

Session #7: The Barrenness of Busyness

Watch!

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/zpj7vLmCsWA>

Study!

A barren terrain is unable to produce plants or fruits. Similarly, if our inner world is barren, we cannot bear fruit for God. In this lesson, we will explore the barrenness that comes due to chronic busyness in our lives. It's about the danger of running on empty and running after things that don't truly satisfy.

Jeremiah 2, verse 5 begins with a pointed rhetorical question, which is actually an indictment from God against His people.

Thus says the LORD:
"What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?"
(Jeremiah 2:5)

Remember, this is God speaking. God's charge was that His people wandered away from Him. They walked away from God and stopped following His ways. They stepped away from abiding in Him and doing His will and instead went after other things. The other things they went after were utterly worthless. We have finite time, which vanishes in a breath. When we say "yes" to something, we're saying "no" to something else. When we say "no" to God, we're saying "yes" to something else. The Israelites said "yes" to chasing worthlessness, therefore they were saying "no" to God. The NASB translation of Jeremiah 2:5 states it this way: the Israelites "walked after emptiness and became empty". In life, whatever we follow, we end up becoming. The Bible warns us that if we follow things that are worthless and empty, we will become worthless and empty ourselves.

These verses are a good reminder for us to always cling to the Lord in all circumstances. In our human nature, we are easily satisfied with whatever we can find. We want quick fixes. We only want things that satisfy us today. Right now! We're after instant gratification, which is temporary. We grab what is around us instead of waiting and relying on God for the best. We are satisfied with things that are not of God. We busy ourselves seeking the things of this temporary world, instead of being in the presence of God himself. We must crave Him who is the source of abundant life. And only in Him, can we be truly satisfied.

Scripture Focus: Jeremiah 2:5,13,18

5 Thus says the Lord:
"What wrong did your fathers find in me
that they went far from me,

and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?
(Jeremiah 2:5)

13 for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

18 And now what do you gain by going to Egypt
to drink the waters of the Nile?
Or what do you gain by going to Assyria
to drink the waters of the Euphrates? (Jeremiah 2:18)

Lesson Framework #1: What are the root issues that cause Soul Fatigue?

What is Soul Fatigue? Soul Fatigue is the tiredness, the exhaustion in one's inner life. There are three root issues that cause Soul Fatigue:

1. We are Ruled by Busyness.
2. We are Overcome by Stress.
3. We Experience Overload.

1. We are Ruled by Busyness

There are five key environments we live in:

1. **The physical environment.** This refers to the material world. The things we see. The places we live. It is the three-dimensional space on earth that we inhabit.
2. **The cognitive environment.** This refers to the landscape of the mind. The things we think and contemplate. The thoughts we have. It is the terrain of our intellect, learning and cognitive perspectives of the world.
3. **The social environment.** This is about our social interactions. How we interact with one another. God designed us as social beings to be part of a community—ideally God's community. We are not to live in solitary confinement or isolation.
4. **The emotional environment.** This involves our heart. It involves our feelings towards God, others and ourselves.
5. **The spiritual environment.** This refers to the spiritual realm. It is about the way we view God, eternity and the spiritual world. This is the environment that is not often considered but is very real.

Our personal progress is most apparent in the physical and cognitive environments. When we say we have made progress, we usually refer to gains made either in the physical or cognitive realms. On the other hand, most of the pain we feel is experienced in the other three areas: the social, emotional and spiritual environments.

How are we navigating these environments? Not very well. It is becoming the norm that we are overworked and under-relating. We are growing and learning physically and cognitively,

but we don't know how to relate to one another. More marriages are breaking down, social interactions are strained, our emotional make-up is brittle and we are spiritually lost.

We're overloaded and stretched to the limits because we spend too much time on useless activities. For example, studies have shown that we now sleep 2.5 hours less than people did 100 years ago. We spend eight months of our lives opening junk mail, two years of our lives holding on the line for people who are too busy or not answering their phones, and five years waiting for people who are chronically late for meetings.

