

# How to Beat Burnout

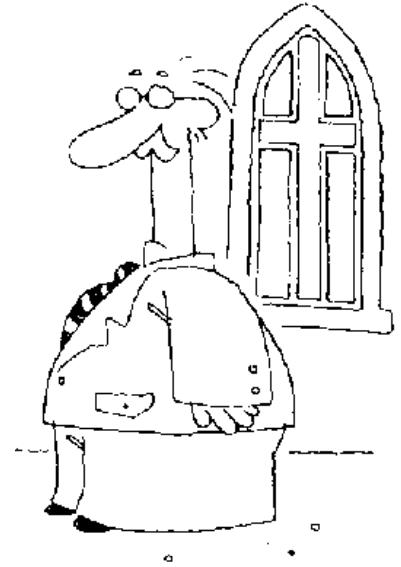
Rich Lamb  
Student Leadership Journal, Volume 2 number 4

During college I majored in InterVarsity. Fellowship activities filled my schedule; and, frankly, I learned more from them than I did from my classes. I enjoyed my ministry-filled life.

That's why I was so surprised when a friend of mine, a local pastor, expressed concern over my full schedule. He told me that if I didn't slow down, I would most likely burn out.

That discussion jolted me. *What if he's right?* I wondered. The possibility that I might not always have the same energy for ministry that I did then felt unthinkable. Yet burnout is a reality for Christian leaders.

The issue of burnout comes up especially often on campus, where leadership responsibilities are heaped on top of academics, extracurriculars and relationships to produce a hectic schedule. Many student leaders live at a pace that cannot be sustained for long without some sort of crash or change.



## The Myth of the Balanced Life

Much of the advice I have heard about avoiding the emotional and physical exhaustion associated with burnout involves striving for "balance" the elusive ingredient we need to keep life in perspective. Without balance, it is said, we're likely to become overly involved in ministry and burn out. And the key to being balanced? Learning to say no to requests for time, as there are more worthy causes and needy people on campus (or anywhere) than we can possibly respond to.

I believe that seeking a "balanced" life is not only unbiblical, but potentially dangerous. When we leaders focus on being balanced, learning how to say no and protecting ourselves from the demands of ministry, we can easily lose sight of the gospel. Little in Scripture implies that spending too much time serving others is harmful. Jesus doesn't teach "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." Rather, Jesus calls for a costly commitment: "Seek first [God's] kingdom .... and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33); "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24); "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

Jesus' message is clear: we *gain* life by pouring out our lives for his sake and the gospel's. That's not to say that too many activities can't cause burnout. They can. But simply saying no and cutting back on our commitments to others is not a sure-fire antidote, either. In fact, if we begin to view ministry as something we need to be protected from, something that saps life from us, we may actually cut ourselves off from

life-giving experiences God wants for us and plunge further into feelings of burnout.

So how can we avoid or recover from burnout? I believe several key principles are illustrated in the lives of two ministers of God - Elijah and Jesus. Elijah experienced burnout, and God responded to him in his time of need. Jesus avoided burnout by making wise choices in situations much like those we face as leaders on campus, saying both yes and no to seemingly endless opportunities for ministry.

### **Elijah: Feeling Like God's Lone Workhorse**

The prophet Elijah certainly ranks as one of the all-time big hitters in the hall of fame of faith. Yet 1 Kings 19 records how even he struggled with burnout.

A chapter earlier, Elijah had won the showdown of the century against 450 prophets of the local god Baal. He and they had assembled at Mount Carmel, and both called on their god to bring forth fire from heaven; but only Elijah's God, Yahweh, delivered. When the people saw Yahweh's power, they helped Elijah slaughter the prophets of Baal. Talk about a mountaintop experience!

Back at the royal palace, however, Queen Jezebel was not happy with the outcome of the match. She threatened to kill Elijah upon his arrival home, and so he ran away into the desert.

Though he has just seen the power of God at work, Elijah is now exhausted and depressed. He wants to die. After forty days God asks him what is wrong. Elijah complains, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:10).

Elijah was suffering from burnout. He felt like God's lone workhorse, and he wanted a break.

### **Embracing Our Dependence on God**

God's response to Elijah's complaint is interesting: "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by" (v.11). God doesn't seem to address Elijah's complaint at all. Rather, he invites Elijah to experience his presence.

Like Elijah, we Christian leaders on campus desperately need a sense of God's presence in our lives. If we try to minister to others without letting God minister to us, we will, indeed, barrel toward burnout. More than any earthly father, God cares about our needs. In 1 Kings 19:5-8, in fact, before God and Elijah ever conversed, God sent an angel to Elijah twice - not to communicate some startling revelation, but simply to fortify him with the food and water he so badly needed.

As leaders we sometimes forget our own limits and lose perspective on where our responsibilities end and God's begin. Have you ever believed that you are the only one in the chapter who is trying to be faithful in some area? The only one committed to evangelism or the only one with a heart for missions or the only one who will get the flyers printed up and posted? Sometimes those feelings will be accurate-humanly speaking. But the bigger reality is that God is more committed to evangelism, missions and even our publicity campaigns than we are. Elijah succumbed to burnout in part because he was feeling alone. God, in his compassionate response, made it clear that God, not Elijah, was running things; and from where God sat, everything was still under control.

