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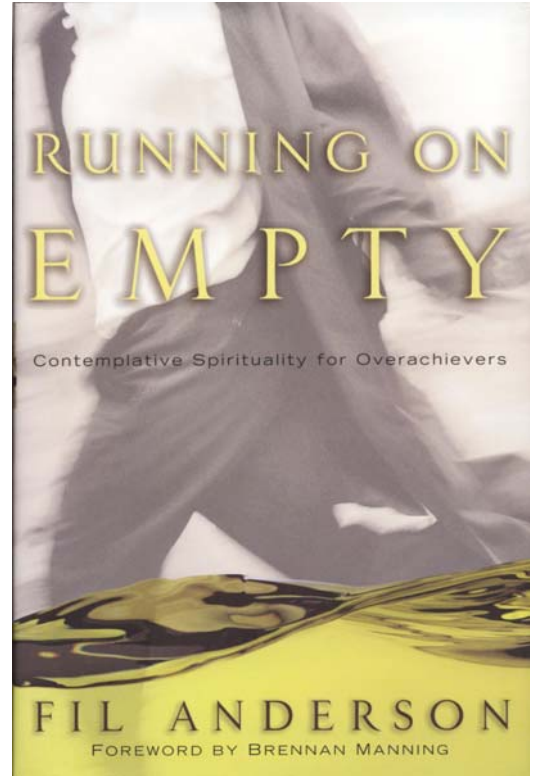
## Running on Empty: Contemplative Spirituality for Overachievers

### A Quick Focus The Book's Purpose

- Explain from personal experience how a harried life leads to destruction
- Demonstrate how many Christian workers are so busy working for God that they fail to spend ample time with God
- Provide a roadmap of recovery for those running on empty
- Refute the notion that productivity is life's most important value

### The Book's Message

Schedules filled with non-stop agendas often lead to diminishing intimacy with God and family—and eventual burnout. Even many churches adopt the common worldview that prioritizes productivity over wellness of the soul. The warning signs of a hurried life might come slowly and unnoticed, but the results are deadly nonetheless.



by Fil Anderson  
Waterbrook Press

There is hope for those who find themselves “running on empty.” Restoration comes to those who recognize that God is more interested in healthy souls than in high-level achievement. The practice of disciplines such as prayer, solitude and meditation can help recapture a meaningful relationship with a loving and caring God.

### Eight Main Points

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# The Road to Destruction:

## A Hurried Life

### Confessions of a Workaholic

#### Headed for a Fall

Fifteen years ago my life was running on empty. While I was successful helping others discover a meaningful relationship with God, my own spiritual walk left much to be desired. Speaking about God came naturally; speaking *to* God became a rarity.

Projecting the image that I had it all together compelled me to win the approval of others. I could help others, but something was wrong within me. I was ministering with an incapacitated soul. I did not possess the kind of life I was obsessed with helping others find.

Working 70 to 80 hours a week, my schedule was filled with doing things for God. But I neglected what was most important, pursuing intimacy with God. I could talk to others about Jesus, but I couldn't sit still long enough for Jesus to talk to me.

At age 18, I had the privilege of serving as part-time youth pastor in my home church. I was in way over my head and knew I was inadequate. So I stayed busy to win others' approval.

By age 21, the fatigue and overwhelming feelings of inadequacy controlled my life. I lived in constant fear that my inadequacies would be exposed. I hated myself for what I had become.

**“ I was unable to distinguish between my activity and my identity~and so my activity determined my identity.”**

#### The Crash

With my immune system weakened, I contracted pneumonia. Determined not to let my ministry suffer, I went back to work in five days and soon afterwards was diagnosed with double pneumonia.

By mid-spring I could handle the fatigue and depression no longer. I broke. My weeping became uncontrollable. I checked myself into the psychiatric ward of a local hospital where

I stayed for two weeks. With no one to care for and no agendas to meet, for the first time in a long time I felt safe and cared for.

The doctor told me that my hurried lifestyle had worn me to the point that I was too fatigued to rescue myself. He stressed to me that God's love and approval was not based on my performance. As meaningful as those words were to me, I returned to the old workaholic lifestyle.

