

OVERCOMING BURNOUT

H. B. LONDON

(Isaiah 40:31)

burnout



Will a human being ever swim across the ocean? Run a one-minute mile? Go six months without sleeping? Of course not, because of the established fact of human limits. Yet because of the rapidly changing conditions of modern living—largely due to progress always giving us more and more of everything faster and faster—we are attempting to exceed our limits in scores of areas all at the same time. The pain is palpable. People everywhere are collapsing in exhaustion, wondering what hit them.

What hit them was overload. This can be defined as the point at which our limits are exceeded. “Load” is not the problem. “Over” is the problem. We have all heard about the straw that broke the camel’s back. Once a camel is maximally loaded, a mere straw will cause the break. The problem is not the load—camels love to carry loads. The problem is *overload*.

Stress is such an accepted part of our modern culture that most of us accept it as normal. In reality, stress distorts our physical, mental, and emotional health, and affects our attitudes, marriages, work, and even ministry. We can overload ourselves to the point that we burn out and are no longer effective in God’s work.

PUSHING OUR LIMITS

Maximizing everything has, of course, become the American way. We push the limits as far as possible. We spend more than we have—whether it be money, time, or energy. Jesus, however, never seemed to be in a hurry. There is no indication that He worked 24-hour days. He went to sleep each night without having healed every disease in Israel. He followed God’s agenda, and so He was perfectly effective.

Jesus understood what it means to be human—and what it means to have limits. Jesus knew what it meant to prioritize and balance in light of these limits and how

to focus on the truly important. Our Lord realized that busyness is not necessarily godliness. He is more concerned with the quality of our lives. He calls us to be fruitful, but He also insists that our fruit should “remain,” not burn out.

By contrast, we are in a hurry. Nearly everyone I know has a full plate, but most of us haven’t completely thought through the performance implications of our saturated states. We continue to say “Yes,” even when “Yes” is no longer an option. Once we cross the threshold of our limits, however, we reach saturation. We can’t factor anything more into our lives until we take something away. As basic as this principle seems, it remains largely disregarded.

How do we know when we have reached these limits? If a car overheats, an indicator light goes on alerting us to the danger. Unfortunately, we don’t have such a visible system in most cases. Therefore, we have to be more honest with ourselves about our limits.

AVOIDING BURNOUT

From the very beginning, rest has had a special significance for God (Gen. 2:3). This rest is not always easy, however. Even Moses had difficulty obeying the call to rest. He experienced unrelieved stress trying to keep two million Israelites happy as they wandered in the wilderness. God

called Moses to rest and to delegate some responsibilities. Soon others helped carry Moses' burden and his stress became more manageable (Num. 11:11-17).

God's calling in our lives does not eliminate stress and burnout automatically. Nowhere does the Bible promise to ease all the stress in our lives. It does promise God's peace when we allow Him to control our lives and shape our decisions. He gives us practical ways to limit stress and avoid burnout in the framework of His design for our lives.

> *Accept responsibility.* We must never relinquish control of our schedules to the unpredictable and sometimes ruthless whims of the world or the demands of others. We should be active in self-examination. Nobody is locked into anything. Each of us can accomplish the needed changes if we want them badly enough.

> *Acknowledge limits.* We can schedule our days more sanely, more humanly, and more relationally. We need not apologize for wanting a good night's sleep; we need not believe the lie that "well-rested" is a synonym for "sluggardly."

> *Understand God's will.* God never guides us into an intolerable scramble of overworked feverishness. We will gain more time by properly understanding God's will for us than by all the time-saving suggestions put together.

> *Consciously slow the pace of life.* The pace of life has become deadly. We simply cannot permit each year to bring an increase in speed and not get caught in the exhausting consequences of such a frenzy.

> *Define and defend boundaries.* Jesus did not minister to everybody in Israel, even though He could have. Remember that it is not necessary to have more compassion than the Almighty.

> *Learn to say no.* It is easy to say no to a root canal or a colonoscopy. It is far more

difficult to say no to things that are interesting and enjoyable. Yet even if everything we are doing is enjoyable, if we do not learn to say no, overload will overwhelm us.

> *Get less done, but do the right things.* We would do well to consider doing less, but radically prioritizing. Remember, the multiplying coefficient for our labor is the power of the Holy Spirit. The same God who spoke the universe into existence sees our faithful efforts and instructs the Holy Spirit to expand the benefit to whatever level best glorifies Him

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of burnout include:

- > Exodus 23:12
- > Psalm 37:7
- > Isaiah 41:10
- > John 16:33
- > Colossians 3:15

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on burnout at Matthew 11:28-30 on page 1247. See also the personality profile of Moses and Jethro on page 103.

