

Filled Up, Poured Out

How God's Spirit Can Revive Your
Passion and Purpose

Mark O. Wilson



Indianapolis, Indiana

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Contents

Acknowledgements	11
Part 1. Vacuus	13
1. Clouds without Rain: Empty Pastors	14
2. Broken Cisterns: Empty Churches	29
3. Catharsis: Empty Out to Fill Up	41
Part 2. Repleo	53
4. Immersion: Filled with God's Presence	54
5. Faith: Filled with God's Promise	67
6. Contentment: Filled with God's Peace	79
7. Enduement: Filled with God's Power	93
8. Confluence: Prayer Is the Filling Station	107
Part 3. Fluo	119
9. Compassion: Pour Out God's Presence	120
10. Blessing: Pour Out God's Promise	131
11. Righteousness: Pour Out God's Peace	146
12. Influence: Pour Out God's Power	159
13. Saturation: Go Be the Church	170
Notes	183

PART 1

Vacuus

empty, devoid of, free from

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

—Psalm 63:1

Shepherds who feed only themselves. They are
clouds without rain, blown along by the wind.

—Jude 12

1

Clouds without Rain

Empty Pastors

Hitting the Wall

I felt numb. Normally, a long October drive through the scenic Wisconsin Northwoods refreshed my spirit, but not this day. My heart was too heavy to notice.

Two weeks earlier, flying home from a speaking engagement in New Brunswick, I had been weary from a long stretch of fast-paced and demanding ministry. I looked forward to recharging. My busy schedule had left my soul running on about an eighth of a tank, and I knew I needed to fill up again soon.

Then I received a shocking revelation that changed everything. It was one of those bad-news moments forever frozen in memory. Melvin and Delores Sipe, the oldest members of my congregation, had been brutally murdered in their home.

A drug-crazed teenager with ambitions of gang membership forced his way into this elderly couple's house and killed them. The whole community reeled with horror and disbelief. These things occur in big cities. They're not supposed to happen in Norman Rockwell villages like Hayward, Wisconsin.

The Sipes were pillars of our congregation. Hayward Wesleyan Church had been their home ever since Mel's parents joined as charter members in 1925. Our church was the hub of life for Mel and Delores. We were like family and included in their closest circle of friends. Mel, a kindhearted carpenter, crafted our Communion table and the kitchen cabinets. Delores was known to our vacation Bible school children as the cookie lady. Their deaths were a tragedy beyond imagination.

The Sunday following the murders, we cried together and sang old hymns to strengthen each other. Amazingly, a bald eagle came to church that Sunday and perched at the highest point on the sanctuary roof. She stayed there the entire morning. I considered it a postcard from heaven, reminding us of Isaiah 40:31, "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles" (KJV).

But, I didn't find an eagle's strength in the days that followed. In fact, I felt weaker as events passed in a blur. My entire schedule was consumed with the funeral, phone calls, dealing with reporters, comforting grieving family members and friends, and trying to make sense of the tragedy myself. At this point, I could tell my tank was dangerously close to empty, yet I didn't have time to refill. I was running on autopilot. Many people turned to me for strength, but I had very little to offer. My energy was gone.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," I complained to my wife, Cathy. "I've completely bottomed out, and my reserve tank is drained too."

“Now you understand how some people in your congregation feel most of the time,” she gently replied.

Two weeks after the funeral, I spoke to a group of pastors in northern Minnesota. I really didn’t want to go but couldn’t bring myself to break the commitment.

After muddling halfheartedly through my presentations, I bid a quick farewell and headed home, hardly recognizing the autumn beauty around me.

I stopped to fill up at Kwik Trip in Brainerd, Minnesota. At the cash register, I glanced down at the newspaper stand. The front page headline blared: Mega-Church Pastor Resigns: Admits Infidelity. The man’s picture accompanying the article was familiar. I had met this guy, read things he had written, and heard him speak on several occasions. He was not someone I would have suspected to have such a moral failure; but there it was, being shouted from the rooftops.