There is too much to do, too many choices, too much work, too much debt and too much information. To compound the problem, we are perpetually connected to the Internet. We're married to our smartphones, and we are connected even when we don't have to be. As a result, our plates are overflowing with junk. We suffer from busyness.

2. We are Overcome by Stress

Hans Selye, the "father of stress research", invented the word "stress" and defined it as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand placed upon it".

This means that stress isn't necessarily an unpleasant experience. Stress can be caused by a positive event like getting married, moving to a new house, having a baby or going on a holiday. The important thing to grasp is that stress is not a circumstance but rather our response to circumstances. It is not "out there" but it is "in us". People don't usually view stress in this manner. That is why people who feel stressed may toy with the idea that they should quit their jobs and do nothing. Just because we quit and do nothing does not mean our stress level will change, because it's not circumstances that cause stress but our response to circumstances. It doesn't mean that when we are stressed at work, we take a break and we'll be stress-free. That doesn't help because the stress is still inside! We need to learn to understand that stress is internal, not external.

There are four levels of stress:

1. **Stress** is our response and adaptation to change.
2. **Eustress** is the positive, constructive aspect of stress.
3. **Distress** is the negative, destructive aspect of stress.
4. **Hyperstress** is when stress is too often or too prolonged.

The point is that prolonged stress is not good for you at all. Even good stress is good only if it is for a short period of time—stress of any kind must be short-lived.

3. We Experience Overload

Busyness and stress mark our world. When stress is chronic and gets out of control, we become overloaded. There are four kinds of overload:

1. **Hurry overload** is measured by how we manage our **schedules**. We have so much to do, with so little time. Our plates are so full, there is no time left for rest.
2. **Fatigue Overload** is measured by our **strength**, our physical well-being. We're always tired and living with low energy. Our bodies are exhausted and therefore we are totally deflated and drained. We end up overworked and under-relating.

3. **Debt Overload** is measured by our **spending**. We tend to spend more than we can truly afford. We buy things we do not need, with money we do not have, to impress people we do not know. People get up to their necks in mortgages and credit card debt. We become financially stressed out. Instead of God being King, money becomes king.
4. **Emotional Overload**. Emotional overload is measured by the **shallowness** of our lives. Our emotional constitutions are weak. We don't have the resilience and capacity to endure the stresses of life. We are so focused on being "successful" that we forget to live. When we're overloaded, we neglect things that are important because we only pay attention to things that are urgent. We end up spending little quality time with our spouse, family and God! We neglect the important things because we are completely depleted by hurry, fatigue, debt and emotional overload.

Allow these issues to linger for too long and fatigue will set in, causing a tiredness that penetrates soul-deep. This damaging fatigue must be stopped before declension of the soul occurs. Declension is subtle. It always begins slowly but has the capacity to spiral down at speed before we even know to halt its decline. As Christians, we cannot afford to take a break from our walk with God because the moment we take that break, we begin to fall. Just as a plane must keep moving forward in flight, there is no reverse gear for us. If we stop mid-air, we crash.

In our lives, chronic busyness causes soul fatigue so that we cannot move forward. To overcome this impasse, we need to carve out margins—to create space—in our calendars for our souls to be refreshed.

The table below incorporates these margins and shows how to adopt a God-centred budget for daily living.

OVERLOADS	MEASUREMENT	BUDGET
Hurry	Schedule	Time
Fatigue	Strength	Rest
Debt	Spending	Finance
Emotional	Shallowness	Worship

We are not called to rest from work, but work from rest.
 - Rev. Paul Jeyachandran

Reflect!

What are some key insights that I can take away from today's session?

Out of the five key environments, which one do you usually feel you make progress in? And in which area do you usually experience pain?

Out of the different kinds of stress, what kind of stress do you experience? How do you cope with it?

Identify the areas of overload in your life. What steps can you take to better manage your budgets of time, rest, finance and worship?

Discuss!

