

# Burnout

RESTING IN GOD'S FAIRNESS

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BRAD HAMBRICK

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series



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Brad Hambrick, Series Editor

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BRAD HAMBRICK



P U B L I S H I N G

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### *Motives for Burnout*

Now that we have been practical, let's be honest. We did not get to the brink of burnout (or over the cliff) because we lacked an itemized time-budgeting tool. Tools won't ultimately tame what got us into this mess. They may show us the mess and the changes that are necessary. When we are worn down and desperate (humble), we will acknowledge what we see and change (repent). But once we get strong (proudful) again, we will think we can "handle it" (foolishness), unless our reason for change runs deeper than a time budget (penetrates our heart).

That is the purpose of this section—to help us see why we got here, so that we can address the root cause of burnout (heart sins) instead of merely its primary manifestation (an unrealistic schedule). Changes at this level will be more challenging than changing your schedule, but the freedom you experience from these changes will be more liberating as well.

Below are nine motives that commonly contribute to burnout. As you read them, you'll find that they are not mutually exclusive. Your goal is to see and hear yourself. You have likely accepted the mind-set of these nine motives as "the way things are" without seeing them as the destructive forces (sin) that push you away from restful dependence upon God in the midst of work.

*Pride.* "I want it to be done right." "I am the only one who can do [blank]." There may be some limited, useful truth in these statements. God does uniquely gift and equip people for certain tasks. But if we find this mind-set encompassing more and more of our life, it is probably the mark of territorial pride rather than the outflow of our gifting. When God's gifts are used as God intended, they multiply the number of available leaders rather than merely elevating (and thereby exhausting) the one whom God gifted.

As we consider pride and burnout, it is important to reflect on how the fall and God's subsequent curse on the human race



affected our work. Winston Smith observes: “Complicating matters, when God confronted Adam and Eve, he cursed the very things in which men and women would find their worth: he cursed their labor . . . You may try to take pride in your work; you may try to find life and meaning in your children, but God isn’t going to make it easy for you.”<sup>10</sup>

Pride does not have to say, *I can do this better*. It can merely say, *I can make this my life*. When understood this way, God’s curse on Adam and Eve was merely a form of protection. Before the fall, self-sufficiency and autonomy were not temptations. After the fall, people needed to be protected from these temptations because of the incredible gift of reason that came with being made in the image of God. God made work and relationships hard so that it would be harder for us to be satisfied with them apart from him—and easily wander toward an eternity separated from God.

Pride can also show itself in the attitude that says, *I don’t want people messing up my little world*. We make a world that meets our specifications. We look at our world and pronounce it “good.” Then we fight to keep the “outside forces of evil” from corrupting our world. People are invited to live in our world as long as they obey the rules of our world. The problem is that we were made only to manage God’s world, not to create our own. So this form of pride inevitably leads to the exhaustion of burnout.

*Fear*. This is burnout built on the prefix “What if . . . ?” If your life is driven into the ground by trying to brace against an endless stream of hypothetical situations that are limited only by the creativity of your pessimistic imagination, then burnout will be the only periodic relief you experience from your “normal” life of fear.

The hypotheticals we create can be about external circumstances (e.g., What if my children forget to wash their hands before eating, get sick, miss a week of school, fall behind in sec-

10. Smith, *Burned Out?*, 22.



ond grade, begin to feel not smart enough, underperform through high school, do not get into the college of their choice, marry a second-class spouse, get a job they don't enjoy, get divorced, and I never get to see my grandchildren?). Or the hypotheticals can be related to our internal capabilities, as described by Winston Smith: "Bob lived out of a sense of shame and inadequacy that had dogged him his entire life. In his heart, Bob considered himself a failure and a fraud. He lived as if it were just a matter of time until he was exposed as a failure at every level. His busyness was a failed attempt to address a problem with who he was as a person."<sup>11</sup>

Fear can result in being overprotective or overachieving, but a life ruled by fear is not sustainable and will inevitably result in burnout. Unless we begin to trust (the verb-form opposite of fear) God, we will not experience peace or rest (the noun-form opposites of fear). Without trust in God, life becomes an endless cycle of burnout (usually called depression in this cycle), in which our body recuperates and prepares for another round of fear-living.

*Approval / Fear of Man.* "I'm not happy unless you're happy." This is the motto of codependent burnout. In this approach to relationships we become so close to someone that their mood becomes the emotional ceiling for our mood. It feels wrong to enjoy life or have a greater level of contentment than anyone we care about. Loving becomes a draining and limiting thing to do.

Another form of this approach to burnout is the "guess why you're not happy game," while assuming the answer is always "something I did" or "something I should have done." The exhausting premise of this approach to relationships is that if I love you well (i.e., fill your love tank or meet your needs), then you should be happy. All unhappiness in those I care about becomes a personal indictment (i.e., my fault).

11. Ibid., 20.

“These reflections have it all—theological depth, gospel centrality, humility, and practical advice. I cannot commend it highly enough!”

—J. G. GREAR, Senior Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

“After sharing wise principles for life planning, *Burnout* diagnoses root causes and then points us toward heart cures—rest in Christ.”

—ROBERT W. KELLEMAN, Executive Director, Biblical Counseling Coalition

## LEARNING TO LIVE WITHIN THE TIME GOD GIVES US

Burnout occurs when the things that once gave us life and energy become discouraging and draining instead, sacrificing our pleasures and accomplishments to the continual onslaught of “next.” While a common danger for Christians who dedicate their efforts to God’s kingdom, burnout eventually makes us choose cynical numbness over the “caring exhaustion” of Christian service. How do we avoid this pitfall?

Brad Hambrick argues that burnout is actually a consequence of our life management, and he shows us how to create a *time* budget to avoid living beyond our means with the time God has provided. He helps us remember to rest in God’s fairness rather than try to gain his acceptance.

THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE booklet series by the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) applies the timeless hope of Christ to the unique struggles of modern believers.

“The gospel isn’t just an ethereal idea. It’s not a philosophy, and it’s not static. It moves and shapes and transforms. I am grateful for ABC’s work of letting the gospel bear its weight on these real life sorrows and pains.”

—MATT CHANDLER, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

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