Shocked, I purchased the paper, returned to my car, and scanned the article again. As I read, the Holy Spirit spoke to me. It seemed almost audible: “This is what happens to ministers who neglect their souls.”

I felt like Adam in Eden who, caught hiding, heard God’s searching voice, “Where are you?” I realized I wasn’t in a healthy place emotionally or spiritually.

“Oh God,” I cried out, “Please don’t let that ever happen to me. What can I do to take better care of my soul? I need your help. I need your strength.”

The long drive home through northern tundra became a spiritual pilgrimage and my car turned into a sanctuary. In one of the sweetest seasons of prayer I’ve ever experienced, God revealed new truth to me and filled my heart with holy love.

I realized that I had been depending on yesterday’s grace, failing to keep my spiritual life fresh and up-to-date. My soul was empty

and needed to be replenished. I saw that I had been hiding behind a very busy schedule to avoid addressing significant internal issues.

On this homeward journey, I grieved the loss of my precious friends, repented of my soul's leanness, and readjusted my priorities. It took this dark night of the soul for me to discover the danger of running on empty. The commitments I made that day led to significant schedule changes and new spiritual commitments (noted in chapter 8) that have sustained me to this day.

Since then, I've made corrective adjustments regularly. It's an ongoing process, being filled anew with God's grace every morning. Occasionally, I fall short and catch myself running on an eighth of a tank again—but now I have a healthy benchmark for life alignment.

I pray that some of the things I've learned on this journey will help you in your daily quest to love and serve the Lord.

Take a Fresh Dip

A pastor's job can be summed up in four words: *preach, pray, lead, and love* (not necessarily in that order). Every ministerial task is included on that short list. One thing is certain: The only way to effectively accomplish these priorities is through the fullness of Christ's Spirit. Otherwise, we are merely resounding gongs and clanging cymbals (1 Cor. 13:1).

Empty pastors are clouds without water, performing empty ministry.

Their sermons are empty.

Their prayers are empty.

Their leadership is empty.

Their relationships are empty.

The great nineteenth-century pastor, Dr. C. I. Scofield, went to church with a Welsh friend, where they heard an empty sermon on Naaman's healing as he dipped himself in the Jordan: "It was a good sermon from a homiletical standpoint, and I admitted it to myself in a kind of protest against an inner feeling that somehow, good as it was, it was leaving me cold. Just then, my friend leaned over and sighed, 'If only the dear brother would take a fresh dip in the Jordan himself!'"¹

Have you been busy running the church, preaching empty sermons, leading empty meetings, saying empty prayers, and engaging in empty conversations? Perhaps you need to stop running, and take a fresh dip in the Jordan.

High Calling, Hard Work

Pastoral ministry is a high and noble calling. There is no greater privilege than helping others find faith, strength, and comfort in Christ. Rightly understood, ministry is joining Jesus in his work in the world. As Methodist theologian Thomas Oden noted, "Ministry in the Christian community is a participation in the ministry of Christ. It is the ministry of the Father through the Son by the Spirit. It is a ministry offered to the whole church as gift and task."²

On good days, it feels like a delightful gift and fulfilling task. Easter Sunday for instance, is an annual highlight for pastors, as absentee parishioners return like the swallows of San Capistrano.

However there are other days when it is neither delightful nor fulfilling.

A few years ago, after the last of four exhilarating Easter worship services, I turned to my elder associate, Pastor Ben, and joyfully

exclaimed, “Isn’t this fabulous? I can’t imagine it getting any better! Being a pastor is pure joy!”

Pastor Ben grinned wryly and replied, “Just wait until tomorrow.”

Sure enough, Monday was another story. Pastoral counselor Arch Hart calls Monday “adrenaline letdown day.” Mark Driscoll talks about “bread truck Mondays,” when the fantasy of delivering bread is far more appealing than continuing in the pastorate.

That Easter Monday, problems sprang up everywhere. I had to deal with a leadership squabble, a budget challenge, a marriage crisis, and a swarm of other difficulties.

