REFLECTIONS OF A BURNOUT SURVIVOR

FLOR ULAN-TAYLOR

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### FLOR ULAN TAYLOR



#### When God Tells You to Rest *Reflections of a Burnout Survivor*

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### For the three men in my life

STEVE, my husband, best friend and soul-mate—Thank you for being there for me at my time of greatest need; PAUL—Thank you for taking the time to go on walks with me; DAVID — Thank you for making me laugh.

## And for you

who, at this time in your life, have been feeling helpless and hopeless, struggling to rise out of the devastation of burnout: it is my ardent desire that through this book you will meet and experience afresh the God who can give you the understanding and comfort, the strength, help and hope that you yearn for.

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## Foreword

Recently Frank, a church planter, and I had a heart-wrenching talk. Two terms in an overseas ministry had drained him. Tensions had multiplied with colleagues, with God, in the ministry, in himself. It was clear that he loved the Lord and wanted to serve Him. I remembered his send-off eight years ago. Back then, his face had glowed. His body had fairly burst with excitement. Now his thinner body sagged, his face was dark. His words spilled over with sadness and guilt: "I guess I'm a washout."

I don't know if Frank will ever return to an overseas ministry. But I do know there are others like Frank—keen to serve God but frustrated by the challenges to their deepest passions.

Here in *When God Tells You to Rest* is a burnout survivor who has been there and who has slowly returned as a more mature servant of our Lord and His Kingdom. I have known Flor Ulan-Taylor for three decades—initially as a vibrant young colleague in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the Philippines, then as a theological student in England when I was based there as Bible study secretary for International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

Our unique friendship continued in Thailand, where she and husband Steve serve the Thai churches and also teach at Bangkok Bible College and Seminary. When I have ministered to students and their staff in Thailand, Flor has served as my able translator in Bible training courses.

While I was reading this book, I was also walking with a friend and colleague who has learned painfully, fruitfully of life and work with our Lord. Flor has valuable lessons to share with any servant of our Lord Jesus, abroad or at home.

Ada Lum Honolulu, Hawaii

## Acknowledgments

This book was based on the journals I kept during my burnout. In these journals are names of family and friends who I am deeply grateful for. The time has now come to thank God publicly and to express my appreciation to those whose love made the completion and the publication of this book possible.

To Ivy Cottage Church in England and to the Discipleship Training Centre in Singapore who gave me refuge as I tried to make sense of what had struck me.

To my sisters, friends, and sending churches (Ivy Cottage Church and Christ is Exalted Community Church)—their persevering prayers saw me through this challenging task of putting my journey through burnout into a book.

To Naty Lopez and Jane Hardy, my friends. Naty was the first to encourage me to compile my reflections into a book and never stopped encouraging until I finished. Jane's enthusiastic belief in this book was infectious.

To Shirley Harbour and Ada Lum, my mentor-friends whose passion for Jesus and for God's Word inspired me to love Him and His Word as much as they do.

To Betté Finlay and Grace Wiarda whose godly insights and compassionate counsel helped me know myself better.

To Miriam Adeney whose helpful suggestions reflected her expertise as an author and as a writing seminar trainor.

To Pat Connell, a former OMF Thailand missionary who gave invaluable comments and corrections on the first draft. My special thanks go to her and to twelve other friends whose insightful recommendations made this book truly beneficial to its readers.

To Dr. Randy Dellosa, who selflessly gave of his expertise and professional experience to answer "Frequently Asked Questions" that relate to burnout and depression.

To Beng Alba, my editor whose professional capabilities coupled with her warm personality made our editing task easier than I had expected. My appreciation also goes to Yna Reyes, OMF LIT Publications Director who provided much-needed encouragement especially during the early stages of this project. And to the entire OMF LIT family—your patience, hard work and creativity are simply amazing.

I could not have finished this book were it not for my husband, Steve, who tenaciously clung to his life motto, "Never quit!" Thank you, for believing in me and for supporting me all the way from beginning to end.

I praise and thank the Lord, my God as I say to Him, "Glory belongs to You and You alone. May Your name be praised by many burnout sufferers reading this book as they ask, receive and experience Your restoring and re-creating touch in their lives."

## Preface

At one time in my life I lived as an exile. An exile from the world of Christian ministry, missionary work, and everything that involved giving out emotionally and spiritually. It was time to leave the ministry, if only for a while.

I was burned out.

This book is about the havoc that burnout wreaked on my emotions, the torturous shadow it cast on my mind, the hazardous encounters with feelings and senses that can only be described but can never be explained.

This is also about the God who rescued me from the trauma of emotional exhaustion, and who, in His mysterious ways, turned burnout into a blessing.

For nine years I served God full-time through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship-Philippines. While directing a student conference, I sensed God's call to serve Him overseas. I went to All Nations Christian College in England where I met Steve who was preparing to go to Thailand as a missionary. We got married in Manila on May 23, 1981. Immediately after our honeymoon, we flew to Bangkok to begin life together as missionaries in Thailand.

For fifteen years we focused all our energy and emotions in serving God among the Thai people. They became our family, our heart and soul. We ate lunch together as a church every Sunday and in the afternoon went out to the parks, temple grounds and to every lane handing out Christian literature, staging evangelistic plays, explaining the Gospel to individuals who showed interest. We spent Christmas Days together in the church, in an orphanage, or on the streets while showing the *Jesus* film.

But the time came when I had to extricate myself from all of these. Burned out, feeling drained and depleted, I had to pack my bags and leave Thailand for a while.

I write this book both for those suffering from burnout and for many overworked professionals and servants of God who face the potential of being emotionally overloaded and exhausted at any time in their lives. Counselors and carers of burnout victims will also benefit as additional information about this modern-day malady will enable them to care with more understanding and Christ-like compassion. Each reflection consists of excerpts from my journals, a meditation on a Bible passage that God had used to turn my burnout into a blessing, a possible application and a prayer response.

My hope is that as I retrace the steps I took during the burnout phase in my life, as I recall God's touches amidst the trauma of stress and burnout, you, my reader will also experience God and His unique way of transforming your life through burnout.

> Flordeliza Ulan-Taylor Bangkok, Thailand May 23, 2004

INTRODUCTION

# The Big Black Hole

#### Bangkok, Thailand—May 6, 1996

The whirring rumble of our thirteen-year old Liteace Toyota broke the rhythmic humming of the crickets from our garden. Steve, my husband, had just returned from a church meeting. Engrossed with my reading, I did not notice it was already half past eleven.

"I had better ask him now," I decided on the spur of the moment.

Mentally rummaging through an upcoming church leaders' seminar, a teaching trip to the Northeast of Thailand, our counseling sessions with an engaged couple, and appointments with our boys' teachers, I asked,

"Lovey, could we slot in a full day-off this coming week?"

"We should, really. Let's see," he replied while stirring a freshlymade cup of coffee.

Yawning, I said, "Could we have a look at our calendar tomorrow then? I feel quite tired already." And we headed upstairs.

As I pulled down our bedspread, I was jarred by an overwhelming sense of tightness in my throat. Wheeling around, I felt as if the walls were caving in on me. I ran to the window, a hand on my throat, and tried to draw in as much air as I could.

"What's the matter?" Steve queried.

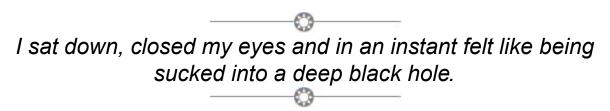
"I need to go downstairs," I said as I dashed out.

Following me, Steve asked again, "Why? What's wrong?"

He was as bewildered as I was when he saw me. Muscles taut, shoulders hunched, I was breathing deeply and in quick succession at the threshold of our widely opened front door.

Faintly, I replied, "I wish I knew."

I sat down, closed my eyes and in an instant felt like being sucked into a deep black hole. It felt as if something was closing in on my mind. Panic began to mount within me—petrified I might lose my grip of things.



Terrified at the thought that a little push would tip me over the edge of a sheer precipice, I struggled to get back on my feet again—fast. Frightened of losing control, scared lest I suddenly hear myself screaming, I paced the floor, half-whispering, "Jesus, You're my only hope. Help me."

In bewildered agony my spirit longed to convey to my Father the despair that was gradually eating up my soul, but found my lips able to utter only the very basic, the most elementary of prayers: "Jesus, help me."

The specter of a pitch-black chasm with its huge, bottomless mouth hungrily waiting to devour me hung on. But a formidable determination to keep my mind from slipping into it propelled me to go on pacing the floor.

Steve prayed for me but the sense of danger still loomed. I attempted to recite some Bible verses and found I had no memory of any verse at all! Then, a thought entered my mind, "Play some praise music."

As the classic hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness" wafted through the air, I snapped up each line—singing its truths in my mind. Verse after verse. The words gradually calmed my soul.

Four hours passed since I had rushed out of our bedroom.

"I think I'm ready to go upstairs," I whispered.

## Overwhelmed by Small Things

A crippling fatigue lingered within me for days. Approaching the kitchen sink, my heart sank when I saw a pile of four plates, wondering when I would ever finish doing those dishes. A small

chore like ironing a basket of ten shirts seemed as difficult as organizing a church conference!

The words, "Lord, help me," were constantly on my lips.

And He would speak in my heart directing me, "Fix your eyes on only one shirt at a time. Don't think of the whole basket."

When my mind was overwhelmed with the prospect of washing four plates, I heard Him say quietly to my heart, "Attend to this one plate in your hand. Don't think of the whole stack. Take one plate at a time."

It never occurred to Steve or me to consult a doctor. I slept normally after that horrifying night. The abnormal feeling of being overwhelmed by very minor things hovered over me for a week, after which I was back to my usual self.

Now and again, though, I would ask, "What *really* happened to me that night? Why did it happen? What did it mean?"

Two weeks after my bizarre experience, I jotted down in my journal:

May 6 has made a profound impact on me. I don't exactly know in what way, but I liken it to a boundary—a boundary in time and experience. Where I was innocently standing on one side of the fence just the day before, I now find myself on the other side, baffled, confounded and distraught. I sense it will be a landmark in my Christian life. Like my conversion, my dying to self, my going out as a missionary, it will herald the dawning of a new era in my life. I doubt if I will ever be the same again. But will it be for good? Or for bad? The future looks ominous to me.

The last week of May was spent frantically packing up for our family's scheduled home visit to Manchester, England. We would be away for seven months.

\* \* \*

#### Bangkok International Airport, Thailand—June 1, 1996

Most of the passengers waiting to board the airplane for England via Singapore were now fidgeting. It had been two hours of sitting idly in the lounge of Gate 12. With mounting frustration, I thought to myself, "How long will this flight be delayed?"

Another hour passed, and all eyes were riveted on the ground stewardess who was walking briskly towards the door. Before she could utter a word, mothers pushed their toddlers' strollers towards the door, while the rest of us restrained ourselves from scrambling towards the half-opened gate.

I settled comfortably with David, our eleven-year-old son, who was enjoying the view from his window seat. Steve and my fourteen-yearold son Paul were seated in front of us.

Pressing the reclining position button, I began to think of the months ahead of us. The first two months were to be spent in Manchester—visiting relatives and renewing friendships. We will also be debriefing with our church leaders from Ivy Cottage—a church which has supported our family through their prayers and financial contribution for the past fifteen years. The following five months were to be our sabbatical leave. Our application to the Discipleship Training Center in Singapore had been accepted. Steve would do some in-depth study on the Thai culture, and I had told them about my need to rest.

I had been looking forward to this sabbatical leave. I have been feeling drained emotionally, physically and spiritually for two years. Back in January 1996, I told Steve that I could not go on living in Thailand if we did not take a long break after our visit to England.

The sound of food trolleys interrupted my reverie. While straightening my seat, I glanced outside and suddenly my heart began to palpitate.

In a split second, it seemed as if the off-white walls of the DC-10 were closing in on me. The inside of the airplane narrowed and shortened, threatening to crush me.

"Lord, Please, Not Here"

"I need air! I need space!" my mind screamed. On the verge of getting hysterical, I thought of requesting for a doctor, or at least, of standing up to relieve myself of the feeling of suffocation. But fear of calling attention to myself prevented me from doing so.

I remembered that fateful night in our home.

"Lord, please, . . . not here. I cannot pace the floor here. People will be wondering what's the matter with me. They won't have a tape of Christian music here. How embarrassing it will be if I scream. Anywhere, but here, Lord . . . ."

My heart was pounding fast and hard, my mouth was dry, my breathing was quick and shallow.

"Lord, what's happening? What's wrong with me?"

The armor of God—these words entered my mind. I tried to recall each part of the armor from the sixth chapter of Ephesians. I prayed as I imagined, taking on one by one, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the belt of truth, the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit. Beginning to breathe more easily, my panic subsided.

But my thoughts raced like a run-away horse. I can't go on to Manchester, not in this state. Is there a land route from Singapore to England? How will I ever make it to Manchester? I'll never be able to get on any plane anymore. Father, what's happening to me?

"How are you getting on there?" It was Steve, whispering through the narrow gap between the seats.

"I had difficulty breathing a short while ago. But I'm feeling better now. I'll tell you later," I replied in a faint voice.

Not long after, our plane landed at Changi Airport. I breathed more freely upon seeing the expansive waiting lounge.

\* \* \*

#### Manchester, England—June to July 1996

Richard Harbour, our senior pastor, and his wife, Shirley, met us at the airport. I was not able to hold back my tears when Shirley hugged me. Feelings of safety, security and relief simultaneously washed over me. "Now, I can rest," I whispered to myself.

## Unlocking the Mystery

The Manse, where we would stay, was welcoming. A large vase of daffodils greeted us in the sunlit sitting room. A walnut cake lay on the dining table. The freezer and the pantry had been well-stocked.

While unpacking the last suitcase, I came across my journal. I absentmindedly flipped its pages and found myself retracing my steps in my emotional and spiritual journey.

March 11, 1995: I feel so exhausted, not physically, but emotionally. Been crying for two days now. I can't face people. I was planning not to go to church this Sunday. At lunch time I had to ring Jane up to ask to be prayed for because I'm afraid this tiredness is going on far too long.

February 22, 1996: Lord, I feel so weary. I have so many questions. Please bear with me. What am I here in Thailand for? What do you want me to do here? Why am I feeling so drained? Am I right to feel frustrated?

March 10, 1996: I realize now that I'm coming from a point of nothingness. I have nothing to offer. I have no zest for ministry, no desire, no motivation to do anything at all. I can't even ask people how they are . . . Lord, please touch me anew.

I closed the journal. I had better get on with my unpacking. But my attention turned to the book which Shirley had lent to me a couple of days ago. She did not know what had happened to me during the past month. Unaware that God was using her, she handed to me the first key that would unlock the mystery that was May 6.

*God's Joyful Surprise*<sup>1</sup> by Sue Monk Kidd was an account of the author's recovery from stress. It made me ask, "Why did I feel so despondent last year? What was my despair really all about?" The book seemed to suggest to me that it was due to stress.

I had always put down my irritable moods, my unrelenting fatigue, and my despondent feelings to mid-life changes. That I was actually stressed-out had never crossed my mind.

The book gave me hope. I saw myself as one who had just begun a journey—a pilgrimage towards God. I did not know what that expedition would entail. But I started to believe that, however terrifying that night in Bangkok was, it was actually a door to something more beautiful than anything I had ever experienced before.

Six days after arriving in Manchester, I recorded in my journal:

May 6, 1996 was not a trap door, not a tragic experience. I now see that my frightening experience last month was an opportunity, a door for God to take me on a journey into the inner recesses of His heart. It is a gateway to an increasing intimacy with my Father. And to a deeper, richer life in Him.

#### What About the Black Hole?

Sue Monk Kidd's book, however, did not answer one burning question in my mind: *What about the black hole experience?* I was also thinking about my feeling of suffocation in the airplane. I was still bewildered. I decided to see a qualified Christian counselor.

Bette Finlay did not take long to suggest that I could be burned out. But she also noted, "It could have been a case of collision. If you were not in mid-life stage, you might have handled your stresses better. But also, if you were not this stressed, your mid-life changes may have felt less severe or lighter."

I began to accept that I could be suffering from exhaustion. But my pain-filled quest for an explanation to my "black hole" experience remained unfulfilled.

### End of the Quest

Then one night, after a prayer meeting, a young wife approached me and said, "I can fully relate to what you've shared with us tonight. I have a book that may help you understand what you went through."

Dr. Roger Baker's Understanding Panic Attacks and Overcoming  $Fear^2$  made me realize that my experience could be what medical experts call a panic attack. He related a patient's story that was strikingly similar to my experience. He wrote,

The fear reaction is at the heart of a panic attack. The sensations involved in the fear reaction and panic are exactly the same—fast heartbeat, increased breathing, sweating, trembling, dry mouth, tingling hands and feet and so on. . . . Although a panic attack is exactly the same as the fear reaction, there is no obvious trigger or stimulus. . . . No wonder people with panic are completely bewildered.

Should I be looking for hidden causes then? Dr. Baker explains,

Sufferers should not look for a connection in terms of what has been happening in that hour, that day or even that week. They should be looking at the events of the previous one to nine months. . . .

There are many studies which show that in the months before the first unexpected panic attack the sufferer had been going through a period of stress or trauma, or several things had happened which heaped up on top of each other.

