

BURNOUT IN THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

INTRODUCTION

“Burnout” is not a term that you will find in the Scriptures. Yet it is a “condition” that is referred to directly and indirectly many times. Because of this, the LORD obviously considers it an important issue to understand and learn of.

“Burnout” is not prejudice. It afflicts whether we’re male or female, young or old, rich or poor, educated or not, and whatever our occupation. The purpose of this study however, is to discover what it is in relationship to the CHRISTian ministry. May the LORD grant us HIS wisdom and grace to understand this powerful threat so we need not experience it, and so we can be that much more effective for HIS glory and the furtherance of HIS eternal kingdom!

I. What Is Burnout In The CHRISTian Ministry?

Following are two “secular” definitions that help us answer this question . . .

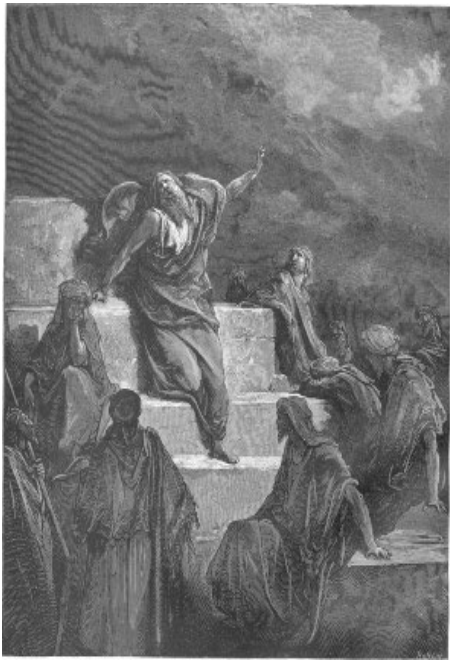
- “Being weary in well-doing, losing hope, being dismayed and giving up.” Bill Gothard
- “A loss of enthusiasm, energy, idealism, perspective, and purpose. It can be viewed as a state of mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion brought on by continued stress.” Frank Minirth and Don Hawkins

Following are two portions of Scripture that describe burnout very well . . .

“I cried unto GOD with my voice, even unto GOD with my voice; and HE gave ear unto me. In the day of my trouble I sought the LORD: my sore ran in the night, and ceased not: my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered GOD, and was troubled: I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah. THOU holdest mine eyes waking: I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times. I call to remembrance my song in the night: I commune with mine own heart: and my spirit made diligent search. Will the LORD cast off forever? And will HE be favourable no more? Is HIS mercy clean gone forever? Doth HIS promise fail for evermore? Hath GOD forgotten to be gracious? Hath HE in anger shut up HIS tender mercies? Selah.” Psalm 77:1-9



**Asaph Knew What
Burnout Was**



Jeremiah Experienced Burnout

peace: I forgot prosperity. And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.” Lamentations 3:1-19

“I AM the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. HE hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light. Surely against me is HE turned; HE turneth HIS hand against me all the day. My flesh and my skin hath HE made old: HE hath broken my bones. HE hath builded against me, and compassed me with gall and travail. HE hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. HE hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: HE hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, HE shutteth out my prayer. HE hath enclosed my ways with hewn stone, HE hath made my paths crooked. HE was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places. HE hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces: HE hath made me desolate. HE hath bent HIS bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow. HE hath caused the arrows of HIS quiver to enter into my reins. I was a derision to all my people; and their song all the day. HE hath filled me with bitterness, HE hath made me drunken with wormwood. HE hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, he hath covered me with ashes. And THOU hast removed my soul far off from

It was during a two-year period (1985-1987), that I was privileged to experience the “affliction” of burnout. There were several symptoms that were greatly manifested. Listing them here with accompanying Scriptures, helps illustrate what burnout is . . .

A. Physical Exhaustion

During those two years, there was an increasing weakness physically. I was physically exhausted twenty-four hours a day.

“I am counted with these that go down into the pit, I am as a man that hath no strength.” Psalm 88:4

B. Mental Fatigue

What I mean by this was an increasing difficulty in concentration and ability to reason clearly. This was true in every area of my life.

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul (i.e. – mind, will, emotions)? And why art thou disquieted in me?” Psalm 42:5a

C. Spiritually Weak

This meant not only a severe “tiredness” in my own spirit, but a real inability to minister to others as well. My “ministry tank” was on empty.