I called Pastor Ben. “This is absolutely horrible! I can’t imagine it getting any worse. Being a pastor is pure torture!” He grinned and replied, “Just wait until tomorrow.”

Grace in the Grinder

Pastoral work, though rewarding, is quite difficult. Between glory moments, we’re in the grinder, and the pressures are absolutely enormous. Focus on the Family reported that “45.5 percent of pastors say they’ve experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.”³

Leadership guru Peter Drucker stated that the four most difficult jobs in America today are: president of the United States, university president, hospital administrator, and pastor of a local church.⁴ Being included on Drucker’s short list somehow gives me a morose sense of satisfaction. At least somebody recognizes the difficulty of our mission.

Only those who share the pastoral load (and those married to them) comprehend the toll it takes. Yet despite the daily challenges, significant joys and fulfillment are readily available to pastors of

local churches. We really can “serve the LORD with gladness” (Ps. 100:2 KJV) and “count it all joy” (James 1:2 KJV) if we are willing to take a fresh dip in the Jordan.

The only way to accomplish God’s bidding is through his anointing. This is our source of strength. The most frustrating task in the world is attempting to accomplish holy work through the power of the flesh. It cannot be done. Human effort alone is merely chasing the wind (Eccl. 1:14).

Why Do Pastors Run Empty?

Overworked, overburdened, and overstressed pastors are prone to depletion due to the involvement, investment, and intensity of the task. Burnout, or “anorexia of the soul” as Harvey Herman puts it, is a state of emotional and spiritual exhaustion.⁵ In this empty condition, ministers feel drained and used up. There’s little energy to deal with people. As a result, burned out pastors seek ways to escape and detach from those they serve.

How does this occur? We don’t launch zombies into ministry. At ordination, when they are given authority to preach the Word and administer the sacraments, fledgling pastors embrace it eagerly, confident enough to beat hell with a water pistol. What happens? How do pastors end up dried, drained, and depleted?

Responsibilities Exceed Energy

Ministry is always unfinished. Recently, a friend said, “It’s not the pastoral work that does me in, but all the work that is left undone after the work is done.”

Ministers, normally a responsible lot, desire to successfully fulfill all the duties placed upon them. The problem is that there

are many more responsibilities than any human being could possibly meet.

Ministry is multitasking while solo-purposing. Seminary doesn't always prepare us well for that. Juggling a thousand issues and interactions clouds the bigger picture. After a busy season of dealing with trifles, I taped the following note on my office wall: "Why are we doing this?"

The next morning, upon entering my office, I noticed our custodian had scrawled a little response on the bottom of the page: "I have no idea and was wondering the same thing myself."

The secret to sustained, fruitful ministry is found in following the path of responsiveness rather than mere responsibility. Our goal, in the face of multiple demands, should be to respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings, bringing Christ's grace to each situation as he leads. His yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30). Surrounded by responsibilities, we must listen carefully for one voice—that of our Shepherd (John 10:4). It's the only voice that counts.

Pretensions Exceed Realities

The temptation to fake it in ministry is powerful. Pastors are inclined to pretend to be more holy, prayerful, loving, and wise than they really are. Occasionally, doting parishioners place us on the holier-than-thou pedestal. Unfortunately, there's only one direction to go from there.

While counseling a young couple, I attempted to connect with the unbelieving husband by saying, "I'm a regular, ordinary guy too." The wife, obviously disappointed in my fall from superhero status, shook her head and sighed, "That's so sad, Pastor. I'll be praying for you." So far, her prayers haven't availed much. I still don't wear a cape and can't leap buildings in a single bound.

Pretention is like driving a misaligned car that always veers to the left. It takes constant effort to stay on course. As soon as you relax and loosen the grip, you end up swerving. You can fake it for a while, but sooner or later, the other you comes out and takes over. Keeping your life and ministry going the right direction is difficult when your inner life is out of line. Instead of pretending that everything is straight while struggling with the steering, why not just go to the master mechanic for a soul alignment?

