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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PERRY NOBLE

WINNING THE WAR
AGAINST WORRY

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Overwhelmed: Winning the War against Worry

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INTRODUCTION

THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE MIND

I wanted to kill myself.

No, that isn't just a figure of speech or an attempt to be overly dramatic. I honestly couldn't get away from the idea that the only way to escape my pain, confusion, and frustration was to take my own life.

At first it was just a passing thought. I was driving home one day, and I distinctly remember looking at a stoplight and thinking, *My light is green—maybe someone who's coming from the other direction will run the light and slam into my car, and my life will be over.*

At that point I sort of snapped back into reality, but from that moment on, similar thoughts would invade my mind every time life threw another overwhelming circumstance at me. I was plagued with thoughts like *You need to just end it all* and *You will never have any relief from this.*

The idea of doing something so drastic seemed to come out of nowhere. I was a pastor at a growing, vibrant church; I was married to the woman of my dreams; I had a beautiful daughter who loved me; we lived in a nice house and didn't have any debt; and I was healthier than I'd ever been. No one who looked at me from the outside would have been able to tell that I'd nearly lost my will to live.

But that was exactly what was happening after years of trying to

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operate my schedule and responsibilities at an unsustainable pace. Life had finally caught up with me, and I was utterly overwhelmed.

One of the toughest parts about what I was going through was that I didn't think I could tell anyone what I was thinking or how I was feeling because I was afraid people would think I was crazy. So I kept this battle all to myself. As a result, I began to struggle with a whole range of problems.

- Some nights I couldn't sleep . . . even with the assistance of medicine. And as I lay awake, I would worry and obsess over things that were completely out of my control.
- I began to distance myself from people who were close to me.
- I thought about leaving everyone and everything behind and starting all over again.
- I couldn't recall the last time I'd had fun.
- I sank into a deep depression and began having panic attacks.
- Worry became my go-to emotion.
- Everything that happened to me had a dramatic impact on my emotions, whether positive or negative. Emotionally speaking, I was a roller coaster.
- I kept telling myself that what I was going through was simply a season and that once my schedule became less hectic and my responsibilities decreased, I would be fine.

All of us experience stress, anxiety, worry, fear, and depression at some point in our lives. But what I discovered when I was neck deep in this battle was that the church has remained largely silent on this issue. In fact, I've heard church leaders make the declaration that someone who is a Christian and is in right standing with God will never have such struggles.

This is simply not true. Scripture is full of examples of godly people who experienced trials and suffering and overwhelming circumstances through no fault of their own.

If your life seems overwhelming to you right now and you don't

know what to do or how to handle it, you are not alone. There are millions of other people who feel trapped in their circumstances and think they can't escape.

So is there a way out of all of this?

Is there a way to reduce the stress and anxiety in our lives so we won't have to walk around in a medicated, zombie-like state of mind?

Is it even possible to experience emotions such as joy and happiness again?

The answer to these questions is yes; however, the journey there isn't quick and easy. There isn't a formula you can pray or a verse you can memorize that will instantly snap you back into a happy place. But I can tell you from personal experience that there *is* a way out, and while it will take a lot of time and energy on your part, it's worth it.

Today I can honestly say I'm more excited and passionate about life than I've ever been. Don't get me wrong—I still wrestle with being overwhelmed. But I now have a much better perspective about how to deal with difficult circumstances when they come my way. My prayer is that after reading this book, you will as well.

Overcoming worry, fear, anxiety, and depression is a journey. I won't be able to offer you three easy steps out of your situation, nor will I share a magical prayer that will suddenly make everything better.

However, I do believe—and it is my prayer—that each chapter of this book will bring you closer to victory—to a place where you are hopeful, not hopeless; peaceful, not anxious; and free, not overwhelmed.

CHAPTER 1

I CAN'T HANDLE THIS!

Several years ago I was a guest speaker at a weeklong event for high school students. Everything was going along as smoothly as you could expect when you have several hundred teenagers all packed into one place . . . until that Thursday I will never forget. I was informed that morning by the leader of the organization that for the afternoon activity we'd all be going tubing.

Before I continue with this story, you have to understand that I may be the biggest doofus on the planet when it comes to anything remotely adventurous. Now don't get me wrong—I like working out and going to the gym, but every time I try something another person claims will be “fun and exciting” (such as snow skiing, waterskiing, or white-water rafting), I always—I mean *always*—get injured. Because of this, anytime someone tells me that “we” are going to try something that involves plummeting from heights, my go-to reaction is most often “You can go eat rocks—there's *no way* I'm getting involved!”

I asked the guy in charge what he meant by tubing, and he kindly explained to me that it was nothing more than sitting in an inner tube

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and floating down a local creek. “It’s one of the most fun, relaxing things on this entire trip,” he assured me.

So I agreed to go.

My first clue that this was not going to turn out so well should have come when we arrived at the launching point. The people at the tube rental were informing the camp leader that they had considered shutting down their business for the day because the area had recently received record amounts of rainfall, and as a result, the creek was at flood stage.

The second clue that this was going to end badly was that the “creek” looked much more like a raging river. It was moving so fast that as I got closer to it, I could hardly hear people’s voices above the rushing water.

Honestly, I was getting a little stressed; however, I thought, *It’s a creek—what’s the worst thing that can happen?*

I was about to find out.

My wife, Lucretia, was with me, and she went first on the tubing adventure. The thing you need to understand about my wife is that she is perfect. She was the valedictorian of her high school and college classes. (I beat up our valedictorian.) She went to medical school. She’s a second-degree black belt in karate. In short, she is a born winner. So when she set off in her tube, I wasn’t surprised to see her head down the creek with a huge smile on her face.

