



## Thoughts on Burnout Prevention and Recovery

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Ministry Essentials

# BURNOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

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The suffering, pain, and confusion that are a part of emotional, physical, and oftentimes spiritual burnout present opportunities to deepen your understanding of God. Renewal comes when we recognize that suffering, along with trust, are gifts from God.

Paul, writing about his suffering, said in 2 Corinthians 12:9: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (NIV). The process of the “dark night,” or when you “hit the wall,” allows God to perfect something of His power in your life, so that in the future you will be able to speak powerful words into the lives of others.

Moving through burnout will deepen your faith in five significant ways:

- You will love God differently. You will deepen your worship and adoration of Him.
- You will love others more richly, being more compassionate and tender.
- You will be more in touch with the depth of your own sinfulness, and more aware of God’s great faithfulness to you.
- You will grow in your understanding and appreciation for intimacy with God.
- You will deepen your commitment to Jesus Christ, being more willing to enter mystery and abandon yourself to Him (Psalm 40:3, *The Message*).

Below are listed some things to think about if you’ve lost your enthusiasm for life and ministry. The idea is not to implement all of these thoughts and ideas at once, but to work through these thoughts slowly, perhaps selecting only one a week to think about and begin to apply to your life. Also you can choose where to start the process. You don’t need to begin with number one.

*“I’m making a cocoon,” said the caterpillar. “It looks like I’m hiding, I know, but a cocoon is no escape. It’s an in-between house where the change takes place. . . . During the change, it will seem that nothing is happening, but the butterfly is already becoming. It just takes time.”*  
--Trina Paulus

1. Consider this question: How does my life need to be different? Are you looking for ways to rearrange the puzzle pieces of your life or are you truly seeking ways to live differently? As one person at an AA meeting stated, “If we always do what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we’ve always got and nothing changes . . . nothing changes” (Smith 2006, 191). Think about what transformation might mean for you. What risks might be involved? What attitudes toward God might need to change? Reflect on Paul’s words in Philippians 1:6 MSG, “There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ appears.” You can change. It begins with a shift in attitude orchestrated by the Spirit of God and your growing desperation to know God more intimately. In this context, you make changes. Perhaps the words of Anthony of the Desert will encourage you. He said, “Every morning I must say again to myself – today I start” (Smith 2006, 221).

2. When thinking of ways your life needs to be different, think about how you spend your time. In order to have sufficient time, energy, and money to provide for yourself and your family do your priorities need to be more clearly defined? Time spent taking care of yourself and your family is not wasted time. Taking time to exercise, walk leisurely in the sunshine, develop a hobby, learn a new skill, read for pleasure . . . bring

nourishment to your soul. What activities in the past energized you? What new activities might bring refreshment to you? How might you simplify some areas of your life to make more time for some new activities?

3. Become realistic about what you can and cannot do. Think about how much your perception of yourself is linked to your usefulness and productivity. Are you like Stephen Smith who hears someone calling out to him, “Do something impressive. Do something significant and you will finally BE somebody” (Smith 2006, 192)? Are your days filled with activities that attempt to validate your significance and competency? How hard is it to say “no” to ministry opportunities or the requests of other people? Why is it hard?
4. Keep a healthy sense of humor. Make room in your life to have fun, play, and laugh. Milton Berle has said, “Laughter is an instant vacation.” Does taking yourself too seriously get in the way of relating to your family and friends?
5. Sometimes the soothing sounds of music can help clarify thoughts and promote relaxation. Listen to Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons”, Handel’s “Water Music”, Yo-Yo Ma’s cello pieces “Dinner” and “Gabriel’s Oboe from The Mission” and a “Song for Rome” from A Summer in Italy album. Because these pieces don’t have lyrics, they allow your own thoughts and imagination to surface. Familiar praise music can lead your thoughts in other good directions. But the idea is, music can help slow you down. Mark Buchanan said, “Someone asked me recently what was my biggest regret in life. I thought a moment, surveying the vast and cluttered landscape of my blunders and losses, the evil I have done and the evil that’s been done against me. ‘Being in a hurry,’ I said. ‘Pardon?’ ‘Being in a hurry. Getting to the next thing without fully entering the thing in front of me. I cannot think of a single advantage I’ve ever gained from being in a hurry. But a thousand broken and missed things, tens of thousands, lie in the wake of all that rushing.’” Buchanan later said, “The Chinese join two characters to form a single pictograph for busyness: heart and killing. That is stunningly incisive. The heart is the place the busy life exacts its steepest toll” (Buchanan 2006, 45).
6. What are your thoughts about rest? Is a consistent day off part of your weekly schedule? How about vacations, weekends away? What do you think about the statement: “To rest is to exist as a testimony to God’s faithfulness and goodness”? What are your thoughts about Evelyn Underhill’s words? “We mostly spend lives conjugating three verbs: to want, to have, and to do. Craving, clutching, and fussing . . . we are kept in perpetual unrest” (Smith 2006, 106). Wayne Muller says, “Because we do not rest, we lose our way. Poisoned by the hypnotic belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger” (Smith 206, 137). Do you think this is true? Is your life, marriage, family in danger because of your unceasing determination and effort to make life work?
7. When did you stop caring about the things you care about? Mark Buchanan said, “When we lose concern for people, both the lost and the found, for the bride of Christ, for friendship, for truth and beauty and goodness: when we cease to laugh when our children laugh (and instead yell at them to quiet down) to weep when our spouses weep (and instead wish they didn’t get so emotional) . . . when we stop caring about the things we care about – that’s a signal we’re too busy. We have let ourselves be consumed by the things that feed the ego but starve the soul “ (Buchanan 2006, 48).
8. Think about these thoughts expressed by Mark Buchanan. Confidence and trust are rooted in a deep conviction that God is good and God is sovereign. “There’s no rest for those who don’t believe that. If God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called to his purposes, you can relax. If he doesn’t, start worrying. If God can take any mess, any mishap, any wastage, any wreckage, any anything, and choreograph beauty and meaning from it, then you can take a day off. If he can’t, get busy. Either God’s always at work, watching the city, building the house, or you need to try harder. Either God is good and in control, or it all depends on you” (Buchanan 2006, 63).

