

A person with a backpack stands on a rocky peak, looking out over a vast mountain range. The scene is captured in a wide-angle shot, showing the person from behind. The mountains are rugged and covered in patches of snow and greenery. The sky is a pale blue, and a lake is visible in the distance. The overall mood is one of adventure and freedom.

Joël Malm

KEEP

The Freedom of Priorities

IT

in Life, Work, and Love

LIGHT

Praise for
Keep It Light

“I’ve been on lots of adventures with Joël and love how he takes principles from the trail and applies them to our spiritual walk. This book is full of practical and applicable wisdom that you can use to stay strong and keep your burden light on the journey of life.”

—**Mark Batterson**, pastor and bestselling author

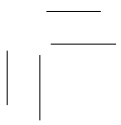
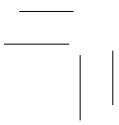
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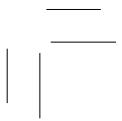
“Joël Malm is a legendary adventurer who has explored some of the most fascinating places on earth, but his greatest discovery isn’t anything you can find on a map; it’s the discovery of a way of thinking and living that can bring more peace and perspective to your life. In *Keep It Light*, Joël invites you on an adventure of rediscovering what life was really intended to be. I feel lighter and more at peace after reading it, and I’m confident that you will too!”

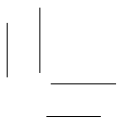
—**Dave Willis**, author, XO Marriage speaker, and coach





**KEEP
IT
LIGHT**





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LIGHT**

**The Freedom of Priorities in
Life, Work, and Love**

Joël Malm



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FAITH

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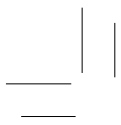
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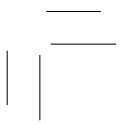
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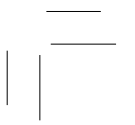
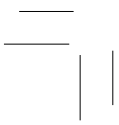
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To Emily and Elise

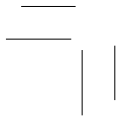


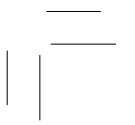
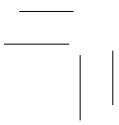
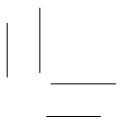




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Keeping It Light

A traveler is happier the lighter his load.

—*Marcus Felix*

I lead outdoor expeditions around the world with an organization I started, Summit Leaders. I've taken teams to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, hike and raft the Grand Canyon, cross the Scottish highlands, walk trails Jesus most assuredly walked across Northern Israel, and hike through the Andes Mountains to the ancient lost city of Machu Picchu.

Most of the people who join me on these trips have never done a major hike before—which is what I want. I'm not looking for people who are all wildernessy and willing to chop off their arm with a Swiss Army knife to survive. Those

people would be really out of place on my teams. (Plus, they'd make me look like a wimp!)

Because my teams are all first-timers, they're usually really concerned about having the right gear. I get tons of texts and emails asking questions about exactly what they should bring. So before our trips, I give them a packing list and have them watch a video I recorded about how to pack for a hike. I show them exactly what I bring. I want them to feel confident, but not overpack. But most people still bring way too much with them. Some commission-based salesperson at the outdoor store saw them coming and convinced them they needed every gadget in the store, or else they would die on the mountain. They show up for the hike loaded down with gear.

This is a serious problem.

A pack that's too heavy will wear you out and you won't be able to successfully complete the hike. So I set a weight goal for the bags, and the night before we leave for the trail, I'll often weigh them. If a bag is too heavy, I have that hiker start pulling stuff out.

This process gets highly emotional in a hurry. People get really sensitive about their stuff. I've seen CEOs of large

organizations nearly burst into tears when I have them leave some things behind. Some folks even get angry. One girl who I wouldn't let bring a hairdryer was mad at me for days. As I lighten their loads, I can see the fear in their eyes, but I know they'll get over it. Usually by the second day of the hike, those same people thank me for making them lighten their load. They realize just how hard the hike would have been with all that extra weight on their backs.

I'm convinced that nobody intends to overpack. It happens slowly, little by little. We're worried about not having something we may need, so we just take everything. And unintentionally, we end up overloaded and tired, trying to carry a bunch of stuff.