For my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.
(Jeremiah 2:13)

An artesian aquifer is a geological wonder that needs a layer of porous material (e.g. limestone) to collect rainwater, then store and release it under natural pressure. In ancient times, having access to sweet water—without hard work—was truly a luxury.

A cistern, by contrast, requires you to dig a hole in the limestone to capture and store rainwater for your personal use. It requires great effort. Even then, water from this cistern will never taste as good as water from the living spring. And eventually the cistern will crack and all your hard work will be for nothing.

In Jeremiah 2, God admonished the people of Israel for forsaking Him, the living spring, for broken cisterns they had hewn that could not even hold water. In essence, they willingly gave their hearts and souls to something with no value.

This isn't God judging us—He is genuinely distraught that we would so easily despise His wonderful gift and spend our time, energy and resources on worthless things that can never satisfy us.

The list of rhetorical questions given in Jeremiah 2 drives home this point. These questions don't really require answers, since the answers are meant to be obvious.

The simple truth is, God is enough. He has always been enough and only when we recognise this will we enjoy dwelling in His love, instead of toiling for useless, broken cisterns.

Read Jeremiah 2:1–19.

Q1: How many rhetorical questions are listed here?

Q2: What point is being made for each of these rhetorical questions?

Q3: How would you summarise this passage in two or three sentences?

Q4: God uses living water to describe Himself. Read Psalm 36:5–9; Isaiah 55:1; John 4:13–14; John 7:37–39; Revelation 22:17 and study their contexts. What do they teach you about living water?

Q5: What two evils did God's people commit (Jeremiah 2:13)?

Q6: What happened to God's people when they stopped seeking Him?

Q7: What are the idols in your life? What cisterns are you hewing? What will it take for you to be fully satisfied with living water from God?

Q8: In the next two weeks, what steps can you intentionally take to remove these broken cisterns from your life?

Between Sessions

Challenge!

Go back to the previous table on the four types of overload. For each area, identify at least one key action you can take to help you grow in that area. Ask yourself:

- How can I create more margins in my calendar?
- How can I intentionally rest?
- How can I manage my finances better?
- How do I build depth in my life?

Journal your commitments and review your progress over the next two weeks.

Memorise!

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Before next session!

Read the article below by Rev. Edmund Chan on Nourishing Your Soul.

Running on empty. Often it takes a crisis, usually a painful one, for people to realise their emptiness. We live in a highly disoriented world that is profoundly confused. We have confused achievements for authenticity. Credentials for credibility. Conceit for confidence. And the applause of men for the approval of God.

When such weary pilgrims stop long enough to examine their unexamined lives, they find that they have been running on empty for too long. So long that chronic fatigue is accepted as a way of life; and chronic busyness, even as a status symbol. The vain reasoning is, if that important person is surely a busy person; therefore if I am busy, I must be important. And the busier I am, the more important I feel. Through all this, the soul is paradoxically restless and purposeless. Undernourished and empty.

There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than that of a restless and undernourished soul. In such an impaired condition, many live driven lives; pursuing the trappings of success and forgetting the triumph of significance. To echo the ancient oracles of Jeremiah, such souls are “chasing after emptiness and becoming empty” (Jeremiah 2:5). As such, there is no greater priority in the redeemed life than that of nourishing the soul.

In his book, ‘Ordering Your Private World’, Gordon MacDonald quoted appreciatively from one of my favourite authors, Thomas Kelly. A devout Quaker, Kelly wrote devotional essays with an insightful emphasis on the inner life. In his classic ‘A Testament of Devotion’, Kelly published a stirring essay in March 1939 entitled “The Simplification of Life”. In it, he pointed out the dangers of the hurried life that works against the nourishment of the soul. According to Kelly, we need an anchor of life, a Divine Centre, where we discover “a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence and simplified multiplicity”. I am absolutely convinced that the inner life must be given attention to. The art of soul care is a lost art that must be urgently restored. I am also convinced that the basic need of the human soul is spiritual nourishment. This nourishment is received when the spiritual disciplines are meaningfully exercised.

