

*LIVING A GRACE-PACED LIFE
IN A BURNOUT CULTURE*



DAVID MURRAY

“The simple truth is this: I needed this book right now! There are truths in this volume—pastoral insights and healing counsels—that speak to me in very personal and tender ways. Occasionally, Murray’s point is so clear—far too clear—that it feels as though I have gotten a slap in the face. But always—always—the point has been to drive me to Christ and to drive me to the embrace of the gospel. This is medicine for the soul in the best possible sense, and I am grateful to the author for writing it. It really does feel as though he wrote it for me.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary–Atlanta

“This is so timely. After you read it, you will sleep better, for starters. Then you will be taken to the meeting place of essential theology and the details of all things related to our stressed lives, where David offers wisdom on every page. The book is perfect for men’s groups.”

Ed Welch, counselor; faculty member, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“For far too long, whether consciously or subconsciously, we Christians have bought into the platonic lie that the spirit matters, but the body does not. As a result, we have neglected, and perhaps even abused, our bodies. It’s no wonder we struggle with food, sleep, and health—both physical and mental. In *Reset*, David Murray returns us to a biblical anthropology, providing us with a biblical and theological framework by which we may reorder our lives as whole persons—body and spirit—for God’s glory, our well-being, and the service of others.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; author, *1 Peter for You* and *Gracia Sobre Gracia*

“From a vast reservoir of personal experience, authenticating social research, and timeless theological wisdom, David Murray shines illuminating light on the dark perils of pastoral burnout. He also offers practical guidance for how the easy yoke of apprenticeship with Jesus makes possible the grace-paced life that leads to personal and vocational wholeness. I highly recommend this needed approach.”

Tom Nelson, author, *Work Matters*; Senior Pastor, Christ Community Church, Overland Park, Kansas; President, Made to Flourish

“Men, this wise book is like a personal coach for your daily life. The one who writes it understands what it is to be a man with a man’s cares and a man’s dreams. He cares deeply about the masculine body and soul that God has given you. You were made with large purpose. David Murray wants to help you learn how to practically take stock of your life, recover your purpose, and live it!”

Zack Eswine, Lead Pastor, Riverside Church, Webster Groves, Missouri; author, *The Imperfect Pastor*

“Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture, like its author, David Murray, is full of surprises. While statistics and sociologists jostle for space alongside *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and a kilned haggis, everything is set within a robust biblical anthropology and a well-grounded pastoral psychology. The whole is laced with a fine touch of self-deprecating Scottish humor. Dr. Murray is Jeremiah-like in the rigor and love with which he seeks ‘to pluck up and break down . . . to build and to plant.’ But he is also Jesus-like in the way he employs the deconstructing and reconstructing grace of the gospel. Here is a book full of practical, spiritual wisdom and a must read.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas, Texas

“You hold in your hand what is quite possibly the most culturally relevant book for pastors I have ever read. Contained in this book is the answer to the epidemic among both pastors and hardworking Christian men who are physically, emotionally, and spiritually collapsing because of the lightning-fast pace our modern culture demands. Murray lays out a thoroughly biblical, immensely practical plan for any Christian man looking to take back his life from the enslavement of his schedule. Murray’s beautiful personal testimony of his own need to reset is worth the book alone. This book will be required reading for every pastor I know.”

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky; Founder, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization Center, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *Reset*, David Murray pries our fingers from the death grip we have on the idol of activity. Since I am a confessed workaholic, this book was right on time for me. I quickly implemented the strategies outlined in this book and experienced immediate results in terms of relief, rest, and peace. Relentlessly honest, refreshingly concise, and eminently practical, this book may literally save your marriage, your ministry, and your health. I see myself revisiting *Reset* every time I need to be reminded of the grace of both work and rest.”

Jemar Tisby, Cofounder and President, Reformed African American Network; Cohost, *Pass the Mic*

RcSET

*Living a Grace-Paced Life
in a Burnout Culture*

David Murray

 **CROSSWAY®**
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To the pastors, elders, and deacons of
Grand Rapids Free Reformed Church.

You have taught me, by word and example,
what it means to be a man of God.

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Introduction

It was one of the most humiliating moments of my life. I'd just come through a successful winter cross-country season in high school, and spring track was getting under way. Our track coach started us off with a series of 800-meter races to split the middle- and long-distance runners into first and second teams. I didn't train beforehand because I was used to far longer races in far worse conditions.

I knew I had to run a bit faster over the shorter distance, so I took off at the sound of the gun. By the time I was halfway round the first lap, I was a good fifty meters ahead of everyone else. "This is too easy," I thought. I didn't have my usual cross-country signposts to help me gauge my speed, but over such a short race in such beautiful spring weather, what could possibly go wrong?