Pleasing Exceeds Shepherding

The church is fertile soil for codependency. If you need to be needed, you'll find plenty of opportunities in the ministry. In fact, the evangelical world normally rewards such neuroses. That approach, however, is dry rot to the soul. When our identity comes from others, we cease to be authentic, and end up in a never-ending quest to please. As Craig Groeschel noted, "Becoming obsessed with what people think about me is the quickest way to forget what God thinks about me."⁶ In my early ministry, I fell into this trap because I tied my worth to the opinions of others. I'll never forget the day God began to free me from the dreadful disease of people pleasing.

I had promised my kids that we would enjoy a popcorn and movie night together, but while the corn was popping, the phone rang. An unhappy parishioner was on the line. "Pastor, my husband and I are upset about a few things at church. We're considering leaving, and we want you to come over to our house tonight so we can discuss the problems."

Codependent Mark kicked in. I gulped and said, "Of course, I'll be there right away." Hanging up, I turned to face my five children staring at me in wide-eyed dismay.

"Dad! Where are you going? Why are you doing that? What about the popcorn and movies?"

At that moment, the clue phone rang for Mr. Wilson, and for the first time I saw myself as a rotten, twisted, people pleaser.

“Kids, you’re right,” I declared. “I made a promise to you and, doggone it, I’m going to keep it.”

I took a deep breath, grabbed the phone before losing confidence, and called the lady back. With the rest of the family eavesdropping, I informed her that I couldn’t come that night after all because I had already made a promise to have popcorn and movies with my kids, and I needed to keep it. She didn’t understand and tried to pressure me, but I held my ground and found tremendous joy and liberty as the approval addiction chains fell away.

My family cheered when I hung up, and the popcorn was the tastiest I’d ever had. I lost a disgruntled couple from my church that night but gained my soul and kept my kids. Looking back, over a decade later, I think it was a fantastic trade.

Outflow Exceeds Inflow

There is a continual ebb and flow in ministry. Even when things are going right, we need repeated infillings for our outflowings. There’s no other way for effective, vibrant, long-term ministry. “The more you experience God’s power working in your life and through your ministry,” said Wesley Duewel, “the more you will sense your repeated need of the Spirit’s new touch.”⁷ Pouring our lives out for others without taking the necessary steps to replenish leads to ministry fatigue, much like the experience I related at the beginning of this chapter.

Pastor, the *best* gift you can give your people is your own healthy soul and your heart overflowing with God’s holy love. You can’t give them that unless you take the time to nourish your soul.

“Beloved,” said A. B. Simpson, “Let us drink of the living waters. Nay, let us receive them into our very hearts, so that we shall carry the fountain with us wherever we go.”⁸

Sadly, too many pastors are so busy running the church that they don't take time to run to Jesus. Several years ago, my seminary professor, C. Peter Wagner, conducted a survey of 572 pastors across America about their prayer lives. He discovered that the pastors spent an average of twenty-two minutes a day in prayer, with 57 percent reporting less than twenty minutes.⁹

No wonder so many ministers are fatigued, frazzled, and frayed. It's impossible to meet the overwhelming demands of ministry on less than twenty minutes a day. That's like eating only one small carrot in the morning and expecting it to nourish you all day long.

Serving Exceeds Loving

You serve God, but do you love him? You work hard for him, but do you enjoy him? After all, according to the Westminster Catechism, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

You serve your congregation, but do you love them? You work with people, but do you enjoy them? I think there should be a pastors' catechism that calls us to love our people and enjoy them forever.

A rookie pastor, at lunch with a seasoned ministry veteran, unburdened his heart, complaining about his congregation nonstop for an hour and a half. At the end of the conversation, the older pastor looked the young man squarely in the eye and said, "I know exactly what will solve these problems."

"What? Please, tell me," the young pastor responded.

"You must learn to love your people. You are serving them out of duty, but you don't love them much and they can feel it. You need to go home, get alone with God, and beg him to place a new love in your heart for your flock. If you do that, you will be amazed at how many of these challenges will be resolved."