In the art of soul care, there are four essential spiritual disciplines. In contemporary studies, there are various ways to categorise the spiritual disciplines. I propose these four essential disciplines believing that the rest can be categorised in one of these four essentials.

The Discipline of Surrender

The foremost spiritual discipline to cultivate is the discipline of surrender. This fundamental building-block gives spiritual vitality to the other disciplines. At the heart of this discipline is prayer. Surrender is an act of prayer and prayer is an act of surrender. It is hard to pray

because it is hard to surrender. It is hard to surrender because we do not pray. He who prays well surrenders well.

Likewise, he who surrenders well prays well. A soul in true prayer is a soul in true surrender. And a soul in true surrender nourishes a soul in true prayer. Thus, for a soul to be truly nourished, it must be a soul that is truly surrendered. Such surrender is the ability to sleep the perfect sleep of faith. It is to be rested in the perfect rest of God. A rest that is profoundly blissful even in the midst of a restless world. The spiritual discipline of fasting is also a mark of such prayerful surrender. Prayer then is the key to a surrendered life. And surrender is the key to prayer. The discipline of such prayerful surrender and surrendered prayerfulness nourishes the soul. Make time to pray surrendered prayers.

The Discipline of Study

The soul is also nourished through thoughtful study, especially the thoughtful study of the scriptures. In our busy world, we ought to give deliberate time for such refreshing study. It engages the reflection of the mind and the contemplation of the soul. For such contemplation and reflection is desperately needed. When the mind is enriched, the heart is enlightened; and the soul prospers. When the mind is renewed, the heart is refreshed; and the soul is nourished.

It is the faculty of the renewed mind that gives perspective to life and the ability to live it meaningfully. The anchor for the discipline of study should be the study of the scriptures. The Word of God is like streams of living waters. As we open up the pages of scriptures, streams of living waters pour forth to nourish the soul. Make time for the Word of God. These two priorities of life, the Word and prayer are God-given resources for spiritual vitality.

The Discipline of Solitude

Solitude cultivates awareness. Awareness is the birth of maturity. Thus, time is needed for the aloneness of the soul. Make time for deliberate solitude. Make time to create space in our inner lives to touch base with ourselves. And for a fresh encounter with God. A refreshing space of silence into which God speaks. For many, the discipline of solitude would involve finding a quiet place, in regular seasons, for undistracted times to be alone with God. There is a great difference between aloneness and loneliness. Loneliness or being lonely is a symptom of the cancer of the soul. Being alone is ironically a cure in itself for that very cancer because being alone cultivates being aware.

Gradually we are aware of the movements of God in our lives. Aware of the glory of divine grace and pleasure in us. Aware of how our private pains can be healed by Him. Including the pain of loneliness. Herein is the soul nourished. Make time to be alone with God.

The Discipline of Service

Service is the outward expression of the inner soul. For ministry is an outflow of life. The quality of our lives determines the quality of our ministry. The state of our soul ultimately determines the quality of our service. Nonetheless, in an intriguing paradox of life, our service also determines our life. Service waters the soul like exercise builds the muscles. The soul atrophies with a lack of service. That is why the man who focuses solely on the inner life, with no outward expressions of service, ultimately leads an unbalanced life. His

soul is not properly nourished by the engagement of life in community and life in service to others. Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve". There is something in His soul that longs to see lives touched by the redemptive power of God; that God may be glorified. To that end, He served. It nourished His soul. Let's make time to serve.

As we begin with the dawn of a new millennium, let's give careful attention to the art of soul care. Make time to serve. Make time to study God's word. Make time to pray. Make time alone with God. This is so that our souls may be nourished and that our lives may be well lived. Have a safe and remarkable journey ahead.

May your soul prosper.

Edmund Chan is an international speaker, author, disciple-making pastor and the leadership-mentor of Covenant Evangelical Free Church, Singapore.