By the end of the first lap, my lungs were beginning to burst and my fifty-meter lead had become twenty-five. Soon I was overtaken by one runner after another, until one of the poorest runners in my class padded past me with a snicker. At the 600-meter mark, I decided to get "injured" and collapsed in a heap at the side of the track.

I learned the hard way that pacing a race is one of the

most important skills for track athletes to learn. Go too slow and we fail by never winning or fulfilling our potential. Go too fast and we fail by injuring ourselves or running out of energy before the finish line. Finding that perfect pace, that sweet spot between too slow and too fast, is vital for success and longevity as an athlete—and as a Christian.

Speed Up and Slow Down

In recent years, a number of Christian leaders have rightly called lethargic and half-hearted Christians to quicken their pace, to dedicate more of their time, talents, money, and efforts to serving the Lord in the local church and in evangelistic outreach at home and abroad. I welcome this “radical,” “don’t waste your life” message to up the pace, and I rejoice in its positive impact on thousands of Christians, especially among the younger generations.

There are others, however, many of them faithful and zealous Christians, especially those aged thirty-five-plus, who need to hear a different message: “Slow your pace or you’ll never finish the race.” As Brady Boyd warned in *Addicted to Busy*, “Ultimately, every problem I see in every person I know is a problem of moving too fast for too long in too many aspects of life.”¹ I’m not proposing that we put our feet up and opt out of life and Christian service. No, I’m talking about carefully adjusting to life changes as we age, as responsibilities mount, as families grow, as problems multiply, as energy levels diminish, and as health complications arise. That’s what successful pace runners do. They are sensitive to significant changes in themselves and in race conditions, and they recalibrate their

1. Brady Boyd, *Addicted to Busy: Recovery for the Rushed Soul* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2014), 44.

pace to avoid injury or exhaustion, ensuring a happy and successful finish.

I've discovered that such pacing skills are in short supply among Christian men, with the result that too many—especially those most committed to serving Christ in their families, in the workplace, and in the local church—are crashing or fading fast before their race is over. It's not just a "Christian" problem though; it's also a culture problem. Some 225 million workdays are lost every year in the United States due to stress; that's nearly a million people not working every workday.² The data on pastors is especially worrying, with high levels of stress, depression, and burnout leading to broken bodies, broken minds, broken hearts, broken marriages, and broken churches. (Burnout is responsible for 20 percent of all pastoral resignations.³) That's hardly surprising, since surveys reveal that pastors relegate physical exercise, nutrition, and sleep to a much lower priority than the average worker.⁴ I've been there and done that—and suffered the consequences. But through painful personal experience, and also through counseling many others since, I've learned that God has graciously provided a number of ways for us to reset our broken and burned-out lives, and to help us live grace-paced lives in a burnout culture.

Although no two burnouts are the same, as I've counseled increasing numbers of Christians through burnout, I've

2. Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 43–44.

3. Lisa Cannon-Green, "Why 734 Pastors Quit (and How Their Churches Could Have Kept Them)," *Christianity Today*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/january/why-734-pastors-quit-how-churches-could-have-kept-them.html>.

4. Gary Harbaugh, *Pastor as Person: Maintaining Personal Integrity in the Choices and Challenges of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), 47.

noticed that most of them have one thing in common—there are deficits of grace. It's not that these Christians don't believe in grace. Not at all; all of them are well grounded in "the doctrines of grace," and many of them are pastors who preach grace powerfully every week. The "five solas" and the "five points" are their theological meat and drink. Yet there are disconnects between theological grace and their daily lives, resulting in five deficits of grace.

Five Deficits of Grace

First, the *motivating* power of grace is missing. To illustrate, take a look at five people printing Bibles on the same assembly line. Mr. Dollar is asking, "How can I make more money?" Mr. Ambitious is asking, "How can I get a promotion?" Mr. Pleaser is asking, "How can I make my boss happy?" Mr. Selfish is asking, "How can I get personal satisfaction in my job?" They all look and feel miserable. Then we bump into Mr. Grace, who's asking, "In view of God's amazing grace to me in Christ, how can I serve God and others here?"

From the outside, it looks as if all five are doing the same work, but inside, they look completely different. The first four are striving, stressed, anxious, fearful, and exhausted. But Mr. Grace is so energized by his gratitude for grace that his job satisfies and stimulates him rather than draining him. Where grace is not fueling a person from the inside out, he burns from the inside out.

Also absent is the *moderating* power of grace. Alongside Mr. Grace, Mr. Perfectionist takes pride in flawless performance. If he ever makes a mistake in his work, he berates and flagellates himself. He carries this legalistic perfectionism into

his relationships with God and others, resulting in constant disappointment in himself, in others, and even in God.