One day, swamped with difficulties, I called my mentor, Loring Peterson. "I need your help," I implored. "I have problems on every

side here at the church, and I need you to pray for the Lord to take them away.”

I was shocked by Loring’s blunt answer: “No.”

“N-No?” I stammered. “I thought you cared about me.”

“I do,” Loring replied. “That’s why I won’t ask God to take away your problems. I’m assuming that all those problems have to do with people, and if God took all the problems, he’d have to take all people too. You don’t want *that* do you?”

“Well, of course not,” I said, then thought for a minute and added, “But can I pick just a few?”

In essence, ministry is loving God, loving others, and helping others love God. Neil Cole observed, “The Gospel flies best on the wings of relationships.”¹⁰

In an effort to do this, we need to wait on the Lord. There are two distinct ways to do this: the Martha method and the Mary method.

When Jesus came to their house, Martha waited like a busy waitress, stressed out, and scurrying around in manic mode. Mary waited on him in a completely different fashion. She simply sat at Jesus’ feet, waiting to hear what he had to say. Jesus said she chose the better way. Martha was so busy serving that she didn’t have time for loving. I frequently find myself acting like Martha, flailing away and imagining I’m doing something great for God, when all he wants from me is to wait at his feet and listen to what he has to say. In the words of Corrie ten Boom, “Don’t wrestle, just nestle.”¹¹ An African adage puts it another way: “There will be such sweet reward when we wait upon the Lord.”¹²

Duty Exceeds Delight

In his beautiful book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen wrote, “I have become accustomed to living with sadness, and so have lost the eyes to see my joy.”¹³

When we lose our eyes to see the joy, everything grows dim. Troubles are what you see when you take your eyes off Jesus.

I live in snow country, and after it sticks in November, people here don't see the ground again until April. One cold December morning, I looked out our picture window upon fourteen inches that had fallen overnight. "Arrgh!" I complained. "Fourteen inches of obligation." When my kids woke up, they looked out the same window, shouted, "Yippee!" and ran to put on snow clothes. For them, it was fourteen inches of opportunity. Same snow—different perspective.

Ministry is obligation or opportunity, depending on how you approach it. The more love you put into it and the more time you take for soul refreshment, the more it will be delightful rather than burdensome.

The Deeper Root

What drives ministers to overwork, assume too much responsibility, and serve out of grim duty? We realize there's a better way but frequently fail to reflect this understanding as we approach the work.

I believe this vain striving is rooted in another issue. We are trying to prove our worth, compensating for a deep inner wound caused by unmet needs, unhealed hurts, and unfulfilled expectations.

A hole in the soul compels us to meet our need for acceptance and affirmation by working hard and overloading with responsibilities. We try to assuage our pain by pretending and people pleasing. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we can meet unrealistic, unfulfilled expectations by hard work and dutiful service.

None of this works.

The Solution at the Center

The answer lies in Christ alone at the spiritual center where, as Quaker Thomas Kelley said, “The breath and stillness of Eternity are upon us.”¹⁴

For Unmet Needs, Jesus Is the Answer

Philippians 4:19 says, “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Jehovah Jireh—the Lord is my provider.

For Unhealed Hurts, Jesus Is the Answer

Malachi 4:2 says, “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” Jehovah Rapha—the Lord is my healer.

For Unfilled Expectations, Jesus Is the Answer

Second Thessalonians 2:16–17 says, “May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.” Jehovah Shammah—the Lord who is there. El Shaddai—God Almighty.

Like a Donut

A child’s song says, “Life without Jesus is like a donut, because there’s a hole in the middle of your heart.”¹⁵ The same goes for ministry. It’s like a donut: there’s a hole in the middle of everything you do, say, organize, preach, and teach unless Jesus is in the center.

As ministers, we're constantly drawn to focus on people, and this is pleasing to Christ. After all, he said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). But as we focus on others, let us never forget to be centered on Christ—for he is the answer for our life, ministry, and people.