The book helped me put my terrifying experience in perspective as I started to recall how emotionally low I had been during the past year.

Our family doctor, Bill Tamkin, commented as I related the events of the past months, "You've had a very fruitful term . . . but it was very costly."

He did not prescribe any medication. Instead, he queried, "What changes will you need to make in your lifestyle when you return to Bangkok?"

With that question tucked in my mind, my family and I set out on our five-month sabbatical leave in Singapore.

\* \* \*

Singapore—August 1996–January 1997

The first thing I did was to find a book on burnout. It seemed so easy for people to say, "I'm burned out" to mean "I'm so stressed-out." But I knew that my kind of burnout was not just simply being stressedout. And I was determined to find out what it really was.

#### What is Burnout?

*How to Beat Burnout*<sup>3</sup> by Dr. Frank Minirth, Paul Meier, Don Hawkins and Richard Flournoy helps readers understand what is dubbed as "the plague of our times." The following are excerpts from the book:

Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, who claims credit for the term, says that burnout is a depletion of energy and a feeling of being overwhelmed by others' problems.

According to psychologist Christina Maslach, an early researcher of the problem, burnout is "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion . . . and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind."

"Once fired up about their involvement with other people—(burnout victims) did give . . . and give and give, until finally there was nothing left to give any more. The teapot was empty, the battery was drained, the circuit was overloaded—they had burned out.

"... too much stress over too long a time can result in burnout. Too much burnout, without learning and applying certain coping techniques, can lead to clinical depression. We might view this on a continuum as follows:

Stress  $\longrightarrow$  Burnout  $\longrightarrow$  Depression<sup>1</sup>

It helped a lot to begin to understand this "plague of our times." I began to be assured that steps could be taken to bring me out of my emotional exhaustion.

#### Ways Out of Burnout

My time in Singapore was a period of "emptying out." One day I saw a picture of a sponge dripping with water. My heart spontaneously responded, "I'm like that sponge—so full I can't take anything in anymore. I've been absorbing the heartaches of others a bit too much. I need to make some space in my heart, like a squeezed-out sponge, before I can start taking other people's burdens in again." So I decided to avoid listening to people's problems for a time. I also read a mixture of light novels, contemplative books like Henri Nouwen's, *Reader's Digest*, women's magazines. Being an introvert, I found quietness and solitude to be companionable. Singing to God, with the wind behind me and the shed leaves under my feet, washed away sediments and remnants of weariness. Speaking to Jesus—on the bed, in the bathroom, by the washing machine, on the winding road to the grocery shop—became as natural as breathing. I devoured the Word. The daily morning worship with the staff and students of the Discipleship Training Center satisfied my craving for fellowship. How we sang!

These months saw me well into a journey of increasing intimacy with God. My petrified, sometimes pain-filled, questions to Him were answered with quiet gentleness. Along the way, however, were precipitous spiritual ravines, treacherous emotional roller-coasters, extreme faith-swings. Nevertheless, I knew that in the end I could only go one way—upwards into a growing closeness to my Father.

I knew that in the end I could only go one way—upwards into a growing closeness to my Father.

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#### Bangkok, Thailand—January 1997 onwards

The month of April was particularly oppressive, not just because of the heat, but because of the restlessness and boredom that began to knock on my door. Enjoying my relationship with Jesus was my priority. Resting from ministry was next. But I began to complain, "Father, I'm tired of resting! I want to be useful, productive. I do enjoy our times together. But I need something else to do apart from reading, writing in my journal, and housework."

#### The God of Surprises

The April meeting was my second time ever in Women Aglow. The guest speaker, who was from Canada, opened the time for prayer

ministry. As I waited, somebody edged herself between the chairs and stood in front of me. It was the visiting speaker.

Her first sentence startled me: "You are in the right place."

I brushed away a tear as I recalled my impatient restless spirit and presumptuous protests about resting from the ministry for too long. The Lord assured me that it had been right to withdraw from all forms of ministering.

The speaker continued, "This is a time of new seasons for you. Forget the past. Lord, pour the spring rains over her."

In the afternoon, as I was strolling in our neighborhood, I asked, "What could 'the new seasons' be, Father?"

Then I recollected a word of encouragement the visiting speaker had for another missionary lady in the meeting. She encouraged her to write devotionals for her friends.

I stopped in my tracks and whispered, "Father, was that for me, too? You don't mean something similar to the Scripture Union Quiet Time guides, do You? No, please. I just can't see myself doing that."

Then in my heart an impression slowly formed: I was to get the materials from my journals, write them as reflections and give them to my friends who are also burned out.

Half-excited and half-skeptical, I blurted, "Lord, is that You speaking?"

"Give to Me your two journals."

I dashed back to the house and snatched my journals from the shelf. Resuming my walk, I surrendered to the Lord my recorded experiences of the past years. July 8, 1995

Tomorrow's Sunday. I'll stay home. Just want to be alone. Don't want to see anyone—smiling, encouraging, asking people how they are . . . . can't do this anymore.

Why am I allowing depression to rule over me?

In my innermost being is a deep longing to seek Him, to feel His presence, but the emotional and spiritual resources to draw near to Him are frighteningly depleted. God is so far away.

It seems as if I'm in a deep, dark cave. Discouragement, a gnawing emptiness, self-pity, even frustration and anger have become my uninvited companions.

I would not choose to stay inside this cave for longer than a week, but I could not summon enough strength to move out into the light either. CHAPTER ONE

# Fight or Flight?

#### Bible Reading: 1 Kings 19:1–5

"Elijah was afraid and ran for his life . . . until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night." 1 KINGS 19:3, 8–9

Elijah had just emerged from a triumphant but an utterly exhausting spiritual battle. Can you imagine the scenario of the past couple of days? The electrifying encounter between spiritual forces on Mount Carmel, God's judgment on the prophets of Baal, Elijah's intense intercession for rain to come, and the outburst of supernatural strength and energy as he sped past King Ahab's chariot, running under heavy rain the eighteen miles to Jezreel.

Before news of Elijah's victory could reach the silent remnant of God's people, Jezebel had already burst into a frenzied rage. With a flick of her finger, she ordered a contract on the prophet's life.

## Fight or Flight?<sup>4</sup>

Fear crept in and overpowered the man who just hours ago had been hailed as a hero. Instead of standing his ground, instead of fighting, Elijah fled! Panic-stricken, he ran south towards Judea with one servant. On arriving in Beersheba, which was far enough from Jezebel's reach, he left his servant and traversed the harsh desert waste towards Mt. Sinai . . . alone.

After forty days of non-stop criss-crossing the unrelenting brutality of the southern wilderness his steps slackened. There at Mount Sinai, he found a cave where he spent the night.

## A Spiritual Cave

Actually, Elijah started to enter a "cave" the moment he took the first step to run for his life. Instead of turning to God, he ran away. Instead of consulting God, he fled. James in the New Testament credited him for being a prayerful man. But in wanting to escape from danger, he did not realize he was withdrawing from the fellowship of the One whose guidance he had always sought. His dramatic encounters with the living God had faded into the distant past. Everything had now become a foggy blur. Elijah had stepped into a spiritual cave as soon as he decided on his own to save his life.

## A Social Cave

By choosing only one servant to accompany him in his flight, the frightened prophet had started to tread the path of loneliness. By abandoning that same servant half-way through his journey, he had chosen to live a life of aloneness. He might not have known it at the time, but he had virtually entered a social cave.

A social cave is a mystifying thing—it can be a place of hiding and resting—where a frightened soul finds safety and security. But it can also be a place of cursing—where the distraught wallows in self-pity and unexplainable despondency.

## My Own Cave

"P' Flor,<sup>2</sup> you look ill. I also don't see you anymore in our afternoon outreach. Is something wrong?" Nee held my hand and looked straight into my eyes.

"We'll be going around this afternoon to the neighbors to invite them to our Christmas program. You're coming with us, aren't you?" she continued.

Shaking my head, I muttered, "I've been feeling very tired for sometime now, Nee. I don't exactly know why. I feel I just want to be alone."

There never was a darker cave than the one I fled to during the nine months prior to my panic attack. I withdrew from friends and church members whom I had loved so dearly.

After the morning worship service all of us in the church normally stayed on for lunch and attended the afternoon activities. Whether it be an evangelistic outreach or a special seminar or just doing fun things together, my family had always been there . . . until emotional exhaustion struck.

Other people's liveliness and chattyness, since then, seemed to me a mockery of my dark, gloomy existence.

I began to dread having to put on a smile. I cringed inwardly at the thought that I might be asked to pray for a discouraged member.

"How can the weak lead the weak? How can the despairing pray for another who's also in despair?" I asked Steve.

"I have no love to give away anymore. Yet, I am expected to love. I can't continue living like this, Steve. I just can't anymore."

Depression clouded my perception. Emotional fatigue fuelled my mounting resentment of my situation. Frustrated with myself, I would dash home after the morning worship or stay home altogether. Love for my Thai sisters got buried under the mountain of despondency. My zest for life dissolved as did every shred of motivation for any kind of ministry.

## God in My Cave

Yet not once did God rebuke or reproach me. Not even once. I never heard Him say, "Pull yourself together, will you?" Negative comments and judgmental remarks overflowed from my lips, but He had never as much as lifted a finger to shake me back to my senses. Never did He make me feel I was a failure, unworthy and undeserving of being called His servant.

Instead, He waited with me in my cave.

This I realized when I stumbled upon one devotional treasure in a Christian bookshop in Singapore. A collection of daily quotations from the Bible, Christian authors and hymn writers, the calendar-like booklet immediately captured my attention. It seemed to have been well-examined, then rejected. The plastic covering was ripped off. The corners and the edges were tattered. Nevertheless, the tiny book *Garden of Promises* compiled by Alice Chapin, refused to leave my hands. From that day on, it became my regular evening companion.

One night, this message leapt out of its pages, "Every moment of life is spent in the sight and company of an Omniscient and Omnipotent Creator.—J. I. Packer." 5

How can that be? The answer is not because He is omnipresent. The a But reading it at this time in my life, I felt as though I was treading on holy ground.

"On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

## Christ in Me, I in Him

This was why I could say that not even for a second had God let me out of His sight. Never.

He was there as I wallowed in the loneliness of my room on Sunday afternoons.

He was there when fearsome thoughts came whispering to me, "You'll never come out of this. You will always feel tired in your mind, not able to listen to your friends . . . or relatives . . . or church members. Your heart will always race and beat wildly when someone tells you a problem."

He was there when more horrific thoughts would taunt me during the night, "You will so deteriorate that your boys will be ashamed of you. How will they introduce you to their friends?"

# Though I had felt alone, the actual fact is that the Lord has never left me.

He was there when my heart raged with fear.

Though I had felt alone, the actual fact is that the Lord has never left me.

\* \* \*

# Application

Our Father never leaves us at the worst times of our lives. Perhaps, you have thought of fleeing from your present painful situation or grief. Know that God is there with you, *in you*, every moment of every day.

He is where you are right now.



Jesus, You know that I'm at the lowest point of my life now. I admit that I can't feel Your presence at this time. But I want to believe that there is no moment when You are not with me. For You are in me, Lord. And I am in You.

Thank You that I'm never out of Your sight. Amen.

June 11, 1995

My inner being struggles to be intact. I feel as though I'm stranded on a desolate mountainside.

At times I fear slipping over. Oh, Lord, You're my only hope . . . .

CHAPTER TWO

# Hemmed In

#### Bible Reading: Psalm 3:1–8

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness . . . ! You have freed me when I was hemmed in and enlarged me when I was in distress; have mercy upon me and hear my prayer. PSALM 4:1, *The Amplified Bible* 

David, the warrior-king found himself again in a tight corner.<sup>6</sup> Being cornered is just what the Hebrew word for "in distress" implies. David had found himself in dead-end situations more than once in his life as a fugitive from the insane wrath of King Saul. This time, as King of Israel, David cried for mercy as his own son, Absalom, staged a revolt and a conspiracy against him. This had forced King David to flee Jerusalem, cross the Jordan River towards the east and await the inevitable confrontation between his travel-weary men and Absalom's larger, freshly-supplied army.

What sent Israel's most popular king reeling in distress?

What sent Israel's most popular king reeling in distress? Was it the physical danger to his life? Or the unimaginable thought of spending months, if not years, living in caves and stony hills? Not likely. He was an incomparably brave fighter such as no one had known in Israel.

**Despair and Despondency** 

What, then, pushed David to cry out in desperation, "I was hemmed in?" How was it to feel hemmed in?

David says in Psalm 55:2–8:

My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught . . . my heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away . . . far from the tempest and storm."

Don't these words give us a picture of the king crouched in a tight emotional corner, cramped in a psychological space only big enough to breathe and to wish for wings to fly him out?

### Space and Safety

Interestingly, David, in his other songs, had also alluded to assurances of being set in broad places where there was plenty of room for movement. In Psalm 18:36 (THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE) he acknowledged, "You have given plenty of room for my steps under me, that my feet did not slip."

Then again in Psalm 31:8 David declared, ". . . You have set my feet in a broad place." These two are pictures of how David saw his deliverance: God putting him in situations where there is room to react wisely to pressures, to move unhindered and to maneuver his resources until victory is attained.

Whether we take these statements of David as literal or figurative, one thing is clear—David had experienced extreme despair on one hand and on the other, an unshakable confidence of his safety and sure deliverance from God.

Like David I have had moments of feeling as though I had been pinned down, pushed into a tight corner. Feeling cramped and suffocated, my mind craved for some space to move around during the first months of my burnout.

## **Emotional Claustrophobia**

An entry in my journal reads,

My mind needs some space—it is so congested it feels as if there's not a millimeter of space in it to take in more narratives of pains and heartaches from people. If only I could literally "squeeze things out" of my mind in order to make room, I would.

## A Spacious Room

I then heard a Malaysian preacher speak on Psalm 4. He paraphrased Psalm 4:1 as "God gave me room during my distress."

Immediately I scribbled on the margin of my Bible, "For me, during this dark and distressing period."

"You. . . enlarged me when I was in distress. . ." David cried.

Yes, it must be exactly like that—God enlarging my space . . . giving me room to maneuver.

"You have given plenty of room for my steps under me, that my feet did not slip."

"You have set my feet in a broad place."

Yes, God had promised sufficient room and space—enough for me to breathe and recover during moments of feeling as if I was ready to burst. He had given me "a broad space" on which I could maneuver and regain my bearings while standing on the precipitous ledges of my emotions.

\* \* \*

Application

Not all burnout victims sense this claustrophobic feeling. But if I have just described your situation, go back to Psalm 18 with me. And let

us soak ourselves in God's assurances of His watchful care and protection over us. He has promised us a spacious place!



Father, thank You that during moments of distress, of feeling cornered as if there's no way out, You enlarge my space and give me room to recover. Thank You for Your promise of a spacious place. Thank You for Your watchful care over me. Amen. January 19, 1997

King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 12:25, "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down . . ." and Proverbs 15:13, ". . . by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken."

I underlined these verses in my Bible only after my burnout had occurred. I had been weeping for no reason. Pinned it down to midlife slump, and the waves of hopelessness to hormonal changes, but never to anxiety.

So, that was it. Anxiety weighs down the heart; then gives birth to sorrow and ends in a broken spirit. I was not aware that my anxiety over the problems of our Thai brethren was gradually causing emotional and spiritual depletion in me. CHAPTER THREE

# Worry: A Health Hazard

#### Bible Reading: 1 Peter 5:6–11

Casting the whole of your care—all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all—on Him; for He cares for you affectionately, and cares about you watchfully.

1 PETER 5:7, The Amplified Bible

Picture a fisherman casting his net into the sea. Can you imagine his rugged form turning one hundred and eighty degrees from the waist to the shoulders? Arms arched, muscles rippling, strong weathered hands flinging the net away as far as his strength enables him. Heaving a delighted sigh, his eyes follow the net sink slowly into the great deep.

Could it be that Peter had that picture in mind when he wrote "Cast all your anxiety on Him"? Throw your worries away—as far as you can. Unload them into Jesus' hands. But unlike the fisherman who will retrieve his net after many hours, we are to leave our anxieties with Jesus. Once we throw them all to Him, we are not to reach for them again.

It is not difficult for us who have known the love of Jesus to bring burdens to Him; but *to leave* them with Him is quite another matter. Whether it is by nature or by habit, we feel the need to be in control. We think we are most calm when we are in charge. Therefore, leaving something in the hands of another, thereby relinquishing our control, can make us feel apprehensive and insecure.

It is interesting that Peter also says we are to cast our burdens on God *for* He cares for us. This is the same as saying, "Cast all your cares on Him because things concerning you matter to Him!" *We* matter to Him. He does not want us carrying heavy loads. He loathes seeing our shoulders tensed up or slumped because of burdens, ours and others'. It does matter to Him when we get emotionally exhausted, because He cares.

In my early months of recovering from emotional exhaustion, I constantly asked the Lord, "Why had I come to this stage?" I thought it's only those with type A, choleric personality that get stressed out. I'm not a choleric, I'm more of a phlegmatic. So what had caused this burnout?

As I meditated on Peter's admonition above, one cause stood out in my mind. I had failed *to leave* my burdens in God's hands.