Mr. Grace's work is just as high quality as Mr. Perfectionist, but grace has moderated his expectations. At the foot of the cross, he has learned that he's not perfect and never will be. He accepts that both his work and his relationships are flawed. But instead of tormenting himself with these imperfections, he calmly takes them to the perfect God, knowing that in his grace, this God forgives every shortcoming and lovingly accepts him as perfect in Christ. He doesn't need to serve, sacrifice, or suffer his way to human or divine approval because Christ has already served, sacrificed, and suffered for him.

Without motivating grace, we just rest in Christ. Without moderating grace, we just run and run—until we run out. We need the first grace to fire us up when we're dangerously cold; we need the second to cool us down when we're dangerously hot. The first gets us out of bed; the second gets us to bed on time. The first recognizes Christ's fair demands upon us; the second receives Christ's full provision for us. The first says, "Present your body a living sacrifice"; the second says, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." The first overcomes the resistance of our "flesh"; the second respects the limitations of our humanity. The first speeds us up; the second slows us down. The first says, "My son, give me your hands"; the second says, "My son, give me your heart."

The *multiplying* power of grace is also rare in burned-out lives. Back on the assembly line, some of the Christian workers are driven by production targets. If they fall short of their daily quotas of Bibles, they go home totally depressed because "Every Bible we fail to print and package is a soul unreached." As everything depends on their sweat and muscle,

they work tons of overtime and hardly have any time for personal prayer.

Mr. Grace, however, works normal hours, and yet he has time and peace to pray for God's blessing on each Bible that passes through his hands. He works hard, but he depends on God's grace to multiply his work. He realizes that while one plants and another waters, God gives the increase. He goes home happy each evening, knowing that he has done what he could, and, as he leaves the factory at 5 p.m., he prays that God will multiply his work far more than his muscles or hours could.

The *releasing* power of grace has often been lacking when a person burns out. Mr. Controller, for example, thinks everything depends on him. He gets involved in every step of the production process, constantly annoying other workers with his micromanagement. He's infuriated by any breakdown in production, yelling at people and even the machines when they mess up. He says he believes in "sovereign grace," but he's the sovereign and grace is limited to personal salvation.

In contrast, Mr. Grace realizes God is sovereign even in the nuts and bolts of life, and releases control of everything into his hands. He works carefully, but humbly submits to setbacks and problems, accepting them as tests of his trust in God's control. In the midst of challenges and setbacks, he can often be heard whispering to himself, "Release, release, release."

Another void in many breakdowns is the *receiving* power of grace. Unlike Mr. Grace, most of his bosses and fellow workers refuse to accept many of God's best gifts. They won't receive the grace of a weekly Sabbath, the grace of sufficient sleep, the grace of physical exercise, the grace of family and friends, or the grace of Christian fellowship. These are all gifts

that our loving heavenly Father has provided to refresh and renew his creatures. Yet instead of humbly receiving them, most refuse and reject them, thinking that such graces are for the weak. Yes, it is more blessed to give than to receive. But if we don't do any receiving, our giving soon dries up.

As long as these five grace deficits exist in the lives of Christians, the wrecker's yard is going to keep filling with broken and burned-out believers. But by connecting God's grace more and more to our daily lives—by growing in these five graces—we can learn how to live grace-paced lives in a burnout culture. That's what this book will train you to live out.

Middle-Aged Only?

But this isn't a book just for middle-aged men. Every victim of burnout will tell you that unhealthy patterns of living and working that they learned in their youth caused their downfall later in life. And if any group is in danger today, it's the millennial generation (aged 18–33), whose stress levels are higher than the national average, according to a report by the American Psychological Association. Thirty-nine percent of millennials say their stress has increased in the past year, and 52 percent say stress about work, money, and relationships has kept them awake at night in the past month, with one in five clinically depressed or stressed out and needing medication.⁵ As prevention is always better than cure, I hope this book will also help younger men learn how to renew their bodies and souls so that they too start living grace-paced lives instead of joining the statistics.

5. Sharon Jayson, "The State of Stress in America," *USA Today*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/02/06/stress-psychology-millennials-depression/1878295/>.

Men Only?

Why write for men only? Don't women also overrun, burn out, get depressed, and so on? Yes, of course they do; but as they often do it in different ways than men, and for different reasons, some of the solutions are different too. That's why my wife, Shona, is joining me to cowrite a sequel to this book, a *Reset for Women*, if you will. As my wife for twenty-five years, a mother of five children (ranging from two to twenty), a family doctor for fifteen years, a past sufferer with depression, and a counselor to many women over many years, Shona will bring a unique female perspective to the problems that women face in this area and to the solutions that can help Christian women live grace-paced lives in a burnout culture.

