

9
Ways to
Hold On
When You Want to
Give Up

James Merritt



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*To Joanne Wardell and Kalli Overcash,
two magnificent assistants who helped me stand tall many days
when it would have been easier
to sit down, sleep in, step aside, or slip away.*

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Holding On

In 1980, one of the most famous fights in boxing history took place. Say two Spanish words to any boxing fan, and he will instantly know which fight you are referring to. It took place on November 25, 1980 at the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans. It was the second fight between Roberto Durán and Sugar Ray Leonard, and gained its famous name from the moment at the end of the eighth round when Durán turned away from Leonard towards the referee and quit the fight by saying, “No más” (Spanish for “No more”).¹ He could at least have waited until the end of the round and let his trainer do it for him.

In boxing’s early days, a prizefighter’s sidemen used sponges to clean his face of sweat and blood. To toss the sponge into the ring during a fight signaled that the boxer had had enough—and so the sponge was no longer needed. In recent years, towels have been substituted for sponges, so when a boxer wants to fight no more, he “throws in the towel.” It’s just an antiseptic way of saying, “I quit.” Duran wouldn’t even wait on the towel.

We all know what it is like to be beaten, knocked down, battered and bruised, and want to throw in the towel and cry, “No más.” You may have picked up this book because you are at a “No más” moment in your life. I realize we don’t like to admit or even say, “I quit.” That is why we “pack it in.” That is why we “wave the white flag.” Or perhaps we just play that song made popular by Johnny

Paycheck, “Take This Job and Shove It.” Still, the end result is the same—we give up. *We quit.*

If you are at one of those moments in your life—the towel is in your hand and you are ready to launch it; the white flag is attached to the pole and you are seconds away from waving it; or you are ready to let “No más” fly from your lips, this book is for you.

Know that I not only sympathize with you, I *empathize* with you. I know how you feel. Not to complain, but being a pastor is not the cushy job some think it is. Consider these statistics:

- 50 percent of pastors feel so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living.
- 50 percent of the ministers starting out will not last 5 years.
- Only 1 out of every 10 ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form.
- More than 1,700 pastors left the ministry every month last year.²

Trust me, I have had more than my share of “No más” moments,³ and I don’t know of hardly any pastor or minister who hasn’t. The truth is that life is much like a boxing match. You are in a ring facing opponents who not only want to hit you, but totally and completely demoralize and defeat you. These opponents may wear different-colored trunks and be massive brawlers or lithe boxers, but their goal is the same. Their names are familiar: discouragement, disappointment, disillusionment, and depression. They use your faults and failures to make you hurl the towel, wave the flag, or show off your Spanish.

Every day you get into the ring, you face two choices and two facts. Choice one: quit, give up, pack it in, wave the flag, toss the towel. Fact one: quitters never win—in boxing or in life.

Choice two: You get off the mat, you fight another round; you don't give up, you *get up*; you don't toss the towel, you throw another punch. You neither give in, give up, nor give out. You keep swinging, punching, and fighting until the bell sounds. Fact two: winners never quit, and victory is only possible and available to those who don't—in boxing or in life.

Don't just take my word for it. Dr. Seuss's first children's book was rejected by twenty-seven publishers. The twenty-eighth publisher sold 600 million copies, and Dr. Seuss's perseverance resulted in the education of millions of children. During their first year of business, the Coca-Cola company sold an average of only nine servings of its beverage a day. Today they are the number one seller of soft drinks in the world. In his first three years in the automobile business, Henry Ford went bankrupt twice. Today Ford is the second-largest American-based automobile company and the fifth largest worldwide. And in 1905 the University of Bern rejected a PhD dissertation, saying it was irrelevant and fanciful. Albert Einstein was disappointed, but as you now know, he kept on writing!⁴

With God's help and grace, you can win and not quit; go up and not give up; last out and not get out. The real-life stories from Scripture about some ordinary people like you and me who became extraordinary and even got divine press because they held on when they felt like giving up will both inspire you personally and inform you practically.