Then it was my turn. So began what I like to refer to as my “three minutes of hell on earth.” I sat in the tube and started down the creek. But while my wife had already sped out of sight, my tube seemed to be having issues. Finally I made it over a rock and dropped about three feet—at which point I came flying out of the tube and it continued down the creek without me.

Losing a tube on the creek wasn’t a problem. I’d noticed that several other people had been thrown out of their tubes as well due to the water conditions, and I knew that if I could crawl to the creek bank and wait for a few seconds, I’d be able to grab an empty tube that some other poor soul had been flipped out of. I waited no more than ten seconds before I had another tube, thus giving me a renewed opportunity for more fun and excitement.

I plopped down and took off again, experiencing fun and excitement—for about fifteen seconds. Then I abruptly flipped and went under the water. But instead of popping back up to the surface like I had the time before, I got caught in the current of the “creek” and couldn’t get myself upright again. I began to wish for things we take for granted in life, such as oxygen, and thought, *So this is how it ends for me. I’m going to die because I drowned in a creek.*

I began grabbing for anything I could find—anything that could pull me out of the current—and I finally managed to get hold of a vine that was connected to the bank. I held on with both hands and pulled with every ounce of strength I had. At last I managed to get my head above the water, and I immediately started gasping and choking, my lungs begging for air.

Eventually I made it out of the creek and collapsed on the bank for quite some time, trying to catch my breath and thanking God that the creek hadn’t taken me down. And I can assure you, I didn’t get back in that creek again. I staggered and stumbled through the woods until I finally found where our vehicles were parked.

That experience has been on my mind a lot lately as I have prepared to write this book, because it’s a tangible reminder of what it feels like to be completely overwhelmed. We climb into college, adulthood, a job, a marriage, or a new endeavor, and we honestly believe it’s going to be easy. For crying out loud, we’ve seen other people do this, and they seem to be just fine.

But before we know it, we’ve fallen into the creek and feel trapped in the current. We are utterly overwhelmed and can see no way out. As a result, we begin grabbing on to anything we hope might pull us out of the current we’re caught up in, which often leads to greater problems instead of helping us.

All of us have been there or perhaps we are there—that place where the current of our circumstances seems to be swirling faster than ever. If we’re not prepared, we’ll be taken down with it and buy into the lie that insecurity, fear, worry, anxiety, and doubt are the new normal.

But nothing could be further from the truth!

Overwhelmed or Overcoming?

We live in a world that seems to focus on problems, uncertain situations, and the absolutely ridiculous. In the past several weeks I've watched the news at night and heard reports about how our economy is about to go from bad to worse, how solar flares from the sun are going to make airplanes crash, how an asteroid barely missed Earth, and how to survive a zombie attack. (No, I am not making this up!)

Some of those situations are pretty extreme; however, some of the overwhelming situations in life aren't "out there"—they're real and they're right in front of us on a daily basis. Here are just a few of the overwhelming situations you may be up against:

- getting laid off at work
- experiencing struggles in your marriage
- having your first child
- graduating from college with a degree, thousands of dollars' worth of student loans, and no job possibilities in sight
- taking care of aging parents
- getting a call from your doctor saying you need to come in as soon as possible
- not being able to get over a past full of mistakes
- losing someone close to you

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the picture: life can easily become overwhelming!

There are two types of people you don't want to encounter when you're going through something like this. First you have the "that's no big deal" types. You tell them what you're going through and how you're struggling, and their response is, "That's not such a big thing—you need to shut up, quit your crying, and just get over it." Most often they think it isn't a big deal because it's not happening to them. If they were in your shoes, they'd be freaking out too.

Second you have the "let me tell you *my* story" people. You tell them what you're going through and they proceed to insist that your

situation pales in comparison to what they've gone through. By the end of a conversation with them, you feel as if you've been emotionally run over by a bus.

I'm going to try not to be either one of these people. Instead, I'm going to share with you some of my own struggles and speak the truth to you—not in a condemning way, but with understanding and practical application.

The first thing I need to say is that your overwhelming circumstances will always be overwhelming, if you allow them to be. In fact, the things that have you worried or stressed right now will most likely not go away by the time you finish reading this book.

Before we go any further, there's a question you must answer honestly: Are you willing to settle for being overwhelmed by circumstances forever, or do you want to step up and overcome whatever is robbing you of joy and life?

Change begins with a decision: to be overwhelmed or to overcome. Some people never make it out of the current of their circumstances. Instead, they surrender to stress, anxiety, and fear—simply because they don't know how to take the first step out.

**Change begins
with a decision:
to be overwhelmed
or to overcome.**

Choosing Abundance

The path to victory is paved by making the decision that life is not going to overwhelm you anymore—period. I know this may sound simplistic, but it's true. What gets our attention ultimately determines our direction. If we are constantly focused on our circumstances, we will be overwhelmed.

Let me be very clear. I'm not saying that if you simply think you aren't in bad circumstances, they'll just go away. However, it's a fact that as we shift our focus from our circumstances to Christ, everything in our lives can change. We see this challenge issued to us in the Scriptures over and over again. The author of Hebrews says, "We do this by keeping

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our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne" (Hebrews 12:2).

All too often in my battle with fear and anxiety, I kept looking at my situation and my struggles, thinking things would never change, when my focus should have been on my Savior. After all, Jesus died on the cross not only so I wouldn't have to go to hell, but also to give me an abundant life on this earth (see John 10:10).

I know what it's like to live outside of this abundance. I had the incorrect focus for more than three agonizing years, and it resulted in a season of crippling fear, anxiety, worry, and even a dark depression.

I was looking to Jesus to change my circumstances; He was trying to change me.

And He'll do the same for you. It's possible to stop the hamster wheel of feeling overwhelmed day in and day out, and embrace the full, satisfied life Jesus planned for you.