So, should women put this book down and wait for the female version? No! If you want to understand your husband better and help him live a grace-paced life, keep reading and jog alongside him as you work out together what track God is calling him to run and what speed will get him to the finish line.

Pastors Only?

When Justin Taylor of Crossway originally approached me to write this book, he had in mind a book especially for pastors and other church leaders. I understood and shared Justin's concern for the unique challenges that Christian ministry leaders face in this area. However, among all the emails, phone calls, and office visits I had received from burned-out and stressed-out pastors over the years, I had also gotten many from Christian men in nonministry callings who were struggling with similar challenges and who responded well to

similar counsel. That's why we decided the book should be addressed to Christian men in general, but with a regular focus upon Christian ministry leaders in particular. We believe that this is the best way to help the greatest number of Christian men and pastors discover how to reset their lives and enjoy the healthy balance of grace motivation and grace moderation exemplified by the apostle:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2)

Repair Bay 1

Reality Check



“You have multiple blood clots in both lungs.”

Just a few hours earlier, I had been reading and relaxing in a chair at home when I felt a sudden tightness in my neck area, a building pressure that then spread down my chest and arms. It was painful, but not unbearable. I was breathless, hot, and disoriented.

Although the symptoms lasted only about ten minutes, my wife, Shona (an experienced family physician), was adamant that further investigation was needed. But when we arrived at the local emergency room, I felt fairly normal again, so I spent ten minutes trying to persuade her that we should just go home rather than waste a few hours and hundreds of dollars on a pointless ER visit. Thankfully, Shona prevailed and I agreed to go in, my parting comment being, “I’m doing this for you, not me!” (Poor woman!)

Although the results of the heart tests were normal and the doctor felt 95 percent certain that all was fine, he said that it was best to get my blood enzymes checked at the downtown

hospital just to be certain that there had been no heart attack. As I dithered, Shona decided, “Yes, we’re going.”

At the hospital, I happened to mention to the doctor that I had had a pain in my calf muscle since Sunday morning, which I breezily dismissed as “probably a muscle strain from tae kwon do.” He paused, turned back toward me, and narrowed his eyes: “Have you traveled recently?” I said that I had driven to Canada on Friday and arrived back in Grand Rapids on Monday morning.

The doctor looked concerned and decided to screen my blood, just to rule out a deep vein thrombosis (DVT) in my leg. An hour later (just after midnight), the results came back with a very high positive. For the first time, alarm bells began to ring in my mind.

Next, I was sent off for a CAT scan. Thirty minutes later, I heard the life-changing (and possibly life-ending) words, “I’m afraid you have multiple blood clots in both lungs [pulmonary emboli], probably having spun off from a clot in your leg.” I was told to lie flat on the bed and be as still as possible lest more clots break off from my leg and block my lungs. I was given a large dose of heparin and an intravenous drip of the same to stabilize the clots and start thinning my blood.

The next thirty-six hours were deeply solemnizing. All the blood clot anecdotes I’d heard over the years decided to flood my mind, probably partly provoked by the doctor’s parting words: “Don’t move from the bed; you have a life-threatening condition.” A sleepless blur of tests, tests, and more tests followed throughout the day, with fluctuating results: raising my hopes, then disappointing and worrying me.

Good to Be Afflicted?

In one of the rare moments of privacy I managed to grab in the maelstrom of that first night in the hospital, I picked up a daily devotional book beside my bed and turned to that day's date to find meditations on the following verses:

I called on the LORD in distress; the LORD answered me
and set me in a broad place. (Ps. 118:5)

It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn
Your statutes. (Ps. 119:71)

These two themes—thankfulness to God for graciously delivering me and a desire to learn from this trauma—stayed with me for the next few days. The primary lesson was painfully clear: “God’s been hunting me down.”

That was my immediate and instinctive understanding of why the Lord had sent these blood clots into my leg and lungs. Three weeks and two complications later, I was more convinced than ever that God had been tracking me for many months, with loving arrow after loving arrow, until at last he’d brought me down to the dust.

Up until a year before, I’d lived a more or less healthy and vigorous life. At 6 feet 3 inches and 186 pounds, I was on the light side of average. Work and ministry, however, had pushed out regular daily exercise for a few years. Over the previous nine months, my medical file had bulged considerably with two other health issues, one of which had culminated in a major (and very painful) operation three months prior. I’d also had a frightfully near miss coming back from a ministry trip when my car spun 720 degrees on black ice, slipped off the highway, and ended up on an embankment. Did these providences give me pause?

