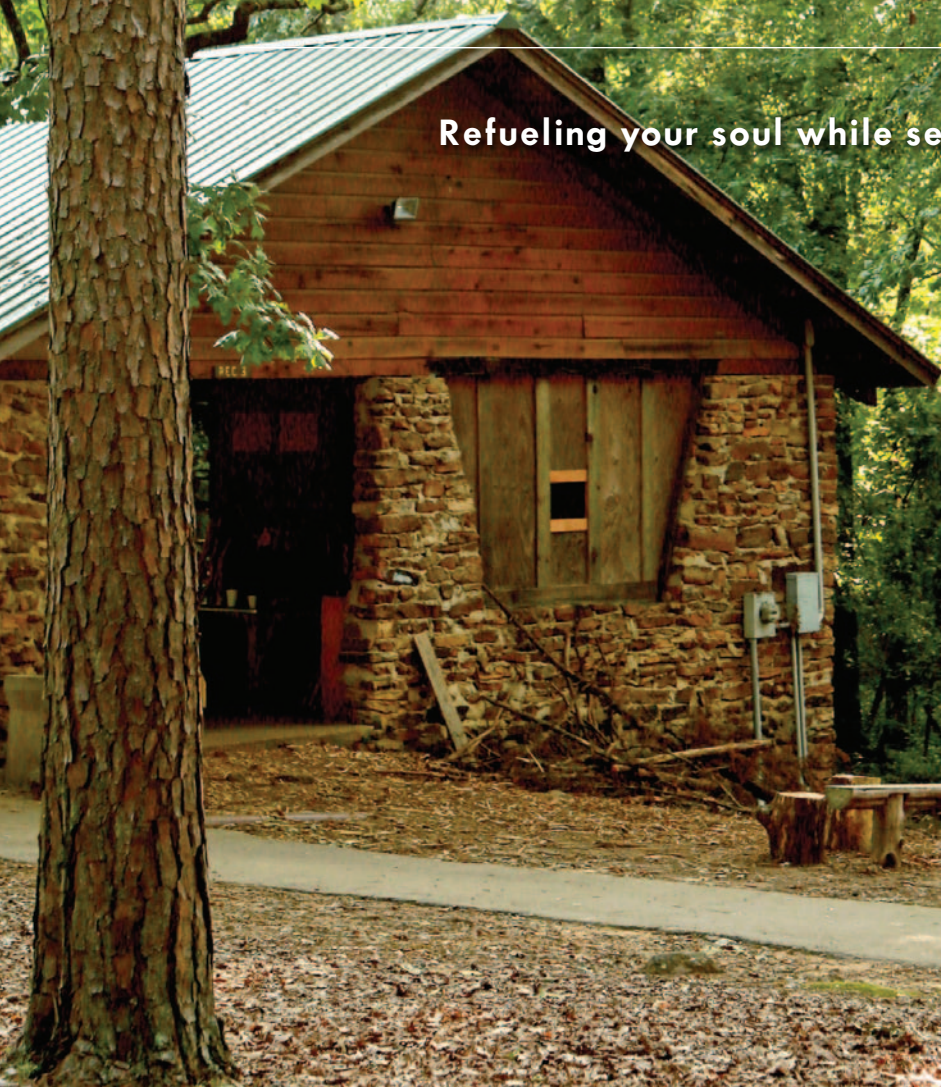


RUNNING ON EMPTY

Refueling your soul while serving others



Early in my career, I learned a disturbing truth about myself: I was much better at doing work *for* God than I was at being *with* God. I was willing to work 80 hours a week *for* God while investing a fraction of my time *with* Him. I was certain this honored God because He had called me to partner with Him, and I wanted nothing more than to use my one and only life to serve Him. Full. Throttle. Ahead. ▶

Ever so gently, God got my attention and whispered the invitation to make some changes.

As you can imagine, I hit a wall after sixteen years in full-time ministry. Disillusioned, I felt like I was on a treadmill that never ended, and while I was somewhat aware that I was depending primarily on my own strength to power that treadmill, I didn't know how to do it any differently.

I took a sabbatical, went back to seminary and started a retreat ministry called Breathing Space to help people like me carve out time to listen and respond to God. Despite my driven, type-A, Enneagram three personality (or maybe because of it!), I started building rhythms in my life to make more space for silence and solitude, to experience Scripture and prayer in new, contemplative ways and to practice many other spiritual disciplines. I discovered, through the gift of God's grace, that this was how He restored my soul. If I would carve out the time, He would meet me in that space and slowly transform me over time.