“I remembered GOD, and was troubled, I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed.” Psalm 77:3

D. GOD Seemed Far Away

Another symptom of my burnout was a seemingly distancing of the LORD from me. It seemed as if HE did not care for my plight nor heed my cries for HIS help.

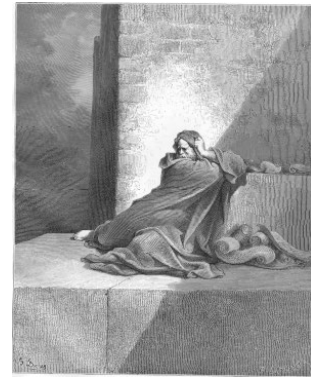
“Also when I cry and shout, (the LORD) shutteth out my prayer. THOU hast covered THYSELF with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through.”

Lamentations 3:8, 44

E. Severe, Prolonged Depression

We all experience a little depression from time to time. This is a normal part of life. However, if the depression is severe and prolonged, this is serious and may indicate burnout.

“My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, where is thy GOD?” Psalm 42:3



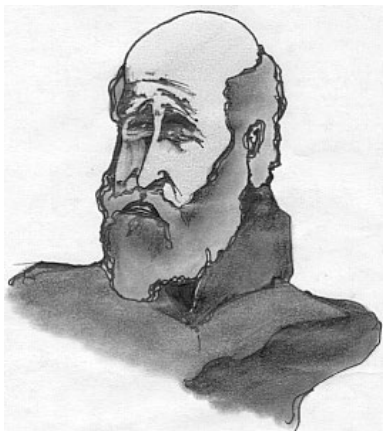
One Of The Sons Of Korah

F. Lack Of Interest In Ministry

This is a very significant symptom of burnout. Where once there was a great joy and love for the ministry, now there was a disdain and even hatred of it . . . especially for the people GOD had called me to serve.

“Lover and friend hast THOU (O GOD) put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.” Psalm 88:18

We close this section of our study with Psalm 88. Another portion of Scripture that describes burnout in detail . . .



Heman The Ezrahite

“O LORD GOD of my salvation, I have cried day and night before THEE: Let my prayer come before THEE: incline THINE ear unto my cry; For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave. I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength: Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom THOU rememberest no more: and they are cut off from THY hand. THOU hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps,. THY wrath lieth hard upon me, and THOU hast afflicted me with all THY waves. Selah. THOU hast put away mine acquaintance far from

me; THOU hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth. Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon THEE, I have stretched out my hands unto THEE. Wilt THOU shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise THEE? Selah. Shall THY lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or THY faithfulness in destruction? Shall THY wonders be known in the dark? And THY righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But unto THEE have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent THEE. LORD, why castest THOU off my soul? Why hidest THOU THY face from me? I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer THY terrors I am distracted. THY fierce wrath goeth over me; THY terrors have cut me off. They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together. Lover and friend hast THOU put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.” Psalm 88:1-18

II. How Does Burnout In The CHRISTian Ministry Develop?

If we desire to be safeguarded from burnout in the CHRISTian ministry, we must first understand the causes of it. Following are several,

A. Failure To Maintain A Close Relationship With The LORD

The CHRISTian worker that allows his daily walk with the LORD to “cool”, is allowing the very foundation of his life and ministry to crumble. An ongoing temptation of the CHRISTian worker is to put the ministry before CHRIST in our lives. This is idolatry, and is strictly forbidden in Scripture.

“I AM the LORD thy GOD . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before ME.”

Exodus 20:2a, 3



Oswald Chambers

Oswald Chambers had rich insight into this problem when he said, “If I am devoted to the cause of humanity only, I will soon be exhausted and come to the place where my love will falter. If we undertake work for GOD and get out of touch with HIM, the sense of responsibility will be overwhelmingly crushing. Many workers have gone out with high courage and fine impulses, but with no intimate fellowship with JESUS CHRIST, and before long they are crushed. They do not know what to do with the burden, it produces weariness, and people say – ‘What an embittered end to such a beginning’!”

B. Failure To Look At The Ministry From GOD’s Perspective

The CHRISTian worker who is serving the LORD and others from just a human perspective, is a worker who is destined for certain burnout.