Not for long. That's why blood clots were required. God's message to me, through my blood, was: "*Stop!*"

My life and ministry had been getting faster and faster for years. It was all good stuff: delivering lectures, preaching sermons, counseling, speaking at conferences, writing books, raising four kids (now five), and so on. But it had been at the expense of quiet and rest—physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual rest. I hadn't neglected the means of grace—private devotions, family worship, and church attendance had all been steady and routine—but they were far too routine, with little or no joy in them. Life had become a restless, busy blur of ministry obligations and opportunities. The graces of sleep, exercise, peace, relaxation, a good diet, friendships, reflection, and fellowship with God had all been sacrificed for more "productive" activities. There had been little or no time to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

But now, in the enforced stillness, I was hearing a loving and concerned God say, "My son, give me your heart" (Prov. 23:26). Not your sermons, not your lectures, not your blogs, not your books, not your meetings, but your heart. *You!*

It was not that I had been totally deaf to God's previous appeals and interventions. I had heard, and fully intended to respond. My plan had been to push through a jam-packed March and April, then use a four-week space in my calendar to get into better physical shape, return to healthier sleeping patterns, secure more time for rest, draw near to God, and renew fading friendships. That was my plan. And it was about to work. I'd just finished the last in a long series of speaking engagements and had settled down in my easy chair to begin my planned soul revival. And thirty minutes

later, I was in a hospital. The Planner had swept my plan off the table.

Burnouts and Breakdowns

But why should I write all this? Why not just learn the lessons privately? I believe God gave me these experiences not only to teach *me*, but also to help *others* who have burned out or are about to. Since I began talking about this to many Christian men and at various Christian conferences, I've come across countless others who have suffered breakdowns or burnouts of one sort or another—some were physical like mine, but others were mental or relational breakdowns. Still others were emotional disorders or moral lapses. A number of men had not yet crashed and burned, but were worried about huge warning signs in their lives and wanted to do something to prevent impending disaster. One pastor confided: "My ministry had become a shell without the heart, a matter of endless duties without joy. I was standing up every Sunday telling God's people true things, good things. But they were no longer things that I lived on personally. It was my job."

Whatever the differences, whoever the person, whatever the problems, whatever the stage of stress or burnout, all saw that they were living at too fast a pace and needed to reset their lives. They wanted the grace of the gospel to be better reflected in the pace of their lives. They wanted more gospel joy in their service.

That prompted me to begin developing an informal program that I now call the Reset process. I have used it with numerous men, and now, through this book, I want to help you reset your life so that you can avoid crashing, or recover from it, by establishing patterns and rhythms that will help

you live a grace-paced life and get you to the finish line successfully and joyfully.

This is not easy for most of us. We are independent, self-sufficient men who find it hard to admit weakness, seek help, and change deeply ingrained addictions to overwork, busyness, and productivity. For pastors and ministry leaders, it's especially difficult; since so much of our work is invisible and intangible, we can be tempted to go into overdrive in more noticeable tasks in order to prove that we are busy and strong. But it's also difficult because our work is more obviously gospel work. How can we back off? How can we slow the pace? How can we rest when there are souls to be saved and when the work is so inherently good and so (dangerously) enjoyable?

I've been there, and in some ways, I'm still there. It's still a daily battle for me to keep a safe pace. Changing lifelong patterns of thought, belief, and action can be extremely difficult. But it's worth fighting for a grace-paced life, not only because we will live longer (and therefore serve longer), but also because we will live more joyfully, fruitfully, and "grace-fully."

So I want to persuade you to a better and more useful life; but I also want to persuade you of the seriousness of your situation. The rest of this chapter will challenge you to take stock of your life, to have a sober look not just at the externals, but also at the internals—your heart and mind. This isn't mere self-centered navel-gazing. "Self-care is the first step in caring for others, for loving your neighbor as yourself,"¹ says J. R. Briggs. It's not selfish to replenish energy and renew vitality in order to serve God and others better. As one of my friends

1. J. R. Briggs, *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), Kindle edition, locs. 2082–2090.

reminded me, “Put your own oxygen mask on first, then you can help others.” So, pull into Repair Bay 1, complete the checklist below, and use it to give yourself a reality check before reality checks you as it did me.

Reality Check

What should we be checking for? Our cars have warning lights that we can look up in our owner’s manual. But what do the “warning lights” look like for men? What are the danger signs that our present pace may prematurely end our race? Here’s a checklist arranged in categories. Whereas the physical category had the most ticks for me, for you it might be the emotional, mental, or another category. God has designed us all differently and knows which warning lights will best get our attention. But as some of us can’t (or won’t) see warning lights, even when all of them are flashing red and blue right in front of our eyes, why not ask your wife or a friend to go through these lights with you and give you a more objective outsider’s viewpoint?

Physical Warning Lights

- You are suffering health issues one after another. Seventy-seven percent of Americans regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress, including headaches, stomach cramps, achy joints, back pain, ulcers, breathlessness, bad skin, an irritable bowel, tremors, chest pains, or palpitations.²
- You feel exhausted and lethargic all the time, lacking energy or stamina for sports or playing with your kids.