#### Wrong Pattern of Burden-bearing

Steve and I were involved with fourteen growing churches, both in Bangkok and in the Northeast of Thailand. We came to love our Thai brothers and sisters, sharing their struggles and inner conflicts.

But as time passed, I began to feel the weight of their problems. Added to that I became involved in a counseling ministry absorbing the hurts and grief of young Thai women. Over time the weight of their burdens began to crush me and I longed to be able to pray with another missionary but as the problems were confidential I couldn't. I prayed for them as best as I could—and this was where my problem lay.

#### **Reclaimed Burdens**

I prayed . . . but did not leave their problems with God. As little as an hour later, my thoughts would already be swirling with burdens just prayed for. Whether cooking, doing the dishes, or ironing, I would be turning and tossing their problems over in my mind. My heart ached as I thought of their emotional wounds and sorrows and of their present and their future.

And was it not alright to do that? Even the apostle Paul had been weighed down with anxiety for the churches everyday! I commended

myself for loving the Thais in this way.

"This is true, hands-on, genuine ministry!" the thought was gratifying.

I failed to see, however, that internalizing their problems was eating into my own emotional resources. It was never the fault of my Thai sisters to have shared their burdens with me. My mistake was I carried their burdens the wrong way.

Almost as a duty, I handed their problems over to God. But I also kept retrieving them, allowing them to swirl around inside me and drain my spiritual energy.

It was not surprising, therefore, that I ended up emotionally depleted.

#### God's Pattern of Burden-bearing

It took burnout to teach me a foolproof way of carrying burdens: *Give* all anxieties and cares into God' hands *and leave* them there.

Let the pressure be on His shoulders; the pain be in His heart; and the weight of the burden be in His hands.

Let the pressure be on His shoulders; the pain be in His heart; and the weight of the burden be in His hands.

\* \* \*

# Application

Does your profession or ministry nurture others but deplete you? Is it because you have been carrying burdens and problems the wrong way?

There is a way for us to learn the art of helping others without getting depleted. Simply *give and leave* all burdens into God's loving hands.

The New Living Translation renders 1 Peter 5:7 as "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you."

Let us remember the old saying, "You cannot pray and worry at the same time."

# Prayer

Lord God, I admit that I've been carrying my worries the wrong way. Please stop me as soon as I make a move to retrieve what I've already given to You. I do want to leave my burdens and anxieties completely in Your hands. Take all my pressures and pain. Thank You that You want to do this because You care. Amen. September 7, 1997

Where was I when God wanted to answer my questions? I have to admit I was not always there to listen to His answers. Although my body was attuned to Him, my mind was somewhere else; my heart engaged in thinking of other mundane things.

But now I am forced to rest and reflect, to ask questions and be there to receive answers. It took being exhausted to make me stop and listen. CHAPTER FOUR

# Wrong Priorities

#### Bible Reading: John 12:1–8

(Jesus) said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant . . . and they were afraid to ask him about it.

LUKE 9:43-45

Mary . . . sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.

LUKE 10:39

Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

Many Christian retreats have delved into one of the most quoted scenes in the Bible: Mary sitting at Jesus' feet. She is a model of true and devoted discipleship. All because she sat at the Lord's feet.

It is a shame that the more important facet of her love for Jesus seems to go unnoticed, if not ignored.

Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to what He said. Listening!

#### Mary, the Radical

Raised up in a culture where the kitchen, not the synagogue, was the woman's domain, Mary intently absorbed in all that Jesus taught. Where women's talk and the latest gossip crowded a young woman's world, she was totally captivated by this Son of Man who also claimed to be the Son of God. Not even the stern glares from her sister Martha, who with impatient and irritated gestures was demanding that she come to the kitchen immediately, could budge Mary from her place at the feet of Jesus.

In John 12, we read of Jesus and His disciples again dining in Martha's house. Mary enters the room with half a liter jar of exotic perfume, reputed to have come from India. Exquisite and pricey. She must have saved long and hard to buy this luxury. Without hesitation, she poured the perfume on Jesus' feet. Frowns were cast in her direction and she was reprimanded for her alleged wasteful extravagance.

#### Mary, the Listener and Doer

But not Jesus. In her defense, He declared that Mary had just anointed Him in preparation for His burial.

Apparently, Jesus had been warning them of His impending death. Mary alone sensed, in that visit of Jesus to Bethany, that it might be His last.

The disciples and Mary had been sitting at Jesus' feet. Each one heard Jesus' words.

But who was genuinely listening?

Out of this reflection on Mary, a heart-searching question came to me: "My child, where were you when I wanted to speak with you?"

#### Seated but Not Present

Many times, I have sat at Jesus' feet alright. . . but listened? I doubt it.

My Bible was open and my eyes were staring at the passage but my mind was meandering somewhere else. A Thai sister's problem with her husband, a recent telephone conversation with a deaconess. Physically I was in the position to meet with Jesus in His Word, but I was not mentally, not even spiritually there to interact with Him.

Many times, I have sat at Jesus' feet alright . . . but listened?

To Him I was *not present*. I was, simply, not there.

It did not take long for this rude behavior to become a habit. (I did not call it rude then, having excused myself by saying I was so intent with concerns for the brethren.) And the habit soon became a pattern. And the pattern, a lifestyle.

A lifestyle that presumes God will brush aside His yearning for intimacy with His children as long as ministries are faithfully performed.

### Mary's Choice

It was when emotional overload struck that I remembered what Jesus said, "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

The picture of Mary's face as she was listening to Jesus burrowed deep in my mind. Her face was set like a flint. Determined to hang on to every word that Jesus uttered.

Her thirst to hear more, to know more, seemed unquenchable. She knew what she wanted; she knew her priorities.

#### Wrong Priorities

Mary's love for Jesus and His words was just the opposite of my smug, complacent stance as I sat before the Word. My placing of ministry concerns above my relationship with Jesus was a prelude to entering a danger zone. It was not too long before the consequences of my wrong priorities became evident. Nick Cuthbert, a British pastor, once said, "Stress occurs when the *external* pressure is greater than the *internal* resource."<sup>T</sup>

It took burnout to make me desire not only God's interactive presence in my life, but also and especially, my own presence before Him. With my whole being now present to God, I quietly come to Him and say, "Lord, I'm here—listening."

#### Practicing the Presence of God

The Lord, in His grace, is making me conscious of His presence, not only when I'm reading His Word, but also when I'm doing mundane tasks like scrubbing the bathroom floor.

My short conversations with God do not consist of elaborate praises and eloquently-stated or well-structured sentences. They're simple talks when I say one or two sentences about anything. Sometimes He answers as soon as the last word leaves my mouth. He has made me more alert to recognize His replies, more sensitive to His voice. At other times, He is silent. But His silence does not scare me; it makes me wait.

#### Lifting My Heart to God

I learned from Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth century monk that at times, words are not even necessary. A mere lifting of the heart towards Jesus may be enough. Brother Lawrence wrote to his friend, "At the table and in the midst of conversation, lift your heart at times towards Him. . . . He is nearer to us than we think."<sup>8</sup>

My waking thoughts are now immediately directed to Him as I spontaneously thank Him for life. What a wonder it is to welcome the sunlight streaming through the curtains, to relish the melodious sound of the wind caressing the mango tree outside, and at the same time attributing all these to God's awesome grace. I don't even use words. Lifting my heart towards Him is all that I do during those times. Likewise, Father-God does not always use words or impressions to communicate to me His love. Sometimes it's a simple stirring in my heart, followed by a sudden welling-up of a desire to embrace Him, as a cherished daughter stretches her arms to encircle her father.

I am not saying that I have it all sorted out. I am learning, however, that "sitting and listening at the feet of Jesus" can be wherever I am —for, indeed, He is nearer to me than I think.

\* \* \*

## Application

No pastor, no missionary, no people-helper, no Christian CEO can survive if his or her inner life is not nurtured and fed with God's Word and with His interactive presence.

We all know this yet most of the time we are guilty of spiritual neglect.

We presume that because it is God's work keeping us from spending that much-needed time with Him, He will overlook it. We assume that He will somehow help us make up for our diminishing spiritual stamina without us having to go through the discipline of spending time with Him.

With God there are always new beginnings. We can stop external pressures from overwhelming us by starting to strengthen our inner resources.

# Prayer

Dear Jesus, I have been so stubborn. I knew there was no way I could cope with the demands and stresses of life and ministry unless I come to You regularly for feeding and strengthening. Yet I insisted

on my own way. Please help me live in Your presence every moment of the day from now on. Amen.

February 6, 1997

Lord, You see the struggles of my own heart. Please help me forgive myself.

CHAPTER FIVE

# Guilt and Self-condemnation

#### Bible Reading: Luke 22:54–62

... the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony .... REVELATION 12:10–11

Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

**ROMANS 8:34** 

Guilt-ridden. That was Peter as he strode out of the courtyard weeping bitterly. He had just denied knowing Jesus for the third time and the rooster crowed. Jesus had looked straight into his eyes. Then he knew. This was the moment Jesus had predicted.

#### The Self-Confident Disciple

Incredulous that he had done what he did, he mentally replayed the events of the past days. Once full of self-confidence, he had declared that he was ready to go with Jesus to prison and even to death. But the crunch came when a servant girl recognized him to be one of Jesus' followers. The first denial. Then the second. Recalling the third time caused Peter to choke with remorse. He had cursed and sworn with an oath, "I don't know this man!"

Then the rooster crowed.

The look on Jesus' face. The absence of condemnation. He only seemed to say, "Do you remember?"

Unrestrained sobbing tore the stillness of the hillside as Peter's guilt intensified.

#### The Accuser of the Saints

The devil had been waiting for this time.

"Hah! You good-for-nothing fisherman. You even thought you could be His right-hand man, didn't you? Now look who has just disowned Him!"

Satan is not just a liar, a murderer, and a destroyer, he is also an accuser and very good at it, too. He never lets up. Revelation 12:10 states that he accuses the saints all day and all night!

Satan's accusing has a two-pronged objective: to make the accused feel hopeless and to make Jesus look ridiculous for persisting to defend the accused.

Jesus, however, will never take the bait. He will never look back at the cross and say, "It has been a waste. The human race was not worth dying for."

But when a Christian wallows in despair, Satan scores a goal. Jesus knew how Peter would feel after denying Him, that was why He said, "I have prayed for you that you may not lose your faith."

#### Intercessor and Advocate

Imagine Jesus praying fervently, His whole heart and soul being poured over Peter. Who could be more familiar with the flaws in this disciple's character than Jesus? He knew exactly where Satan would find a foothold in Peter's life.

Jesus' intercessory role did not end with Simon Peter. Hebrews 7:25 tells us Jesus is presently interceding for us who are God's children.

Jesus is presently interceding for us who are God's children.

How does Jesus' interceding assure us that we will triumph over Satan's lethal accusations?

Jesus is not advocating for us in a vacuum. This is clearly revealed in Romans 8:34. His intercessory prayer is rooted in the sacrifice of His life, through the shedding of His blood for us. God raised Him up from the dead, living proof that His sacrifice has been accepted by God. He is now exalted and is seated at the right hand of God—the place of power and authority—from which position he now makes intercession for us!

Who, then, can condemn us? Absolutely no one.

#### My Condemning Heart

Numerous times I have made mistakes. Many are minor but some seem to be major and written in indelible ink. They were more due to my immaturity at that time, insensitivity to the feelings of others and worse, to personality clashes. These mistakes relentlessly played havoc with my mind.

#### False Guilt

Feelings of condemnation flashed back even after I had asked forgiveness from the person I had offended. I felt that I ought to have done better under the circumstances. And I had failed.

This haunting feeling of failure oppressed me. It strangled my faith in God's forgiveness and opened the door to false guilt.

Jesus knew this flaw in my personality—I churned the past over and over again in my mind. I seemed to love rewinding a video tape of mistakes and offenses I committed against others! I did not know at the time that false guilt was a stressor. False guilt robbed me of peace; it stole my joy; and it undermined my relationship with the people I was called to serve. This was a major stress factor putting a strain on my emotional and spiritual health.

### The God of Mercy

God was merciful, though. He opened my eyes to see Jesus advocating for me from a position of power and authority. He helped me question the source of my guilt feelings. Once I asked who and where the accusations were coming from, truth resurfaced. No one can condemn me now. Not Satan, not even myself.

\* \* \*



False guilt and self-condemnation, coupled with the propensity to churn things over and over again, can put a strain on our emotional health. The process can be quite slow and subtle so that we do not notice joy and gladness gradually slipping away. And when we do become aware of diminishing spiritual vibrancy in our life, the last thing we think to blame is ourselves with our self-censure and disparagement.

The time has come to close the cracks that allow these lies into our lives. Now is the time to entrust our case to Jesus, our Defense Counsel.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank You for covering all my mistakes and failures with Your blood. Thank You that I don't have to live under this blanket of false guilt and self-imposed failure anymore. I declare them to be lies and false accusations from the enemy. Thank You for being my defense counsel before God, our Father. And I know we will always win! Amen. December 30,1998

said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, Sive me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown". And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."

[M. Louise Haskins]<sup>9</sup>

"The unknown" has taken a whole new meaning for me. I had thought that coming to Thailand as a missionary would not be very difficult, after all I'm an Asian. I was wrong. CHAPTER SIX

# Out of My Comfort Zone

#### Bible Reading: Ruth 1:1–7

So the two women (Naomi and Ruth) went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.

While recovering from burnout, I looked back and scanned the past for possible factors that contributed to my emotional exhaustion. I was told that adapting to a new and different culture can be a major stress factor for anyone.

Are there accounts in the Bible of men and women who got stressed out due to living in a strange and unfamiliar culture? The question intrigued me and prodded me to examine the Scriptures. Of the countless biblical characters who journeyed in foreign lands, one woman aroused my curiosity: Naomi.

#### On a Cross-cultural Journey

During the time when judges ruled Israel, famine struck the land of Judah. A family from Bethlehem set out to seek respite in Moab.

On the surface, it would seem that Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons had little to adjust to in Moab. The language spoken in Moab

RUTH 1:19-21

was a dialect of Hebrew as Israel and Moab shared a common ancestor, Abraham. Their culture shock, I would have imagined, could have been brought about by a most obnoxious aspect of Moabite culture: child sacrifice.

#### The Inevitable Clash

Chemosh was the national deity of Moab and was appeased with degrading and cruel rites like burning children as sacrificial offering. The Moabites also worshipped fertility gods and goddesses which encouraged the proliferation of temple prostitutes.

These Hebrew immigrants must have flinched at the sight of handcarved idols dotting the hillsides and at the sound of hair-raising chants as fire consumed yet another child at the temple of Chemosh. To keep their heads above water in a society saturated with idolatry and human sacrifice the couple must have resorted to a favorite pastime among Hebrew families: story-telling. Would Naomi have told her daughters-in-law of God's miraculous deliverance and provision for Israel in the wilderness those forty years? Would she have sung songs of praises like the ones that Moses and Miriam had sung? Naomi's faith in the one and only true God must have been irresistible such that Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, declared to her one day, "Your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Trying to stay in the light and to let that light shine forth amidst an overwhelming darkness as was found in Moab must have been very stressful for Naomi.

#### Last Straw

As if coping with that kind of stress was not enough, her husband died, followed by her two sons. The death of a beloved is tragic, but what do you make of the death of three loved ones?

Naomi was then faced with the grinding poverty of widowhood. There was nothing left for her to do but to return to Judah where she had heard the drought had at last broken.

Bereft of her husband and two sons, her youth and financial resources, she bluntly asked her old friends in Bethlehem, "Don't call me Naomi (Pleasant) anymore, call me Mara (Bitter) for the Lord has made my life very bitter."

Could grief, poverty and the stressful years of adapting to a foreign culture have contributed towards Naomi's resentment and bitterness in life?

## God's Surprise

Naomi's story did not end here though. She was yet to uncover a precious gift that God had stored for her. God's plan began to be unravelled soon after Naomi and Ruth's arrival in Bethlehem which "coincided" with the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth found favor in the eyes of Boaz, a barley field owner and a relative of her father-in-law Elimelech. He allowed her to glean and gather leftover grains behind the harvesters. Clearly, mutual respect and admiration stirred in both their hearts the first day they met.

And Naomi, of course, was not slow to these things. Steeped in the laws of Moses and the Jewish customs, she knew that Boaz, being a close relative, could be expected to take Ruth as his wife, thereby redeeming the name and the property of Naomi's dead husband and sons. And she was not disappointed—Boaz took Ruth as his wife.

# A Joyous Ending

Naomi's face glowed as she held Ruth's baby boy in her arms. The wonder of God's gift to Naomi was best put by her neighbors when they said to her, "Now at last Naomi has a son again!" (Ruth 4:16, NLT)

That child was Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who in turn was the father of David.

And, as we all know, Jesus Christ our Lord came from the line of King David.

Naomi's story brought back memories of my first years of adapting in Thailand. The language, being tonal, proved hugely difficult for me. Loneliness visited me frequently during those years. Days set aside for rest and relaxation were few in proportion to my physical and spiritual needs. I was not aware then that these, among other things, would contribute to my emotional overload.