“For MY thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways MY ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are MY ways higher than your ways, and MY thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

C. Taking On Responsibilities That Are GOD’s, Not Ours

We as CHRISTian workers have the tendency to forget that we are but *“flesh and blood”*, just as the people we are ministering to are. If we attempt to “play the HOLY SPIRIT”, and take on responsibilities that only GOD can fulfill, burnout is a certainty.

“Commit thy way unto the LORD, trust also in HIM, and HE shall bring it to pass.” Psalm 37:5

D. Relentless Attacks From Satan And His Evil Forces

When the servant of JESUS CHRIST gets involved in CHRISTian ministry, he enters into a spiritual war where the enemy is strong and formidable. He is vicious and wants to destroy us and the work we’re attempting to do for the LORD. One of his greatest weapons is **discouragement**. If we are not alert to this, and do not take the proper steps of defense against it, burnout is inevitable.

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Ephesians 6:12

E. Failure To Take “Time Away” From The Ministry

GOD created us in such a way that we all need regular rest. This would include physical, emotional, and spiritual. If we fail to get this regular refreshment, we will soon experience devastating fatigue and burnout.

“My zeal hath consumed me . . .” Psalm 119:139a

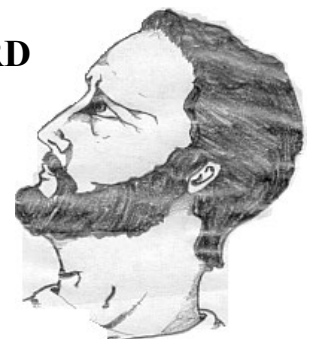
III. How Do We Recover From Burnout In The CHRISTian Ministry?

The LORD may choose to allow us to experience burnout in the CHRISTian ministry. If so, we must know what principles are essential for deliverance and healing. Following are several . . .

A. We Must Nurture Our Personal Relationship With The LORD

We learned earlier in our study that Asaph was a man who knew what burnout was. He shares the importance of seeking the LORD at this time by writing . . .

“My flesh and my heart faileth, but GOD is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.” Psalm 73:26



Asaph

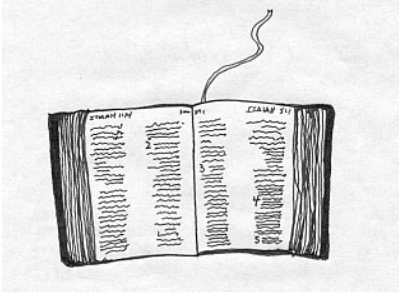
Jeremiah adds his witness to this truth when he writes . . .

“Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD.”

Lamentations 3:40

Following are the two means given to us to maintain and strengthen our personal relationship with the LORD.

1. Read and meditate in the Scriptures



GOD’S Word Is Life To Us

“My son, attend to MY Words, incline thine ear unto MY Sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes, keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh.” Proverbs 4:20-22

Seeking the LORD through HIS Word is not only the single most important “ingredient” to a personal relationship with the LORD, but is also the key to healing and recovery from burnout. This would especially be true concerning the book of Psalms. This is so, because so many of the Psalms were written for our benefit in this area of burnout. Notice the pattern that many of the Psalms were written in . . .

- Despair, defeat and “burnout”
- The cry for help from the LORD
- Deliverance and rejoicing



(See Psalms 3, 4, 18, 27, 28, 30, 31, 34, 35, 77 and many others)

We Must Learn To Cry Out To The Lord For Help

2. Spend much time in secret prayer

“I called upon THY Name, O LORD, out of the low dungeon. THOU hast heard my voice, hide not THINE ear at my breathing, at my cry. THOU drewest near in the day that I called upon THEE, THOU saidst, Fear not. O LORD, THOU hast pleaded the causes of my soul, THOU hast redeemed my life.” Lamentations 3:55-58



Prayer Can Bring Deliverance

Prayer is the other key to developing our personal relationship with the LORD and receiving healing and recovery from burnout. Whenever we spend time in prayer with the LORD, we’re acknowledging that we need HIM, and O how we need HIM in the midst of burnout! These times of prayer would not only be characterized by our crying out to HIM for healing and recovery, but also being silent before HIM, seeking to discern HIS will and HIS purposes for allowing the burnout. (see I Kings 19:11-12)

B. We Must Look At The Ministry From GOD's Perspective

We learned earlier in our study that looking at the ministry from a human perspective is a major cause of burnout. Thus if we are to experience deliverance from burnout, we must view the ministry from GOD's perspective.

