel God's love, when the Holy Spirit is bubbling within my spirit, when I'm in conversations with Him throughout my day, hearing His whispers, trying to be present and responsive to Him—when I'm really in a dialed-in relationship with God—it's the single most replenishing dynamic in my life.

Sometimes just a sentence or two from Him spoken into the depths of my heart can change my entire day. *You're doing good, Bill.*

When I feel
God's love . . . it's
the single most
replenishing
dynamic in
my life.

I'm proud of you. That means so much to me! Sometimes an encouraging phrase from God in the middle of a tough day can take my bucket from 25 percent full to 75 percent full.

When I'm really connected with God, I'm far less concerned about other people's opinions of me or their plans and expectations for my life. I'm quicker to stay on God's agenda. I'm able to remind myself, *Hey, I don't need to fulfill someone else's agenda, because I have my hand in the hand of the one whose plans and purposes my life is all about.*

Being right with God and tuned in to Him and walking close with Him simplifies my life. It filters out all the noise of everyone else who wants my attention.

Perhaps you've never really connected with God to begin with. If you've always sensed somewhere deep in the core of your being that there is more to life, I challenge you to reach out your hand to Him. He loves you, and He will grasp any humbled hand that comes His way. Maybe you have long withheld your hand from His, and today is the day you need to apologize for your waywardness and stick out

your hand and say, “God, I need You in my life.” He will become that replenishing force for you. The powerful touch of God on a human life is a game changer. It has been for me. It can be for you.

If you’re not in the daily habit of reaching for God’s hand and listening for His agenda, let me offer you a challenge: Find a spot in your home—for me, it’s a wooden rocking chair by the fireplace—and sit there for fifteen minutes a day, connecting with God. Read His Word, open up your life to Him, and listen for His whispers. When you’re in that chair and you’re in a right relationship with God, it secures your identity. It simplifies your agenda. You won’t be so tempted to run out and do all the other stuff that doesn’t matter a hill of beans to God.

So, chair time. Start there.

There are many other avenues that can help you connect with God. Gary Thomas’s book *Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul’s Path to God* describes ten “spiritual pathways” that help Christ followers express their love for God.⁴ Most of us utilize more than one pathway to augment our hand-in-hand connection to Him. Do you connect with God best through solitude? Through nature? Through tradition, loving others, music? By discovering the spiritual pathway that fits best with your unique temperament, you can more readily keep your hand-in-hand relationship with God tight. If you’re not sure how to connect with God, use part of your fifteen minutes in the chair, as I described above, to explore your relationship with Him in ways that resonate with how He wired you.

Spending time with God each day is the antidote to one energy-killer in particular: *image management*. Many of us drain an exorbitant amount of energy from our buckets by constantly maintaining our personal image: *I’ve got to look good for so-and-so. I’ve got to speak well in front of this person. I’ve got to produce such and such for that person.* When we’re connected with God and we’re secure in our identity as His daughters and sons, we can spend all that energy on stuff

that meets God's agenda for our lives, rather than on image management. Life is simpler when we have only one agenda to meet: God's. For me, the number one priority in my daily, weekly, monthly, and annual rhythm is to stay as closely connected with God as I possibly can. It is by far the biggest replenisher in my life.

Family

A second replenisher—and this is a huge one for me as well—is family. Family looks different for each one of us. For me, family is my wife, son, daughter, son-in-law, and grandsons. And whether

As I stay deeply connected with my family, these relationships pour refreshment into my bucket.

you're married or single, there is the "family" of friends you have gathered around you, people God has brought into your life who are family to you. These relationships are important replenishers.

My family is not a burden to me. Far from it! My wife and kids fill me up, and now I have two grandsons who tip my bucket to overflowing. As I stay deeply connected with my family, these relationships pour refreshment into my bucket. On any given day, I'll exchange e-mails with Todd, our son who lives out of state, and texts with our daughter, Shauna, and her husband, Aaron, as well as texts and phone calls with Lynne. Even when Lynne or I travel out of the country, we stay closely connected. I love my family, and they refurbish my soul. Even when we have an occasional conflict—as every family does—these people don't drain me. We work things through and get back on track.

