



Ministry Burnout: What To Do When Deeply Fried

By Janel Breitenstein

Tears blurred my line of sight as my husband dodged potholes the size of a small child on our way to church. Africans trudged along the road's shoulder with goods perched on their heads.

I don't remember what precipitated that particular season of ministry burnout. But it threatened constantly.

Burnout loomed from the emotional weight of poverty all around us. Unrelenting stress from lack of the "easy buttons" I'd grown up with: consistent power, water, internet, government integrity, traffic lights. All of which I also felt ashamed, as the majority of the population in Uganda struggled simply to put food on the table and acquire adequate medical care. There was the feeling that no matter what I accomplished in ministry, the darkness was oppressively greater. There was a consistent gap between the person I longed to be in my work, versus my capacity. And a lack of soul-level rest in a land as hard, demanding, and unsafe as it was technicolor, fulfilling, and life-changing.

That week, my run-down body couldn't heal from the chest cold I'd carried for weeks. And the idea of enduring another church service where I smiled through exhaustion and alienation brought me to tears.

There at the intersection, my husband turned the wrong direction. One of our kids piped up from the back of the minivan, "Where are we going?"

"Your mom needs something more than church today," he replied as he pulled up to an inexpensive spa and commanded me to get a massage. "We'll pick you up after service."

I slumped in the steam room, coughing and weeping from fatigue, my husband's kindness, and for his ability to see beyond appearances.

Is a "good" Christian burned out?

Ministry burnout affects so much more than our bodies. As one burned-out friend in ministry confessed, "I don't feel like being a 'professional Christian' anymore."

If you're struggling with burnout, my desire is not to chide you, to offer you more "shoulds." If we were chatting over lattes, I'd look you in the eyes and say, "I'm sorry you're tired. From a personal place, I get it. I really do."

God received Elijah with tangible compassion: cooking for him, telling him to sleep, asking him to tell his story, and meeting him in holy spaces to respond to soul-weary questions (1 Kings 19). I've had to ask myself: Was Jesus burned out all the time? Was that the measure of a good Christian? And does God value me for what I can produce?

Truth: Even as the most "poured out" man in all history, Jesus turned away from people looking for Him (e.g., Mark 1:35-39).

Along with working and helping, God also identifies Himself throughout Scripture with resting and feasting, with restoring my soul (Psalm 23:1-4). He commands me to come to Him, where I can find rest (Matthew 11:28-30).

Rest, you see, is not just a "have to" because God created us to be unconscious for eight hours a night or our machinery starts flipping out. God commanded the Israelites in part to observe the Sabbath because they were no longer slaves as they'd been in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). God didn't rest because He deserved it! Rest is an act of faith in God and an outworking of the gospel: of Jesus' work on our behalf being enough, and us no longer being slaves to sin and self-salvation.

It's too easy for service to become an attempt to please God rather than the natural product of a thriving relationship with Him. And in that, I end up preaching to myself—and those I serve—a false gospel. It says I am really saved, really worth something, and God is pleased with me not

because of Jesus' worth and Jesus' work, but because of what I do (see Ephesians 2:8-9).



The real danger of overcommitment

Often my burnout occurs when my activity surpasses my presence with God: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me ... apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

Personally, when I'm not sticking in God's love for me (John 15:9)—not just what I do for Him—and drawing His life-sap, it's tempting to stick on my own fruit like a bad flannelgraph.

Ruth Barton, in *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, casts an alternative vision for what our service could be—stemming first from satisfaction in God Himself, from a deep, cultivated inner world with him. "We will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our intimacy with God."

What would it look like to experience and enjoy God in our service, loving from the inside out, rather than miss God in the name of what we're doing for Him? Like Mary (Luke 10:38-42), we hope to serve God from the soul—from our encounters with Him. To *find* God rather than *miss* Him in performance-driven service.