Feelings of fear, loneliness, and disappointment flooded my soul. I never felt satisfied. This pattern dominated my life to the point that I would become physically ill with flu-like symptoms anytime I would break away from work, especially around the holidays and family vacations.

#### The Turning Point

I was on a winter retreat when I finally realized that my frenzied pace was keeping me from enjoying the life God designed for me. A *Testament of Devotion*, the classic by Quaker Thomas R. Kelly, helped me to see that God wanted me to have a life of peace. All the distractions in my life were keeping me from hearing God speak. Busyness was not the root problem. The problem was a divided heart.

**“I could see that each misfit part of my soul was sewn to the others with one common thread: distractions, keeping me from hearing the true voice of God.”**

God didn't want me to abandon my values and live a life of isolation. He simply wanted me to readjust. As I studied the life of Christ, I realized that Jesus was busy, but His activity never threatened what was most important~doing God's will. And I came to the understanding that God never intended for me to run on empty.

#### Life at Breakneck Speed

My workaholicism is a microcosm of an entire society that operates nonstop at breakneck speed. The negative effects of meeting expect-

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**THE ROAD TO DESTRUCTION: A HURRIED LIFE**  
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tations, producing results, and winning everyone's approval are disastrous. The symptoms may be gradual, but they are deadly nonetheless.

What's crazy is that as much as we complain about busyness, actually we are seduced by it.

“When we're busy, we don't have to think about important matters we prefer to avoid... Plus busyness makes us feel important.”

Do you remember in the sixties when futurists predicted that emerging technology would create a society of leisure? Unfortunately, they were wrong. Better efficiency led to more productivity, which led to more work. So instead of leisure, we have become a society that is driven and stressed out. Our country is vacation-starved.

This frantic pace forces us to neglect the things for which we ultimately long. We have forfeited our souls. We make time to do the things that matter most to us. So actually our problem is not a matter of not having enough time~it's a matter of minimizing the importance of a life that enthusiastically delights in God every moment of every day.

“The overload seems to express itself in a simple pattern: overscheduled at work, underscheduled at home, and unscheduled when it comes to nourishing one's soul.”

## The Road to Destruction: An Unhealthy View of God

When my thinking about God is healthy and focused, it has a positive effect on the rest of life. When my thinking about God is unhealthy and out of focus, my whole life is affected negatively. Bottom line~I need a correct view of God.

### Flawed Images of God

My tendency toward busyness is directly related to a flawed concept of God. I've been geared to think that God's approval is directly proportionate to my level of activity. The more I perform for God, the more He will love me.

This flawed image of God was ingrained in me from my earliest years. Growing up in the Bible Belt, I pictured Him as an angry God. I needed to earn His acceptance by good behavior~memorizing Bible verses, going to church and Sunday school, and not thinking bad thoughts or participating in “evil” activities such as playing cards and going to movies (especially on Sunday).

To me, God was more interested in my outward behavior than my heart. To be honest, I loved Him, but I sure didn't like Him. What was to like about someone so harsh and demanding?

### A God I Could Control

In grammar school I committed my life to God. Not many days after, I was playing basketball and let some vulgar words slip. I was ashamed to tears, knew that I was a miserable disappointment to God, and vowed to never use bad language again. But I was more focused on outward appearance than on the condition of my heart.

By high school I craved acceptance from others. Above all, I craved approval from crowds. I had two sets of friends and strived for their acceptance. With my spiritual friends I would do spiritual things. With my godless friends I would do godless things.

The God I knew became someone I could control. I could make Him happy or sad depending on my behavior. My image of Him was certainly rooted in my longings for acceptance. My church always stressed how much God needed more help than we were giving Him. On one occasion I responded to a plea to become a missionary to a foreign land. The essence of my faith was doing things for God. By college, I was addicted to work.

### Gaining a Healthy View of God

Eventually I began to understand how flawed my concept of God truly was. I began to see to a meaningful relationship to Him was not based on my efforts. Instead, He was pursuing a relationship with me.