Then, I became the executive director of a Christian camp. The frenetic pace, constant needs of others, external crises out of my control and being on call 24/7 sucked me back into the nonstop rhythms of workaholicism. I didn't completely abandon the practices that drew me close to God and nourished my soul, but I slipped back into seeing them as a luxury that camp leadership rarely afforded me. Sometime during my third year, I was exhausted and realized this insane pace was unsustainable. Ever so gently, God got my attention and whispered the invitation to make some changes.

It was then that I was reminded of this most powerful truth from John Ortberg's book, *Soul Keeping*: "The most important thing in your life is not *what* you do; it's *who* you become. That's what you will take into eternity. You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe."

Mic drop.

These are the questions for each of us: Who am I becoming? If my mission is to make disciples of Jesus, am I becoming the kind of person who lives like Jesus would if He was in my place? In other words, am I *actually* living the life I am inviting others to live? Am I becoming a person powered by God's strength? Is my soul being transformed to look more and more like Him over time?

The soul is often described as the engineer of our being. In his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard wrote, "What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, or your thoughts, or your intentions or even your feelings, but your soul ... [it] correlates, integrates and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self."

The soul simply *cannot* be avoided; it hungers for meaning, and in the absence of meaning, it resorts to performance and fanaticism. If I'm not careful, I can find myself guilty of performing, running around doing a bunch of stuff I think pleases God while completely neglecting my soul and the work God wants to do *in* me.

It was in a similar climate when Jesus spoke the words found in Matthew 11:28–30, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

There is, perhaps, no greater verse than that for leaders to meditate on to evaluate the condition of our souls. Just as people misguidedly find their identity in sports, politics or possessions, we can get lost in the work of ministry. ▶



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon



Pause to Reflect

Questions to consider

Before the first campers arrive, I invite you to consider your soul and reflect on the following questions. It may be worthwhile to incorporate these questions as part of your check-ins with staff throughout the summer.

- Am I focusing more on who I am becoming or what I am doing?
- Am I coming to Jesus in silence and solitude and growing in my ability to experience deep soul rest, free from exhaustion and anxiety?
- What intentional plan can I make for daily and weekly spiritual practices to take care of my soul this summer?
- Am I generally seeking to control outcomes or am I abandoning them to God?

Our souls were created to run on God's grace, and we access that grace as we surrender and open ourselves to Him.

Weariness, exhaustion and burnout are common complaints among those of us who have given our lives to serving the kingdom of God. However, in *Renovation of the Heart*, Willard points out, “such weariness and endless labor was, to [Jesus], a sure sign of a soul not properly rooted in God — a soul, in effect, on its own.”

Jesus invites us to stop living in our own strength, to come to Him and live in His yoke, actively partnering with His work in our lives instead of trying to carry the burden on our own. Our souls were created to run on God's grace, and we access that grace as we surrender and open ourselves to Him. Most often, this happens through spiritual practices.

This is critical as we come into the summer season of camping. The spiritual practices of silence and solitude are especially important for the soul's health. Jesus was constantly escaping the crowds to talk to His Father and find rest. As we abstain from noise and people, we can listen to God's voice and move into deep soul rest that we cannot find in any other source.

It takes intentionality and planning, especially during the summer, to appropriately step away from staff and campers, empower others to lead and spend time with the God who dwells and delights in us. It could be as simple as connecting with God while going for a prayer walk over lunch, listening to worship music, sitting in creation and journaling or meditating on a favorite passage of Scripture. If you are looking for a great resource, I highly recommend Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

It is only in this peaceful space that we can hear God reminding us that we are His beloved son or daughter. In this space, He speaks words of truth and life into our souls and replenishes us in ways that only He can. Only in this space are we reminded that we are not in control of outcomes and aren't responsible for making anything happen; instead, we can work with open hands and trust Him with the results. It is from this space we emerge as a calm, non-anxious presence, able to respond to the situations of life in ways that are good and right.

I love Willard's vision of a soul well cared for by God: “Our soul is like an inner stream of water, which gives strength, direction and harmony to every other element in our life. When that stream is as it should be, we are constantly refreshed and exuberant in all we do, because our soul itself is then profusely rooted in the vastness of God and His kingdom, including nature; and all else within us is enlivened and directed by that stream. Therefore, we are in harmony with God, reality and the rest of human nature and nature at large.”

May it be so for each of us this summer. ■



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