And by the way, I'm not talking about packing for a trip anymore. I'm talking about life.

Life is like a long hike, and most of us are walking along with a pack that feels way too heavy. We're all doing our best to provide for ourselves and our families. We figure if we can just squeeze in a little more, we'll have everything we need. Like a hiker picking up rocks along the trail, thinking we might need them at some point to throw at a bear or lion, we take on more and more. But eventually, we get overloaded.

We're weighed down by financial burdens. We're doing all we can to provide for our families and give our kids what we never had growing up, but it seems impossible to get ahead. Just when we think there might be some breathing room, a major expense arises—a car or appliance breaks down, a medical emergency. It feels like we always need just a little more to feel secure and comfortable.

We're weighed down by demands on our time. Work deadlines, overtime, kids' sports schedules. We feel like slaves to our schedules, with no time to just relax. When there is a moment to relax, we feel guilty, thinking surely we're dropping one of the many balls we're juggling. Sometimes we get so used to being busy that not being busy feels awkward and uncomfortable.

We're weighed down by things that consume our energy—important projects, kids' extracurricular events, and the maintenance we have to do just to keep life from falling apart. Add to that all the things that sap our emotional energy—relational conflict, responsibilities, seeking others' approval, managing their expectations and opinions. They all take a toll on our physical and emotional well-being and leave us, well . . . tired. I heard someone say, “The world is

run by tired people.” Basically, yes—it is. If we could take an entire day to sleep, most of us would—but anxiety and stress actually keep most of us from sleeping soundly, making us even more tired!

Maybe for you, things are under control most of the time, but there’s conflict you keep bumping up against. The disagreements with your spouse about money—whether to save or spend. The ongoing discussions and subtle hints being dropped about how you or those you love spend their time.

Or maybe it’s the periodic “crashes” you experience (seemingly out of nowhere) when you find yourself in bed, wiped out, spending days trying to recover and get back to normal. You feel like a failure when you’re forced to stop moving. The weight of those periodic meltdowns is taking its toll.

If we’re honest, most of us feel that the weight of life is a lot heavier than we’d like it to be. And we aren’t quite sure how to lighten it. We’d like to, but it seems impossible or reckless to stop carrying some things. A lot of what we we’re carrying is actually good stuff—opportunities, relationships. But as the weight builds, we feel overwhelmed, like we’re carrying around a giant pack. We’re strong, but not that

strong. Eventually, we end up dreading every day, saying, “I’m tired and I can’t carry all this anymore.”

We read in the Bible where Jesus says, “My burden is light,”¹ but how many of us actually feel like the burden of life is light? Is this just something nice that Jesus said so we can put it on inspirational cards and memes? Or is it possible that He was serious and maybe—just maybe—we need to evaluate exactly why we aren’t feeling the lightness He talked about?

I’m convinced that Jesus really meant what He said and, if we get intentional about it, we can actually experience that lightness. But it won’t happen by default, mostly because we live in a world that will naturally push us to carry more and more.

This is a book about how to be strategic and make sure you’re only carrying what you need to live a life that honors God. My goal is to offer some insights I’ve learned along the way that I believe can actually help you experience the lightness Jesus was talking about. It really is possible to have the time and energy you want to give to those you love the most. It’s possible to have less and actually be more content. It’s possible to not feel constantly short on resources and in

constant fear of lack. But it will take intentionality. Freedom comes when we prioritize the right things.

And here's some good news: Most of the time, it doesn't require totally overhauling your life. It usually just takes a few tweaks here and there, plus a shift in mindset. Keeping it light isn't about doing more; it's about making sure you're only carrying what is absolutely necessary for the journey ahead.

The Path toward the Light

Jesus wants to lighten the load you're carrying. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."² A yoke is a large piece of wood that was placed over the shoulders of two oxen. Those oxen would pull a heavy burden together. They shared the load because it was a lot to pull. But they had to work together. If one got ahead of the other, they'd end up pulling more weight on their own. Balance and power came when they walked in lockstep.