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
 22 *It is* He who sits above the circle of the earth,
 And its inhabitants *are* like grasshoppers,
 Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
 23 He brings the princes to nothing;
 He makes the judges of the earth useless.
 24 Scarcely shall they be planted,
 Scarcely shall they be sown,
 Scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth,
 When He will also blow on them,
 And they will wither,
 And the whirlwind will take them away like stubble.
 25 "To whom then will you liken Me,
 Or to *whom* shall I be equal?" says the Holy One.
 26 Lift up your eyes on high,
 And see who has created these *things*,
 Who brings out their host by number;
 He calls them all by name,
 By the greatness of His might
 And the strength of *His* power;
 Not one is missing.
 27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
 And speak, O Israel:
 "My way is hidden from the LORD,
 And my just claim is passed over by my God?"
 28 Have you not known?
 Have you not heard?

The everlasting God, the LORD,
 The Creator of the ends of the earth,
 Neither faints nor is weary,
 His understanding is unsearchable.
 29 He gives power to the weak,
 And to *those who have* no might He increases strength.
 30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
 And the young men shall utterly fall,
 31 But those who wait on the LORD
 Shall renew *their* strength;
 They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
 They shall run and not be weary,
 They shall walk and not faint.

ISRAEL ASSURED OF GOD'S HELP

41 "Keep silence before Me,
 O coastlands,
 And let the people renew *their* strength!
 Let them come near, then let them speak;
 Let us come near together for judgment.
 2 "Who raised up one from the east?
 Who in righteousness called him to His feet?
 Who gave the nations before him,
 And made *him* rule over kings?
 Who gave *them* as the dust to his sword,
 As driven stubble to his bow?
 3 Who pursued them, *and* passed safely
 By the way *that* he had not gone with his feet?
 4 Who has performed and done *it*,
 Calling the generations from the beginning?
 'I, the LORD, am the first;
 And with the last I *am* He.' "



SOUL NOTE

Renewed Strength (40:31) One of the great challenges of the Christian life is dealing with the problem of spiritual burnout. Isaiah reminded God's people of the value of waiting upon the Lord. "Waiting" does not mean inactivity; rather, it is patient service that is not overcommitted and overextended. Many desire to "mount up with wings like eagles," but they assume that the harder they run the more likely they will fly. The prophet says, however, that the harder people run the more likely they will fall. Instead, "those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength." Such "waiting" is the antidote for spiritual burnout. **Topic: Burnout**

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you. ²³And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be^a brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

JESUS GIVES TRUE REST

²⁵At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. ²⁶Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²⁷All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*. ²⁸Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

JESUS IS LORD OF THE SABBATH

12 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²And when the

Pharisees saw *it*, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"

³But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? ⁶Yet I say to you that in this place there is *One* greater than the temple. ⁷But if you had known what

this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,'^a you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is Lord even^a of the Sabbath."

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

MATTHEW 11:28

HEALING ON THE SABBATH

⁹Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. ¹⁰And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him.

¹¹Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls

11:23 ^aNU-Text reads *will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be.* **12:7** ^aHosea 6:6

12:8 ^aNU-Text and M-Text omit *even*.

KEY PASSAGE



Burnout

A BEARABLE BURDEN

(11:28-30)

Many people long for rest. Jesus' welcome words call out, as if saying, "Give me your impossible burdens. I will carry them." Jesus says that He will take from our shoulders the heavy burdens that are burning us out, and replace them with an easy yoke, a light burden. Submission to Christ does not place us in bondage to a harsh taskmaster but under the loving care of the gentle and lowly Savior.

Jesus is in touch with the burdens of life that we carry and how much they hurt and exhaust us. When we give our troubled hearts to Him, He gives us rest for our souls. That kind of rest will cure our burnout and renew our enthusiasm for Him.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about burnout on pages 920, 921. See also the personality profile of Moses and Jethro on page 103.

they went into the tent. ⁸And Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them on the way, and *how* the LORD had delivered them. ⁹Then Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the LORD had done for Israel, whom He had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians. ¹⁰And Jethro said, "Blessed *be* the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹Now I know that the LORD *is* greater than all the gods; for in the very thing in which they behaved proudly, *He was* above them." ¹²Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took^a a burnt offering and *other* sacrifices *to offer* to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

¹³And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. ¹⁴So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, "What *is* this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?"

¹⁵And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. ¹⁶When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws."

¹⁷So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do *is* not good. ¹⁸Both you and these people who *are* with you will surely

18:12 ^aFollowing Masoretic Text and Septuagint; Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate read *offered*.

PERSONALITY PROFILE



Burnout

JETHRO: A FRIEND IN NEED

(EXODUS 18:17, 18)

When we are stressed, a powerful asset can be the blessing of someone a little older, a wiser voice of experience, to help us handle the pressure. In that person's wisdom is our relief.

Moses discovered a mentor when he needed one most—*after* he led the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. Confronting Pharaoh, it seems, was easier than trying to lead the millions of Israelites to the Promised Land. To avoid being overwhelmed by this task, Moses needed wise and seasoned counsel. He received it from Jethro, his father-in-law.