#### Tears over the Thai language

*"Farang! Farang!"*<sup>3</sup> The children at a wet market where we were distributing Christian literature shouted at Steve.

"Pen yangai, khap? Sabai dee mai khap?"<sup>4</sup> Steve greeted back.

The children froze then nudged each other, "The *farang* could speak Thai!"

I, as a foreigner coming from the Philippines, endowed with Chinese eyes and brown-yellowish complexion, did not elicit the same awed reaction. Actually I would have no problem at all if only I could keep my mouth shut the whole time. The incredulous, confused look came when I spoke more than two sentences in Thai.

"You look very much like a Thai, but you don't speak Thai well. How come?"

This question had been obviously asked with all innocence and devoid of any derogatory intention. But I began to question whether I was really cut out for Thailand.

#### Language Study: a Principal Stressor

Each move towards change strains the emotions; each attempt to adapt taxes the system.

Learning and using the new language took so much out of me. Once, we were entertaining some Thai guests in our home and I wanted to dish rice on to their plates. Very graciously, I said, "*Khoo chaan noi kha. Cha tak khao kha.*" A muffled giggle came out from one of the guests. I was then told that what I actually said was, "I'll put some knee on your plate!"

These embarrassing times, whenever I used a wrong word or tone, although funny, proved to be stressful.

Being the proud person I was, I got tense when asked to read a Bible verse or to pray aloud in a prayer meeting. At that time, I was not aware that stress hormones were produced and circulated in my system every time I got frustrated with linguistic challenges that were simply beyond me.

#### Struggle with Loneliness

My struggle with the language contributed to my deep loneliness, a struggle many new missionaries experience.

Steve and I were independent missionaries so we lacked the strong support and care of an organized missionary organization. Our churches in England and the Philippines had sent us out to serve directly under the local Thai church. We had felt this was the way the Lord was leading us.

The six months of intensive language study took up most of my time and energy that I had no time to miss my family in the Philippines. On the seventh month homesickness suddenly struck.

"What are you staring at outside the window?" Steve queried.

I turned to him, "I'm missing Mother. I wonder how my sisters are doing. My friends . . . ."

"Yes, I understand but what about thinking of it this way: We have a new family here, our church. And you have new friends here."

"I know. But I can't share my deep thoughts with them. I don't know the Thai words to express what's really going on inside me. I didn't realize it can be this painful—that I wouldn't be able to share deeply."

In due time, my Thai improved. As it limped from being terrible to somewhat bearable, other factors that hindered deep communication surfaced: age and maturity gap. The members of our church were young, not only in age but also in spiritual experience. I loved them as my younger brothers and sisters. But I missed the peer fellowship that I had enjoyed in the Philippines.

Later on, the Lord gifted me with friends from different nationalities, both missionaries and expatriates. For a time I delighted in a same-wavelength camaraderie, laughing together at jokes that did not need to be repeated or explained, reminiscing about familiar places and events, praying together spontaneously and meaningfully. But then the inevitable happened: They were assigned to work elsewhere or they had to go back to their home countries.

#### Loneliness of Leadership

Loneliness does not only come from the lack of soul-mates; the position of leadership is actually a very lonely place.

One of God's precious gifts to us was the trust of our Thai sisters and brothers. The pastors and the church leaders drew Steve into the leadership committees where all kinds of issues were discussed, from visions to problems, from financial matters to disciplinary measures. And these were not just from one church but from the other churches in the Association of New Life Churches as well.

From the very beginning, Steve had shared the burden of the ministry with me and I reveled in my role as a support and sounding board for him. As the problems, however, multiplied, my own need for a sounding board became evident. But I could not have the same luxury. Many things were confidential and needed to remain as such. The position of leadership is, indeed, a very lonely place.

# Stripped of a Vital Support System

When a woman comes from a closely-knit family, she feels the sting of loneliness most acutely when she gives birth in a foreign country. I was blessed that two of my sisters came during the birth of my two sons though they had to leave after two weeks. I still remember the dread of touching my son's feverish body and not knowing what could have caused it. I wished my mother and sisters were just a local phone call away. Medical books, my neighbors' advice, hospital visits, although helpful many times, seemed to lack something. And I knew what was missing: the warmth of my family. I longed for my mother and sisters' touch, the assurance of their soothing voices and the authoritative ring of family history and experience.

## Need for Rest and Relaxation

During the first months of my burnout, Steve and I were given a thorough physical examination by one of the doctors of a missionary organization in England. After interviewing and examining us, she said, "I'm actually surprised that you were burned out only now, after sixteen years of serving in Thailand. I know of many missionaries who have had to go back to their own countries due to burnout after only ten years of service. And they've never gone back to the mission field."

"Do you have a day-off? How much holiday do you take?" she continued.

"Uh, we do try to take two half-days off every week." Then I brightened up, "But we go on holidays two weeks a year."

Shaking her head, the doctor said, "Two weeks? That's not enough. You expend a great amount of mental and emotional energy each time you shift your thinking as you try to understand what a person of another culture is communicating to you. You should take, at least, a month's holiday each year."

# A New Resolve

While I cannot do much about the realities of cross-cultural mission work—acquiring linguistic ability, missing my family of origin, or accepting loneliness as part of leadership, there is one aspect of cross-cultural living that I can do something about. I shall look for more ways and means to replenish my dwindling physical, emotional, and spiritual resources.

\* \* \*



We, cross-cultural missionaries, tend to underestimate the ravages that constant adapting to a new mindset and to another way of doing things can inflict on our emotions. And so we blaze on unmindful of our tiredness, citing sacrifice, ministry, and especially God's calling to justify our frenzied Christian activities. We need to remind ourselves that this cannot go on without adverse effects on our lives and service to God.

Unwinding—getting away from the daily grind of ministry—is not a waste of time; it is essential. The wife of one overdriven missionary asked her husband, "How would you want to serve the Lord: by over-stretching yourself and dying soon, or by being wise, thereby serving Him longer?"

# Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You are sovereign over the changes in my life. You know the strains and stresses that adapting to these changes produces. Please give me wisdom and strength as I react and respond to the challenges that confront me. Enable me to serve You better and longer as I take good care of the resources You've given to me. Amen.

January 29, 1997

Dependence upon God is to acknowledge that—

"You have no strength but what God gives and you can have all the strength that God can give."

Andrew Murray<sup>10</sup>

CHAPTER SEVEN

# **Misplaced Dependence**

#### Bible Reading: Deuteronomy 8:1–18

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . .

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God. . . when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your silver and gold increase . . . and your heart will become proud . . . But remember the LORD your God. . .

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3, 11-13, 18

The desert wanderings were over. Resting and waiting in Moab, on the east side of the Jordan River, the Israelites were on the verge of entering Canaan. Moses was giving them last instructions before they crossed the river to conquer the land God had promised to them.

This was a pivotal point in their journey. It could be a place where they drop their guard and dream of the fatty, garlic-spiced meats of their childhood, or mouth-watering honey-coated dates, thus, dulling their alertness and waking up appetites that had been denied for the past forty years. Or it could be the spot where God's people would resolve in their hearts to obey God at any cost.

This short reprieve by the river bank called for fresh challenges and stern warnings. Here Moses chose to remind them of God's *purposeful* dealings with them. He had humbled them, tested them, to know whether they would keep His commands or not.

Humbled them? Why?

# Wrong Dependence Points

The Hebrews had always been self-reliant. They were a strong race, with instincts sharpened by a nomadic lifestyle, bodies hardened by the bone-breaking construction work under their Egyptian taskmasters and willpower toughened by the indignities they had suffered as slaves. To survive, they had to rely on their own strength.

It was this attitude of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, this independent spirit that God zeroed in as the Israelites wandered in the desert. God knew that the wilderness would not be able to sustain even the minimal dietary needs of two million people. Of what use would be their famed strength, without the natural resources to work on? In no time at all, hunger and thirst stared them in the face. God's people came to realize only a miracle from the Most High would do.

### **Dependence Points Removed**

God had to pull the objects of earthly dependence from under their feet in order that they may learn to rely and lean on God alone. They were brought low. Humbled. Pride in their strength was crushed.

If only to know in their hearts that they were alive only because of the Lord their God.

The Almighty God had to teach me the same lesson.

### **Misplaced Dependence**

I never knew what being drained of all human strength meant until that day when my first experience of a panic attack almost debilitated me.

Fairly good health, a calm, level-headed temperament, a consistent and stable spiritual life—these were blessings I had thanked God for. To others, I was a picture of a mature, serene, gifted servant of God.

But God saw through me. He knew the real me.

Mine was a life of misplaced dependence, all very subtle though. A paradox, actually. Acknowledging God as the source of these blessings, yet covertly being proud of my maturity and spirituality.

Relying on my good health, my spiritual gifts, decades of Christian experience and mid-life maturity that is more appealing than offending (or so I thought!), I glided into a comfortably fulfilling counseling ministry.

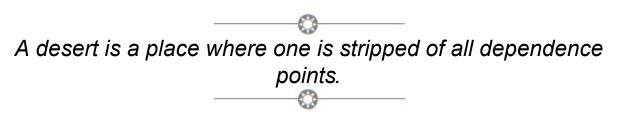
# Pride and Glory

Before I knew it, I had started patting myself on the back. Selfglorying which was synonymous with glory-grabbing soon followed. Outwardly I gave God the glory but in my mind I was replaying how well I had handled a particular counseling situation.

And it went on until God had to take me down a peg or two by bringing me to the desert of emotional exhaustion.

# **Desert of Nothingness**

A desert is a place where one is stripped of all dependence points. Nothing but the howling wind, the swirling sandstorm, the harsh sun and the lethal coldness of the night, and with no refuge whatsoever in sight.



I was in an emotional desert. I had nothing to show for myself, apart from Jesus Christ I was nothing. He allowed me to be drained of all human strength—strength which I thought was naturally mine.

It was humbling to be brought low, made weak.

Then, like the Israelites of Moses' time, God fed me with manna, an abundance of spiritual food which I had neither known nor experienced before. Intimations came from the Father to teach me that I could not live in my own strength, or on my own spirituality.

For in reality, I had neither.

# Living on God's Strength

I now acknowledge that the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual strength I have at present is God's, not my own. I can only shop for groceries because of God's enabling. Lead Bible studies because He is merciful. Enjoy days-off with my husband and write email to my two sons because He is strengthening me. Yes, I do need His strength to enable me to do even the small things, and to help me live the ordinary day-to-day living.

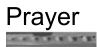
I wrote to a friend: "One thing I learned from last year's experience is that I cannot depend on my own strength anymore. *I lost that strength last year*. The strength I now live by is no longer my own, but God's."

\* \* \*

# Application

Losing something is not always a negative thing; we only come to know what we have had when we lose it.

After the loss we discover something new that we never had before. And this is when the losing becomes a blessing.



Father, forgive me for relying on my good health, my abilities, training and experience. I admit that although I outwardly acknowledged You, I was also seeking my own glory. Now that I lay bare before You, stripped of everything that I can boast of, I can only say," Thank You. For I have found You, my Strength and my Joy. Amen. July 22, 1996

Lesley was praying for me today when she laid her hand on mine, saying, "You will have a secret place located in your inner heart. It will be like a ledge behind a waterfall. You can stand on that ledge and be there anytime to commune with your Father." I will be there, Lord. And thank You so much for friends like Lesley. July 22, 1996 Lesley was praying for me today when she laid her hand on mine, saying, "You will have a secret place located in your inner heart. It will be like a ledge behind a waterfall. You can stand on that ledge and be there anytime to commune with your Father."

I will be there, Lord. And thank You so much for friends like Lesley. when God

# CHAPTER EIGHT

# Angel's Touch

#### Bible Reading: 1 Kings 18:16–35; 19:1–9

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat."

1 KINGS 19:7

Victory does not come without a cost.

Elijah's triumph over the followers of Baal, the fertility god of the Canaanites, was so dramatic and stupendous it exacted a heavy toll on Elijah's emotional state. His decision to flee from Jezebel's wrath was a result of a sudden attack of fear compounded by an intensified state of exhaustion.

He plunged south into the wild expanse and eighty miles later, sank down in a heap under a juniper tree. Exhausted, spent, confused, terrified and alone, he despaired of life itself.

"I have had enough, Lord."

### **Professional Care**

God saw behind his servant's plea to die, the intense strain and pressures that he had just been through. Quietly, He set to work, providing what Elijah basically needed at such a time: sleep, food and drink. Moreover, God made sure that Elijah received "professional" care. He sent an angel to keep him company through the night. An angel's hands shaped the dough and baked bread for him. Water was drawn and poured into a clay jar for him. An angel's tender touch coaxed him to get up and eat. Presumably hours later, the angel gently touched him the second time and urged him to rise up and eat some more. The angel also reminded Elijah of the long journey ahead of him. Nourished and strengthened by that last meal, Elijah traversed the harsh desert for forty days until he arrived at Mount Sinai, the mountain of God.

Reading how an angel ministered to Elijah's needs reminded me how God sent friends to comfort and encourage me during the first confusing months of burnout.

### Angels in the Flesh

In Manchester, friends took me to Bumbles, a quaint tea shop in the village where we chatted and laughed over tea and hot buns. A couple surprised my family with paid reservations for a week's holiday at a Welsh resort.

Friends in Bangkok, Singapore and America phoned or visited to pray for me. God-given counselors ministered to me with compassion and wisdom. The staff and students of Discipleship Training Center were among those angels who touched my weary soul on its way to recovery. And I believe there were many others who had prayed on their own, unknown maybe to me, but not to God.

### **Never Alone**

Like Elijah, I found myself on an unplanned journey—one that brought me through the uncharted territory of burnout. The roads were unfamiliar, but God knew the way. He knew how far I had to travel. He gave the necessary provisions for whatever lay ahead: rest, nourishment, and the love of His people.

As He was to Elijah, so He became to me.

\* \* \*

# Prayer

Father, You understand what's happening inside me right now even though I don't. You know how utterly exhausted I feel. Please restore my strength and minister to me as You had done to Elijah.

Thank You for \_\_\_\_\_\_ who has/have brought me Your comfort and ministered to me. Thank You for touching me through them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

June 14, 1996

I didn't know that my perception of who I am had been inextricably linked with my usefulness and productivity. Due to my burnout I could only see myself as a blunt tool in His Kingdom work. Good for nothing. Worthless. Like broken pottery.

# CHAPTER NINE

# Roots . . . More than Fruits

#### Bible Reading: Luke 10:17–24

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

LUKE 10:17-20

### Power exhilarates.

The disciples were ecstatic as they cast evil spirits out of the demon-possessed. Sunburned fishermen, tax collectors, militant radicals—all untutored in the theological halls of their day—driving demons away? Unthinkable!

With surging power and near-incredulity they reported, "Lord, *even* demons obey us when we use the authority of Your name!"

Nonchalantly, Jesus responded, "This is not the thing that matters most, you know. What's more important is that your names are in heaven."

Was Jesus being indifferent to the disciples' successes? Why, instead of commending them, did He dampen their enthusiasm?

### The Potential of Power

Jesus must have known that power, even constructive power, could breed pride. And that a craving for prestige would follow next. After this the reality of the saying, "Power corrupts" was not too far away. In no time at all, His followers would begin to measure fruitfulness and productiveness with statistics and sensational reports on their healing and preaching ministries. It would not be long before they started to equate fulfillment and personal worth with their successes. Results, numbers, spiritual gifts, empowerment, more signs, more wonders: these would become their all-consuming passion.

Jesus saw otherwise. His yardstick for real joy and lasting fulfillment was so opposite man's. Drawing His disciples aside, He said, "How privileged you are. You have seen what prophets and kings longed to see but did not."

"You saw Me."

## A Satisfying Ministry

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak" is one of the easier commandments for me. Perhaps this is the reason why encouraging and counseling seem second nature to me.

I remember May<sup>5</sup> relating to me how her father tied her to a mango tree for a whole night. While big red ants crawled in and out of her clothes, her mind tried to shut out terrifying thoughts of ghosts hovering around.

Then there was Aree<sup>5</sup> who recalled how her drunk father chased her with a knife in the rice fields. And  $Jen^{5}$  who had been kicked and hit by her two brothers in Thai boxing style, not once but numerous times.

Our pastor's wife and I listened and prayed with these young women. We cried to the Lord, and together claimed God's promises of cleansing, healing, and restoration. The Holy Spirit led in amazing ways.

I realized that I had found my niche in the Thai church: counseling. For four years I stood amazed at how God worked in renewing the lives of our Thai brothers and sisters. Then, burnout struck.

# A Ministry Taken Away

My panic attack occurred just before my family was due to leave for England. During our first month in Manchester, I began to dread intense discussions and prayer meetings. After about ten minutes in a serious conversation, my mind would start to feel crowded and tight. I had to excuse myself, afraid my head might explode if I continued listening and pretending everything was all right. After some time I realized that my inability to listen had become a regular occurrence. I cry out to God, "Father, if I can't listen to other people's problems anymore, what will I be in the future? Will this mean I won't be able to counsel anymore? How else can I serve the Thai church if I can no longer listen to people?"

I felt my future slipping away. God was taking away the one gift I felt good at, and to my mind then, He was also taking away a ministry that had given me much fulfillment in the past four years.

