

# LEADING WELL: AVOIDING BURNOUT AS A LEADER

It was the afternoon of Father's Day 2016. My stomach started feeling a little uneasy, and the pain wouldn't go away. I kept thinking that maybe if I rested for awhile I would feel better, but as I stretched out on my bed moaning in pain, my easygoing husband came in and said, "I think you need to see a doctor."

I don't know about you, but the idea of going to a doctor or urgent care on a Sunday afternoon didn't seem like a great idea. I assured him I would feel better in the morning and if I didn't, then I might consider seeing someone. After an hour of increasing pain, I relented. Within a few more hours, I found myself admitted to the hospital and spent the next four days being treated for diverticulitis and hooked up to some pretty intense antibiotics.

The past six months had taken a toll on my body. I was weeks away from my daughter's wedding. I was in seminary, teaching a college course, holding down a full-time job, and had watched my son move away for a new job. On top of that, only my husband knew I was contemplating a huge job change that would move us hundreds of miles away. I knew life was crazy, but what I didn't know was how the stress was affecting me physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I had all the classic signs of burnout, and it about took me out.

I've listened to countless leaders discuss burnout, and I've read many books describing the painful side of what can happen when life is moving fast and you're trying to keep up. I've studied Elijah's burnout in [1 Kings 19](#). But, if most of us looked in the mirror, we wouldn't see that we're headed toward a crash. So, if you think burnout is something other people face, maybe you should ask yourself these questions:

- Are you getting enough rest at night?
- Do you cope with stress by numbing your mind with television or binging on the latest streaming series?
- Do you read your Bible and pray but it's not nourishing your soul?
- Do you look at emails past normal working hours?
- How much caffeine are you ingesting each day? What about processed foods or sugar?
- Do you enjoy a hobby or have a way to move your body on a regular basis?
- Do you have friends you enjoy being with?
- Do you struggle with saying no?

These may not be all the signs of burnout, but if you find yourself saying yes to several of these questions, it might be time to evaluate whether you need to slow down or recalibrate the rhythms in your life. For some, burnout can be debilitating. Professional help may be needed, especially if you have suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm. The range of burnout can be wide, but if you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms, here are some practical ways you can avoid a crash.

## **1. KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS.**

Is there something that you need to say “no” to or a boundary you need to put in place? All of us have the same amount of time each day, so when someone gently says, “I don’t know how you are doing it all,” you might consider that a warning that too much is going on in your life. Psalms 90:12 says, “Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts.”

## **2. CONSIDER YOUR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES.**

Are you finding time for reflection or solitude in the midst of completing one Bible study after another? Are you skipping time alone with the Lord because your to-do list is too long? If you are in ministry, are you finding ways to experience spiritual rest or receiving spiritual nourishment instead of giving it? Your spiritual input must be greater than your output. Even Jesus spent time with his Father, knowing what He would face each day. Mark 1:35 reminds us, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he got up, went out, and made his way to a deserted place; and there he was praying.”

## **2. WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT SYSTEM OR ACCOUNTABILITY DO YOU HAVE IN PLACE?**

Spiritual leaders who experience burnout or facing burnout may set themselves up for temptation and sinful behaviors. Find someone who will ask you hard questions and will check on your well-being. Are you always leading in spiritual things, or do you sometimes take a step back and let others lead you? Proverbs 15:22 says, “Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”

Finally, consider self-care as well as soul care. Are you eating nutritious meals? Are you finding ways to move your body and exercise? Do you take vacations and actually focus on rest? Are you waking up refreshed? If not, remember Jesus’s words in Matthew 11:28-30, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find reset for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

As I’ve navigated the past eight years and recovery from burnout, I don’t always get it right. But thankfully I have others in my life who watch for signs when I’m overwhelmed or not in a healthy place. I have learned to turn off notifications on emails. I’ve learned how to set more boundaries. I’ve learned how to practice the presence of the Lord through solitude. And taking a two-mile walk on a regular basis helps me clear my head. We all want to be like Paul at the end of our lives and say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

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