“ I was beginning to understand that my faith in God is oftentimes greater when I rest than when I am busy. For a compulsive overachiever, this was a revolutionary thought.”

**THE ROAD TO DESTRUCTION: AN UNHEALTHY VIEW OF GOD**

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Gaining a healthy view of God came about as I began to focus on the amazing love and humility of Jesus Christ. Growing in my knowledge of Him saved me from the destructive consequences of busyness. Now I know that nothing I do will ever cause God to love me more or to love me less.

**“All the other love I’ve encountered has had something to do with me...but being loved by God is different. His love is unique in that it has *nothing* to do with me.”**



**“ ‘Going into Arabia’ and communing with God is the single most important, most difficult thing I’ve ever chosen to do.”**

## The Road to Recovery: Solitude

If all your efforts of being active for God are not producing the results you hoped for, there is help and there is hope. There is a pathway to recovery. The first step is to seek solitude.

### Why Are We Afraid of Silence?

As a child, I remember sitting in time out as the worst punishment my parents could inflict on me. Most would agree that the absence of noise makes us uncomfortable. Why?

A few years ago I led a retreat for a group of men from a large church. Evidently, the leaders failed to inform them that they would be spending many of their hours in silence. You should have seen the looks of confusion and terror on their faces when I told them. One fellow especially struggled with this idea. But by the end of the retreat he informed me how the silence gave him a profound awareness of God’s presence like he had never witnessed before.

For most people, silence is a waste of time. They live under the illusion that nothing productive can happen in quietness. But it’s been my experience that when I find myself living under a constant bombardment of noise and words, a dose of solitude certainly helps.

**“What I must continue to try to get into my head is that solitude and silence are not luxuries, but some of life’s most vital necessities.”**

### The Value of Being Still

We could learn a lot from the Quaker worship service I attended where time was given to be still and quiet. I fear that churches today have joined the conspiracy of filling our worship experiences with noise and busyness. The Bible says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). When is the last time you went to a church service that allowed time for silence?

I believe the Apostle Paul’s experience in the early days of his Christian journey should teach us the importance of “going away into Arabia.” (See Galatians 1.) There he took time to get away to think through his life’s priorities and the convictions of his soul.

More than anything else busyness has robbed me of experiencing the presence of God. My ministry loses its effectiveness whenever I provide no time for solitude.

Consider the life of Christ. As busy as He was, He never let noise and busyness distract Him from what was most important. Often we see Him finding a place of solitude in order to keep in constant communion with the Father. If seeking solitude was His standard practice, certainly it should be so for us also.

### Practical Steps to Solitude

Stop making excuses and experiment with some of these practical suggestions:

- Spend some time thanking God. The first thing when you wake up, express gratitude for a new day.
- Use your lunch break to find a place of solitude.
- Discover your own special places for solitude, maybe a nearby park, a chapel, or a retreat center.
- Schedule some quiet moments in your day. Allow a few moments between tasks to be still and quiet so that you can reconnect with God.



# The Road to Recovery:

## Prayer

### Why is Prayer Such a Struggle?

I have unlimited access to God, and He invites me to approach Him and converse with Him. So why do I resist His invitation to intimacy? Why is prayer such a struggle for almost every believer?

The reasons vary. For one thing I'm usually in too big a hurry. On top of that I want quick results. But the underlying truth is that I want to be in control, and I want God to move at my pace. I'd like prayer to be like ordering in a fast-food lane, then driving around to pick up the food. I long for intimacy with Him, but I also run from it. I'm like the prodigal son who ran from the very place that had all I needed.

### Lessons from a Monastery

A visit to a Trappist monastery in South Carolina made a lasting imprint on my life. The members of this community practiced the centuries-old tradition of ceaseless prayer. Seven times a day the monks gathered to sing psalms, to focus their lives on God's Word, and to offer prayers for others.

Their dress and diet were simple. They had no cell phones or televisions. They had taken a vow of silence. They were never in a hurry. But the main difference between my life and theirs was their serious focus on ceaseless prayer.