9. Would it feel uncomfortable to just sit quietly with God? How might you cultivate listening to God? Where do your thoughts go when you read the following quotes? Francois Fenelon has said, "How rare it is to find a soul quiet enough to hear God speak" (Smith 2006, 121). Ronnie Stevens commented on stillness when he said, "Stillness is not the admission that nothing can be done. Stillness is the confession that we can do nothing. Stillness is the cry for God to do everything" (Stevens 2009, Notes on Prayer, Danube International Church, Budapest, Hungary).
10. Evaluate your relationships. Are there people in your life who know you well? Are you free to express your feelings, concerns, and fears to a few people in your life? Do you have any ideas about how to cultivate a more meaningful relationship with your spouse and one or two other people? If you're married, do you take time to be with your spouse to talk, listen or just be together? Possibly you could ask your spouse the following questions: (1) How do you evaluate our relationship? (2) Do you think I understand you and what is happening in your life? (3) Do I listen to you when you want to share your life with me? (4) What's it like to live with me? How might your relationship with your spouse be impacted if you took the answers to these questions seriously?
11. Is maintaining control really important to you? For instance how committed are you to making sure your children turn out right, the ministry prospers, your donors view you as a good investment, or others around you see you as a role model? Realizing that control is an illusion is a good first step. Control and performance are not so much about excellence as they are about idolatry. One person said, "Prior to my burnout, I really thought that I was in control of things. I thought I was making my ministry grow. I thought I was raising up disciples. I was leading. I was speaking. I was teaching. I was writing." "I" was doing it all (Coffman 1997, 87). This equates to idolatry. What commitments do you have to life and ministry that might be more about control and self-centeredness than you previously thought? How comfortable are you with mystery?
12. How can you live with more expectancy than expectations? Blaming others for the problems you have leads to demanding that others meet your needs and expectations. Living in the present with the expectancy of being with others--laughing, talking, and sharing your life with them leads to opportunities to build reciprocal relationships. Unrealistic or demanding expectations drain the life out of relationships while expectancy celebrates life, allowing relationships to grow. (Cf. Young 2007, 204-206 for further discussion).
13. Read Scripture that refreshes you. Try a new approach. Read from a different translation or paraphrase than you normally use. Try reading *The Book of God* (the Bible in novel form) by Walter Wangerin. Thomas Merton has said, "The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived" (Smith 2006, 101).
14. Realize that the pursuit of a better life that leads to blessing from God, or greater happiness, will always bring disappointment and pressure to "get it right," or to "make life work." The Law of Linearity says if you want happiness or God's blessing (B) then you must do (A). Because you can never get it quite right, the pressure will always be on. Larry Crabb says, "The Law of Liberty has been established as the way to a better hope rather than a better life. This better hope is intimacy with God. In any circumstance, in any condition, we can draw near to God, and from Him draw our identity, find strength to persevere, and experience the joy of anticipation. . ." (Crabb 2002, 27).
15. Think about this statement: "The root of all change is repentance. You must change your mind about God because the root of all sin is a wrong attitude toward God." Nancy Groom has said, "The call to repentance according to Scripture requires that we turn from our sin, but not toward greater effort at self-improvement. Rather we are to 'turn to God' so that our 'sins may be wiped out' by the blood of Jesus, not by our own dedication to amending our lives. Moreover, our repentance will result in 'times of refreshing (that) come from the Lord,' for God always

nourishes us with His grace when we acknowledge our sin and ask for His forgiveness” (Groom 2000, 192).

16. Walter Trobisch has said, “God’s love does not allow us to remain as we are. It is more than acceptance. It works and forms, it carves out the image which God has intended. This is a lifelong process and sometimes a painful one” (Smith, 2006, 251). This molding and carving allows each of us to reflect more fully the individual way we reflect God’s image and glory. Our purpose is not to become like everyone else, but to become our true selves – the one God uniquely created to enjoy Him. That’s exciting! As Søren Kierkegaard has said, “And now Lord, with your help, I shall become myself” (Smith 2006, 251).

### Summary Comments

Regardless of where you find yourself on the continuum of burnout, keep in mind that you can begin to move in a healthier direction that brings renewal, refreshment, and an aliveness that can deeply impact your spiritual life and your service. Reversing burnout takes time. It’s not an instant fix! Those that really experience serious burnout, find that for every month they were moving toward burnout, it may take the same length of time to reverse the process. But you can reverse burnout by beginning to take steps to fill your emotional, physical, and spiritual tanks. You need not remain on empty!

As we mentioned at the beginning of this document, consider these thoughts over a period of time, looking for ways to implement them into your life. Possibly you want to select one and consider it for a week, carefully wondering how it applies to your life as you listen to God. As the Spirit of God prompts you to take action and make changes, may you be encouraged in a way that helps to restore hope and joy as you continue living your life. May your intimacy with the Father please Him, reflecting more of His Glory in your life.

### Resources

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