Family is one of the greatest blessings in my life. I build into the members of my family, and they build into me. We have a new little guy running around our family these days: our younger grandson, Mac, who is two. That kid has brought so much joy into my life. Before I was a grandfather, I couldn't see it coming—how much

it would change me. But my grandkids have proven to be major replenishers in my life.

I'm glad it helps out Shauna and Aaron when Lynne and I babysit, but frankly, I do it for myself. My grandchildren fill me up! I'm with them as often as I can be. Psalm 127:3 says, "Children are a gift from God."⁵ If I'm too busy for my own kids and grandkids, then I'm too busy. They ought to be a big part of my life, and I want to be a big part of theirs.

Not every family relationship is replenishing. Family systems are complex, and they require intentionality. Maybe it's time to make amends with some family members to get your relationship back on track so they're on the replenishing side instead of the energy-draining side. Relationships are tricky, and if yours are not life giving, you may have some work to do when we dive deeper into this topic in chapters 5 and 7. But for now, think about how you can make your family a life-giving source of replenishment.

Satisfying Work

Another key replenisher for me is satisfying work. I love my job. It gives me energy every time I set foot on our campus at Willow Creek. I am surrounded by gifted, passionate leaders who are terrific at what they do. I have a fantastic team of staff members who report directly to me. We have a broader leadership team of about twenty, who lead the rest of the staff and the various ministries we have. And we have a world-class board of elders. I also work with the Willow Creek Association's board and leadership team. And I have an executive assistant, Jean, whose joy is outright contagious and whose skills match or surpass any executive assistant on the planet.

King Solomon says it just right, in my view: "It is good and proper for people to find satisfaction—replenishment—in their labor."⁶

Friend, life is short. If your job sucks the life out of you week

after week, year after year, you will never be able to keep your energy bucket filled. Get on your knees every single day and pray, “God, either help me change my attitude about this job or help my job to change. Help me change departments, change employers, or change careers.”

If your job drains you again and again, perhaps you’re not in the right vocation.

Believe me, I know this is a very complicated subject. In today’s economy, you don’t just run out and quit your job. I understand

that. And perhaps the job that would satisfy your soul and fill your bucket doesn’t bring the money you need to stay afloat in this season. But prayerfully evaluate what truly matters. What are your needs, versus your wants? Begin praying that God will lead you to a vocation that brings the provision you need and also fills your bucket.

Life is short. If your job sucks the life out of you, you will never be able to keep your energy bucket filled.

I could tell countless stories of friends who walked away from lucrative marketplace jobs to take less pay and fewer perks, putting their hands to the plow of jobs that bring them deep satisfaction. We have many such people on staff at Willow. I am currently walking alongside a friend who just sold his mansion-sized home and moved his family into a nearby rental. He is stepping out of a high-income business to attend seminary, and his family is helping him follow God’s whisper to pursue a career that will fill his bucket in a way that his wealth-producing marketplace job did not.

When I see people who are consistently filled up, I often discover they’re quite satisfied with what they do vocationally. God, in His love for you, would love for your job to be a bucket-filler and not a bucket-drainer. I believe you can trust Him for that, in His wisdom and His timing.

Recreation

The fourth replenisher was a problem area for me during the first fifteen years of my ministry at Willow Creek. My days of church building and parenting small children were extraordinarily intense, and I had no form of recreation in my life whatsoever. How could I take time to go have fun when people were still far from God? When there were still people with needs that had to be met, and ministries that required my leadership input? When my family needed so much from me?

That kind of thinking almost put me over the edge. I let myself get so depleted that I couldn't find my way out. I ended up in a Christian counselor's office, and he pushed me to do the things that replenish me—and do them regularly. He challenged me to find some form of recreation that gave life to my soul. And that's how I got into boating. Being on the water pours huge streams of replenishment into my bucket.