2. “Stress Statistics,” Statistic Brain website, October 19, 2015, <http://www.statisticbrain.com/stress-statistics/>.

- You find it difficult to sleep, you wake up frequently, or you wake up early and can't get back to sleep. Maybe you can identify with my friend Paul's nightmare: "Then came the insomnia. Killer insomnia. Like all night. Then another night. I was panicking. What on earth was going on with me? I went to my doctor. He gave me some heavy-dose, prescription sleep aids. It worked like a peashooter on a tank."
- You are following the example of a young entrepreneur who admitted to me, "I used my lack of sleep to justify sleeping in later, which only perpetuated that poor sleep cycle."
- You are like one pastor who confessed to me that "my excessive sleeping was simply an escape."
- You are putting on weight through lack of exercise or eating too much junk food, or you are drinking too much alcohol or coffee.

Mental Warning Lights

- Concentration is hard; distraction is easy.
- You think obsessively about certain difficulties in your life. Jim described it to me like this: "Even little things began to fall on me with great weight. I would try to put them out of my mind, but it was like my brain was stuck. The thoughts kept spinning over and over. Nothing new was added to the process, no new solutions, no new information. Just the same cycle." Another man said it was like "trying to swat mental flies."
- You forget things you used to remember easily: appointments, birthdays, anniversaries, phone numbers, names, deadlines, etc.

- You find your attention drawn to negative subjects, and you are developing a hypercritical and cynical spirit.
- Your brain feels fried.

Emotional Warning Lights

- You feel sad, maybe so sad that you have bouts of weeping or feel you are on the verge of tears.
- It's been a long time since you had a good laugh or made someone laugh. Instead, there's emotional numbness.
- You feel pessimistic and hopeless about your marriage, children, church, job, nation, etc.
- Worry stalks your waking hours and anxiety climbs into bed with you every night.
- As soon as you wake and think about the day ahead, your heart starts pounding and your stomach starts churning over the decisions you face and people's expectations.
- You find it difficult to rejoice in others' joy, often forcing yourself to fake it.
- At times, you feel so hopeless and worthless that you think it would be better if you were not here.

Relational Warning Lights

- Your marriage is not what it once was. You don't delight in your wife as you once did.
- Your sex drive is erratic, as you often feel too tired to have anything but perfunctory, and mainly selfish, sex.
- You are irritable and snappy at your wife and children. They view you as angry, impatient, frustrated, and critical (ask them!).

- You spend limited time with your children, and any time you do spend is interrupted by smartphone use or poisoned by thinking about all the other things you could be doing. A Christian friend admitted that he once started sobbing uncontrollably: “My startled wife asked what was wrong. I was watching my father-in-law play with my children and said to her, ‘I wish I could enjoy them the way he does.’ My own children had become a source of irritation. I envied him. I couldn’t enjoy my own kids. I couldn’t enjoy anything.”
- You avoid social occasions, neglect important relationships, and withdraw from friendships, even with people you care deeply about.
- You frequently lose your temper and are in conflict with various people. One businessman told me that although he had rarely suffered through overwork, “as I have looked back over my life, the times that I have struggled with extended periods of depression have most often had in common that I was really struggling with a relationship. One time it was with my brother, twice it was a romantic relationship, twice it was struggles with my spouse.”

Vocational Warning Lights

- You work more than fifty hours per week, although not very efficiently, productively, or satisfyingly. As Greg McKeown puts it, “We have the unfulfilling experience of making a millimeter of progress in a million directions.”³

3. Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, 2014), 7.

- Your work regularly spills over into evenings and weekends, or whatever days make up your “weekend.”
- You have little joy in your work, you dread it, and you are so miserable that you would consider doing anything else but your present job. “I was confused,” one pastor wrote to me, “and soon my confusion turned into bitterness toward God. ‘What do you want from me? I work all the time. I have no hobbies, no down time, no joy, no life.’ I began to hate the ministry.”
- You are falling behind, feel constantly overwhelmed, and have begun to cut corners, take shortcuts, and drop your standards.
- Procrastination and indecision dominate as you flit from one thing to another to another with little sense of accomplishment. When you do make decisions, they are often the wrong ones.
- Motivation and drive have been replaced with avoidance, passivity, and apathy as you drag yourself through the day.
- You find it difficult to say no and feel like every woodpecker’s favorite tree. One pastor admitted to me that he had reached the point where he hated being needed by so many people. He just wanted a regular job that he could leave behind after eight hours.
- You feel guilty or anxious when you are not working and regard yourself as lazy or weak for taking time off.

