

Burned Out

“My burnout happened because of two reasons. First, my church expected me to serve them in the place of God. Second, I had unhealthy, personal characteristics that made me feel like I had to serve in the place of God.”

His statement convicted and unsettled me. I was sitting in prayer service a few weeks ago, listening to the testimony of someone who pastored a previous church in the area. He was sharing about his crippling anxiety, exhaustion, and eventual burnout that was the result of serving in three challenging ministry assignments. Now, months later, God reminded him of the call to ministry placed on his life. He opened up to our church about the realities of exhaustion that ministers face.

From John 3:22-30, he shared how John the Baptist responded when his followers were more concerned about people following Jesus’ teachings than John. But John did not falter. He did not grow envious. He understood his ministry assignment, reaffirmed his calling, and clarified something for his followers about Jesus: “He must increase, I must decrease.”

He illustrated his ideas and explained that John the Baptist was like the best man in a wedding. He made all the preparations, but the wedding was never about him. The wedding was about the bridegroom. In ministry, when we make our work about us, it leads us to inevitable hopelessness. Ministry was never meant to be about us.

A Place of Hopelessness

Burnout is a topic that most ministers hear and know about, but none consider that it could actually happen to them. In the podcast last week, Jimbo and Bob discussed burnout this way: “Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress,” adding, “That sounds like ministry.”

It does.

Let’s understand what burnout is. Is it too much stress? Is it fatigue or depression? Fatigue can be cured with a three-day weekend. Stress can be relieved by the completion of projects or tasks. Depression may be close, but depression is simply the loss of hope and doesn’t capture the level of cynicism and escapism frequently associated with burnout.

Brad Hambrick of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors says, “Burnout occurs when the things that we once relied upon for life and energy become a source of discouragement and drain. Burnout occurs when we begin to live as if caring were a necessary enemy, and we begin to prefer the ‘living death’ of numbness to ‘caring exhaustion’ of Christian relationships and service.”

Is Burnout Inevitable? Or Optional?

There has been some disagreement between some pastors about the certainty of burnout. Is it a choice we make or a choice made for us? We dealt with Forced Termination in another blog, But burnout is typically a choice we make when we are past the point of hopelessness. When facing this type of hopelessness, asking the right questions is essential. Instead of asking, "What did I do wrong," we should ask, "Where am I emotionally, spiritually, and mentally?"

I recently spoke with a pastor who is considering relocating and quitting his church. Here are some of the things he said to me:

"I just don't like my job anymore." (no joy)

"There are a hundred people who could do this job better than me." (comparison)

"I think our search team regrets hiring me." (lack of self-esteem)

"I think God is pushing me out." (disillusionment with God)

"Things would be better if we were just back home right now." (escapism)

"If I were to grade myself, it would probably be marriage: D, parenting: C, school: C...I'm not sure about ministry." (feelings of failure)

"I'm going to give it to the summer and probably be done." (giving up)

These are all warning signs of someone dangerously close to burnout. Maybe you've had these feelings yourself! As an AMS, how did I respond?

"Brother," I said. "The last thing I want to do is "be" the voice of God for you because that is a dangerous place to be! But from an outsider's perspective, I will say this: this is not about your ministry, your marriage, your parenting, or your education. This is about your walk with the Lord. And if the Lord is releasing you from this ministry assignment, and you have peace about his leadership in that area, that's one thing. But if you're exhausted, depressed, lack joy, and comparing yourself to others, that's not the right reason to leave the ministry."

Please hear my heart: I know how difficult ministry is! The Bible never promises to us that it will be easy! But by the grace of God, there are a few ways we can deal with the stress of ministry and prevent the looming burnout that we can all grow close to. I will propose four things.

Grace

Do not forget about the grace of God. To dwell on the grace of God is to allow God's work to heal our wounds and mistakes. Many leave ministry because of some mistakes that they feel forever remove them from ministry. Did you preach a lousy sermon? Did you forget to visit that church member, and now they have passed away? Did you lose your temper during a business meeting?

Do not forget about the grace of God. Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then, with

confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.” John said, “From His fulness we have received grace upon grace.” John 1:16. 1 Cor. 15:10 says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

The song says, “Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe,
All who are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?”

Will you? Will you receive the grace of God when you’ve failed? Will you, when you’re feeling lost? Will you, when you cannot turn anywhere else? Look to the grace that is greater than all our sins.

Rest

As exhausting as this may sound, you need to schedule rest. I am not talking about planning a week of vacation in your calendar, per se. I am speaking about scheduling rest in your daily rhythms of life. If you work with your mind, rest with your hands. If you work with your hands, relax with your mind. A healthy life requires a good amount of rest. We live in a day of restlessness, and many leave the ministry because they simply have not found rest.

Consider the very gentle and lowly heart of Jesus, who says, “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Jesus promises to give rest to all who come to him. Here is my question: are you going to him? Are you resting in Christ? If you get to work, and you are so focused on getting the sermon done, getting the bible study planned, and thinking about the draining budget from your church’s account, yet you have not sat in the presence of God for a while, you are not a person of rest. Rest comes naturally with the designation of time. How much time are you intentionally pursuing to rest and spend with God?

Fruit

When Jesus spoke with his disciples in John 15, he encouraged them to “Abide” in him. He said, “By this, my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples (v8).” Richard Blackaby said, “I have never met a burned-out pastor ready to quit that was deeply abiding in Christ.” In the context of personal holiness, this is such a true statement.

I understand there are good reasons to leave a ministry position at a church. If God calls you elsewhere, you are dealing with an unethical dilemma or do not think it is wise to remain given various circumstances. But burnout is a choice that stems from a point of absolute hopelessness, exhaustion, and depression. Usually, this is an indicator that something wrong has happened on the inside. I understand there is a variety of circumstances that can change

the dynamic of departure. But if you are leaving the ministry, it helps to ask, “Why” and “How did I get here?”

Business is not the same thing as fruitfulness. It is all too easy to get “busy” in ministry. But it is possible to be busy without bearing fruit. Accordingly, Jesus did not say, “By this, my Father is glorified: that you do a bunch of busy things for me.” This passage also speaks of pruning. Pruning is when God takes anything away from your life that is not fruitfulness. So, if something gets taken away from you in the ministry you worked so hard for, it could very well be God's gracious, pruning hand.

Trouble

Here's my last word to help prevent burnout: trouble. Well, maybe not trouble itself, but the likelihood of it. Going into ministry with a realistic perspective is helpful. Trouble will come. Church members (and we) are sinful sometimes filled with pride. Financial trouble stings. Hurtful words are said. Thankfully, we have the God of comfort on our side.

By the way, I've always loved the beautiful words of Paul in 2 Cor. 1. Blessed be the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction! Why did he say this? Oh, he tells us in verse 8:

“For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt like we received the sentence of death!” The closeness of burnout sounds inevitable if not for the separation of one sentence: “But that was to make us not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

There is nothing that our resurrecting God cannot handle. Know his grace. Rest in Him. Bear fruit. And be aware of trouble. You will have set your mind on him when trouble comes and stayed the course. And if, perhaps, you do leave your church, at least leave after doing all that you could have done to abide in Him.