At first, it was hard. I told my counselor I felt horrible being a pastor who would go boating in a world where people are still poor and where a lot of people are not headed to heaven. What right did I have to be out on the water?

This counselor helped me understand the heart of God in a new way. He helped me understand that recreation means to *re-create* energy and vitality in your inner person. He kept saying, "Bill, God wants for you to re-create energy and vitality so you'll have much to offer others."

So I race sailboats and hang around sailors, and savor the spray of the water and the sound of the waves and the feel of the wind in my face. Recently, my grandson Henry and I took our eight-foot wooden rowboat out on a little adventure in South Haven, Michigan. We explored the shoreline of the Black River and spotted at least a dozen turtles. We made

God wants for you to re-create energy and vitality so you'll have much to offer others.

memories I won't soon forget. When I get back from little excursions like this, I am filled up to overflowing.

What is it for you? What fills you up? Is it reading, cooking, golfing, gardening, camping, stamp collecting? Whatever it is, you need to find something that re-creates your energy and vitality, and you must install it as a regular stream of replenishment in your life. You need the replenishment of recreation to keep you filled up.

For me, it's boating. And just for the record, I think it's biblical:

When Jesus heard what had happened, he
withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.⁷

So you see, Jesus was a boater! I'm in good company. Feel free to golf or rock climb or garden, or do whatever fills you up, but I'm sticking with the thing Jesus did!

Exercise

The final replenishment activity that fills my energy bucket is exercise. For many years, I have made exercise a significant and regular part of my life. I come from a genetic line that has not been kind to Hybels males. My father died of a heart attack at age fifty-four, when I was just twenty-seven. Losing him when I was in my twenties devastated me, and I will do anything I can to keep my kids from having to experience what my siblings and I went through.

Years ago, I made a commitment to good health. Running, lifting weights, getting adequate sleep, and eating healthy foods are the norm for me. And though I made that commitment for the purpose of physical health, I have discovered that these activities also boost my mental health and energy reserves in a way that far exceeds the amount of time and investment they cost me.

Read any study on the topic of what adds energy and vitality to your life, and you'll find that most experts agree: Exercise and proper

rest patterns give about a 20 percent energy increase in an average day, average week, average month.⁸ *A 20 percent increase in energy.* If you're not motivated to exercise for the purpose of physical health, do so as a simple, effective way to increase your energy—and with it, your overall quality of life.

Diet also maximizes my energy levels. Because of my dad's heart history, I have always been cautious about cholesterol intake, staying away from too much red meat, too much cheese, etc. But in recent years, largely due to the influence of Shauna, Aaron, and Lynne, I have cranked up the healthy-eating habit a notch or two. I've been doing a Hybels version of the Paleo diet—for the most part, eating just fruits, nuts, vegetables, small portions of meat, and the like. The difference in my energy levels has been striking. If you struggle with sluggish energy, especially in the afternoon, I highly recommend increasing the health of your diet.

Maximizing your energy requires more than eating the right foods; it also requires eating at the right intervals. Jack Groppe is an expert and pioneer in the science of human performance and an authority in fitness and nutrition. He wrote a book called *The Corporate Athlete*, which talks about energy being the fundamental currency of organizations.⁹ We brought Jack in to train our staff on the subject of energy management a few years back, and it changed the way we all look at our energy investment. Simple changes, such as eating nutrition-packed foods at work when energy gets low, have helped our team keep our energy buckets full.

Adequate sleep isn't very exciting to talk about, but it is fundamental to increasing your energy reserves. When I travel internationally, jet lag is a killer. The cost is worth it—I love the work I do with global pastors and leaders—but it takes its toll on my energy levels during and after each trip. When I get home, I'm reminded firsthand why experts insist that sleep patterns matter. As far as I'm able, I make it a priority to engage in regular sleep patterns at home.

My greatest bursts of energy come in the morning, so for me, getting to bed at a decent hour is a nonnegotiable if I want to maximize the most productive hours of my day. If you are a night person and find that your best thinking and productivity come late at night, adjust your schedule so you can sleep longer in the morning. Identify your best hours of the day and modify your daily routine accordingly.