Your opportunity vs. your call

Ministry burnout can also be a discernment problem. I was saying the wrong “yeses.” All. The. Time. This could be because my “yeses” aren’t just opportunities. They’re people. People with needs, pain, longings, hope.

But sometimes I wasn’t looking at myself with “sober judgment” (Romans 12:3). A sizeable gap has always existed between the person I want to be and my actual human capacity in the body and life God gave me. But to quote a friend: *The need does not always constitute the call.*

While there is something truly faith-filled in spontaneously helping—*Here am I! Send me!*—there is also great beauty in wise, well-considered steps of faith. I needed to listen to God’s voice.

Too much of a good thing?

Acting solely based on need, rather than considering whether or not I have capacity, can reveal my unbelief.

It’s as if God desperately needs me ... and only me. As if the body of Christ—and God’s ability to provide—are not to be trusted, depended upon, empowered (see 1 Corinthians 12:23). I think more highly of myself than I ought (Romans 12:3), not counting the cost (Luke 14:28). And I subtly and swiftly confuse my usefulness or results with faithfulness or God’s pleasure with me.

Consider Jethro’s words to Moses: “What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone” (Exodus 18:17-18).

Personally, my “ministry” plans can be driven by ego, significance, or feelings of “I should,” aiming to fill the holes in my soul. I lack humility to embrace the boundaries God’s put in place, like Sabbaths, sleep, health, or the call for mutual relationships. At times it can be a large view of myself and a small view of God.

Will I form my ministry commitments out of fear? Or faith, peace, and joy in the greatness of our God?



This is your soul on rest

What's the rested version of you look like? Is there a reason that version of you might be valuable for more than just accomplishing more?

Here's mine.

1

I feel less like a slave, more like a daughter.

Y'know what operates around the clock? Things like my fridge. That is, machines. Not people.

Can I complain God isn't giving me rest as He leads me beside quiet waters and green pastures, but I decide to mow the grass and swim laps?

In the story of the prodigal son, the elder son was gut-level, long-term enraged. He didn't see his father giving him any ingredients for a party with his friends. He saw himself as sweating it out in His father's field, unappreciated.

But note the father's (aka God's) response: "Son ... all that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31).

2

I love more genuinely. I'm more resilient and patient.

When burned out, I may not love well the people in front of me. Those I attempt to love may endure the depleted, more sinful version of me—snapping at them, militantly pushing them, and generally functioning out of the stressed version of myself.

But doing things without love is counterproductive: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind ... it is not irritable or resentful" (1 Corinthians 13:3-5).

When I'm rested, those around me no longer pose have-to's, but get-to's. I'm more present, engaged with what engages them.

3

I have more time to be with God and to drink in the beauty He's made around me.

Prayer can spread out on the couch of my available time where I can pray, then think, then pray some more.

Turns out God is less of a faucet I can turn off and on. My relationship with Him requires presence to flourish, too.

4

I have more capacity for what lies around the corner.

That's not to say, "The point of rest is to be able to help others more/better." But the rest I'm resisting may not be for what I've been through, but for what I'm about to go through.

Learn from my self-made disasters: Don't wait until burnout to decide to obey God for rest. The next time your brain tells you that you can't rest, consider with me what could describe your relationship with God—who you could be—if you did.

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WHY SOUL CARE?

JANEL BREITENSTEIN & GARRICK CONNER

I wish burnout and I weren't on such snuggly terms.

But burnout and I are unfortunate buddies because overcommitment and I are good friends. Funny thing is, I'm burned out for all the right reasons.

I'm seeking to be a nurturing, all-in, all-there mom and wife. I try to be a robust, dependable freelancer and author. I aim to be an available, listening friend. I'm active in church and with their homeless ministry.

Those are great reasons to be completely depleted and resentful ... right?

Let me put it another way: Was Jesus always walking around burned out?

WHEN THERE'S ALWAYS MORE TO DO

"There is always more we can do in ministry," Christopher Ash writes in *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice*.

