

**SOUL RESET:
How Is It With Your Soul?**

**Isaiah 40:1-11
2 Corinthians 4:7-18
Matthew 11:28-30**

Burnout calls for a soul reset.

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One of the biggest news stories of the last several weeks has been the spread of the corona virus COVID 19 across the planet. Some scientists are now calling it a pandemic, although the World Health Organization has declined to give COVID 19 that title. A pandemic differs from an epidemic in that an epidemic is an unusual number of cases in a localized area. A pandemic is worldwide exposure to a disease. The last pandemic was the H1N1 flu virus in 2009. COVID 19 has now reached 53 nations, being diagnosed in over 80,000 patients, and killing almost 3,000 people. But it's not considered a pandemic yet.

Another pandemic that we are dealing with is more spiritual in nature. I'm talking about burnout, a situation in which whatever gave you joy in the past no longer has the meaning it once had. Burnout can be caused by physical problems, overwork, or under-appreciation. It produces fatigue, stress, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, everything that robs life of its joy and purpose. Burnout is a common condition, and it afflicts people worldwide.

In South Korea, they have a place you can escape burnout for a short time by going to prison. You can pay \$90 for a 24-hour stay in solitary confinement in a mock prison. The "inmates" are locked up in a cell with no phone, clock, or other people—just quiet. They are given a prison uniform, a yoga mat to sleep on, three meals and toilet facilities. If that actually sounds kind of nice to you, you're not alone. The founder of the fake prison, Noh Ji-Hyang, was inspired by her husband, who often worked 100 hours in a week. "He said he would rather go into solitary confinement for a week to take a rest and feel better," she said. "That was the beginning." The name of this respite from the world translates as "Prison Inside Me," which says a lot about where the real problem lies. Ji-Hyang says, "After a stay in the prison, people say, 'This is not a prison, the real prison is where we return to.'"¹

Some people will go to any lengths to get some peace and rest. That's what makes the promise of Jesus so relevant, so necessary today: "*Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"² When we feel weary, burned out, exhausted, and anxious, we

turn to our faith for resources of peace and strength. We look to our spiritual leaders to guide us on our journey.

But honestly, sometimes our spiritual leaders get burned out, too. Dr. Junius Dodson was a very successful African-American United Methodist pastor. He had started and grown an ethnically diverse United Methodist Church in California, and then he was appointed to pastor St. Mark UMC in Wichita, Kansas, which he grew to about 3,500 members and multiple campuses. It was an upward trajectory all the way. But along the way, Dotson lost his way. He never got enough rest; he didn't have time to pray; he was trying to shoulder all the responsibility of a large and growing ministry. One day, in the middle of preaching a funeral, he passed out (ironic, don't you think?). At the hospital, he was diagnosed with "extreme fatigue." That experience of crashing and burning started Junius Dotson on the way back to spiritual health. He chronicled his journey back to faithfulness and integrity in a book called *Soul Reset*. This book will form the foundation of our Lenten journey this year.

I heard Dr. Dotson speak and met him last fall, and when I heard about his journey, I knew that this would be a helpful story to tell in the church. We face forces every day that threaten to pull us away from God. Sometimes these forces are external, and we can only figure out ways to cope with them. Sometimes these forces are internal, and we can learn how to do better. Our greatest need in the world today—in life today—is to have a healthy soul. Our souls get sick, and in order to get ourselves back on the right track, we need to do a *soul reset*.

If you have anything to do with electronic devices, you know what a reset is. When your phone or your tablet or your computer has a problem, they just freeze up. I imagine that inside these devices there are little electrical beings that get to running so fast that they slide off into the ditch and get stuck. So you have to do a reset. Usually that means just turning the device off, then turning it back on. But if those little electrical guys run off into a deep ditch, you may have to do a "hard reset." If that doesn't work, you may have to do a "factory reset," which takes the device all the way back to when you opened it out of the box. Then you lose everything that you have

saved over time. So I always cross my fingers and hope the easy reset works.

Dotson gives a definition of what he is talking about when he says a soul reset: “A *soul reset* is a hard stop of chronic busyness; a deep look inward and an intentional look to God; and a new, more holistic journey forward that more closely resembles an abundant life into which Jesus calls his disciples. A soul reset is the pouring out of one’s self to God. It means laying yourself at the altar and earnestly seeking God’s face. It means a season of fervent prayer and fasting. It includes finding new and meaningful ways to connect with Jesus, the lover of our souls.”³ Sounds like a Lenten journey to me.

The first thing we have to do to begin to reset our soul is to rediscover the “why.” We’re pretty good with the “what” and the “how.” How big is your car, your house, your church? What do you do for a living? What do you want to become? How much money do you make? What we forget sometimes is the “why.” Why do you do what you do? Why were you put on the planet? Why did God gift you and call you to a mission? If we are burned out, we have probably forgotten our “why.”