I yearned to have that kind of focus on prayer. But I knew that my life was focused on too many other things.

### Challenging the Evangelical View of Prayer

The well-known biblical mandate to pray without ceasing is accurately translated *come to rest*. It doesn't imply that we need to escape from all the pressures of life. Instead, it refers to our need to rest in God in the midst of life's daily struggles. How? Through unceasing prayer.

However, attaining this focus is impossible whenever my desire for accomplishment outweighs my passion for God. I thought prayer was more of an intellectual exercise that involved telling God the things on my request list. That's the traditional evangelical way—speaking to God instead of being with Him.

If I had an issue, I would present it to God and expect Him to give me a solution. The only problem is that I was always too busy to listen to His response.

Later in my spiritual journey I discovered that genuine prayer takes place where Jesus resides, from deep within the heart. Prayer needs to move from the head to the heart. It's in my heart where I meet the One who knows everything about me and still loves me immensely. My life is fully exposed to Him, and I am able to clearly hear His whispers to me.

### The Best Way to Learn to Pray

Just like the best way to learn a foreign language is to practice speaking it, the best way to learn to pray is to practice praying. A study of the Scriptures reveals scores of styles and postures of prayer. Jeremiah stood, Nehemiah sat down, and Abraham was on his face. Daniel prayed three times a day, Hannah prayed without using words, and Jonah prayed from a fish's belly. These saints did not teach us how to pray; they simply taught us to pray.

For years I viewed prayer as something to be accomplished. I said my prayers then went on with my busy schedule, leaving no opportunity for God to commune with me. Now I understand that prayer is more a gift from God than it is an accomplished mission.



# The Road to Recovery:

## the Scriptures

A trusted friend once told me that I was good at quoting other authors, but rarely did I quote from the Scriptures. Ouch! Quite frankly, I wasn't giving God an opportunity to speak to me. I read the Bible practically every day, but in reality I kept it at arm's length.

I read it to look for facts and to store up ammunition when others attacked me. Actually, I became like the Pharisees who knew the Scriptures but missed out on Jesus.

**“In my reading of the Word of God, I had failed to recognize God and to be embraced by God's Word.”**

Thankfully, I discovered that Jesus desired an intimate relationship with me, one that could be developed by embracing God's Word.

**“Real reading includes hearing, and hearing God's words is essential in recovering our lives from the soul-killing addictions to noise, performance, and activity.”**

If the Word is to influence me away from the busyness trap, then I must read it prayerfully. I must learn to hear God speaking through His Word. To hear, I must learn to listen. Only then will He begin to reshape my life. Reading the Scriptures with an openness to God is

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risky because it can certainly lead to transformational changes.

How can I read in such a way that God's Word will reshape my life? By practicing what I call spiritual reading. I allow the words to form in the deepest parts of my soul. Instead of looking for something that I can use to inspire others, I let the words penetrate my heart. This process includes a four-fold progression.

### Reading

There is a major difference in reading for information and reading for transformation. To read for information is to work on the text. To read for transformation is to let the text work on me. Both are needed, but life-change takes place with the latter.

One of the keys is to take a brief passage and read it slowly, even aloud. Don't be so concerned with in-depth exegesis. Instead, be aware of the Author's presence,

listening for His voice. God will illuminate the things you need to understand.

### Meditating

How much I read is not important. I must not be in a hurry to get to the next verse. Moreover, what I'm looking for is not more knowledge but how the truth can impact my life. Meditation means that I linger on a verse and inhale every bit of its flavor.

Using my imagination, I try to approach the word with all five senses. I also try to place myself as one of the characters in the story and write a narrative about my experience.


### Praying

The third part of the progression is praying. Whatever has captured the object of my meditation must now lead me to respond. What are the implications for my life? What must I do to obey? Sometimes praying is regret, confession,

or repentance. Sometimes it is a time of celebration and gratitude. God knows what I need, and He makes sure I receive it.