"But God is not asking 'Can you do more?' He is asking 'Do you love Me?' Some of those extras are not always as vital as we think them to be."

Sometimes I don't view tasks as extras. As a missionary and mother of four, I know well there's always another basket of laundry to fold, another hand to hold.

But Ash quotes a fellow pastor and volunteer firefighter:

It's foolishness to ignore your limitations, try to be the hero, and cramp up, pass out, or have a heart attack while in a burning structure because you're beyond the limits of what God has supplied you with the capability of doing. It's a form of heroic suicide that is counterproductive because you're now no longer effective in fighting fire and the resources that were dedicated to fighting the fire are now dedicated to saving you.

Yet it's more than practicality that drives me.

I want to know the other half of the "chief end of man": not only to glorify God, but to enjoy Him. I want to drink deeply of the existence of which Shauna Niequist speaks in her book *Present Over Perfect*:

... a life marked more by presence and connection and less by exhaustion and competition...

Present over perfect living is real over image, connecting over comparing, meaning over mania, depth over artifice.

I've invited Garrick Conner, a licensed professional counselor, pastor, and marriage and family therapist, to help us explore some of the questions we sort through as devoted, exhausted followers of Jesus.

WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY CHRISTIANS SUFFER FROM BURNOUT?

Garrick: I believe for many, burnout is yoked to approval. And the church, possibly more than any other organization, is often complicit in driving its most generous volunteers to burnout.

Many Christians work in jobs (or at home) where they are unhappy, unappreciated, and even emotionally and verbally abused. These individuals find safety and belonging in the church and its ministries.

But left unchecked, unmet needs can pave the way for an addiction to approval. Churches run on volunteers, and their high needs can intersect with unmet emotional needs in ways that can become outwardly productive but inwardly toxic.

AS CHRISTIANS, WE TEND TO ASSOCIATE "SELF-CARE" WITH SELFISHNESS.

How does caring for ourselves—and these souls attached to our bodies—fit with Jesus’ command to deny ourselves (Luke 9:23)? Or what about, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3)?

Garrick: I think we do ourselves a profound disservice when we take certain verses and apply them liberally and universally.

The Apostle Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”

Now to be clear, Paul is addressing the believer’s freedom when it comes to eating and drinking, faith and conscience. But in the context of self-care, sometimes the good of our neighbor is best served when we take care of ourselves first.

So many times as a pastor, I watch people burn out because they haven’t found a way, amidst rigorous demand, to take care of themselves. But those who don’t tend to their own basic needs for rest, nutrition, exercise, and spiritual renewal are more easily agitated, frustrated, and defeated.

Sadly but surely, it’s *the people they’re caring for* who catch the brunt of those negative emotions.

DOESN’T THIS MEAN SELF-CARE OR SOUL CARE ARE OPTIONAL?

Shouldn’t we be following the “Jesus first, others next, yourself last” mantra?

So many of us have been told that if there’s an opportunity in front of us to help, this should take precedence.

Garrick: Our opportunities to serve will almost always be greater than our capacity.

There are so many considerations that must be weighed in about available opportunities. These include an accurate assessment of our current commitments, many of which are not official or exciting. Menial tasks such as grocery shopping, housecleaning, and transporting kids to activities must not be overlooked, because they all take time and energy.

It’s also important to have a healthy understanding of your own giftedness and passion for the opportunity in view. It’s far better to take on one or two commitments that we’re uniquely equipped to do with enthusiasm than to take on four or five commitments for which we are ill-equipped and disinterested.

Remember:

1. Churches are notorious for filling ministry opportunities with warm bodies.
2. All of us are far less likely to do with excellence those tasks and responsibilities for which we are only marginally equipped and interested.

WHAT'S THE PLACE OF EMOTION AND SPARE TIME FOR A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN?

Garrick: It's extremely important to listen to our bodies. Unfortunately, that's a learned skill that doesn't receive much priority in today's culture where busyness and overscheduling have become idols.