Grieving, I told myself, "You're of no use now. You're worthless. What's your life for?"

I shared this with my counselor, Bette Finlay. At the close of our first meeting, she casually asked me, "What is the most important thing in your life, Flor?"

She must know my answer to that. It's superfluous, I thought defensively.

Silence. She did not pursue the question any further.

# **Truth Restored**

Walking back home, I was startled to hear in my heart the Lord bouncing Bette's question back to me.

"What is the most important thing in your life, Flor?"

"You know it's You, Lord. You know You are the most important thing in my life."

"If it is Me, why are you anxious if I take the capacity to listen away from you? If I am the most important thing in your life, why are you grieving if I take away the ministry of counseling from your hands?" Tears filled my eyes as the truth hit me.

"Father," I whispered, "You may take away anything You please abilities, capacities, ministries, anything. It doesn't matter anymore. As long as I have You, that would be enough for me."

\* \* \*



Burnout incapacitates. It does not make us, the sufferers, bedridden but it can take the wind out of our sails. Physically, we look fit, but mentally and emotionally, we are put out of gear. We become incapable of doing some things, which leaves us feeling useless. A problem arises if we have unconsciously intertwined our identity with productivity, our value with usefulness. When burnout renders us incapacitated, although temporarily, our self-worth starts plummeting. If grief or resentment over being made useless enters into the picture, recovery will even be slower.



Jesus said, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Let our identity rest on our roots, not on our fruits.

# Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, that You value me for who I am, not for what I do. I bring to You my feelings of uselessness and worthlessness. I now see that my worth does not depend on my abilities, gifts or successes. You have me, I have You—that is enough for me. Amen.

January 9, 1997

I am what I am now because Jesus has been praying.

CHAPTER TEN

# When God Intervenes

### Bible Reading: Luke 22:31–34

"Oh, Simon, Simon, do you know that Satan has asked to have you all to sift like wheat?—but I have prayed for you that you may not lose your faith. Yes, when you have turned back to me, you must strengthen these brothers of yours."

LUKE 22:31–32, J.B. Phillips Revised Edition

Satan has asked to have you all that he might sift you like wheat," Jesus confided to Peter.

Could it be possible in that instant that Job's name flashed before Peter's eyes?

Could the following scenario have occurred before God's throne? One day the angels presented themselves before God. Satan also came. And God spoke to Satan, "What are you up to now?" Satan replied, "I saw Your Son teaching a group of twelve hardy-looking men. They looked as if they would give up everything for Him. But give me Your permission and I will show them up for what they really are. I will prove to You that they are mere chaff, easily blown away by the wind. Worthless."

True, the disciples did not have such a great track record. There was Judas, a known embezzler. Did he not betray Jesus for a fee? And James and John? Did they not make a bid for power asking for seats of honor in the kingdom of heaven? What about the rest? They all quarreled about who was the greatest!

What is in Man

Jesus knew what is in man. Only Jesus had seen, truly seen, through to the utter baseness and unimaginable filth of the human race.

He knew that unless He was to break in upon man's inherent bent for sin, this small band might indeed end up as wind-blown husks.

"But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."

"But," a barely noticeable word. It carries, however, a tremendous weight in the management of human and heavenly affairs. When Jesus used it, He meant Satan will not just be given a free rein to inflict sorrow, harm and injury. In the case of Peter, the enemy will never be allowed the pleasure of victory.

### Jesus Had Intervened!

Jesus spoke, radiating power and authority over every heavenly and earthly situation, "But I have prayed for you . . ." The Son of God Himself had stepped in.

This declaration of Jesus was one of God's first healing touches that led me to recover from burnout.

## **Being Sifted**

In Singapore my days alternated between feeling I was back to my old self, and feeling as though I was being shaken in a giant sieve. One moment my heart was quiet and at peace. The next moment I would find my mind tormented with fear, many times in the middle of the night. Anxiety about causing hardship and embarrassment to my husband and two sons if I were to get worse tortured me in the wee hours of the morning.

I fought fear and doubts, holding my ground in Jesus' name and using the spiritual authority Jesus had given to me. I had been involved in spiritual warfare in our Thai churches before but I had never encountered anything as terrifying as being the target of attack myself. Each time I had to fight, the Lord gave victory. Not instantly, but the harassing thoughts would eventually leave. After a few days or so, however, they came back.

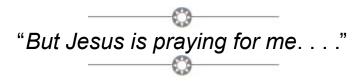
## **Being Prayed For**

One day, God directed my attention to this passage in Luke 22:31–32.

"This is the very feeling I've been having—being sifted!," I exclaimed under my breath.

"But Jesus is praying for me. . . ."

For anyone who has experienced spiritual attacks and harassment, this six-word assurance from Jesus makes a world of difference between torment and peace, between fear and faith, between despair and hope.



This revelation from Jesus came in the middle of November. It was a simple encounter. There was no spine-tingling sensation, nothing dramatic at all. But a deep, calm certainty washed over me: *Jesus had intervened*.

From that day on, every time fear and doubt attacked, I whispered, "Lord Jesus, thank You that You are praying for me this very minute. Thank You for praying that my faith will hold up."

# A Surprise

On December 2, I received a framed cross-stitched work from Lesley, my friend in Manchester. She shared how she was praying for me and the Lord gave a verse to her. She immediately started work on it so she could send it to me as soon as possible.

In cross-stitched letters, the frame proclaimed:

"But I have prayed for you . . . ."

\* \* \*

# Application

How many times have you told someone, "Thank you for your prayers. I felt upheld and strengthened."

And you have only been experiencing the efficacy of human prayers!

How much more when the truth sinks in that *Jesus is praying for you!* 

# Prayer

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Lord Jesus, You know how many times my faith has been on the brink of failing. I need You. Please speak to my heart. Please make Your truth minister to my soul today. I want to experience the reality of You stepping into my affairs. Give me faith to believe that You, my Lord, are indeed praying for me. Amen. May 17, 1997

Those who gaze at giants live like grasshoppers; those who gaze at God live like giants.

Billy Chiang<sup>11</sup>

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Grasshoppers and Giants

#### Bible Reading: Numbers 13:17–33

So they spread a false report among the Israelites about the land they had explored. They said, "That land doesn't even produce enough to feed the people who live there. Everyone we saw was very tall, and we even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We felt as small as grasshoppers, and that is how we must have looked to them."

NUMBERS 13:32-33, Today's English Version

Under God's instructions Moses chose one representative from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to spy out the Land of Promise. After forty days of secret reconnaissance, they returned and handed in their reports.

"The land is rich, fertile and delightfully fruitful. The cities, however, are well fortified with high thick walls all around. The inhabitants look strong and powerful. We saw the descendants of Anak! The giants!"

A spirit of gloom enveloped the camp.

One by one, ten of the spies recoiled from the idea of attacking the impregnable foe.

"We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are."

Fear Tends to Exaggerate Facts

The ten tried to influence the people by overstretching the facts.

"All the people we saw there are of great size." (Not only the Anakites were giants now, but "all the people" as well.)

"Compared to them we felt like grasshoppers and that's how we looked like to them."

Finally, the death knell: "The land we explored will eat up any who go to live there."

Fear, to achieve its goal, must stretch the facts beyond the boundaries of truth. To make us retreat and withdraw from the battle is its chief aim. Unfortunately, so many yield to its power.

### **But Faith Blazes Ahead**

Caleb and Joshua refused to give in to the blatant cowardice displayed by the ten.

In passionate indignation at the people's rebellion, they tore their clothes and cried out, "Do not be afraid of them. They are defenseless. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us."

Caleb and Joshua's experience opened a new window of understanding for me. I realized:

Fear fuels cowardice, and cowardice triggers retreat.

But faith sees what the human eye does not and stirs up the courage to do what the cowards would not.

God used this story to make me confront what I had considered as giants in my own life.

### My Towering Giants

During my first months as a burnout victim, fear became a formidable giant in my life. Fear of permanent disability, fear of the future, fear of being overcome by fear and ending up a nervous wreck. I had felt these giants looming over me, threatening me until God invited me to probe more deeply into the nature of my fears.

Armed with the principles that God's Holy Spirit had shown me, I confronted three lies that had wormed their way into my thinking. In the same breath, I planted three truths to replace these lies.

#### The enemy's lies

Burnout is unbeatable. You will never recover from it. You may even get worse. You will always be afraid afraid of the future, afraid of permanent mental and emotional impairment, afraid of life itself.

grasshopper, who is at the mercy of circumstances and your personality. You will always remain the fearful little girl that you have always been.

escape. Uncertain future, doubts, spiritual harassment will swallow you up, sooner or later. God has already forgotten you. He doesn't care what happens to you.

#### God's truths and promises

1 God is the only mighty One. No one else, nothing else. Burnout is not a giant. It is conquerable. It is under God's almighty power. These fears which I have perceived as "giants" are *not* giants at all. They are not as overpowering and overwhelming as I think them to be. God said. "Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God himself will fight for you." (Deuteronomy 3:22)

You are just a tiny insect, a 2 I am God's child, by virtue of Jesus Christ's death on the cross. I am not a tiny insect hopping from one blade of grass to another. God my Father carries me, His little girl, in His strong, loving arms.

You are ruined. You cannot 3 I am in Christ. I will *not* be devoured by these so-called "giants." My life is hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:3) How much safer than this could I be? God said, "I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15–16)

One ordinary day, God opened my understanding to the truth behind the apparent power of the evil one.

I was hanging up the washing when suddenly a question entered my heart. I sensed it was from God. "Why do you consider My powers and Satan's powers to be equal?"

I tried to defend myself, "Lord, I've never said Satan is as powerful as You are."

"No, you've never said that. But your fearful heart and thoughts betray what you really think deep inside," He replied. "Flor, I'm the only Powerful One. There is no other. Satan only derived his power and authority from My hands. His powers are temporary. Stop thinking that the powers of good and the powers of evil are equal, and tough luck if evil triumphs over good. Evil will never win. Christ is the victor. He is greater than all the principalities and demonic powers combined."

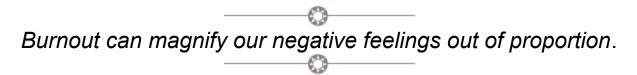
It felt as though scales fell from my eyes. I had known about this truth in my head but when God exposed the lies I held in my heart, the atmosphere around me became clearer, more transparent, more luminous.

\* \* \*

# Application

Burnout can magnify our negative feelings out of proportion. Anxiety, fears, feelings of insecurity and instability, bitterness, resentment, even poor self-image, are easily exaggerated. Resources to overcome them being depleted, the burnout sufferer is easily led to think that these feelings are real and true.

The Holy Spirit, however, can expose these false and exaggerated perceptions and reveal God's truth to those who seek and ask.



Let us immerse ourselves in the Word and ask the Holy Spirit to minister God's truths into our hearts. God is the only Powerful and Almighty One. Let us keep our gaze on Him!

# Prayer

Lord God, You know those times when I have felt dwarfed and almost resigned to be stomped on by \_\_\_\_\_\_ (name those feelings that you have perceived to be so gigantic and overpowering). I now refuse to be intimidated and overtaken by these feelings. They are not the powerful "giants" I had thought them to be. You, my God, are the only Mighty One and I look up to You for my deliverance. In the name of Jesus. Amen. July 22, 1996

A friend shared with me a promise from the Lord in Jeremiah 31:3-5 —"I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. . ." Father, I would like to claim this promise for myself. You are pledging restoration and recovery here. Can I take this to mean as recovery from stress of all kinds—physical, mental and emotional? But when can I start having undisturbed sleep? Up to when will I have to put up with a tense, tired mind? CHAPTER TWELVE

# Rebuilding the Ruins

#### Bible Reading: Jeremiah 31:1–6

The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful. Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit."

JEREMIAH 31:3–5

No other prophet had wept for Jerusalem as bitterly as Jeremiah had. The Babylonian army burned down the Lord's temple, the royal palace and the whole of Jerusalem. Every illustrious building in the city was leveled to the ground. The plundering army smashed down the walls around the city of God.

Halfway through his book, though, hope begins to peer through the grey ominous clouds of Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah starts to sing of restoration—the return of exiled Israel to Jerusalem.

Jeremiah's weeping gives way to hope, then to unmistakable confidence. Confidence in God's unending love. A love that will draw God's people back to Himself—restoring His people to their relationship with Him, promising peace and prosperity. "Again, you will know Me," God said.

"Again" signifies a renewing of trust, giving the offender a second chance. Exultantly, Jeremiah announced to exiled Israel, "God will build you up *again*; you will *again* be joyful and will *again* enjoy the fruit of your own vineyards."

Burnout helped me identify with Israel's devastation and ruin. But still, I never expected the extent of the emotional tumult that it

brought to my life.

### Foreign Terrain

My friend in England shared with me these promises of rebuilding from Jeremiah at a time when I could not understand the turmoil going on inside of me. Why did my heart palpitate over news of murder or rape, even riots? Why was I feeling as if a tight band was constricting my head? Why could I not hold an intense discussion for more than ten minutes?

"This is just not me," I kept telling myself.

"Will I be like this for the rest of my life?"

My emotional landscape felt very unfamiliar. Like an uncharted territory, it loomed before me, its very unknownness terrifying me.

### "You will be Rebuilt"

I read articles about stress. They explained that headaches and neck pains, palpitations and breathing difficulties, fatigue and frequent infections can be physical signs of stress. But I could not find any article about the emotional disarray that I was experiencing.

I kept going back to God's promise "... you *will be rebuilt.*" I knew it in my heart, recovery is not only possible, it is certain. I underlined the word "again" as I recorded Jeremiah 31:3–5 in my journal. Hope and certainty of recovery and restoration to full emotional health filled my heart.

The Lord surprised me in Singapore when friends from England came to this city-state for conferences. Rosemary Dowsett, who had trained me as a junior staff member of InterVarsity in Manila, was one of them. She cautioned my husband and me, "It will be a long haul, Flor. You may need more than six months of rest from ministry if you don't want your exhaustion to lead to breakdown." Dr. Ken Webb, a missionary doctor, reckoned it might take a year before I began to feel free of exhaustion symptoms like heart racing and head tightening. He added, however, that recovery time would vary from one burnout sufferer to another.

Having a particular timeframe in mind brought such a huge relief. At last I felt a little in-the-know. It was one thing to be assured by my Father that recovery was sure; it was another thing to have an idea of how long before I could see it happen.

### Drawing My Emotional Map

The scary, unfamiliar emotional terrain began to take shape, producing signposts and landmarks for me to follow.

I soon learned what emotionally loaded situations to avoid. I set up imaginary "Do not enter" signposts. I skipped past news columns about violence, riots, rapes and murders. I shunned action movies, dramas, and anything suspenseful. I dodged conversations about emotionally-charged subjects and reminded myself not to feel guilty and be over-apologetic for doing so.

My emotional map included happy landmarks: parks, winding lanes, garden centers. I enjoyed watching birds and butterflies, figuring animal shapes out of clouds, pottering in the garden, and listening to soothing music. Having read that belly laughter releases feel-good hormones, I gave up my usual suppressed, demure laughter and laughed out loud when watching comedies. Regular, brisk walking upped my blood circulation and dramatically reduced my lethargy. I started to lighten up and held on to life with a more relaxed open hand instead of my usual tense clenched fist.

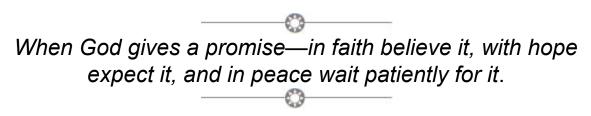
My landscape began to appear less intimidating. I became familiar with its shadows and lights, its sharp curves and treacherous bends, and its occasional straight, smooth lanes.

\* \* \*



"Ground Zero" for me was 1996-1997. Like the World Trade Center after that devastating terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, I too was shattered, flattened, and razed to the ground. With no end in sight, I almost believed that there was no way I could move from zero to one.

But I did. God fulfilled His promise. And that same promise is for you.



Sod will build you up again; you will again be joyful and will again enjoy the fruit of your own vineyards."

Let me restate what I read in the *Little Book of Quotations*: When God gives a promise—in faith believe it, with hope expect it, and in peace wait patiently for it. $\frac{12}{2}$ 

# Prayer

Father, I believe this promise is for me. I look forward to seeing You rebuild and restore my shattered life. Lead me on the road to recovery, Lord. And please help me quietly wait for that day when I can say, "I've been restored. The Lord fulfilled His promise!" Thank You. Amen.

March 17, 1998

I'm just beginning to realize how deep and boundless my inner space is. I'm not surprised anymore why it's taking so long to get my emotional reserves full again.

Help me be patient, Father. Teach me to take one day at a time. It may take a long time before I can feel fully replenished; but, replenished I shall be. CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# **Replenish My Inner Space**

#### Bible Reading: Psalm 139:1–18

[This] knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain . . . For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

PSALM 139:6, 13-14

Words could never be enough to describe the marvel that was unfolded before King David. There in that secret place that was his mother's womb—where not even the most skilled medicine man of his time could reach—God's hand was intricately designing and crafting him. More than that, God had gazed at him *even before* he was clothed with flesh.

David declares in verse 15:

/hen I was woven together in the depths of the earth, our eyes saw my unformed body.