Jesus says that if you want to lighten your load in life, get connected with Him. Take His yoke. You still have to carry

something, but doing it with Him will make it bearable. We all have a unique burden of responsibility to carry, but that burden gives life meaning. Kids, jobs, and relationships can be really challenging sometimes—but they also bring the greatest fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Trying to carry no burden at all will only lead to feeling like life is meaningless.

But if the burden of life seems too heavy to bear, there's a good chance you're carrying something you weren't meant to carry alone (or at all). And it's creating unnecessary suffering.

Some suffering is just part of life. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”³ (I wish that verse weren't in there.) God uses that kind of suffering to strengthen us and help us grow. It's necessary suffering. It makes us “strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”⁴ We know this instinctively when it comes to physical strength. The only way to get stronger physically is to push yourself slightly beyond what you think you can handle, little by little—no pain, no gain. That principle applies in our spiritual lives, too. Suffering builds strength.

But no one gets started on a path to strength at the gym

by lifting four-hundred-pound weights in their first workout. You'll never get the weight off the ground and will probably hurt yourself in the process! Lifting something you can't actually carry won't make you stronger—it just crushes you. Only lifting what you can actually lift, in increasing increments, will make you stronger. The same is true in life, work, and love.

When we carry the burden God asks of us—our responsibility—it makes us stronger. But when it comes to a really heavy weight that we can't carry on our own, we trust that His strength will be there to help us with that burden. That's what Paul was talking about when he said suffering “produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”⁵ Carrying the burden we are called to carry offers the hope of meaning and purpose. That's the necessary suffering that leads to strength.

But adding things God never intended for us to carry—or trying to do life in our own way—creates unnecessary suffering. It's exhausting and overwhelming. Sometimes we think we're pleasing God by going above and beyond what He asks. Sometimes we're carrying things that have slowly accumulated and we don't even realize they are holding us

back. Not only does that suffering not help us grow, it actually hinders our forward movement. And it creates all sorts of chaos.

We naturally tend to complicate things in life. It's human nature to go outside the simplicity of what God asks of us. He made one simple request of Adam and Eve: Do not eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But when the serpent asked Eve what God had commanded, she added her own twist to it: She said she wasn't supposed to eat it, *or even touch it*. The original sin that got us into this mess came when we started adding stuff to God's simple request.

Spiritual maturity comes when we carry what is ours to carry and learn to trust God with what isn't ours to carry.

It's learning to stay in lockstep with Him. If we rush ahead, we'll end up carrying more than we're meant to carry. If we pull to the side or lag behind (out of fear of what's ahead), we'll also end up carrying too much of the burden. But when we walk at Jesus's pace and take no more than what has been placed on our shoulders, it keeps the weight of life light.

The challenging thing is, this isn't a one-time decision. It takes constant evaluation. What we should be carrying at any

given time is a constantly moving target based on the season of life we're in. There's a burden and a blessing for each season of life. Maturity is learning to embrace the blessing and shoulder only the burden God is asking you to carry in each season.

This is why, from time to time, you need to stop and evaluate what needs to have priority on this stage of your journey. Like a hiker packing for a trip, what we put in our bag depends on where we're planning to go. Which is why, before you load up your bag, you should always start by defining your destination.

Define the Destination

You don't pack flip-flops to climb through the snows of Mt. Kilimanjaro. You don't take a goose-down parka for a trek through the Amazon. Life is no different. When you know where you're going, it's a lot easier to know what you need and don't need—which is why it's really important to define your destination in life. You need to figure out where you want to go.

After working with lots of people over the years, I've

found that most know what they *don't* want more than what they *do* want. They may have a vague idea of what they think they want, but it often has more to do with running from what they don't want.

I don't want to be poor.

I don't want to be insignificant.

I don't want to be alone.

When you know what you *don't* want more than what you *do* want, you'll find yourself reacting to life most of the time. You'll settle for anything that offers to instantly take away the discomfort you don't want to feel. You'll be moving all the time, but you'll be running away with no direction. You can run *from* something in any direction. But you can only run *toward* something in one direction.

If you're running from being poor, you'll work with no financial goal in mind other than: *a little more*.

If you're running from feeling insignificant, anything that gives a quick moment of feeling important—likes on social media, relational drama—will drive you.