**“When I am deliberate and thoughtful in slowly reading the words of God, taking time to meditate on them, and begin to tell God what I have heard and how it relates to my life, stuff just happens!”**

### Contemplating

There comes a point when I stop reading and talking and just rest and listen. Contemplation is being silent with unreserved openness and attentiveness. It is very difficult to define or explain. It is beyond the reach of words. Bottom line~contemplating is being aware of the reality of God, nothing more and nothing less. 

# The Road to Recovery: Spiritual Direction

It was at a retreat 15 years ago that a brief conversation with a spiritual director changed my life forever. Desperate for help, I asked him what I should do. He turned the question around and asked me who I believed God created me to be. I've experienced many cleansing moments with God, but never had I become so transparent with another person.

For the first time in my life, I held back absolutely nothing. The Holy Spirit had revealed to me the poverty of my soul. While being good at gaining the love of others, I had never focused on who God created me to be. I had spent years of ministry impersonating the one I wanted to be but had no clue how

to be a spiritually authentic. I needed a spiritual director. Let me explain.

**“My alienation from God was concealed by my immersion in service for God. What was missing most was a deeply lived love relationship with the One I constantly told others about.”**

### What is a Spiritual Director?

A spiritual director does not interpret God's will for your life. Instead, he helps you to be attentive to how God is speaking to you. This person has the discernment to ask focused questions that will help you to understand God's path.

### What does a Spiritual Director do?

A spiritual director is like a physician who creates the environment for the true Healer to do His work. There are three essential roles the director plays.

First, he cleans the wound. He recognizes that my initial need is to be cleansed from all my worries and fears so that I can become aware of the presence of God. This process takes time. The settling of my soul must occur before proceeding.

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## THE ROAD TO RECOVERY: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION continued from page 6

Second, he aligns the broken parts. During these moments I speak and pay attention. The director listens and helps me express my feelings, doubts and experiences and how they relate to God.


Third, he prescribes rest. He guides me to practice the spiritual disciplines that are designed to create the space in my life that God needs to work within me.

### Why do I need a Spiritual Director?

Why do I need another believer to direct me when I have the Holy Spirit, the Perfect Guide, living within me? The Holy Spirit does guide us. The problem is that not all of us are listening and following. And the Scriptures verify the importance of seeking guidance from others (Proverbs 20:18; Ecclesiastes 4:9-10,12).

### What Qualities Do I Look For?

First of all, look for someone who obviously has a deep companionship with God. I believe it's best to begin with someone you know. Don't look for the title of spiritual director as much as the qualities that he or she should possess. This person should be able to guide you in knowing who God created you to be. Sometimes he or she will need to teach, confront, or hold you accountable for your attitudes and actions. Be sure at the outset to determine if the director expects to be paid.

Bringing a spiritual director into my life has reaped tremendous benefits. The presence of God has become an ongoing reality for me. My walk with Him is filled with much greater energy. 

**“If grapes and grain are not crushed, there can be no wine and bread. If my life is not crushed, there will not be the closest and most intimate communion with God.”**

### My True Heroes

Typical modern-day heroes wear athletic uniforms. But my heroes are those whose faith sees them through life's most difficult situations. Take for example, Dale, a 40-year-old father and husband, who was dying of cancer. He sat in my office and began listing the many things for which he was grateful. Approaching death at such a young age, he expressed with such clarity how God had given him a great life. He didn't feel cheated at all.

Being around highly gifted people in my 25 years on a ministry staff caused a sense of inferiority. I wanted to be them. Take, Steve, for example. He was a wonderful communicator who naturally attracted others to him. But then I learned about his personal trials. One of his brothers was mentally handicapped. While in high school, another brother had been killed in an automobile accident. Soon after he married, his mother died. Two of his sons were diagnosed with neurological disorders. During the latter stages of his father's Lou Gehrig's disease, his sister lost a battle to cancer.

“I can't help but believe it was in the furnace of these afflictions that the qualities I most envied were forged.”

### Happy Endings?

Take a look at the Scriptures and you will discover that the endings are not always happy. Apparently, the only land Abraham owned at the end of his life was Sarah's burial plot. Moses did not get to enter the Promised Land. David's life certainly didn't end on a high note.