God saw what was invisible to the human eye! Capacities to think, reason and feel, man's very soul and spirit—God breathed all these into him as he lay, formless yet whole, in the palm of His hands. There in the deepest and darkest recesses of his mother's womb, God beheld David.

Describable but Immeasurable

When I ponder God's work in creation, I can think of nothing more awesome than the unplumbed depths and the unreached heights of the human emotion.

Can man scientifically measure the depths of one's soul?

Words can convey the *intensity* of one's feelings—mild, strong, violent, fiery, fervent, passionate—but how can we measure the *immensity* of human emotions?

A person can descend into the deep and meet the terrifying rages, the bestial drives and the monsters of one's fantasies. Or one can ascend to the heights and be enraptured by the ecstasy of loving and being loved, and of being surprised by small acts of kindness done by man to his fellow man.

But then, again, this only describes the mystery that is within every one of us. It still does not satisfy our search for an objective way to measure the scope and magnitude of our emotions.

Perhaps, there is none.

For the space our emotions fill goes beyond the perimeters of our physical frame. The room they occupy in us has no floors, no walls, no ceiling. Having no boundaries, its expanse leaves us speechless in wonder.

#### In God's Wisdom

"Inner space"... the term came to me.

The depth and the breadth and the height of this inner sphere is beyond measuring. No wonder it took time to get depleted. And no wonder it is taking time to get replenished.

Reflecting on Psalm 139 and getting a glimpse of the depth and vastness of my inner space helped me put some aspects of my recovery into perspective.

#### Nearly Empty Reservoir

God gave me an impression in my heart of a reservoir where the water level had run dry to a precarious low—approximately a foot above the reservoir floor.

My emotional state was like that water dam. In order to prevent a catastrophe, I had to cease giving out and needed to replenish.

### Re-stocking the Supply

Resting helped my emotional supply get stocked up again. Near the end of a seven-month rest in Singapore, I was able to give a fortyminute Bible exposition and was back to counseling. If I use the picture of the water reservoir as my standard, and give it the height of twenty meters altogether, I would say that my "water level" had increased to five meters!

My emotional capacity consistently expanded until one day two friends from Bangkok came. We could not stop chatting for hours.

That evening, sleep eluded me. I had to sit up several times to ease my breathing. My mind felt congested, alarmingly crowded.

"What triggered this?" I searched for an answer in the wee hours of the morning.

I realized that the excitement of hearing all the good and the sad news from Bangkok used up a lot of the emotional energy I had stored up in the last months.

At least, I did not plummet back to one foot above the reservoir floor but my intuition told me that my "water level" definitely slid down.

### Re-evaluating the Time Frame

It dawned on me—replenishing that inner expanse which had been depleted would indeed take a longer time than I had thought. If I wanted less setbacks on my road to recovery, I would have to build my emotional reserves up to a stronger surplus level.

# Application

Three As may help to make the road to recovery smoother. *Anticipate* that the process to recovery will be slow. It will take time. And all that it asks is for us not to rush it.



Going back to our normal workload prematurely can result in a second collapse of our emotional system. The second time around might necessitate a much longer period to recover.

*Accept* that during the early months the recovery process will be like the tide; it ebbs and flows. Accepting the seesaw pattern of replenishing will actually lessen tension and anxiety.

Acknowledge before God that nothing is impossible for Him. Let us tell Him that—

there is no space too vast for Him to replenish;

no hole too deep for Him to refill;

no blackness too dark for Him to lit.

Praise Him!

# Prayer

Father-God, I realize that it will be a slow trudge to full recovery, but thank You . . . I know I will get there. For, indeed, nothing is impossible for You. Amen.

May 1, 1997

I feel so invigorated. I've been looking up the story of the Canaanite woman in different Bible versions. I sense that the Lord has something special there for me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# A Feast or Just Crumbs?

#### Bible Reading: Matthew 15:21–28

... but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

**MATTHEW 15:27** 

"And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones..."

LUKE 22:29-30

Two tables: one stands at the far-end of a farmhouse; the other dominates the dining hall in the King's palace.

Two stories: the first is of skinny dogs scavenging for scraps of food that have fallen from the farmer's table; the second is of ladies and gentlemen in royal apparel feasting and drinking with the King at the royal table.

#### The First Story: Under the Dining Table

How many nights of sleep had this Canaanite mother lost because of her demon-possessed daughter?

This woman was well known in the village for being a strong, resilient wife and mother. But now, despondency and hopelessness had begun to eat at her heart. On hearing that Jesus, the miracle worker, was passing nearby, hope sprang up in her heart as she ran to catch up with Him. Breathlessly she cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus' reply sounded surprisingly discriminatory. Looking at her more intently, He added, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

But, true to her character, she was not deterred.

She replied, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus was captivated by her tenacious faith and humility! She had not disputed the prevalent Jewish mentality that Gentiles were comparable to dogs. And she *actually* believed that a mere spill-over, a mere crumb of Jesus' power and authority would be enough to deliver her daughter from the clutches of the evil one!

### The Second Story: A Place at the King's table

Colin Urquhart, in his devotional book,<sup>13</sup> *My Dear Son*, shared an interesting angle from the story of this Gentile mother. He suggests that God our Father is wanting to tell us, "Are you not My child? This means you don't have to scratch around on the floor under the table looking for crumbs. I have given you a place at the table. You can eat as much as you want. If a crumb effects such a healing, what could the entire feast do for you? You only have to come with faith to the table of My provision."

You only have to come with faith to the table of My provision.

#### A Feast, Indeed!

A picture came to my mind of a long table laden with many different serving plates, bowls and platters. On examining their contents, I discovered they did not contain food. One was a serving of hope, another, emotional strength. God's promises were invitingly laid out on a silver tray, while His commands filled a huge bowl to the brim. One oval dish contained patience, one very large plate was filled with joy. As the train of bowls and platters paraded before my eyes, I saw they offered peace, healing, faith, mental strength, protection, recovery, grace, love, and victory. What a feast!

## A Child, Not a Dog

I often thought and acted more like a dog than a child of God. I sniffed for crumbs under God's table, desperately grabbing at any scraps of hope and encouragement I might find.

With this picture of a heavenly spread in my heart, I sensed my Father speaking to me, "My child, you have a place at My table. What are you doing down there?"

I then straightened up, drew near to the table and sat down. Throwing a grateful glance at the head of the table, I helped myself to God's rich provisions and resources and ate heartily.

\* \* \*

## Application

Despair commonly stalks the burnout victim. The enveloping mantle of darkness gives a feeling that recovery is a long, long way off. It could be. But it doesn't mean we must live like a beggar rummaging through bins, scrounging for scraps of hope.

We are not paupers but children of the King of kings. His heavenly resources are at our disposal. Strength, grace, peace, protection, faith have all been promised. All we need to do is to claim each one for ourselves. And to keep on claiming.



Father, thank You that I'm Your child. Thank You for making all the resources of heaven available to me. I claim healing and restoration to full emotional and mental health. Thank You for my newly-found hope. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May 21, 1997

"I know all about you, child. . . I know when you worry and are anxious about your circumstances . . .

"Beloved, I have made you for faith, not unbelief; . . . for joy, not heaviness; for peace, not anxiety; for fulfillment, not frustration. Abide in Me."

Colin Urquhart in MY DEAR SON<sup>14</sup>

Father, thank You!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### Bible Reading: Psalm 91

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

PSALM 91:1–2, 4

The coalition government in Cambodia had broken down. Heavy fighting between the two coalition parties had been reported. The specter of Pol Pot regime's massacre in the 1970's still lingered and this renewed street fighting struck fresh terror in many hearts. A Filipino missionary wrote, "A number of expatriates have taken refuge in our house."

A place of refuge conjures many images in our minds. It may be a covered walk in a sudden thunderstorm, or a leafy tree in the scorching heat of the sun. It may be a narrow trench in a war zone, or a canvas tent in a refugee center. In Cambodia, in the year 1997, it was a missionary's house. Whatever shape and form it takes, a refuge is this: a temporary place of safety in the face of trouble and danger.

God's people, however, have a refuge that offers more than just a temporary relief from danger. Our refuge, the Almighty God, is One in whom we find long-lasting safety, security and rest. He is a refuge comparable to none.

He is a Strong Refuge

Our refuge is the omnipotent God, the all-powerful One. Every threat or danger becomes inconsequential in the hands of the Almighty. Is He not the One who says, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" No peril will be beyond His power to handle. We can, therefore, entrust our safety into His hands.

## He is our Covering and Shield

When we are in danger we feel exposed, as though we are in open space, like sitting ducks ready to be hit. But once inside God, our refuge, do we not instantly sense that feeling of being covered, of being shielded from harm?

## He is Our Dwelling Place

Our refuge is not merely for emergency shelter or temporary respite in times of distress. The psalmist tells us in Psalm 91:9–10, "If you make the Most High your dwelling . . . then no harm will befall you . . . ." He exhorts us to stay, to dwell in Him, to make the Almighty God our home.

## He is Our Rest

Anyone who dwells in the Most High will rest. We run to Him, our shelter, because we admit, "There's nothing I can do anymore. I can't help myself. I can't defend myself. I need You, Lord." In our shelter there is no more struggling, running or resisting. Rest awaits those who choose to make God their shelter and dwelling place.

### He is our Fortress

God, our refuge, is also our fortress. He is our strong defender, fighting our battles for us. As our refuge, He gives us rest from our enemies; as our fortress, He provides defense against our foes.

God led me to study Psalm 91 after experiencing what I believe was a spiritual attack from the evil one. A fresh appreciation of God as my refuge ensued.

#### **Spiritual Struggle**

Six weeks had passed without any heart palpitations. I felt confident enough to overstep my usual limits and read heavy fiction. That night I had difficulty breathing and felt overly fatigued.

Not long after, evil thoughts came stalking. In the past I had woken Steve to pray for me but this time I could not even move nor speak to wake him up. It felt as though my mind, body, and will were being pinned down. I tried to resist but to no avail. I whispered, "Lord, help me. I take refuge in You." But something seemed to hold me back from reaching my refuge. I felt my Refuge was within reach, yet I could not reach Him. Suddenly a thought struck me, "Will I reach my Refuge in time? Or will panic overpower me?" That sent me reeling.

God was merciful. Words dropped into my heart, "Leave the battle to Me. I will fight for you. I have you covered." The Lord knew how drained I was. I stopped struggling and, with God's promise running through my mind, I fell asleep.

#### My Wrong View of Refuge

That experience made me realize how wrongly I had viewed my Refuge in the past. I had unconsciously super-imposed the idea of a typical refuge on to God, my Refuge: something out there that I could run to in times of distress. It was somewhere out there. And it was me running, struggling, fighting to reach it. It was all up to me.

Psalm 91 taught me that my refuge is not somewhere out there. My refuge is One already sheltering me, shielding me. Since I already dwell in Him, I won't have to run anymore to get inside the shelter. I am there already! No longer do I have to doubt, "Will I reach my Refuge in time? Or will panic overcome me?" I am *already* inside my Refuge. Therefore, help is immediately at hand!





When hearts begin to race and thoughts run wild, there is no need to panic. In God is our safety and under His wings we have a refuge. Inside the Almighty, we are shielded, guarded and kept safe. All struggle and fighting cease inside our refuge. We can rest. For we are sheltered and covered by His mighty power.

# Prayer

Dear God, You are my refuge, my shield and my defender. Thank You that I am in You. I cannot think of any safer place. I rest in You, my Lord. Amen. November 29, 1996

Dear Flor and Steve,

You're in the painful process of becoming fully human—fully alive. It's the same process that Jesus Himself went through—(Hebrews 5:7-10). For me verse 8 keeps invigorating my soul. "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered . . . ."

May these be your best weeks for healing and re-creating for 1997, when the Lord will show you a richer, fuller ministry for which this suffering is preparing you. At the same time it's good to remind yourselves that "ministry" is not our ultimate goal. Don't let anything or anyone steal your enjoyment of the Lord.

> Peace and joy, Ada

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## Transformed by Burnout

#### Bible Reading: Jeremiah 18:1–6

But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

JEREMIAH 18:4, 6

When Jeremiah arrived the potter was already seated on the edge of a small pit in which stood his wheels. The potter carefully set the clay in the middle and commenced shaping as the wheel revolved. A few minutes later, the rotating stones came to an abrupt halt. The potter pursed his lips and shook his head, then calmly squeezed the emerging jar, turning it into another shapeless lump of clay. He gazed upwards scanning the horizon for an idea, a design. A soft smile flickered across his face as he scooped up the formless mass. A faint whirr. A little at a time, the disfigured mound evolved into the shape of an oil flask.

Eyes dancing, the potter gazed at his creation with utter satisfaction. Finding a broken shard, he commenced etching geometrical patterns on to the still supple flask. Gingerly, he placed it on a wooden bench to bake in the sun waiting its turn to be cooked in the potter's kiln.

#### God, Our Potter

Likewise, our Master Potter does not discard a damaged vessel. With a loving purpose in mind He forms and transforms, creates and re-creates. Not out of whim or caprice, but because. . .

He has a vision of an exquisite vessel before Him.

Nothing less will satisfy Him.

This is why He persevered in transforming a disfigured lump of clay like me.

## My Life in the Potter's Hands

It was a cool January morning in Bangkok. I caught a glimpse of a verse posted on the wall of my bedroom.

e has sent me to provide for those who grieve in Zion bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,

ie oil of gladness instead of mourning,

nd a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

I complained to the Lord, "Months ago I asked You for restoration, for that oil of gladness and garment of praise, remember, Father? But why do I feel exhausted until now? Father, when will I be my old self again?"

There and then, the Lord spoke to my heart, "Are you sure you only want restoration? Are you certain you're happy with what you used to be?"

I stood transfixed, greatly puzzled.

The Lord continued, "My child, what I have in mind for you is not mere restoration. The healing I am working in you now is more for. . . *transformation*."

Expectancy hovered in the air.

"Your life will not be as it used to be."

"I have better things for you."

Jeremiah's visit to the potter's workshop sprang to mind. I wondered how this re-creating work would come about. I did not expect it to be very soon.

## Transformation at Work

That morning, the garden beckoned me to come to the rescue of a struggling sickly tree. A climbing vine was strangling the tree with its tightly curled tendrils. I began disentangling the curling vines and was astonished to find that some had intertwined with each other, thereby producing a strong rope. As I cut away with the gardening scissors, I saw how strong the hold of the parasite vine was—choking life out of the tree.

As I cut and pulled away the wicked creeper I felt the Lord speak to my heart.

"There are things you have allowed to cling to you so viciously, deforming and damaging you."

### Lethal Enemies

I recognized them immediately—my creeping vines—choking spiritual life out of me. Frustration, critical spirit, resentment and bitterness had surreptitiously wound themselves around each other producing a rope too strong for me to break.

At first, my discouragement and frustration over the slow growth of our churches seemed to be acceptable. I told Steve, "It's normal. Every one gets discouraged." But then faultfinding thoughts and critical comments about our methods and strategies followed. Mix that with anger and bitterness over some injustice done to a church leader and before I knew it, joy had gone out of me.



Negative feelings are a joy-stealer. They rob our peace and wreak havoc on our faith. Hostile feelings are also like creeping vines that strangle a tree. They ravage our spiritual resources, leaving us joyless and almost lifeless.

God helped me recognize this as I struggled with the vines that were choking the life out of my tree. I had a choice: to keep allowing these sins to cling to me, or to release all these negative feelings to God, for good.

\* \* \*



How strange that when disaster strikes, we only long for a return of what used to be as long as we are picked up from under the rubble, dusted off and restored to life as it was before, to our old familiar and normal routine. For many of us, that's good enough.

But not so with God our Potter. He has loftier plans in mind. A return to our idea of what is normal is not His goal.

He makes new; He transforms.

For, from His perspective, He envisions a Masterpiece.

# Prayer

Dear Lord, it is exciting to know that restoration is not Your only plan for me. Your desire is a transformation, a new creation, a masterpiece! I yield to You, my Lord. Amen. February 13, 2000

A friend has just told me, "You will be a stronger, more sensitive person because you have gone through this pain." I guess it's true. God has opened some opportunities for ministry which only a burned out person can understand.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## Pass It On

#### Bible Reading: John 21:15–19

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

"But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." LUKE 22:32, NRSV

No child of God can monopolize the grace and blessings that flow from the Father's hands. In one way or another, we will be compelled from within to pass on to others the spiritual riches we have received from God. The served will serve; the ministered to will minister, the comforted will comfort others.

Let us take Peter as our showcase.

Hours before His arrest, Jesus told Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

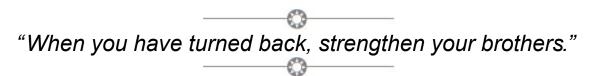
As we know, Peter, in cowardly fear, denied knowing Jesus three times. He failed. He had cracked under the strain. Was that the end of his relationship with the Lord?

See how Jesus reinstated him, recommissioned him as a leader a few days after His resurrection. Jesus charged him, "Feed and take care of My sheep."

But was that all? Was Jesus merely *reinstating* Peter? I believe there was another angle, hidden and imperceptible, an act that displayed an aspect of our Lord's character.