“For MY thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways MY ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are MY ways higher than your ways, and MY thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

C. We Must Remember And Meditate On The LORD's Past Workings

This principle is important, because in the midst of burnout, we tend to forget the LORD's goodness to us in the past. As we follow this principle, we receive encouragement and strength to continue serving the LORD and others.

“And I said, This is my infirmity (i.e. – burnout), but I will remember the years of the right hand of the MOST HIGH. I will remember the works of the LORD, surely I will remember THY wonders of old. I will meditate also of all THY work, and talk of THY doings.” Psalm 77:10-12

This is why “*hope*” is so important to the CHRISTian worker in the midst of burnout. To have “*hope*” means to have assurance that GOD is in control. Even more than this however, it means that we have faith that the LORD is walking through the burnout with us!

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in GOD, for I shall yet praise HIM, WHO is the health of my countenance, and my GOD.” Psalm 42:11

“The LORD is my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in HIM.”
Lamentations 3:24

Isn't it significant that Scripture teaches that afflictions (including burnout), can actually produce “*hope*”.

“. . . but we glory in tribulation also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience, hope . . .” Romans 5:3b-4

“Now the GOD of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the HOLY SPIRIT.” Romans 15:13

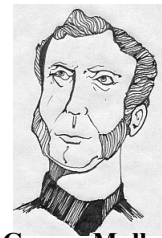
D. We Must Fellowship With CHRISTians That Can Minister To Us

Certainly one of the primary aspects of CHRISTian ministry is giving. Giving of one's self physically, emotionally, and especially spiritually. But there is only so much we can give before we feel “emptied” and burned out. This is why it is so important that we be continually ministered to and encouraged by other GODly saints. Following are several areas for this to be accomplished . . .

- attend another church
- be part of a small group
- one-to-one fellowship
- couple-to-couple fellowship
- attend seminars
- view encouraging videos
- read CHRISTian biographies



Oswald



George Muller



Charles Spurgeon



Amy Carmichael

“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even CHRIST pleased not HIMSELF, but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached THEE fell on ME.” Romans 15:1-3

E. We Must Listen TO GODly, Melodious Music

Bright, melodious music is a powerful means whereby we can receive much encouragement in the midst of burnout. This has been the testimony of many saints throughout the years.

“THOU art my hiding place, THOU shalt preserve me from trouble, THOU shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance. Selah” Psalm 32:7

“Let the saints be joyful in glory, let them sing aloud upon their beds.”
Psalm 149:5 (see also Psalm 42:8; 43:4; Colossians 3:16)

F. We Must Take Time Away To Rest

This would include our daily times of regular sleep, our weekly “Sabbath day” times of rest, and our yearly times of “furlough”. Scripture teaches very clearly the importance of these times away.

It is said of GOD HIMSELF, that after HE finished creating “... *the heavens and the earth* ...”,

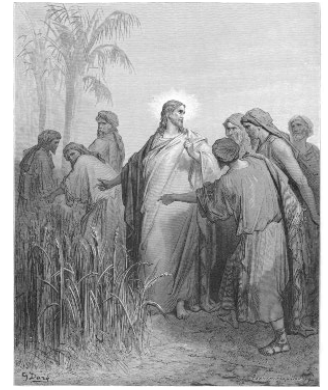
“(HE) ended HIS work which HE had made, and HE rested on the seventh day from all HIS work which HE had made.” Genesis 2:2

The LORD later commanded HIS people that . . .

“Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD thy GOD, in it thou shalt not do any work . . .”
Exodus 20:9-10a

After the apostles returned from a very busy missionary tour, Scripture tells us . . .

“(JESUS) said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while, for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.” Mark 6:31



Jesus And His Disciples

We conclude this portion of our study with Psalm 30.
We could very well entitle it . . .