A little girl watched in fascination as her mother smoothed some cold beauty cream on her face. "Why do you do that?" she asked. "To make myself beautiful," the mother said as she began removing the cream with a tissue. "What's the matter?" asked the girl. "Giving up already?"

No matter what you are facing, with God, it's always too soon to give up. Hang on, for his grace and strength are always on the way.

When Life Is Physically Draining

“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

MOHANDAS GANDHI

I hear the ding on my phone indicating another email has come in, and my hand jumps to snatch it. The litany length of tomorrow’s to-do list enlivens my mind such that I cannot sleep. When I consider the pile of bills on my kitchen table and the uncertainty of our volatile economy, I twitch in my seat.

I’m stressed, and if you’re like most Americans, you are too. You’re plagued by worry, racked with anxiety, and stalked by frustration. But admitting we share this problem doesn’t solve much. We must decide what we will do about our stressful state of affairs.

Early in my career, I believed the solution for stress was management. Or perhaps suppression. Either way, it was an inevitable part of life that must be dealt with. But “dealing with it” is not a solution; that approach is a highway to breakdown.

In the recent movie *Limitless*, the main character, played by Bradley Cooper, happened upon a wonder drug that opened up the entire capacity of his brain. He could learn languages and complex math in a fraction of the time it took normal people. He could recall almost anything that he’d read or seen from the past.

He could analyze more quickly and more in-depth than the best financial gurus on the planet. He was limitless in his abilities. He was able to leverage this ability to earn millions and achieve great success.

As I watched this movie, I remember thinking, *Where can I get some of those pills? If only I could find a way to increase efficiency and accomplish more, all my problems would drift away.* I have a feeling that I'm not the only one who reacted to the film this way.

Fifty-four percent of Americans are concerned about the level of stress in their everyday lives. Sixty-two percent say work has a significant impact on their stress level. Seventy-three percent named “money” as the number one factor that affects their stress level.¹ I know I am dealing with a problem the majority of us face every day. But it's one thing to acknowledge that we all deal with stress and even suffer from it. It's another thing to tackle stress, controlling it instead of the reverse.

I've learned that you can categorize stress under three areas: *relational*, *financial*, and *occupational*. (I sympathize with you if you are saying, “I've hit the trifecta!”) You are either *under pressure* or you are *under problems*. When you don't handle pressure well, you experience stress. When you don't handle problems well, you experience depression.

We now know that one of the major reactions to stress is depression. Some experts predict that depression will be the leading occupational disease of the twenty-first century. Some suggest depression will be responsible for more workdays lost than any other single factor. Today businesses in the U.S. spend \$300 billion annually, or \$7,500 dollars per employee, on stress related compensation claims, reduced productivity, absenteeism, health insurance costs, direct medical expenses, and employee turnover.²

I awaken early each morning—between five and six o'clock—focused on my to-do list and deadlines. I feel like a mosquito in

a nudist colony: I don't know where to start! Tasks need finishing, concerns need addressing, problems need solving, emails need answering. And once I get done with all of these issues, I have to work on being a husband, father, grandfather, and friend.

I read about a guy who drove a small truck, transporting things for others in order to make a living. One day he was hired to transport some chickens. A guy in a car following the truck noticed something unusual about this truck driver. Every mile or so he would pull over, get out, and pound the side of the truck with a baseball bat. The guy in the car couldn't take it any longer. He stopped the guy and asked him why he was beating the side of the truck with a bat. "I've got a half-ton truck and a ton of chickens," the guy said. "I've got to keep half of them flying at all times!"

I feel like that a lot, as though I'm constantly beating my truck with a bat so half my chickens will stay in the air. I'm not asking you to throw a pity party and name me guest of honor. Instead, I want you to know that we struggle together. When you lie in bed late at night staring into the blackness, so do I. And when you wake an hour before your alarm is set to go off, I'm stirring with you. I deal constantly and consistently with stress. Sometimes it's caused by people and issues external to me. Other times it's self-induced and internal to me. I deal with it and I handle it, but I can never escape it completely.