I think we owe much of the blame to modern technology and our seeming inability to leverage it for good while simultaneously limiting its control over us.

When we stop and look at the pattern God established, it's clear that even He rested. And He commanded we rest, too, on the seventh day of each week.

His instruction wasn't about control or even a felt need to rest; it was about loving care. He knows what is best for us and that we can't be in "go mode" all the time and still function effectively.

For most people in modern-day America, solitude and contemplation are abstract concepts rather than concrete practices. It's like everything we do is in fast-forward, because we're just in such a rush all the time.

We are hurried souls.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UNSEEN DANGERS OF OVERCOMMITMENT? WHAT DYSFUNCTION CAN LIE BENEATH?

Garrick: I believe we all worship someone or something. Certainly God has created us for relationship with Himself and with others, but our culture has glorified busyness.

Our culture, in its own strange way, rewards us for busyness and overcommitment, conflating them with importance. Hence, if I'm not busy, then I must not be important or valued.

Something always has to suffer when we pile too much on our plates or bite off more than we can chew. The struggle is real.

So is the fallout. It shows up in physical problems like hypertension, lack of sexual intimacy, migraine headaches, and digestive issues—all exacerbated by stress. It also shows up in emotional problems like anxiety and depression.

From a purely spiritual perspective, busyness can point to a flawed theology that says “The more I work, the more worthy I am of salvation, forgiveness, and grace.”

Such a works-based approach can set us up for a lifetime of chasing something that was never meant to be attained through our own efforts and pursuits, no matter how seemingly altruistic.

WHAT COULD EFFECTIVE SOUL CARE LOOK LIKE—IN BOTH DEEP TREATMENTS AND MORE SUSTAINABLE ADJUSTMENTS TO LIFE RHYTHMS?

Garrick: Effective soul care is one of those things that doesn’t just happen. It requires regular attention and willful intentionality.

It’s found in:

- A growing ability to identify those things that are life-giving versus those that are draining.
- Establishing a regular pattern of connecting with God and with the most important people in your life—namely your family and closest friends.
- Setting healthy boundaries with people who require more energy and availability than you realistically have to offer.
- Setting limits on 24/7 technology that competes for your time and attention. As *Life’s Little Instruction Book* counsels, “Don’t allow the phone to interrupt important moments. It’s there for your convenience, not the caller’s.”

For me, soul care also involves giving myself the freedom to have some regular times each day that are unstructured—and guilt-free.

Yes, there’s always something that needs to be done—laundry to be folded, lunches to be made, bills to be paid, emails to be sent, paperwork to be completed. But sometimes good, and even necessary, things have to wait because the better thing is to take care of myself.

One of the things I know for sure is that those who are looking to us for spiritual sustenance need us first and foremost to be spiritual seekers ourselves...

Then, rather than offering the cold stone of past devotionals, regurgitated apologetics, or someone else's musing about the spiritual life, we will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our intimacy with God.

– RUTH HALEY BARTON , *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*

SOUL-CARE ASSESSMENT

0 = not me

1 = pretty much me

2 = definitely me

(If a question doesn't apply, leave blank).

A. My Body

1. I regularly receive a full night's sleep (7 + hours). _____
2. I eat regular meals. _____
3. I eat healthy. _____
4. I exercise regularly. _____
5. I enjoy regular sex with my spouse. _____
6. I reject pornography. _____
7. I do not regularly eat or sleep in excess. _____
8. I regularly seek preventative medical and dental care for myself. _____
9. I regularly seek medical care when something's wrong. _____
10. I spend time outdoors. _____
11. In my work, overtime is not a regular habit. _____
12. I don't work after dinner/early morning without allowing for other compensating times of relaxation. _____
13. I generally possess margin so that pieces of my life can shift when things go wrong or unexpectedly arise. _____
14. I don't feel like I am "always running." My schedule feels manageable, doable. _____
15. I have taken more than three days leisure time off work this past year for something I personally enjoyed. _____
16. I take a weekly Sabbath/day of worship and vocational rest. _____
17. If I have an ongoing medical condition, I do what I need to ensure long- and short-term health. _____
18. None of my relationships are physically abusive. _____
19. When I'm tired, I try to find a way to rest, even for a moment. _____
20. I am not addicted to any substance. _____
21. I accept the body God has given me. _____
22. I have healthy work/life balance (with "work" including "ministry"). _____

What , if any, physical signs of stress am I experiencing?