#### Jesus, the Affirming Master

Jesus believed in the genuineness of Peter's faith in Him. At the same time, He sensed the shame, the wretchedness, the anguish and agony that racked Peter's innermost being. Thus, Jesus drew this errant but repentant disciple near Him to offer His forgiveness personally and to heal his guilty, broken heart. He came *alongside* Peter, not merely to reinstate him but to affirm His disciple's worth in God's eyes.



Three times Jesus charged Peter, "Feed and take care of My sheep."

It was as though Jesus was saying to Peter: "I trust you. I accept you. And I entrust My flock to you."

With each affirmation from his Master came a fresh wave of cleansing, strengthening and a calm reassurance that, yes, he indeed belonged to Jesus. And he, at last, understood why Jesus had said before His arrest, "When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

### My Own Recommissioning

"I feel ready to go back to Bangkok," I announced to Steve while packing up our things at the Discipleship Training Center in Singapore.

My husband smiled reassuringly but said nothing.

I heaved a sigh, "Of course, he knows."

I brushed aside my apprehension about going home and set out on preparing a testimony for the last student-staff meeting at DTC.

"Jesus' assurance to Peter that He's praying for him is the most significant landmark in my journey towards recovery," I mused. "I'll share that with them."

To get the exact wordings I turned to Luke 22:32. Inadvertently my eyes fell on the second part of the verse. I had never really noticed it before. But this time, it jumped out at me, "And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

I stared at the verse, incredulous.

"Lord, are You commissioning me anew?"

A sense of exhilaration carried me through those days of zipping up our bursting suitcases, shopping for mementos and saying farewell to friends.

## Back in Bangkok

Actively ministering to people was far from my mind that first year back in Bangkok. I was drawn towards continuing to rest in the Lord. Although news of problems among our Thai brothers and sisters reached my ears, I did not make as much as a hint that I was available to help.

The truth was, I had lost my confidence.

## God Had Other Plans

Joyce Huggett in her book, *Formed by the Desert*,  $\frac{15}{15}$  reiterated what Jesus had told me in Singapore. She wrote, "God uses the desert to sift us, not to silence us. He sometimes stops us in our tracks . . . not to stifle us, but rather to purge and purify us."

When, at last, the Lord directed me to write down my reflections and send them to friends also suffering from burnout, I was ecstatic. I understood what Jesus had meant when He said, "When you have turned back, strengthen others."

Overjoyed with this new task, I determined to concentrate on my writing and not to get involved in people's lives. That is, until one Sunday.

While my husband was preaching, I saw a lady in the congregation, red-eyed, face downcast. Her expression a grim shadow of her usual cheery self.

When the service was over a church leader asked me if I would like to talk with this lady. For many weeks, they had been worried about her. We talked and my suspicion was confirmed: the beginnings of burnout. It was a long talk. And the Holy Spirit ministered to her.

#### It Takes One to Know One

The Lord led me to another lady who used to be very active in her church. Chatting with her over dinner, I sensed a deepening depression in her, a downward spiral that others had seen as a critical spirit.

That particular chat was sobering. I felt God giving me the capability to see through her and to understand the despondency that had begun to encroach into her soul.

Charles Swindoll puts it precisely, "God allows suffering so that we might have the capacity to enter into another's sorrow and affliction. God gives His children the capacity to empathize, to understand, by bringing similar suffering into our lives."

Many others whose emotional reserves have been precariously low have since crossed my path. What a privilege to encourage them with the same words of encouragement with which God had strengthened me.

\* \* \*

## Application

Loss of confidence makes us think we are no longer fit to minister to others.

"If I have been rendered weak to the extent of burnout, what right have I to think that I can help others? How can the infirm help the weak?"

It is so easy to forget 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

We have received healing that we might minister healing to others. We have been renewed that we might point others to the One who makes all things new. We have received strength that we may encourage and strengthen others.

God has given us so much. Let's pass it on.

# Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You have comforted and strengthened me beyond my wildest imagination. Help me not to deny others the joy of receiving your comfort and strength through me. Amen. March 29, 2000

Jacob and Paul had one thing in common: both were impaired. The former's dislocated hip and the latter's thorn in the flesh answered my questions about why my emotional resources seem to dwindle quite quickly. It has only been three years since I recovered from burnout. I was not expecting to need recharging my batteries this soon.

Tommy Tenney, an author, wrote about God's ways with Jacob. "Jacob prayed and wrestled for a blessing, but what he received was a 'changing'. His name, his walk, and his demeanor were changed. I'm convinced that, in order to bring godly change into our lives, sometimes God puts a little spot of 'death' in our bodies."<sup>17</sup> CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Of Thorns and Splinters

#### Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. . . .

He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. . . For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:2, 4, 7-10

His unparalleled tour of the heavenly realm must have rendered Paul speechless and weakened in body for days, if not weeks. To have seen the invisible, heard the inaudible and experienced the inexpressible must have all been staggering!

However, when the mist and fog of the unintelligible had cleared away, what feelings of grandeur could have begun to tempt his mind? Imagine the King of the heavenly hosts choosing *him* to be entrusted with these exceedingly awesome disclosures of the heavenly realm!

Did conceit attempt to slither into his heart?

Paul himself admitted, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." There has been a wide range of speculation about the nature of Paul's thorn, but one thing is certain: it tormented him.

Imagine how Paul must have felt with that thorn "sticking out" each time, distracting him, perhaps slowing him down at times. On a very minute scale, think of a splinter in your finger that refuses to come out with your tweezers! It is a nuisance, isn't it?

Despite Paul's pleadings, God did not take the thorn out. So how did Paul cope with this infirmity?

He lived *by God's grace*. When he pleaded to God to remove the thorn from him, the Lord's reply was, "My grace is all that you will need." His grace will be there for Paul and it will be sufficient to help him bear the affliction, and be at peace in it.

He lived *conscious of God's power in him*. Paul claimed that when he was weak, it was then that he was truly strong. For God's power worked most effectively in Paul's weakness. It was in his affliction that God's power shone most brightly.

He lived *with his weaknesses joyfully*, "gladly glorying" in them so that Christ's power might all the more work in him.

His weaknesses plus God's grace, power, and joy—experiencing all these was Paul's secret in living a full and contented life.

#### **Emotional Exhaustion Returns**

Ten symptom-free months had passed. My husband and I led a team of ten Bible College students on a mission trip to some villages in Northern Thailand. This being my first time to join such a team, I made attempts to get to know the team members.

By the third day, we had somehow bonded already. We laughed and joked with each other. A student confided more personal details about her life with me. I began to feel useful.

I did not expect though how an innocent remark from a student could affect me as it did. After breakfast on that third day, she commented in her typical ringing voice, "Hey, it's good to have a woman staff with us this year. There's more feminine touch; there's warmth and it's more fun for us girls!"

Stealthily, self-importance wormed its way into me.

## **Downward Spiral**

Having had breakfast, we set off for our day's round of the villages. Where there was a cluster of villagers, we stopped and presented the Gospel through poster pictures, songs, and personal conversations.

At night we held open-air evangelistic meetings. Drums, electric guitars, powerful floodlights, dust, laughter, the booming voice of our evangelist mingled together in what would be a memorable night for some.

At about eleven o'clock, we bid the villagers goodnight. Arriving at our sleeping quarters, we sat down together to evaluate the whole day's ministry. It was one o'clock in the morning before we finally hit our beds.

This rigorous schedule would demand all the strength we could muster for the next ten days.

On the fourth night, I collapsed in bed, more exhausted than usual. Sleep eluded me. I tossed and turned the whole night. My head felt "full" and tight, my heart agitated. The sight of some poor paralyzed old women dragging their lifeless limbs along the dusty road haunted me. Their vacant, scarily penetrating stares seemed to leer back at me.

I reminded myself of my place in Christ, my Refuge. I determined not to move an inch from the Cross, where I had taken my position. Fear fled. Yet I could feel it—exhaustion had started to knock on my door. Again.

## Limited All Through Life?

The team granted my request to rest the next day. Emotionally hurting and alone in our room, questions rushed out like a torrent: "Lord, why did I have those symptoms again—the tightness in my head, the agitation in my heart? Why can't I just go on without the need to pause, to rest? Now that I've put burnout behind me, why can't I just be normal like the others in the team? Would I be living with these limitations all my life?"

## Paul's Infirmity

"Look at Paul's thorn in the flesh," was impressed in my mind. Then I understood.

I forgot that God allowed burnout in my life to put to death my conceit and reliance on my own strength and gifts.

I took the student's appreciation as a praise for my ability to connect with them, thereby winning their trust and confidence. When I basked in the glow of that innocent compliment, pride triumphantly slid back in.

### Better "a Limp Than a Strut"

To jog my memory, God allows exhaustion to catch up with me once in a while. This "little spot of death" will need to make its presence known in my life at times, just so I will remember that self-glory and spiritual conceit are detestable in my Father's eyes.

Max Lucado reinforced this when he wrote, "For all we know about thorns, we can be sure of this. God would prefer we have an occasional limp than a perpetual strut. And if it takes a thorn for him to make his point, he loves us enough not to pluck it out."<sup>18</sup>

And you will see that My power works best when you are weak than when you are strong.

Indeed, it is because God loves me that He would rather allow burnout to stalk me once in a while than to see me wallow in pride. But at the same time He promises, "My grace is all that you will need. My grace will be there for you. It will be enough to help you bear this affliction. And you will see that My power works best when you are weak than when you are strong."

\* \* \*

# Application

What would we choose: "an occasional limp" or "a perpetual strut"? To live by God's grace or to live on our own strength? To experience God's power at work through our weaknesses or to see mere human strength in all that we do?

May we be able to say with the apostle Paul, "I delight in my weaknesses. For it is when I am weak, that I am truly strong."

# Prayer

Lord, I must confess that many times I'm baffled by the ways You work Your will out in my life. Yet I'm convinced that the purposes and reasons behind them are all for my good. If it be Your will that I live life carrying this weakness with me, then I believe that Your grace will be there for me, and that it will be sufficient to help me bear it. Thank You for assuring me that it's when I'm weak that I will see Your divine strength and power at work in me. Amen. February 5, 2000

As long as we remain afraid of each other we live defensive lives. Only when we dare to lay down our protective shields and trust each other to confess our shared weakness and need can we live a fruitful life together.

Henri Nouwen in IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

#### Bible Reading: Jeremiah 32:36–44

"I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul." JEREMIAH 32:40–41

Stigma. I didn't realize that burnout carried a stigma until a friend cautioned me, "Be careful how you tell others that you are suffering from burnout, Flor."

Seeing my puzzled look, she took the direct approach. "Some will consider you a weakling, a failure, or one who simply failed to cope."

"Yes, somebody had told me to just get on with life and made me feel as if I was making a mountain out of an anthill."

"Exactly. So choose who you tell and how you tell it," she concluded.

#### The Dilemma

But what if someone who I'd rather not confide to asks what's the matter with me? How should I answer? Will I be dodging questions forever?

Could I ever venture to be vulnerable? To open myself to possible derogatory remarks and unfair judgments? Dare I ever be open about my condition? Or will I be wearing a mask forever?

#### The Answer: God's Goodness

God's reply did not come immediately. Rather, for more than a year, God unfolded before me one aspect of His character which the priests and the temple musicians in King Solomon's time repeatedly sang in praise to the Lord: "He is good; His mercy endures forever."

The book of Jeremiah contains one of the most superb disclosures about the nature of God's goodness and its impact on Israel. But first, we have to see God baring His wounded heart to the prophet in Jeremiah 32: 28, 30, 33:

I am about to hand this city over to the Babylonians and to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who will capture it.

The people of Israel and Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; indeed, the people of Israel have done nothing but provoke me with what their hands have made.

They turned their backs to me and not their faces; though I taught them again and again, they would not listen or respond to discipline.

Now listen to what He confided to Jeremiah next (Jeremiah 32:37–38, 40–41, 33:6).

I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good.

Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.

#### What Kind of God is This!

After all that the Israelites had done to Him, after all that horrible and obnoxious idol worship, God was still pledging to do them good! Of course, God did not spare them His judgment and punishment. But after He had disciplined them, He intended that His desires, plans, and actions towards His people would be simply *full of goodness* through and through!

To top it all, God said, "I will rejoice in doing them good." Imagine our Father's heart dancing with *delight* every time He blesses His children!

When He disclosed to me, "My child, what I have in mind for you is not mere restoration but transformation," I was stunned!



It reminded me of His promises to His people. God's goodness moves Him to go an extra mile. Not contented with merely restoring His people to their homeland, He prospers them. Not satisfied with giving them the land to till again, He makes their devastation bloom, their deserts populous and fruitful more than ever before. Our God is beyond comparison!

## The Challenge of Vulnerability

On realizing how, in God's goodness, He had used burnout to change me inside out, I resolved to be transparent. When quizzed about my need to rest from ministry, I would simply say I was burned out or that I was suffering from emotional exhaustion. Dodging the issue was not worth the effort. Meanwhile, I was so busy getting more and more amazed at God's healing and re-creating work, I could not be bothered by what others could be thinking of me.

## The Test

My journals were my constant companion while I struggled with burnout. I jotted down everything that the Lord was teaching me. As I was emerging out of it, I sensed the Lord directing me to share what I had learned from Him with others who were in the same situation. At that time though, nothing could have been further from my mind than putting it into book form. I was content to just mail copies of my reflections on to others who I thought would benefit from them.

Later on, a dear friend wrote, "I can think of nothing less than a book here, Flor." Other friends also encouraged me to compile my writings and make it into a book.

"Could it be that the Lord is speaking through them?" I mused.

"Lord, do You really want me to take up this challenge? To open up my pain, my fears, my weaknesses, my defects to strangers? What will people think of me? You know, Lord, that burnout and breakdowns are still an embarrassment, a shame to so many."

Gently, the Lord impressed upon my heart, "Why are you afraid? What are you wanting to protect?"

"It's my reputation, Lord."

"I understand, but . . ." He pursued, "you also know that selfprotection is a great hindrance to genuine sharing, an obstacle to true fellowship."

And before I could blink an eye, God delivered the *punch line*. "Did you not taste *My goodness* in all of this?"

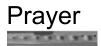
The decision to press on with my writing was sealed.

\* \* \*

# Application

When we become so thrilled with God's goodness in our lives, and when we realize that He is using burnout to transform us, we will find ourselves flowing with thanksgiving for how He has been directing the course of our lives. Then, and perhaps only then, will we be willing to be vulnerable, willing to run the risk of getting hurt and willing to put our reputation at stake.

For when we have tasted God's goodness through our burnout, nothing else will matter.



I praise You, Lord God, for You are so good. I know you are changing my life; You are changing me! Your goodness to me gives me the courage to be open and transparent about my burnout. Lead me and give me the words to say as I testify how You are transforming my life through burnout. Amen. May 25, 2000

I meditated on 2 Corinthians 4:7 this morning and somehow, God drew my attention to the nature of the earthen jar— that it's made of clay. My childhood was happily spent playing in a muddy yard. Memories of the mushy feel of sticky soil in my hands as I shaped small clay pots and frying pans, complete with their lids, came rushing back! The remembrance of their crudeness struck a raw spot in my heart.

Lord God, help me find just the right crude clay jar to remind me of who I really am.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

# A Charred Clay Jar

#### Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7–12

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this allsurpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7–9

My friend has a picture on her office wall of a cat staring at her own reflection in the mirror. If I were to choose a caption for that picture, I would title it, "Don't overestimate yourself." For from the mirror a lion is glaring back at the cat!

While some might see a mouse sheepishly looking back at them from the mirror, I, like that cat in the poster, often find a lion conceitedly returning my gaze.

It is for this reason, I think, that while meditating on the verse "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us," God focused my attention to the clay component of the jar.

## My Clay Jar

Conceit has always been a problem for me. It may not be obvious on the outside but I have longed for my talents to be recognized and acknowledged by others.

Focusing on the clayness of the earthen jar shifts my ultra high regard for myself down to where it belongs. Unless the fact of my clayness enters deeply into my soul then the image staring back at me from the mirror will always be larger than it really is. I would always perceive myself as near-perfect, able and strong, competent and excellent in the ministries I am gifted at. Until I admit my clayness and my natural bent toward pride, there will always be a part in me that secretly covets the praise and appreciation that belong to God alone.

My clay jar, for all its impoverished origin and unsophisticated upbringing, had stored an all-excelling treasure inside its mud-made walls. But since it was heavily glazed with image-enhancing and strength-projecting lacquer, it had been difficult for the radiance of that inner treasure to shine forth.

Then, something totally unexpected happened. My clay jar stumbled onto a fire and fell. The heavy glazing peeled off, the lacquer paint melted and all the illusions of beauty and glory faded away.

Once self and pride were no longer in the way, my jar became its true self—just an earthen jar. Stripped of its self-promoting props, my clay jar was exposed as it really was—fragile, brittle, and vulnerable. It could easily crumble to pieces when knocked.

Now, here was an astonishing mystery . . . my clay jar fell but did not break. It was struck down but it got up and kept going. It was burned but lived to tell the story.

When my clay jar set out to live its true self, the brightness of Christ's glory within burst forth!

And all the world knew that the glorious power that kept it safe and whole must have been from God and not from man.