My stress level concerns my wife. She's convinced it has taken years off my life. She constantly says, "I look forward to the day when you no longer face this problem." The "problem" is stress. The only comfort I find in the stress of my life is that I expect consternation as a pastor. It comes with the job.

Stress is almost a prerequisite to succeed in our culture. You want the corner office? Get ready for stress. A family? Stress will be your crest. Even planning a vacation to escape stress will wear you out. A life of strain seems inevitable.

But is it really?

Unfortunately, you're not Bradley Cooper's character and neither am I. We're not limitless. The sooner we get over this fact the better off we'll be. But I've discovered a strategy that's better than a fictional magic pill. I didn't find it in a self-help book or daytime television. It derives from one of the greatest leaders in all of history. This leader nearly burned out and died early because of his stress. Yet, he took three steps forward that gave him the ability to handle it all. And through this, he teaches us a winning strategy for overcoming a physically draining life.

Recognize Your Limits

Moses was literally in the middle of a *stress mess*. Here's the context.

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone."³

Moses was under a tremendous amount of stress, a word that comes from a Latin word meaning "to be drawn tight." I can't tell you how often I've felt entangled in a tightly drawn noose. But a

word is more than its etymology. I define stress as *the gap between demands that are placed upon me in everyday life and the strength I have in meeting those demands*. Basically stress is the gap between my “ought tos” and my “can’t dos.”

The phenomenon is defined by others in various ways. Some call it the stress factor, and others the stress ratio. Many refer to it as the stress component or the stress formula. Whatever the best moniker is, we know that these pressures can drain us.

Before we demonize Moses as someone who was a bad leader or poor at time management, let’s admit that his stress was honestly earned.

Sometimes we fall under stress we cause ourselves, stress that we really

shouldn’t be under. If you procrastinate and put something off until the last minute, you’ll get stressed out. When you don’t do what you ought to do, when you ought to do it, you will get stressed out. Laziness is a great stress producer—when you just don’t do things at all and you let things go undone.

Moses was not lazy. He was getting into the office before sunup and he wasn’t leaving until sundown. He was working six days a week, with no vacations, and no time off. He was the classic workaholic, but his fuel tank was empty. Not only had he reached his limits, he had exceeded them. Now he had to face his limits.

I don’t care how much of a super-man or a super-woman you think you are, we all have limits. Indeed, the great philosopher Clint Eastwood, a.k.a. Dirty Harry, observed, “A wise man knows his limitations.” Have you ever noticed on the back of a tractor-trailer rig the sign that communicates the load limit the truck can carry? That’s one reason why highways have weigh stations along

Basically stress is the gap between my “ought tos” and my “can’t dos.”

the way—to make sure these trucks aren't carrying more weight than they were designed to haul. If a tractor-trailer with a massive engine and unbelievable horsepower has load limits, then it makes sense that we do too.

This Jewish leader performed an impressive task. Eating on the run, ripping from one end of the camp to the other, planning appointments, meeting deadlines, and seeing everybody that wanted to see him. But on the inside he was dying. Each step of the way Moses moved closer to burnout. Maybe people close to Moses didn't notice it or didn't care, but Moses's father-in-law did both. He came to his son-in-law and said, "You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out."

The Hebrew word for "wearing out" literally means "to become old." Jethro was saying, "Moses, you're taking years off your life. You're growing old before your time. You're wearing yourself out unnecessarily."

One of the saddest things about the approaching death of the newspaper industry is the disappearance of comic strips. I remember finishing my *USA Today* when my kids were young and handing them the back page. There we'd sit with dirty dishes from Saturday breakfast before us, and I'd watch them chuckle.

A "Cathy" comic strip from years ago seems to illustrate how many people today feel. This homely single woman, who seems to be in her thirties or forties, is sitting at home with a typically disgruntled look on her face. She's pondering the many regrets she's facing from her workday, including things she wished she had said, and things she should have done for her family, friends, coworkers...and puppy.