What's one area where my spouse would want me to improve physically? My kids?

What's one area I feel most convicted God would want me to better care for the body He's given?

B. My Emotions

- 1. I usually know in advance whether an activity will be enjoyable/relaxing or draining. I make wise choices with my energy. _____
- 2. I continue to thoroughly, thoughtfully, and prayerfully explore difficulties from my past. _____
- 3. I don't feel a need to control my circumstances. _____
- 4. I have healthy ways of coping with anxiety. My anxiety doesn't usually feel overwhelming. _____
- 5. I have recently done something that feels brave. _____
- 6. I have someone in my life who I could call in a crisis, even in the middle of the night. _____
- 7. I frequently feel hopeful. _____
- 8. I'm not frequently angry. But when I am, I can respond with self-control and honesty about my contributions—and without punishing others or myself. _____
- 9. I can pace myself and my schedule well. _____
- 10. I frequently feel happiness. _____
- 11. When I feel stressed, I take time to discern whether I should push through or step back. _____
- 12. I frequently apologize and ask forgiveness when I hurt or offend others and God. (Confused how this is "soul care"? Apologizing and embracing our weaknesses requires humility and acceptance of ourselves as God's children. They cleanse our souls and release us from the chains of our own sin.) _____
- 13. When I feel sadness, I take time to acknowledge the value of what I've lost. _____
- 14. No emotions are "off limits" to me. _____
- 15. I have moments of stillness and/or solitude built into my day or week. _____
- 16. I regularly make time for a life-giving hobby that makes me happy. _____
- 17. I embrace my limitations. _____
- 18. I take time to learn something that makes me curious. _____

What's one area where my spouse would want me to grow emotionally? My kids?

What's one area I feel most convicted God would want me to better acknowledge and care for the emotions He's given?

C. My Relationships

- 1. I have a valuable, mutually-fulfilling friendship with someone of the same gender. _____
- 2. I confide in my spouse. _____
- 3. I maintain healthy boundaries in my relationships. _____
- 4. I don't feel a need to please others in order to be loved. _____
- 5. My closest relationships love me for who I am, not what I do. _____
- 6. I feel emotionally safe and known in my marriage. _____
- 7. I am emotionally open with at least one trustworthy person. _____
- 8. I don't feel a need to control others. _____
- 9. I have friendships in which I feel known and emotionally safe. _____
- 10. I have friendships in which I can effectively and meaningfully care for others. _____
- 11. I feel comfortable asking for what I need. _____
- 12. I'm discerning, well aware of which people are trustworthy. I'm wise with whom I share my heart. _____
- 13. I speak up respectfully when I disagree or sense I may be taken advantage of. _____
- 14. I feel comfortable talking openly about my weaknesses and struggles in my close relationships. _____

- 15. In activities with friends or my spouse, we sometimes do what I would enjoy. _____
- 16. When I'm with people, I'm "present": fully engaged, undistracted. _____
- 17. I generally enjoy social activities. _____
- 18. I'm generally the same version of myself in varied social situations. _____
- 19. I make time for life-giving relationships. _____
- 20. My spouse and I make time for each other. _____
- 21. I take time to connect with my kids in effective ways. _____
- 22. I am not minimizing or ignoring conflict in my life. _____
- 23. With those in authority over me, I can still respectfully voice my opinion. _____
- 24. My relationships generally involve a healthy level of giving and receiving. _____
- 25. I don't have anything to prove. _____
- 26. I take time away from my phone. _____

What's one area where my spouse would want me to alter the way I engage socially? My kids?