BEGIN WITH A FULL BUCKET

In the coming chapters, as you assess key practices to simplify your life, it is essential that you first make course corrections to move from exhausted to energized. That's the starting point. Depletion has got to stop, friend. When you're at the bottom of your fullness bucket, you're dangerous. Living this way has consequences for your marriage, your children, your team, and your colleagues at work. They

Learn how to fill up your bucket and keep it filled. God created you to live your life with your energy reserves filled to the top.

know it, and you know it. You can feel it too. You're in a rut, and it's hard to get out of it. If you have spent too long at the bottom of your bucket, you're not living the way God designed for you to live. He designed a better future for you.

Learn how to fill up your bucket and keep it filled. God created you to live your life with your energy reserves filled to the top. That's how He created all of us to live. My prayer for you is that you will put a stake in the ground that says, *I'm done living on empty. I'm done staying in a depleted condition.* May you have the kind of humility and conviction it takes to mark today as the day that living on empty *ends* for you.

Get creative. Get motivated to find the activities that will start pouring life into your empty bucket. No one can do this for you. It's your life. It's your future. You're on the right path, and I admire you.

Feel free to engage the Action Steps below with a friend or two, or even a small group, as you self-assess your movement from exhausted to energized. Often our friends can reflect back to us valuable insights, showing us things we cannot see in ourselves. Those who know you best are the ones most likely to help you spot patterns and trends that keep your bucket drained. Likewise, in the company of friends, it can be fun to brainstorm life-giving activities that will bring you refreshment.

You will be your best self when you live at the top of your energy bucket. You'll do God's bidding more eagerly. You'll love more effectively. And you'll leave a legacy for your family when you live your life out of a full bucket.

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ACTION STEP: TAKE AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

The first step in learning to fill your bucket is to take a sober assessment of where you are now.

In your journal or on a piece of paper, draw a bucket and put a line to mark where you feel your energy level is right now. Be realistic. Are you filled up? Are you half full? A quarter full? Are you depleted? Don't lie to yourself. Be honest. (If your instinctive reaction to this assignment is, "Take a flying leap, Hybels. I'm not going to do it," then I know where your line is—you're depleted!)

Once you've marked your energy level on your bucket, ask yourself, "Why do I let myself get this depleted? What drives me, *really*?" Ask God to give you insight into what's underneath your propensity for running on empty. When you are living this way, what inner hunger are you feeding that should be fed in healthier ways? Is there someone you're trying to please? If this type of reflective digging has you stumped, ask a trusted friend or a Christian counselor to help you gain insight.

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ACTION STEP: CRAFT A CUSTOM REPLENISHMENT PLAN

The second step in filling your bucket—and this is fun, but it's not simple—is to design a custom replenishment plan that fits you.

A bucket-filling plan will look different for every person. We're all filled up by different replenishment streams. Don't worry about what works for other people. Just craft a plan that fits you.

What are the replenishing people, dynamics, activities, and engagements that predictably fill you up when you've gotten a little low in the tank? What things work uniquely for you?

Don't worry yet about how to fit these into your current, overbooked schedule. We'll deal with that in the next chapter. For now, envision a blue-sky day in which your assignment is to do nothing but what suits you—the things that bring you the most joy, the deepest sense of God's pleasure with your life. They may be ventures you've never done before but want to try. They may be activities you used to enjoy but have let slide. What are those things?

To stimulate your thinking, glance back at my top five replenishers: connecting with God, time with family, satisfying work, recreation, and exercise. Do any or all of those ring true for you? Feel free to add your own replenishers, completely different from what works for me.

Next, scan your list and choose one or two replenishers you can do starting tomorrow; one you will do by week's end; and one you will try by the end of the month. The point isn't to fill yourself up quickly, but rather, to train yourself to begin the habit of prioritizing the replenishing streams that breathe life into your soul and leave your bucket filled. There are no shortcuts. Change begins with small, daily steps. Start now.