At this point, you're feeling pretty sorry for the poor girl. And then comes the final frame with Cathy's conclusion:

Even when I'm not going anywhere, I have three hundred pounds of luggage with me.

Do you ever feel like Cathy, as if you're carrying three hundred pounds of to-dos and didn't-dos on your back? I know I do. There are times when life gives me less than what I need and demands more than what I can give.

Years ago we bought a grandfather clock. We hired a professional, who works specifically with these types of clocks, to deliver that clock to our home. When he brought it to us and set it up, he told us we needed to avoid two dangers with this clock:

1. Don't let it run down.
2. Don't wind it too tight.

That's what happened to Moses and too often happens with each of us. We let ourselves run down and get wound too tight because we're carrying more of a load than God wants us to carry.

Whenever I begin to feel the weight of stress, I've made it a practice to take a step back and evaluate what's causing it. Once I pause, I discern whether I'm the one who ought to be handling those pressures at all. Everyone must learn the art of separation. That is, I must separate the pressures only I can handle from the ones that others can and should carry. If you try to handle everything, you won't handle anything very well.

Everyone must learn the art of separation. I must separate the pressures only I can handle from the ones that others can and should carry.

Share the Load

When you're carrying too much of a load, you will eventually share that load one way or the other. Either you will collapse, unable to carry the load at all, *or* you will share a part of it so you

can carry the load that you ought to be carrying. If the first step for dealing with a physically draining life is to recognize our individual limits, the second one is to learn to share the load. That was the advice Moses's father-in-law gave him:

"Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."⁴

Moses didn't realize it at the time, but Jethro just gave him one of the greatest leadership lessons ever taught or learned. He told Moses to evaluate what only he could do and delegate what others can do. Delegate to others what others can do so you can focus on the things that only you can do. Remember, nobody is indispensable, but everybody is important. Anytime you're looking at a job that looks bigger than you can handle alone, take that as a sign—God is telling you, don't try to do it alone.

This is common sense. If you're trying to lift a heavy load, both of your hands are better than one of your hands. Six hands are better than two. It's not the size of the job that causes stress. It's the sharing of a job that determines whether or not that job is stressful.

But something else arises from Jethro's instruction. He doesn't

tell Moses to dump the work on just anybody. He emphasizes the importance of the people to whom Moses will delegate. More than just giving a job away, delegation entails ensuring the right person gets the right job. If you pair a person with a job that makes no sense to them, disaster will ensue.

When you delegate, you've got to do these things:

- Find the right people.
- Give them the right job.
- Trust them to do the right thing.
- Delegate the result, not the process.

I don't care how great you think you are or how indispensable you think you are to a company or an organization or a household or a PTA. Not even Moses, as great a man as he was, could do everything. One thing I'm constantly trying to master is to work smarter, not just harder. I work smarter by spending most of my time doing the things that I do best and doing the things that only I can do so that others can do what they do best and do what only they can do.

If you want to replace stress with serenity and pressures with peace, then *do only what you can do. Delegate the rest to others and leave the results to God.* That assertion does raise a question: "How do you separate those things you can do from what others can do? How do you determine how to prioritize what you need to be doing?"

Talk to God

Let's take a quick step back to the first piece of advice Jethro gave Moses: "Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him."⁵

Now we come to the root of Moses's problem. He was spending too much time talking to the people about God and not enough time talking to God about the people.

Who sets your schedule each day? One of three people will set your schedule. Either somebody else is going to set your schedule or you are going to set your schedule or you can go to God and ask Him to set your schedule. One of the reasons I believe that God allows us to get stressed out is to force us to come to Him for guidance and strength and direction.

There's plenty in life that I can't handle, but God and I together can handle anything. The key? Make sure to handle only the things

There's plenty in life that I can't handle, but God and I together can handle anything.

God wants you to handle. If you're sitting there saying that you've got more to do at the end of every day than you can get done, then I can tell you one thing that is absolutely true about you. You are trying to do more than God wants you to do.