We need to be leaders who operate with a clear understanding of our dependence on God in all that we do, and even in all that we don't have time for. One way we can do this is to take a Sabbath rest to spend time with God and let him renew us. In contrast to saying no to ministry opportunities to protect yourself from burnout - a decision made out of fear - taking a Sabbath rest involves faith that God is the one giving you life and energy for ministry, and faith that God can provide for the people you may need to leave behind for a day.

### **Recovering a Sense of Purpose and Partnership**

After Elijah stands in the presence of the Lord, God again asks him what is wrong. And Elijah makes the exact same complaint as before! Once more, God's response is not what we might expect. He doesn't offer a shoulder to cry on. Rather, God's response in verses 15-18 is essentially threefold: I've got a job for you to do; I've got a partner for you, Elisha; and you are not, in fact, as alone as you believe, for 7,000 people in Israel have not bowed down to Baal. God is reminding Elijah of his purpose and of his need to be in partnership with God's people.

*Purpose.* God helps Elijah recover his sense of purpose by giving him direction: "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel" (vv. 15-16). To avoid burnout, we Christian leaders need to experience a deep sense of the purpose of our labor too. Even exciting tasks can cause burnout if the underlying purpose is forgotten and conversely, even the most mundane responsibilities can be energizing when the purpose behind them is keenly felt. Ask yourself. Do I sometimes resent God for calling me into the drudgery of being on the leadership team? Do I tend to forget that the purpose of planning time consuming skits is to make large-group meetings enjoyable and inviting? Do I care more about being noticed for all the hard work I put into publicity than I do about helping pull off the evangelistic outreach?

Many InterVarsity leadership teams spend time before the beginning of the year deciding what the group's purpose for the year is going to be. If we agree with that purpose statement at the beginning of the year, then we should remind ourselves of it throughout the year. With a clear

sense of purpose - and a clear sense of how we leaders are called to help accomplish that purpose - we can be energized to continue working toward our group's goals, long after our initial excitement has worn off.

*Partnership.* As I mentioned before, Elijah got depressed because he thought he was the only man of God left in Israel. God responded by giving him a partner, Elisha, and by reminding him of 7,000 others, "all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (v.18).

Burnout is most often caused by too little dependence on God and his people - not by too much devotion to the needs of others. Ask yourself these questions about your fellowship's leadership team: Do I feel that the leadership team wants what's best for me? Do I have partners on the team who know my limitations and lifestyle? Would they challenge me if I were working too hard, or falling short on my commitments because I had taken on too much?

If you are in a team but approaching ministry like a single workhorse, then you are probably not relying on the partners God has already given you. What steps could you take to partner better with others on your team?

If you aren't in a team, ask God for one or more ministry partners to help you continue to enjoy the ministry that he has given to you. Often overworked leaders delegate their tasks to others to spread around responsibility and increase ownership; but if you only delegate tasks and never seek partners to help you with them, you may still feel isolated and burned out.

When you do delegate tasks, do so in the context of community. Use teams and lead them whenever possible. Teams can be formed around many different jobs, including publicity, drama, worship and finances.

### **Jesus & the Art of Saying No**

Even if we carry a keen sense of purpose, depend on God and partner with others, we fellowship leaders cannot possibly say yes to every ministry opportunity that comes our way. Still, I am convinced that vigilantly protecting ourselves and our schedules from the needs of others is not a biblical solution. Rather, I believe that we need to use the kind of discernment Jesus showed in saying both yes and no to requests for his time.

In the first chapter of Mark, we read about a busy day early in Jesus' ministry. After calling his first four disciples, he teaches in the synagogue, heals a demon-possessed man, and then goes to Simon's house where he heals Simon's mother-in-law. Later that evening he says yes to many requests for healing.

The next day Jesus goes off alone to pray. When Simon and his companions find him, they exclaim, "Everyone is looking for you!"

I can imagine Simon having already been busy that morning setting up lines of sick people. Perhaps he had visions of starting up "Jesus & Simon's Country Clinic" after witnessing so many healings. But when Simon finds Jesus and tells him about the waiting crowd, Jesus replies: "Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (v.38). Jesus' answer was, in a word, no.

I like this story because Jesus so clearly models for us how he responded both yes and no to requests for his time. He said yes to the people who gathered about his door late into the night. But the next morning he said no to those who wanted to keep him in one village as a country miracle worker. Jesus could say a willing yes without reserve and a straightforward no without guilt because he had a strong sense of purpose borne out of time spent in prayer with his Father. He knew what he was supposed to be about and stuck to that. *Jesus avoided burnout in part because he did what mattered most.*

Yes, Jesus grew tired. Purposeful labor is tiring. But in contrast, purposeless labor is nearly always tiresome.

We can have the fullness of life that Jesus, Paul and many others have experienced. God has made known his presence with us and his purpose for us, and given us partners with whom we can accomplish that purpose. Therefore, "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12: 1).

*Permission is granted to make and distribute verbatim copies of this article for educational purposes provided this permission notice, and the copyright notice below are preserved on all copies.*

*Not to be reprinted in any other publication without permission.  
© 1995 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA. All rights reserved.*