Moral Warning Lights

- You view risqué material on the Internet or have even “graduated” to using porn.
- You watch movies with language and images you’d never have tolerated in the past.

- Your expense account and tax return have some half-truths in them.
- You cultivate close relationships with women who are not your wife (or you think about it).
- You shade the truth in conversations, exaggerating or editing as appropriate.
- You medicate yourself (and your conscience) by overspending, overdrinking, or overeating.

Spiritual Warning Lights

- Your personal devotions have decreased in length and increased in distraction, with little time or ability for meditation and reflection.
- You check email and social media before you meet with God each day.
- You don't have the same ongoing conversation with God that you used to have.
- You skip church.
- Listening to sermons sends you to sleep. One burnt-out businessman wrote to me, "One of the things that has been a great concern to me is the fact that I haven't been 'moved' by a sermon in years in spite of listening to some great sermons."
- You don't enjoy fellowship with other Christians or serving God's church.
- You believe all the truths of the Bible but you don't believe them for yourself.

Pastoral Warning Lights

- You are bored with the small stuff of ministry, thinking yourself above ministering to the seniors, the sick, and the time-wasters.

- After church, you don't hang around to fellowship with or minister to others.
- You are more taken up with the advancement of your own name than God's.
- You find it difficult to confess sin and even to admit weakness to God and others you are accountable to.
- You draw only on past knowledge and experience rather than present. As Aaron Armstrong put it: "We can rely on the backlog of information in our heads from years of reading, and not notice that something's wrong—that our metaphorical tanks are getting low—until we stop in the middle of traffic."⁴
- You base your acceptance by God on your hard work, your success, or your faithfulness. This painful story is too many pastors' experience: "When I felt like I was failing as a husband, father, pastor, Christian, even a human being, all I could do was work more, try harder. After all, there's no time for lollygagging when there's so much ground to regain. I made it impossible to rest. This made me a worse husband, father, pastor, Christian, and human being. That left me feeling more guilty."

What you're trying to do here is give yourself a reality check, to find out where you really are, how you really are, and who you really are. The next step is to analyze your checklist, to gauge the seriousness of these warning lights. You do that using three measurements:

How many? Probably everyone can tick a few of these items. That's life for fallen creatures in a fallen world. But if

4. Aaron Armstrong, "I've been running on empty—and what I'm doing to change that," *Blogging Theologically*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.bloggingtheologically.com/2015/12/30/running-on-empty/>.

you see five or more of these warning lights flashing on your dash, that should get your attention.

How deep? How serious are these issues? Rate the intensity of each of the ticks from one to five, with five being the most serious.

How long? How long has this been going on? The longer a symptom has lasted—especially if it has been a month or more—the more dangerous it is.

So you have your checklist and have analyzed it. It has a worrying number of ticks on problems that are sufficiently serious and that have been going on long enough for you to be concerned. What now?

First, you need to realize the danger you are in and the potential consequences if you don't slow down. As one of the men I've counseled put it: "One of the most important lessons I have had to learn is that if I don't slow down God will slow me down. And it's usually much more painful when he does it!"

Second, be grateful that God has alerted you to your danger before it is too late. Soul-weary pastor Josh Harris resigned from his church to go to seminary after a number of personal and ecclesiastical crises. He wrote: "I could keep grinding it out in ministry, but I knew that wouldn't be best for my soul, for my family, or for the church. I needed more than just a sabbatical—I needed significant retooling and recalibration. Time to stop talking and to listen. Time to relearn how to abide with Jesus. Time to unlearn professional busyness." But he resigned with thankfulness, as he explains: "If the way you're living isn't healthy—isn't expanding your soul and deepening your love for God and fellow-humans—then

a crisis that awakens you to your need for change is a good thing. It's a God thing. And that's my experience."⁵

The good news is that there is a way back, a way to reset your life, get all of these dimensions back on track, and start enjoying a grace-paced life. That's what this book is about. Let me give you a brief summary of what you can expect in the following chapters in order to encourage you to proceed.

You've already passed through Repair Bay 1—"Reality Check." In the next chapter, you'll reverse into Repair Bay 2, "Review," to figure out how you got here, what caused these various issues. It's important to understand causes so that you can avoid repeating the same mistakes a few years down the road.

Then you'll circle around through eight more repair bays as you perform a step-by-step reset of your life. Some of these bays will be more relevant and applicable to you than others. But it's worth reading about each of them just in case you miss something crucial. It will also help you to help others. These chapters will be characterized by:

Practicality. Most men are solution-focused, and that's what I want this book to be. I'll keep theory to a minimum, offering just enough to help you understand the practical steps you have to take.