“The Psalm Of Recovery From Burnout”

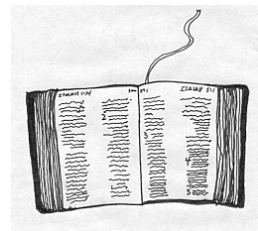
“I will extol thee, O LORD; for THOU hast lifted me up, and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me. O LORD my GOD, I cried unto THEE, and THOU hast healed me. O LORD, THOU hast brought up my soul from the grave; THOU hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. Sing unto the LORD, O ye saints of HIS, and give thanks at the remembrance of HIS holiness. For HIS anger endureth but a moment; in HIS favour is life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. And in my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved. LORD, by THY favour THOU hast made my mountain to stand strong; THOU didst hide THY face, and I was troubled. I cried to THEE, O LORD; and unto the LORD I made supplication. What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise THEE? Shall it declare THY Truth? Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me; LORD, be THOU my helper. THOU hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; THOU hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; To the end that my glory may sing praise to THEE, and not be silent. O LORD my GOD, I will give thanks unto THEE for ever.”

Psalm 30:1-12

IV. How Do We Prevent Burnout In The CHRISTian Ministry?

Now that we have learned what burnout is, how it develops, and how we recover from it, we can discover the important principles of how to prevent it from occurring in our life and ministry. Following are several . . .

A. We Must Keep Our Personal Relationship With The LORD Strong



The Word Of God Will Keep Us From Burnout

We learned earlier in our study that this is the most important aspect of recovery from burnout. It is also the most important aspect of preventing burnout. Again the LORD has given us two powerful means to maintain and strengthen our personal relationship with HIM . . . daily times of Bible study and prayer. As we spend time in these two disciplines daily, our spirit, soul and body is nourished and strengthened against burnout.



Daily Prayer Will Keep Us Spiritually Strong

“As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after THEE, O GOD. My soul thirsteth for GOD, for the Living GOD, when shall I come and appear before GOD?” Psalm 42:1-2

B. We Must Remember To Look At The Ministry From GOD’s Perspective

We also learned from our study earlier, how important it is to look at the ministry from GOD’s perspective, not ours. We must remember that the ministry is not ours, but HIS work. We must view the many struggles, disappointments and heartaches that accompany the CHRISTian ministry from the LORD’s sovereign and eternal point of view. As we remember these important truths, we are spared from the destructive forces of burnout.

“For MY thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways MY ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are MY ways higher than your ways, and MY thoughts than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9

C. We Must Understand The Difference Between GOD’s And Our Responsibilities

The Scriptures are clear in proclaiming that in the CHRISTian ministry, the LORD has HIS responsibilities and we have ours. As we understand this, we will not expend our physical, emotional and spiritual energies on responsibilities that are not ours, but will instead be able to focus all of them on what the LORD gives us the grace to accomplish. This will keep us from burnout.

Psalm 37:1-5 is just one portion of Scripture that illustrates this principle . . .

MY RESPONSIBILITIES

- *“Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity” (v.1)*
- *“Trust in the LORD and do good . . .” (v.3a)*
- *“Delight thyself also in the LORD . . .” (v.4a)*
- *“Commit thy way unto the LORD, trust also in HIM . . .” (v.5a)*

GOD’S RESPONSIBILITIES

- *“For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.” (v.2)*
- *“. . . so shalt thou dwell in the land and verily thou shalt be fed.” (v.3b)*
- *“. . . and HE shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” (v.4b)*
- *“. . . and HE shall bring it to pass.” (v.5b)*

D. We Must Learn To Wait On The LORD

Over thirty-five times in Scripture, we are commanded to *“wait on”* or *“wait for”* the LORD. As we study and meditate on several of these Scriptures, we learn just how important this principle is in relationship to being kept from burnout in the ministry.

“Wait on the LORD, be of good courage, and HE shall strengthen thine heart, wait I say, on the LORD.” Psalm 27:14 (see also Psalm 62:5)

The Hebrew word for “wait” here is “qavah”, which means “to expect”. As we place our expectations in ministry only on the LORD, we are kept from burnout because the LORD never disappoints. However, expecting certain results from fellow-workers, programs, and even the world we’re seeking to lead to the LORD can lead to burnout when they are not fulfilled.



People Will Always Disappoint Us

“Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for HIM . . .”

Psalm 37:7a

Not only do we have to learn to “wait on the LORD . . .”, but we must learn to “wait patiently for HIM . . .” This is a virtue that is needed for the CHRISTian worker, because much of the CHRISTian ministry is just waiting for GOD to work in the people’s lives we’re ministering to, or through the particular programs we’re serving in. Learning to “wait patiently” for the LORD will keep us from burnout.