If you're running from being alone, you'll end up using time and energy to win over people you don't even like so you won't feel alone.

It's good to know what you don't want. But a big part of having a vision for your life is getting a clear picture of what you actually *do* want. When you know where you're going, you'll know exactly what to bring and what can be left behind.

That's what King Solomon was talking about when he said, "Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint."⁶ When you don't know exactly where you're going, you'll just throw everything into your bag. But when you have a clear picture of your final destination—a vision for the future—you'll pack only what you need to get you where you want to go. You'll give valuable space in your bag to only what's most important.

So, to do a good gear check on your life, you need to evaluate what's important to you.

A Question of Values

People often tell me, "I really want to travel more, but it's so expensive. How can you afford to travel so much?" They look at my fifteen-year-old, beat-up car and the tiny house I live in, and it seems pretty clear I'm not rolling in money. And

they are correct to think that. But that old car and small home are a big part of the reason I *can* afford to travel so much.

Having a nice, new car isn't that important to me, but travel is. So rather than making a car payment every month, I take what I would have spent on that and divide it into savings—a little for travel and a little for when my family will need a new (to us, but in reality, older) car. We've also decided to live in a house that is way less than what we can afford. When we travel, we do it inexpensively by going with friends and splitting costs. In fact, the amount of money most people would use for four months of car payments (or a few days at a theme park in Florida or California) will get us two weeks in Europe.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with having a nice, dependable vehicle. (Honestly, sometimes we do get a little jealous of people with nice, shiny cars with no dents in them.) And there's nothing wrong with having a big, beautiful home. It's just that travel is more important to us than those things, so we put our money, time, and energy toward it.

We all have certain things that we value—a nice home, a secure job, loving relationships, respect—and we instinctively give our time, money, and energy to those things.

Values are unique to each person, and there is an unlimited number of things you can value. Some of our values are learned through the way we were raised. Some are just adopted, without much question, based on the society or culture we live in. And the truth is, many of our values come from doing whatever it takes to make sure the thing we fear the most doesn't come upon us.

That's part of what Jesus was talking about when He said: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."⁷ If you want to know what your heart is set on (what you value), look at what you do with your time, money, and energy (your treasures). If you want to know what someone really values, look at what they do—not what they say or think or feel.

If you voluntarily work a lot of hours, there's a good chance achievement or financial security are probably things you value highly.

If you engage in all sorts of online debates and always want the latest gossip, then—like it or not—drama and conflict might be of high value for you.

If you work out a lot, fitness, health, or how you look is of high value.

As I said, I drive an old car. As much as I would love to travel and also be able to drive a new car, my bank account tells me that's just not possible. I've only got so much income and so much money.

And this is the challenge we all eventually face: We are limited. And as a result, at some point the things we value come into conflict with each other. We have to decide what will get our best resources of time, money, and energy. Not every value can have equal value. If everything has the same value, nothing has value. You can be certain that if you're trying to give everything equal value—i.e., put it all in your backpack—you'll quickly get overwhelmed and frustrated.

We need to have an order—a hierarchy—to our values. Sometimes we have to sacrifice one value to give our best to another.

When life changes—you get married, have kids, change jobs, a relationship ends, kids leave the house—you'll need to make some changes to your value structure. If you're still doggedly pursuing goals that you set for yourself in your teens, twenties, or thirties without adjusting for new values that have appeared since then—like kids and a spouse—there's a good chance some of your more recent values may suffer as

a result. If you're still trying to keep the same pace you did years ago, without accounting for the reality of your current energy level or responsibilities, you'll get frustrated and exhausted.

Some values must change with new seasons. That's why it's so important to get really clear about what you value most and prioritize what to put in your backpack for this stage of the journey. Making the right sacrifice ensures that we keep it light on the part we're walking right now.

How do you know if a value needs to change? Great question. Fortunately, there's a pretty simple answer: tension. When you feel the weight of relational tension, frustration, or irritation in yourself or from others, it's a sign that you may need to change some priorities to make sure you're only carrying what you need for this phase of your journey. In a strange way, tension can actually become a gift that helps you properly prioritize what's most important in this season.

And that's what we'll talk about next.

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