Jethro joined Moses in the wilderness with Moses' wife and sons as the Israelites traveled toward the Promised Land. Jethro rejoiced in all that God had done, and the deliverance story strengthened his own faith. But Jethro also saw his son-in-law burning the candle at both ends. He saw the dysfunctional judging process that Moses attempted to shoulder alone, and he suggested a better way. He encouraged Moses to delegate the judging of some of the minor disputes to godly men who were able to know the people and deal intimately with their needs. Moses then became more like a supreme court, dealing only with the legal issues that affected the entire nation.

Jethro demonstrated that those outside a situation can bring valuable perspective to those who may be overwhelmed in it. Fresh eyes can often see the obvious way out that tired eyes have overlooked. Jethro showed Moses where he could get the help he desperately needed. God had provided plenty of wise leaders all around Moses, but Moses needed help to see them.

At different times, God sends us mentors, guides, helpers, and burden-bearers. They can assist us in performing the tasks that God sets before us. Before you burn out, look around for those helpers whom God may have sent your way.

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to the land which You swore to their fathers? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they weep all over me, saying, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' ¹⁴I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden *is* too heavy for me. ¹⁵If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!"

THE SEVENTY ELDERS

¹⁶So the LORD said to Moses: "Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. ¹⁷Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that *is* upon you and will put *the same* upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear *it* yourself alone. ¹⁸Then you shall say to the people, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "Who will give us meat to eat? For *it was* well with us in Egypt." Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, ²⁰but *for* a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the LORD who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, "Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?"' "

²¹And Moses said, "The people whom I *am* among *are* six hundred thousand men on foot; yet You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat *for* a whole month.' ²²Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the

sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?"

²³And the LORD said to Moses, "Has the LORD's arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether what I say will happen to you or not."

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD, and he gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tabernacle. ²⁵Then the LORD came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the Spirit that *was* upon him, and placed *the same* upon the seventy elders; and it happened, when the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, although they never did so again.^a

²⁶But two men had remained in the camp: the name of one *was* Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them. Now they *were* among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle; yet they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

²⁸So Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, *one* of his choice men, answered and said, "Moses my lord, forbid them!"

²⁹Then Moses said to him, "Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets *and* that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!" ³⁰And Moses returned to the camp, he and the elders of Israel.

THE LORD SENDS QUAIL

³¹Now a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea and left *them* fluttering near the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. ³²And the

11:25 ^aTargum and Vulgate read *did not cease*.



SOUL NOTE

Going It Alone (11:16, 17) Pushing hard with many hours and demands can become counterproductive. We need to set boundaries around our time and energy to protect ourselves. God is aware of our limitations and encourages us to lighten the load by delegating responsibility to others who can help us be more productive and effective. The leader always carries greater responsibility, but he or she can alleviate the stress of going it alone by sharing the load. We should consider our responsibilities and how we can delegate to others in order to get the job done.

Topic: Burnout

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'I, the LORD, am the first;
And with the last I *am* He.' "

SOUL NOTE



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And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

²¹Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief *men* of Galilee. ²²And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you." ²³He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

²⁴So she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?"

And she said, "The head of John the Baptist!"

²⁵Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

²⁶And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard of it, they came and took away his corpse and laid it in a tomb.

FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

³⁰Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. ³¹And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. ³²So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves.

³³But the multitudes^a saw them departing, and many knew Him and ran there on foot

from all the cities. They arrived before them and came together to Him. ³⁴And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things. ³⁵When the day was now far spent, His disciples came to Him and said, "This is a deserted place, and already the hour is late. ³⁶Send them away, that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves bread;^a for they have nothing to eat."

³⁷But He answered and said to them, "You give them something to eat."

And they said to Him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them *something* to eat?"

³⁸But He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see."

And when they found out they said, "Five, and two fish."

³⁹Then He commanded them to make them all sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in ranks, in hundreds and in fifties. ⁴¹And when He had taken the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and the two fish He divided among them all. ⁴²So they all ate and were filled. ⁴³And they took up twelve baskets full of fragments and of the fish. ⁴⁴Now those who had eaten the loaves were about^a five thousand men.

JESUS WALKS ON THE SEA

⁴⁵Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. ⁴⁶And when He had sent them

6:33 ^aNU-Text and M-Text read *they*. **6:36** ^aNU-Text reads *something to eat* and omits the rest of this verse. **6:44** ^aNU-Text and M-Text omit *about*.

SOUL NOTE



Rest Stop (6:31, 32) After an exhausting time of ministry, Jesus invited His disciples to "come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." They took a break from their ministry in order to refresh themselves. A hectic schedule takes a physical, emotional, and spiritual toll on us. God knows that we need to come aside and rest a while so that we don't burn out. He will refresh us so that we can continue to serve Him. Rest and refreshment is not wasted time. **Topic: Burnout**