“The LORD is good unto them that wait for HIM, to the soul that seeketh HIM. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.” Lamentations 3:25-26

We have studied earlier that Jeremiah was a man who experienced “burnout”. But it is also his personal testimony that as he learned to “quietly wait . . .” for the LORD, he received “salvation” too . . . “salvation” from burnout.

E. We Must Allow The LORD To Be Our Strength



Asaph Knew The Power Of God’s Strength

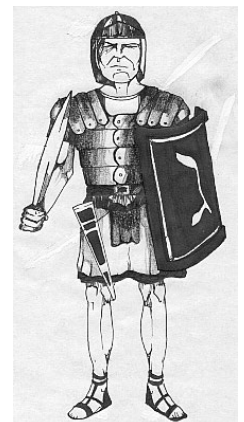
As we consider this practical doctrine of how to prevent burnout in the CHRISTian ministry, this principle is very important as well. Learning to allow the LORD to be our strength in ministry, will keep us from trusting in our own strength and the strength of others. These sources of strength are of course extremely inferior to the LORD.

“My flesh and my heart faileth, but GOD is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.” Psalm 73:26 (see also Isaiah 40:29-31; Ephesians 6:10)

F. We Must Protect Ourselves With The Armor Of GOD

We should never forget that in the CHRISTian ministry, our fiercest enemy is Satan himself. His attacks are powerful and relentless. Yet GOD has given us HIS armour that will protect us from his onslaughts that can often lead to burnout.

“Put on the whole armour of GOD, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil.” Ephesians 6:11



“Put On The Armour Of

G. We Must Pray Against The Principality Of Discouragement

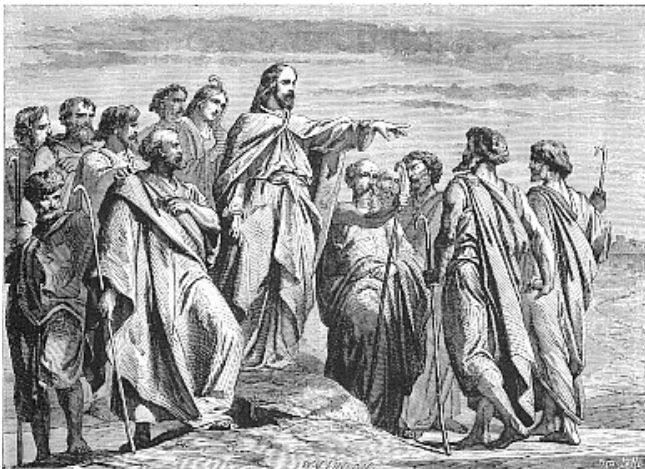
The Scriptures warn us that Satan is not our only enemy in the spiritual warfare that rages in CHRISTian ministry . . .

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Ephesians 6:12

“A municipality is an area of land over which there is governmental jurisdiction. A principality is an evil ruler over an area of land. There are *“principalities”* over nations, cities, and districts.” (Life Purpose, Volume 2; Institute In Basic Life Principles, p.9)

Over the years we have identified specific *“principalities”* that we *“wrestle”* against within the inner-city. One of them is **“discouragement”**, that stems from the CHRISTian worker not seeing more significant results from their labors. This **discouragement** thus breeds a disillusionment, that in turn leads to burnout. However, as we have learned to pray against this principality, the rate of burnout amongst our missionaries has decreased.

H. We Must Take Time Away To Rest



*“Come Ye Yourselves Apart...
And Rest A While...”*

We have already seen earlier in our study, the importance of taking periodic times of rest away from the ministry. As we practice this important principle regularly, we not only receive our much needed rest, but also are shielded against burnout.

“(JESUS) said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while...” Mark 6:31a

(Note: Physical exercise is also a valuable component for our physical, emotional and spiritual health. This is why Scripture tells us that, *“...bodily exercise profiteth (a) little . . .”* I Timothy 4:8a)

CONCLUSION

The CHRISTian ministry has many challenges. At times it can be full of struggles, disappointments and discouragements. These can easily lead to “burnout”. But this need not be. The purpose of this study has been to give us the wisdom to not only understand the characteristics of burnout, but more importantly to give us the principles that will keep us from it. So we can for many, many years be at maximum effectiveness for the LORD’s glory and the furtherance of HIS eternal kingdom!

“Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting GOD, the LORD, the CREATOR of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? HE giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might HE increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk, and not faint.” Isaiah 40:28-31

