

Burnout



*Let be and be still,
and know—recognize and understand—
that I am God.*

PSALM 46:10, AMP

“God, I can’t! I just can’t do it anymore! I’m so tired! I just can’t keep on keeping on!”

Whoa! What happened? Notice I did not say “won’t”; rather, I said “can’t.” Why? Because I was burned out! I had pushed so hard for so long that there simply wasn’t anything left to give. I was drained, empty.

Webster’s New World Dictionary’s definition of burnout reads, “To exhaust yourself by too much work.” Having gone through several periods of burnout, my definition is much stronger. For me, it is a state of being totally depleted—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is frightening and frustrating since I have used the argument that Christians need not be victims of burnout because of the power of prayer and availability of God’s help.

Definitions and arguments aside, it is possible that each of us, no matter how deep our faith, will experience burnout at some point in our lives. It is not a state peculiar to writers; rather, it is the product of the pressure and stress of daily living—the accumulation of problems and never-ending to-do lists that cause us to push ourselves beyond our resources.

“There is a difference between *burning out* for God and *being poured out* for God,” Elizabeth Skoglund says. “Burning out will not multiply our results. . . . Burnout will hurt the quality of our work and eventually diminish its quantity as physical or emotional breakdown take hold” (*Burning Out for God*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988, pp. 15, 18).

The Bible says that God created the world in six days; and on the seventh day, he rested. Surely he has given us an example to follow, yet I know I’m not the only person to ignore it. And I’m not talking about just keeping the Sabbath, as important as I believe that is. We also need to pace ourselves during the week. While an occasional late night in the office can produce wonderful results, it’s not the ultimate answer.

“Rest in the Lord; wait patiently for him to act,” David said (Ps. 37:7). I’ve always found it difficult to live by that verse. It’s not just my problem with impatience but the problem I have with resting. What does it *really* mean to rest in the Lord?

I used to think it meant a cessation from activity. Ugh! Since I enjoy what I’m doing, I don’t find that very appealing. I have a strong sense of call and am excited about the ministry opportunities God has given me. The rest God is talking about, however, is not a sit-and-do-nothing rest but rather, I believe, a state of being so centered in him that we neither run out ahead of him or lag behind. It’s learning what it means to abide in him as Jesus spoke of in John 15 and to wait for his clear leading *before* we say yes.

“Come to me and I will give you rest—all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke,” Jesus said (Matt. 11:28). Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Matthew 11:28-30 in *The Message* reads, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

In 1835, in his beloved hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” Joseph M. Scriven wrote, “O what peace we often forfeit,/O what needless pain we bear,/All because we do not carry/Everything to God in prayer.”

But what about those times when I have prayed and waited on him, those times when I know I'm in the center of his will, yet still I teeter on the edge of burnout? Frequently, the problem is not with the work itself but rather with my attitude. Pushing myself to work long hours because I'm afraid I won't meet a deadline, afraid I won't measure up, robs me of joy and is often counterproductive. I can't do my best work when I'm pushing or rushed. Haste does make waste. And I'm reminded of Jesus' example. Despite only three short years to complete his earthly ministry, he never was rushed or uptight.

Expecting more of myself than is realistic—more than God may expect—contributes to that feeling that my life is out of control and ultimately to burnout. The more overwhelmed I feel, the harder I try to regain control. Instead of stopping to pray and ask the Lord for his perspective of what's most important, I jump from one thing to the next, trying to somehow keep my head above water. But like Peter, taking my eyes off the Lord only causes me to sink (Matt. 14:22-32).

The exhaustion that comes from having given all to reach a goal and the low that naturally follows a high may trigger burnout. I'm reminded of the story of Elijah. After winning an incredible victory over the prophets of Baal, he went from the mountaintop to the valley—actually the pit—of self-pity and depression. “I've had enough,” he told the Lord” (1 Kings 19:4).

Like Elijah, I, too, have won some victories. I have known the joy of seeing the Lord do “exceeding abundantly above all that [I] ask or think” (Eph. 3:20, KJV). But then I lower my shield of faith because my arms are too weary to hold it up. Immediately, the Evil One takes aim, knowing I'm especially vulnerable to his lies and half-truths when I'm exhausted.

Someone has said the difference between despair and hope is a good night's sleep. The first thing Elijah did was sleep. After he rested, an angel woke him and told him to get up and eat.

Resting and eating sensibly helps me regain my perspective. I see how I have been pushing too hard. Yes, I'm doing kingdom work; but I need to remind myself that the world does not rest on my shoulders. When I complete a major project, I need to stop and rest—and celebrate—rather than immediately tackle the overwhelming piles of catch-up work.

Sometimes, however, burnout is not the result of my attitude or overwork. Problems I haven't created and cannot resolve may be dumped in my lap. After all, I've always been the fix-it person in my family. A loved one may be in a crisis and need my help. Maybe all I can do is listen or stand beside her bed in the emergency room. Or I may offer godly counsel only to find myself in the middle of a situation for which there are no easy answers. Yet whether I'm able to help or not, I've got to try. I can't ignore the needs of those around me; but if I'm not careful and prayerful, I can take on cares and responsibilities that are not mine to carry. I need to remember that I'm called to point people to the Savior, not to try to be their savior.

What of my own needs? I thank God that when I come to him, exhausted and stressed for whatever reason, he doesn't ignore me. He quiets my heart and speaks as he did to Elijah, in a gentle whisper. "Let be and be still" (Ps. 46:10, AMP). He reminds me of his promises and provision for all of my needs. And I know, because he has done it for me again and again, that "he gives power to the tired and worn out, and strength to the weak. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isa. 40:29, 31).



RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL TO WRITE

Read Matthew 11:28-30 in several translations or paraphrases. Then evaluate your present situation. Are you in over your head because you've tried to pick up every loose end and need? If so, seek his forgiveness and ask him to set you free to do what he is calling you to do—no more and no less!