Sympathy. I told you my own story (and I'll tell you more of it) partly to show you I'm not writing this from the new-car showroom. I'm writing this as someone who has crashed, burned, and ended up in the wrecker's yard. I understand and I sympathize, as do the other men whose stories appear in

5. Josh Harris, "The 40-Year-Old Seminarian," *Christianity Today*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2015/fall/40-year-old-seminarian.html>.

these pages.⁶ I understand how difficult it is to reset our lives after years of unhealthy patterns and rhythms. I'm not writing this as a success story but as the account of a fellow struggler.

Hope. Whatever place you find yourself in, your life can be reset and you can find a more joyful and sustainable pace to help you enjoy and finish your race.

Joy. Although you've been through or are in various kinds of pain, and although some parts of the repair process may be a bit painful initially, the ultimate aim is the restoration of joy. That's why the last repair bay is called "Resurrection." That's not just an end-of-life doctrine; by God's grace, it can also become an everyday life experience. We can know the power of Christ's resurrection daily raising us up from the dark depths of sin, stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, strife, and backsliding, and renewing our lives.

Two Questions

After my near-fatal crash, two questions kept bugging me: "Where is God in all this?" and "What is he doing?" I was doing God's work, I was sacrificing myself for the kingdom, I was spending and being spent for Christ, and it landed me in the ER and almost in a coffin. Where is God and what is he doing? Initially, my best answers to these two questions were, "I do not know" and "I do not know."

Then, in the midst of my puzzling, I remembered that an even greater sufferer (and a far godlier man than I) also had asked these questions as he looked back down the rocky road of life (Job 23:1–9). "Where's God? And what's he doing?" Thankfully, Job came up with far better answers than I did.

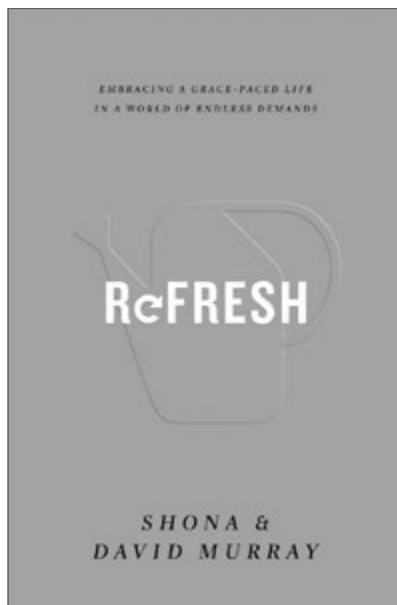
6. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

God knows where I am. “He knows the way that I take” (23:10a). Although we don’t know where God is and we may not even know where *we* are, God knows our exact location, direction, and destination. Just like a child on a long car journey, we don’t need to know where we are as long as Dad knows.

God knows what he’s doing. “When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (23:10b). He’s not just proving us but improving us. With his hand on the thermostat and his eye on the timer, he knows exactly how hot the furnace needs to be and how long to leave us in it to make our gold purer and brighter.

God knows where we are and he knows what he’s doing! The end product is gold, especially the gold of a closer relationship with God and of greater usefulness to others. Hold on to these priceless answers as we drive into the second repair bay.

Cultivate a Sustainable Pace in an Overwhelming World.



Writing to women in the midst of our busy, do-it-all culture, husband-and-wife team Shona and David Murray offer practical tips for avoiding exhaustion, depression, and anxiety by setting healthy, biblical priorities motivated by Christ's transforming grace.

For more information, visit crossway.org.

“HOW DID I GET HERE?”

These are the words of many Christian men on the brink of burnout or in the midst of breakdown. They are exhausted, depressed, anxious, stressed, and joyless. Their time is spent doing many good things, but their pace is unsustainable—lacking the regular rest, readjustment, and recalibration they need.

But there is good news: God has graciously provided a way for men to reset their lives to a more sustainable pace. Drawing on personal experiences—and time spent counseling other men in the midst of burnout—David Murray offers weary men hope for the future, helping them identify the warning signs of burnout and offering practical strategies for developing patterns that are necessary for living a grace-paced life and reaching the finish line with their joy intact.

“This is medicine for the soul in the best possible sense, and I am grateful to the author for writing it. It really does feel as though he wrote it for me.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina;
Robert Strong Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“This is so timely. You will be taken to the meeting place of essential theology and the details of all things related to our stressed lives, where David offers wisdom on every page.”

Ed Welch, counselor; faculty member, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“David Murray is Jeremiah-like in the rigor and love with which he seeks ‘to pluck up and break down . . . to build and to plant.’ But he is also Jesus-like in the way he employs the deconstructing and reconstructing grace of the gospel. Here is a book full of practical, spiritual wisdom. It is a must read.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas, Texas

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CHRISTIAN MINISTRY / MEN'S ISSUES