#### The Quest

After God told me about the clay jar, I embarked on a search for a crude pot that would serve as a reminder to me of what I am. However, the pots on display in the city markets were either glazed or colorfully embossed or vibrantly adorned. I set my hope in the markets upcountry. I strained to look at pot and plant stalls in the town markets, hoping to catch sight of the very thing I wanted, knowing that when I see it, I would say, "This is it." Yet what I saw in the village pot shops were still too immaculate, too unflawed for my needs.

Little did I know that my clay jar was only three hundred meters from my house in Bangkok!

Sitting in a mini-bus one day, I sighted this little plant shop. In a fleeting second, I caught a glimpse of a crude-looking pot. Hastily getting off the bus, I crossed the road with my eye on the imperfect-looking container.

"May I see that one, please?"

"Oh, you don't want that one. It's useless. It's cracked." The attendant was honest.

"It's alright," I insisted. Could I have a look at it, please?" "Here. But I tell you, you'll have no use for this one."

Crude, chipped, cracked and charred. I could not have a better clay pot than this!

On scrutiny, the unglazed pot revealed its intriguing history: its lid was coarse and crude; the spout was chipped; the bottom was nursing a two-inch gash; and the heat must have been so intense while being baked in the kiln, that the jar was scorched in several spots. Perfect!

Crude, chipped, cracked and charred. I could not have a better clay pot than this!

#### Memorial to a Downfall

It now sits on a side table in our living room. Some evenings, as I sip my chamomile tea, I watch my clay jar as the lamp casts a soft glow on its burnt side.

My charred clay jar reminds me that at one time in my past God, through burnout, dealt a deathblow to my pride.

Now, I understand—it is only when I am conscious of my clayness that this glorious Treasure inside me can shine forth and proclaim

that I am what I am now only because of the all-excelling power of Jesus Christ, my Lord.

# A Final Reflection

Who is this Glorious Treasure? He is our Ever-Present Companion Our Intercessor and Faithful Prayer Warrior He is our Refuge and Fortress The Rebuilder of our Ruins Our Burden-Bearer He is our Host in the Banquet of All Times The Awesome Designer of our Inner World The Good God Our Treasure, Our Glory JESUS CHRIST The Hope of Glory In Us.

# Prayer

My Lord Jesus Christ, I kneel down before You with awe and wonder in my heart. I worship You and praise You for all that You are. I give You my offering of thanksgiving for all that You have done in my life. You are my priceless treasure, the only One I glory in. To You, my God be praise and honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

# Appendix A Frequently Asked Questions Answered by DR. RANDY MISAEL S. DELLOSA

1 What is burnout?

Any situation of stress creates a strain on a person's body, mind, and emotions. For most people, adequate rest and appropriate nutrition are sufficient to recover from the effects of stress. However, when stress is prolonged and relentless, fatigue sets in and initiates a downward progression towards burnout.

Burnout is a condition wherein one's inner resources and coping strategies have become ineffective to stave off the physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion from chronic high-level stress.

## 2 What are the symptoms of burnout?

Physical symptoms of burnout include stress-related disorders such as hypertension, migraine headaches, body aches, digestive discomfort, sexual difficulties, physical depletion, frequent infectious illnesses, sleep difficulties, and appetite problems.

Emotional symptoms of burnout include feelings of failure, hopelessness, helplessness, and lack of motivation. Anger, irritability, resentment, and cynicism are commonly experienced, alongside feelings of sadness, anxiety, and fear.

Mentally, burnout is manifested by negative attitudes towards one's self, other people, work, and life in general. Difficulty in concentration and making decisions are also common complaints. Burnout that is not managed may result into the development of psychiatric disorders such as major depression, anxiety disorders, psychosomatic illnesses, sexual dysfunction, or even addiction problems.

Behaviorally, people experiencing burnout may become socially withdrawn and lack the motivation to engage in productive activities. Relationships and work naturally suffer.

### 3 What causes burnout?

Some common causes of burnout include the following:

**Poor self-care**—Physically, we need to be strong and healthy to cope with stress. The lack of sleep and rest, an unhealthy diet, the lack of exercise, and an uncomfortable living environment all predispose a person to stress and subsequent burnout.

**Overwork**—When we take on more work than we can handle, we stretch ourselves too thin and our energies get depleted. At work and at home, we may get saturated with so much responsibilities and obligations that it becomes difficult to prioritize our tasks and manage our time. Often, there is little material compensation or emotional reward for all the work done.

**Perfectionist tendencies**—Some people place very high expectations on themselves and on others. They have a strong need for success and pursue their goals or tasks with intensity and compulsion. However, since their standards are hardly ever met, chronic frustration sets in, paving the way for stress and burnout. Persons with high standards commonly live in fear of failure and tolerate criticism very poorly.

*Emotional care-taking*—Attending to the needs of others can be an emotionally-draining task. This is especially true for service professionals and people-helpers. Some people harbor a messianic complex that compels them not only to carry another's burden but also to "save" them from their problems. Taking care of others becomes priority over taking care of one's self.

# 4 Is burnout what a person actually experiences when he/she says, "I'm so stressed-out"?

Feeling "so stressed-out" generally means that the person is overwhelmed by responsibilities or problems and is physically and emotionally exhausted. In this condition, the person is working on "reserve" energy and gets little opportunity to recharge adequately. The stressed-out person however is still able to cope.

On the other hand, the person experiencing burnout has lost his capacity to cope, has become demoralized, detached, and depleted of energy.

# 5 How do you distinguish between burnout, depression and nervous breakdown?

Nervous breakdown is a generic term that refers to any incapacitating emotional or mental crisis. The crisis causes the affected person to experience significant personal distress and impairment in social, occupational, and other areas of functioning. Nervous breakdown includes conditions such as psychotic disorders, major depression and panic disorder. Burnout may be considered a nervous breakdown if it is severe and occurs simultaneously with the conditions mentioned. Since the term "nervous breakdown" is vague, and can mean many different conditions, mental health professionals rarely use it as a formal diagnosis.

Major depression is a psychiatric disorder primarily characterized by a depressed mood and a loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities. Other symptoms of depression include changes in sleep and appetite patterns, changes in energy level, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty in concentration and decisionmaking, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. Major depression may result from stress and burnout.

Burnout refers to the endpoint condition in which the affected person can no longer tolerate prolonged and intense stress.

## 6 What is anxiety disorder or panic attack?

Anxiety is a normal response to actual danger or threat. However, if the anxiety is intense, persistent, distressing, and affects work and relationships, then it has reached abnormal proportions and has become a psychiatric disorder that needs psychiatric treatment in the form of medications and psychotherapy. There are many different forms of Anxiety Disorder such as Phobia, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and Panic Attack.

A panic attack is a period of sudden and intense fear and discomfort. It is manifested by physical symptoms such as palpitations, sweating, tremors, shortness of breath, chest discomfort, abdominal discomfort, lightheadedness or dizziness, and generally body weakness. Because of these overwhelming symptoms, there is often an accompanying fear of dying, going crazy, or of being afflicted with a serious illness. Despite frequent visits to the emergency room, no medical illnesses are usually found.

# 7 Does panic or anxiety attack always accompany burnout?

No.

8 Some people tell their burned out family members or friends, "What you're feeling is just all in the mind. Just get your act together." Is it really "just all in the mind"?

It is unfair for caregivers to tell the burnout sufferer to "snap out" of their condition and imply that "it's all in the mind." While some caregivers have good intentions in saying such, many times, it is said out of ignorance, frustration, anger, or impatience. Burnout is more than a mental problem. It affects the totality of one's being such that the sufferer's physical, emotional, and spiritual health deteriorate.

Furthermore, burnout is not a sudden condition of weakness from which a person can recover quickly. On the contrary, it is the endpoint of long-term stress wherein one's energies have been drained and coping skills failed.

Moreover, the burnout sufferer may be afflicted with a major depression or an anxiety disorder. These are psychiatric illnesses with a neuro-chemical abnormality and it would be impossible for anyone to "snap out" of an illness.

9 Does burnout cause significant physiological changes in the brain? Some medical experts point to chemical imbalance as one of the causes of a person's depression. What is chemical imbalance and how does it affect our mental and emotional health?

The brain is a powerful organ that functions much like a computer system. It is made up of billions of nerve cells called neurons. These neurons communicate with each other through brain chemicals known as neurotransmitters. It is also through these neurotransmitters that the brain is able to send to and receive messages from different areas of the body.

Two significant neurotransmitters that help to regulate your emotions are norepinephrine and serotonin. When the levels of these neurotransmitters change, there is a corresponding change in our emotional state. In the normally-functioning brain, the neurotransmitters adjust to produce the appropriate emotion for a certain situation.

What is termed as a "chemical imbalance in the brain" occurs when the neurotransmitters do not adjust as should be, thereby producing inappropriate emotions such as depression. The chemical imbalance also disrupts the communication between the body and brain thereby resulting in the symptoms associated with depression such as appetite and sleep changes, psychosomatic pains, etc.

Stressful life events, illnesses, certain medications, drug or alcohol use, and hormone levels may play a role in triggering a chemical imbalance that leads to depression. For some, the tendency for brain chemicals to get out of balance is genetic or hereditary.

Antidepressant medications are a form of treatment aimed particularly at correcting the chemical imbalance in the brain.

# 10 At what point or stage in a burnout sufferer's condition should he/she seek medical advice?

Burnout is a sign that the affected person should have sought medical and psychiatric consultation much earlier. Even before burnout occurs, anyone experiencing long-term stress should visit an internist and psychiatrist.

Since chronic stress can exact its toll on the different organ systems, a complete medical check-up is important. A visit to the psychiatrist is equally important because people experiencing burnout often suffer from psychiatric disorders such as major depression or panic attacks. In this case, psychiatric medication and psychotherapy are necessary. Not to receive medical or psychiatric help would only delay the burnout sufferer's recovery.

Consultation with a psychiatrist is also needed when the following stress-related symptoms develop: sleep and appetite problems, persistent distressing feelings and worrisome thoughts, stressrelated ailments, addictive behavior, or hearing hallucinatory voices.

It's important to get help from mental health professionals who offer wholistic treatment rather than treatment for just one or some aspects of the problem.

## 11 As a Christian psychiatrist, would you say that taking medications is the only solution for people suffering from burnout, depression or nervous breakdown?

Being a Christian counselor, physician, and psychiatrist, I integrate my Christian faith with my academic learnings to help people in a wholistic and hopefully life-transforming manner.

I acknowledge the importance of medications in the treatment of burnout, depression, or nervous breakdown but I do not rely on it alone. Because life problems are always multi-dimensional in nature, it is important that I address the different aspects of my patient's problem. This means that I search for biological, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and relational triggers and help my patient deal with them accordingly. In this way, I am able to help the person more thoroughly and deeply.

# 12 How long does it usually take for a burnout sufferer to recover?

Left untreated, the recovery period for burnout can take many months or years, and can be complicated with medical and psychiatric illnesses and occupational and relational difficulties.

Many interventions will hasten recovery from burnout, among them, getting medical and psychiatric treatment, receiving psychological and spiritual counseling, making lifestyle changes, and engaging in activities for self-renewal and self-nurture.

13 What can we do to avoid burnout? And what can those who have already recovered from burnout do to prevent it from happening again?

To prevent burnout, one has to make a personal life review and identify the factors that contribute to stress in one's life. Once the sources of stress are identified, they should then be reduced or at least managed. For the stresses that cannot be eliminated, coping strategies such as relaxation techniques may be used.

Here are some principles that can counter the development of burnout: Simplify life. Live only by what matters. Balance the various aspects of your life. Manage your time. Connect with people who can offer emotional support. Nurture yourself by acknowledging your needs and getting them met. Finally and most importantly, develop a spiritual outlook on life.

# 14 What should those caring for burnout sufferers do? What should they not do?

Looking after someone suffering from burnout can be quite a challenging and stressful task. To witness a formerly strong and capable loved one become weak and despondent is difficult for anyone to bear. The primary task of the caregiver is to make sure that he or she gets emotional, social, and spiritual support for himself or herself during the period of caregiving. It is important also for the caregiver to take care of his or her own physical health, getting enough rest and sleep and eating well. After all, the caregiver of a burnout sufferer is also at risk of experiencing burnout.

The caregiver must be well-informed about burnout, depression, and panic attack. Doing so prevents the caregiver from having unrealistic expectations or making unreasonable demands on the affected person. Moreover, the caregiver should offer emotional support in the form of non-judgmental listening, understanding, encouragement, compassion, and affection. Caregivers can also show emotional support by not pressuring burnout sufferers to snap out of their condition and become normal. Instead, caregivers can invite the burnout sufferer to make small practical steps towards improving their condition. Lastly, it is important for caregivers to encourage the burnout sufferer to seek and regularly consult medical or psychiatric treatment.

\* \* \*

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He earned a degree in psychology from the University of the Philippines, medical degree from Far Eastern University Institute of Medicine, and psychiatric training from Veterans Memorial Medical Center. Feeling restricted by psychiatry's emphasis on medication and the traditional Freudian approach to psychotherapy, he trained at Southern California University and the Gestalt Psychotherapy Network of Europe. He explores other therapies, aside from traditional practice, and does dream analysis, touch therapy and primal therapy, among others.

He is a member of the faculty of Asian Theological Seminary for its counseling program. He has also taught counseling courses at the Alliance Biblical Seminary. He is one of the founders and the charter president of the Philippine Association of Christian Counselors.

# Appendix B List of Counselors/ Counseling Centers

Here are names and contact details of competent doctors who might be able to help you. I've deliberately kept this listing short as I've only included the names of those I can personally vouch for.

In the Philippines:

**DR. RANDY MISAEL S. DELLOSA** Tel. Nos: (063-2) 4156529 / 4157964 Email address: lifechangerecovery@yahoo.com

LIFE CHANGE COUNSELING CENTERS 57 Examiner corner Times St. West Triangle, Quezon City *and* Back to the Bible Building 135 West Avenue, Quezon City

LIFE CHANGE RECOVERY CENTER 84 Maria Clara St., Brgy. Sto Domingo Sta. Mesa Heights, Quezon City

#### DR. ELIZA NAZAL-SIMON

Tel. No: (063-2) 9356124 Email address: ellisnsimon@yahoo.com

FEU-NRMF Unit 604 Marian Medical Arts Building Dahlia St., Fairview, Quezon City

DR. MICHELENE ESCOBAR-BUOT

Tel. No: (032) 2532994 Visayas Community Medical Center Osmeña Blvd., Cebu City

Outside the Philippines:

COUNSELLING AND CARE CENTRE Contact Person: **Mrs. Gracia Wiarda** Tel. No: 65366366 Email Address: info@counsel.org.sg Website: <u>www.counsel.org.sg</u> Blk 536 Upper Cross Street #05-241 Hong Lim Complex Singapore 050536

EMMANUEL CHURCH COUNSELLING SERVICES Tel. No: (0161) 4342224 Pro Tem Trust 8 Ward Street, Didsbury Manchester M20 6TJ England

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#### **Chapter 2: Hemmed In**

: *Kidner:* Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*. Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, p. 56.

#### **Chapter 4: Wrong Priorities**

- : *Cuthbert*: Statement by Nick Cuthbert, Quoted by Shirley Harbour in her Prayer Letter, Easter, 1997.
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#### Chapter 6: Out of my Comfort Zone

: *Haskins:* Louise Haskins (quoted from Precy Tay's prayer letter)

#### **Chapter 7: Misplaced Dependence**

D: Murray: Andrew Murray, quoted in Alice Chapin, A Garden of Promises. Minnesota: Garborg's Heart 'n Home, Inc., 1993, January 29.

#### **Chapter 11: Grasshoppers and Giants**

1: *Chiang:* Billly Chiang, "In the Middle of It," *Impact* Vol. 21, No. 2, April/May 1997, p. 16.

#### **Chapter 12: Rebuilding the Ruins**

2: The original quote reads: "God makes a promise—faith believes it, hope anticipates it, patience quietly awaits it." *Little Book of Quotations*. Rotherham, UK: Country Studios, a division of History and Heraldry Ltd., 1999.

#### Chapter 14: A Feast or Just Crumbs?

<u>3</u>: *Urquhart:* Colin Urquhart, *My Dear Son*. Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992, p. 75.

#### Chapter 15: God, my Shelter

<u>4</u>: *Urquhart:* Colin Urquhart, *My Dear Son*. Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992, p. 113–115.

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# Endnotes

<u>1</u>. A missionary-friend who had suffered from clinical depression pointed out that this is not an absolute sequence. For some, stress, burnout, and depression might come in a different order and in different patterns over a long period of time.

<u>2</u>. P' Flor – pronounced as the common letter 'p' is the respectful but affectionate Thai title for older sister or older brother

- <u>3</u>. *Farang* means foreigner
- <u>4</u>. *Pen yangai khap means* "How are you doing?" *Sabai dee mai khap means* "How are you?"
- 5. Not her real name

# About the Author

**Flor Ulan-Taylor** taught Philippine History at the University of the Philippines for two years before joining the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She worked with IVCF for nine years after which she went to All Nations Christian College in England where she met her husband Steve. They have been missionaries in Thailand for more than twenty years now. Flor enjoys teaching, counseling and mentoring women.

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