We don't like to hear this kind of advice because we think we can handle the pressure. We fool ourselves if that's what we believe. And trust me, I don't like to hear this advice either. In my pride I think I can do it all. But I can't. It was a tough lesson for me to learn. But when I started to live by the lesson, I found my stress levels dropped and the kind of peace the Bible talks about—the peace that passes understanding—entered in. And that, my friend, is a beautiful place to be.

If you will indulge me, I want to put my pastor hat on for a moment. My mini-sermon for you right now is this: When you feel pressure from every side, like you're in stress's vise-grip, then listen up. Right there, in the middle of that stress, God is calling out to you saying, "If you will seek Me and spend time with Me

and listen to Me, I will tell you what you need to do, and I will give you the power and the strength to do it.”

When Moses did this, the Bible says, he would be able to stand the strain and all the people in his care would go home satisfied. The promise is not just extended to this great ancient leader, but to you as well.

Look at all the benefits Moses would receive if he handled stress God’s way: longer life, working smarter, happier people, peace instead of pressure, sincerity instead of stress, work-life balance achieved. It only makes sense. God has things He wants you and me to accomplish day-by-day. If we focus on those things, He then is duty bound to give us the time, energy, and resources to do it.

Jesus is our greatest example here. He stayed in constant communication with His heavenly Father. He got his marching orders from Him daily. Yet in only three years of active ministry, He could look back and say, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.”⁶

Each day of your life you will accomplish nothing greater than to glorify God. Burning out, stressing out, falling out doesn’t glorify God. Only doing the work He gives you to do daily glorifies Him.

In my opinion, the greatest coach ever, of any sport, is the late John Wooden. He won eleven national championships in thirteen years at UCLA. John Wooden introduced something in the early 1960s that was previously nonexistent in college basketball. He began to use the full-court press for almost the entire game. The relentless pressure against other teams caused many turnovers, and it helped bring Coach Wooden his first NCAA championship in 1964.

Coaches all over America began copying UCLA, but Coach Wooden said most coaches didn’t really understand the purpose

of the press. Other coaches assumed that the press was designed to create turnovers. Coach Wooden said that was never the design of the press. He said the press was installed to make the other team play at a faster tempo. Coach Wooden knew that, given the opportunity, most young players would play too fast, and that is when they make mistakes. More than any other lesson he taught, Coach Wooden constantly instructed his basketball teams to *slow down*. His motto was, “Be quick, but don’t hurry.”

Are you physically drained from the grind of life? Are you crumbling under the weight of stress? Do you feel drawn tight by the noose of your own schedule? You need to slow down and take a deep breath. You should evaluate your limits and do only what makes sense for you to do according to what you’re best at. You should share the load and give away everything that somebody else can do. And you should remain in constant communication with the Lord.

At the end of *Limitless*, Bradley Cooper’s character learned that even though his newfound ability produced immeasurable riches in his life, he could handle only so much. He also learned that to live limitless carried serious ramifications—side effects that damaged his very being. He eventually learned how to control the drug and to wean himself off it.

I made a decision about five years ago that I wish I had made at least twenty-five years before. I learned to say no. See, there was a time I thought every invitation to speak, counsel, consult, write, and advise had to be answered with a yes. I thought it would be neat to fly so often that the airline pilots would all know me by my first name. Then my wife and my executive assistant both came to the same conclusion—you can’t go everywhere and be where you most need to be or accept everything and do what you most need to do.

I knew they were right. I cut my speaking almost in half and saw people only I could help or I really needed to see, and I was able

to see more light than tunnel and more silver lining than cloud. Jesus accomplished the greatest work in history, finished *everything* His Father had assigned Him to do and did it completely stress free (except for the stress of the cross). What He did, He can enable us to do as well.

We weren't built to live without limits. We were built to live within the boundaries that God has established for us and to thrive in the work He's given us. And the truth of the matter is that when we do operate within ourselves and cling to God's strength, then and only then do we see the full extent and reach of our abilities.

Limitless? Doubtful. Stressless? Yes!



Guideline 1:

Find Others to Stand with You