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# The Road to Recovery: Sorrow

Life is filled with suffering and sorrow. No one is exempt. My life has had its share of ups and downs, but never would I call it boring. The demands of home, job, and friends sometimes are far beyond my abilities to satisfy. We all live in an “if only” world. I don't know of anyone, if the truth is admitted, who is living the life he or she dreamed of living.

### Longing for Completeness

The main reason I find myself living at such a frantic pace is that I have this inherent yearning to be complete. I have lived under the false assumption that Jesus promised me a life without trials and sorrow. But He never promised that.

I confess that my interest in God has more to do with hoping for His healing and restoration in my life than in longing for an intimate friendship with Him. I can't find in the Scriptures the guarantee of completeness that I yearn for. However, there is one gift promised and that gift is God Himself, and that is the gift that makes me complete.

### Longing for Completeness

How did the Church ever arrive at the idea that when we become Christians, God rescues us from trials, pain, and suffering? How could we ever believe that in light of Jesus' example? When He faced struggles, He embraced them and allowed them to happen. Sometimes we find trouble, and sometime trouble finds us. But one sure thing we can learn from Jesus—difficulties are a part of life.

Could it be that life's greatest joy is found in sorrow? Could it be that when I fail to endure, I am missing out on what's most important in life, namely, intimacy with God? I've discovered that I'm in closest communion with God in the midst of shedding tears.

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Just because I'm living in close communion with God does not grant me immunity from life's difficult storms. In fact, it could be

that walking with Christ increases the odds of facing storms. But if I hang on, I discover that God never changes. He holds me closely in His strong hand. 

## The Road to Recovery: **Joy**

Who am I? For years the answer to that question was based on what I did and what others said about me. Now I realize that my identity is based in solely in who I am in Christ. No matter what the world thinks of me, I know I am loved by God, and that's what matters.

### The True Mark of a Christian

Knowing where my true identity lies has brought wonderful joy in my life. John Ortberg has helped me understand that the most vivid sign of a Christ follower is joy—not faith, hope, or love.

Joy is an eternal and essential part of God's character. He longs for all of creation to reflect His joy. The Bible speaks repeatedly of the believer's need to be joyful. In fact, living without joy seriously offends God. We Christians are known for talking about the magnificent power of God, but if we truly believed this, we'd lighten up and have more fun in life.

**“Instead of Christians moping around and wringing our hands at the condition of the world, perhaps we should stike up a game of Birdie on the Perch or Red Rover.”**


We get this false idea of Jesus always being serious and frowning on fun. I tend to believe that Craig McNair's performance of *The Fifth Gospel* is a more accurate depiction. In this drama the disciples are involved in a fun mud fight when Simon the Zealot hurls a mud pie that hits the Son of God right in the head. The disciples freeze, wondering how Jesus will respond. He stoops down, comes up with a large mud pie and slings it at Simon, hitting him in the head. Then they all break into laughter.

### Joy Restored

With all the trials we face, it would be easy to allow darkness to overwhelm us and rob us of joy. Camping out in the Psalms provides a remedy for me. No emotion is off limits. Making the Psalms my own by praying them to God leads me to joy in spite of the difficulties I might be encountering.

If I allow my heartaches and struggles to capture my focus, I will miss out on the level of joy that every minute is designed to bring. The author of Hebrews exhorts us to fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). I wonder what Jesus was focusing on while He hung on the cross. Something tells me He was looking beyond His pain and focusing on the face of the Father. Without pain and sorrow, no one can know fully the genuine experience of joy.

### The Difference Between Joy and Happiness

The word happiness comes from the word meaning happening, which suggests that it is based on circumstances, things that happen to me. Joy is present in spite of sadness or difficulty. Happiness is the good feeling I have when things are going well. Joy is an attitude that I claim regardless of what might be happening to me because I know God is in control. Joy is a choice I make and is based on the truth that God loves me and I belong to Him. Nothing can take that truth away from me. 



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