What's one area I feel God would want me to more wholeheartedly respond in the relationships He's given?

D. My Relationship with God

1. I feel connected with God. _____
2. I address past or present suffering when I feel pain, exploring my soul's questions with God. _____
3. I feel God hears me. _____
4. I feel accepted by God. _____
5. I don't feel the need to hide from God. _____
6. I feel God's compassion. _____
7. I can sense God is for me. _____
8. I am learning the ability to know how God may be directing me or "speaking" to my soul. _____
9. I frequently find encouragement in Scripture. _____
10. I feel God loves me for more than what I do for Him. I don't serve so He'll be more pleased with me. _____
11. When I repent, I know God's forgiveness. _____
12. When I sin again in the same way, I still know God hasn't rejected me. _____
13. I respect God's rhythms of rest in my life. I embrace His opportunities for refreshment and renewal. _____
14. At my core, I feel loved by God. _____
15. Even when I don't get God, I feel a deep level of trust. _____
16. Even when I'm hurting, I feel loved and cared for by God. _____
17. I have taken time recently to be alone with God for an extended amount of time. _____
18. I frequently take time to nurture my soul in God. _____
19. My schedule has margin for me to listen to God. _____
20. When I realize sin in my life, I don't feel condemned. _____
21. I see ways God advocates for me. _____
22. I am surrounded by and intentional in a Christian community. _____
23. I've found activities and/or disciplines that help me experience more joy in and communion with God. _____
24. I actively address my own "pet lies" with truth from God's Word. _____
25. I regularly create time to listen to and engage with God's Word. _____
26. Worship feels like a "get to" rather than a "have to." _____

“COME TO ME,

*all who labor
and are heavy laden,*

AND I WILL

give YOU rest.

Take my yoke upon you,
and learn from me,

FOR I AM GENTLE

and lowly in heart, and you will find

Rest FOR YOUR
souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

MATTHEW 11:28-30



HE
Restores
MY SOUL.

PSALM 23:3

SEEK THE LORD

and his strength;

seek his

PRESENCE

continually!

1 CHRONICLES 16:11

He gives

POWER

to the faint,

and to him who has no might

HE INCREASES

strength.

ISAIAH 40:29

Processing Burnout:

Questions for Journaling, Debriefing, and Reflection

- What keeps me from healing from ministry burnout?
- What do I do when I'm not handling stress well? What does the stressed version of me look like?
- When I'm stressed, what lies do I tend to believe about myself, others, or God? What truths in Scripture directly address these lies? How will I keep these truths accessible?

- Who can I turn to in my stress? Who do I feel comfortable debriefing with?
- What would a compassionate friend offer me as a “stress-relief prescription”?
- If I don’t address my stress, who might pay the consequences?
- Where are my default sources of fulfillment, legitimate and illegitimate?
- What’s my biggest obstacle to healthy rhythms of work and rest? When I’m honest, what dysfunction can lie beneath that? What’s my gut-level response to rest, and why?
- How have my responsibilities challenged me? How have they changed me? What sense of purpose and meaning do I find in my work? What do God and I love about what I do?

- What activities, methods, and people refresh me after I've expended energy to help?
- In what Scriptures do I find hope and comfort?
- What questions do I have for God because of my work?
- In what ways do I feel pressure to compromise quality on the work that matters to me?
- (How am I responding to others internally, despite what they see? How would I describe the health of my closest relationships and how I'm responding to them?)
- In what ways do I feel restless or fantasize about escape?

- How much “white space” exists in my day to simply live, think, and enjoy the life God gives me—and worship in the unique ways He’s made me (like running or painting)? Am I compulsively overworking (see Romans 8:15)? Am I going through the motions of loving?
- When it comes to ministry or saying “yes” or “no” to activities, in what ways might I be impulsive?
- How am I caring for myself in heart? Spirit? Body?
- What signs of stress is my body showing?