Our “why” has to do with Jesus Christ. We are called into a relationship with Jesus. We are here to serve Jesus by serving his children. We are here to be disciples and to make disciples of Jesus. That’s our “why”; our relationship with Jesus empowers and energizes our life. If we are connected to Jesus, we are already on first base.

You know in the game of baseball, the idea is to advance around the bases until you score at home. But you have to touch every base as you go around.

Bobby Bowden is a Hall of Fame football coach who led the Florida State Seminoles for over 30 years. He is also a devoted Christian, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes gives a Bobby Bowden Award each year to the college athlete that most exemplifies the walk of faith. When Bobby Bowden was in college, he was actually a baseball player. He had never hit a home run in college, until one day he hit a line drive down the right field line. The third base coach waved him around second, and halfway to third base, the coach was still waving him on. Bobby rounded third and slid into home plate for the score. Everyone was cheering and giving him high fives.

But the pitcher of the opposing team threw the ball to the first baseman, and the umpire called Bobby out. He had failed to touch first base as he ran past it, so the rest of his home run was meaningless. Telling the story often, Coach Bowden would say, "If you don't take care of first base, it doesn't matter what you do. If you don't honor the Lord first, it doesn't matter what else you do."⁴

First base for Christians is a relationship with Jesus Christ. That's our "why."

Established in our "why," we grow as disciples through spiritual practices. This is our focus in Lent—usually the spiritual disciplines of prayer, giving, and fasting. But there are many spiritual practices. Wesley called them "means of grace," things like worship, prayer, reading Scripture, sacraments, Christian conversation, and acts of mercy. Put them all together, these spiritual practices add up to discipleship. Dotson says, "Everything comes back to discipleship. ...Discipleship is a lifelong journey that requires a steady connectedness to Jesus."⁵

As we begin to reset our souls, the first spiritual practice we want to do is called **self-examination**. We have to do a spiritual assessment and see where we are with our faith, to see where we stand in relation to Jesus. John Wesley was a master of self-examination (to a fault, some would say). He wrote, "Be serious and frequent in the examination of your heart and life."⁶ Whenever the early Methodist class meetings or bands would get together, Wesley gave them a question to ask each other: "How is it with your soul?" We still ask that question when we gather as Methodist clergy.

On your bulletin insert, there is a list of 22 questions that John and Charles Wesley made up to guide the self-examination of their Holy Club at Oxford. We won't go over them all in detail, but I hope you will this week. Can you imagine a small group of college students gathering together and answering those questions to one another?

Another way of self-examination was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius was a 16th-century Catholic priest who founded the Society of Jesus, which became known as the order of the Jesuits. His practice of spiritual assessment is called *The Examen Prayer*. It's described on the colorful side of your insert. In 15 minutes at the end of your day,

simply get quiet, turn off the TV, and reflect on what God has done for you that day.

1. **Ask God for light.** I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not merely my own.
2. **Give thanks.** The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
3. **Review the day.** I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit. The good things Ignatius called *consolations*. The bad things he called *desolations*.
4. **Face your shortcomings** (the desolations). I face up to what is wrong—in my life and in me.
5. **Look toward the day to come.** I ask where I need God in the day to come.⁷

That seems very simple, doesn't it? But I guarantee if you spend some time reflecting on your day, you and God will have something to talk about.

The goal of self-examination, the goal of a soul reset, is wholeness—that your body, mind, and soul would be all that God wants it to be, that you would be living the abundant life that Jesus came to bring you. God wants you to have rest from your exhaustion. God wants you to have peace in your soul. The promise of Jesus, as expressed in *The Message*, is “*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.*”⁸ That's what we need—to “learn the unforced rhythms of grace.” That's what we need—to live “freely” and “lightly.”

We see this at work in the life of the great apostle Paul. He certainly had cause to be burned out: beatings, imprisonments, stonings, shipwreck, conflict, and anxiety. He was constantly in distress of some sort or another. But Paul found his consolation in his relationship with God. He wrote to the Corinthians, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any*

affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”⁹ Despite all his suffering, he was able to speak a Gospel word of hope that still rings true today: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”¹⁰

And here’s the reset button: *“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”¹¹*

That’s the quest we are on this Lent. It’s a journey toward abundant life. It’s a journey toward eternal life. We want to get out of the prison of fatigue, exhaustion, anxiety, chronic busyness, and burnout. We want to become whole, to find peace, to get some rest. We need a soul reset.

¹ C. J. Green, “A Peaceful Prison,” *Mockingbird Blog*, November 30, 2018.

² Matthew 11:28.

³ Junius B. Dotson, *Soul Reset: Breakdown, Breakthrough, And The Journey To Wholeness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 9-10.

⁴ Kevin Long, Tennessee Titans center, *The Tennessean*, September 29, 2000.

⁵ Dotson, *op. cit.*, 29.

⁶ John Wesley, “On Conscience,” Sermon 105, <http://wordsofwesley.com/libtext.cfm?srm=105>.

⁷ <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Examen-Prayer-Card.pdf>.

⁸ Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:7-10.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.