

How to Avoid Burnout

By Pastor Peter Yi

Some of you know that I really enjoy and benefit from reading biographies of great Christians. Several prominent Christian leaders have said that next to the Bible, Christian biographies are the most helpful for our spiritual growth and development. I know John Piper has said that and David Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said that. And I too have found that to be true.

Over the course of my Christian life I've read around 20 or so biographies, which comes to an average of about one per year. From reading these biographies I've come to notice certain lifestyle patterns, common aspects that are true of most or all of these great Christians. When I look at the lives of some of the great saints like George Muller, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Whitefield, Adoniram Judson, Hudson Taylor, David Brainerd, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, D.L. Moody, Keith Green, C.S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, there are some general life patterns that they had in common. All the people I mentioned other than C.S. Lewis (author, professor) and Wilberforce (British MP) were in some sort of professional Christian ministry. Sorry that they are all men. I promise to read the bios of some great women in the near future.

Now, you might think reading bios might be helpful for me since I'm a pastor, but how can it be helpful for you, since you are a student or you work at a secular workplace. Well, to some degree you're right. There might be certain aspects that you can't relate to, but there are general life principles that we can glean from all faithful Christians. As well, the bible says to all of us, and in particular to lay people,

"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."
(Heb 13:7 NIV11-GK)

What I want to do is share some of those common elements. What kept them going? What was it that enabled them to accomplish great things for God? And that relates to burnout because, we want to learn from the greats, the things that sustained them, through thick and thin, to be faithful servants of God.

But, before I do that, let me mention some of the things they didn't share in common.

1. Not all came from strong spiritual families.
2. Not all were married.
3. Not all were powerful intellects.
4. Not all had the same spiritual giftings. They were quite varied.
5. Not all had large, expansive ministries.

Because we might think that to be a spiritual giant, and to be effective in ministry requires some of these things, but I don't believe that's the case. Now, here's what they did have in common:

1. **They all had a very strong assurance of their salvation.** They all understood that they were sinners, saved by the sovereign grace of God. I believe this became the bedrock of the rest of their lives and ministry. If a person is not certain of this, I don't think they can go the distance. We might be able to sustain some measure of ministry for a season or two, but how could we possibly suffer and endure and sacrifice for the Lord without assurance.

With this assurance, they all had a sense of the great unworthiness of their own lives. Great thankfulness that God had saved them. And as a result they all felt deeply indebted to Christ as their Lord and Captain.

“¹⁴ For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”
(2 Cor 5:14 NIV11-GK)

2. **They lived life with vision and purpose.** They all lived with a very clear, defined purpose to their lives. It might have been to honor God, to glorify him, to reach a certain people with the Gospel, to transform a city, to minister to orphans, to write Christian literature, to write Christian music, but all of them had a God-given, God-fueled vision and purpose to their lives.

Their vision was about the gospel. There’s this weird passage in Philippians 1 where Paul mentions certain people who do gospel ministry with the right motives and certain people who do it for the wrong motives, but at the end of the day, he says,

“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” (Phil 1:18 NIV11-GK)

Jonathan Edwards, when he was just around 20 years old drafted about 70 life vision statements, that guided him throughout his life and ministry. Let me read you a few:

1. *Resolved, That I will do whatsoever I think to be most to the glory of God, and my own good, profit, and pleasure, in the whole of my duration; without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved, to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved, so to do, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many soever, and how great soever.*
4. *Resolved, Never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God, nor be, nor suffer it, if I can possibly avoid it.*
5. *Resolved, Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.*
6. *Resolved, To live with all my might, while I do live.*
7. *Resolved, Never to do any thing, which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.*
20. *Resolved, To maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking.*

D.L. Moody the great evangelist of the 1900s resolved that not a single day would go by without him sharing the gospel. And one evening after a day of ministry, he was about to retire and go to bed, and he remembered that he had not yet shared the gospel with anyone, so he but his coat back on and went out into the dark street and shared the gospel with the first person he met.

Several years ago for an assignment I drafted my own vision statement and now all our pastors have a vision statement by which they live.

Peter Yi's life purpose is to know Jesus Christ¹, my Lord and Savior, to be known by him,² and to make him known³. My life is not my own, I was bought at a price,⁴ therefore the one life I have to live⁵, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.⁶ My desire is to be like Christ in holiness⁷ and character, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.⁸ This is so that my life may be a blessing⁹ and I may be a minister of reconciliation.¹⁰ Like Christ, I desire to be faithful to my wife¹¹, my children¹², my God, and my church¹³, taking the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth¹⁴. I will live my life in order to hear my Savior say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."¹⁵

Whatever it is you are doing, whether ministry in the church or work or school, or family, each of us needs to recalibrate our lives to live under God's vision. Without vision, we flounder and we burn out. What if your vision was this? **I exist to lead peoples near and far to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ?** How would that change the way your work, the way you do family, the way you approach school? How about your ministry at church?

¹ Philippians 3:10

² 1 Corinthians 13:12

³ Colossians 1:27

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

⁵ Psalm 39:4

⁶ Galatians 2:20

⁷ 1 Peter 1:16

⁸ Hebrews 12:14

⁹ Genesis 12:3

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

¹¹ Ephesians 5:25

¹² Ephesians 6:4

¹³ 1 Peter 5:2-4

¹⁴ Acts 1:8

¹⁵ Matthew 25:21,23

3. **They had vibrant quiet times with the Lord, they took deep inventory into their own lives and souls.**
 - a. Whitefield's QT. Greek NT, KJV, Matthew Henry's Commentary.
 - b. Edward's horse rides.
 - c. Brainerd's journals
 - d. Jesus' morning times with God

So, you have to keep spiritually fed. Why is this so important? Let me give you an example from the wonderful world of cycling.

The longest bike ride I did last year was 145km. And when you do a ride like that or anything that's over 50km, you are constantly expending energy. On a 145km ride, I'll easily expend around 2500 calories, not to mention all the electrolytes and fluids you'll lose. So over that ride, you need to replenish. So we'd drink these energy drinks that are rich in electrolytes and carbs, taking a swig every 15-20 minutes. And we'd be eating fruit, or an energy bar or stop for a meal. If you don't replenish you'll just hit a wall, start cramping, and you'll muscles will begin to seize. Cyclist have a term for when that happens. Bonking.

If all we're doing is giving and giving and not taking the time to take in spiritual nourishment, then we'll have nothing in the tank to give, then a kind of spiritual bonking occurs.

Ministry is hard. It can't be done well on an empty spiritual tank. We need to be charged up and filled and overflowing to effectively serve. What your church needs, what your ministry needs is a you that is fully charged up with God, not one that virtually depleted.

4. **They all were incredibly disciplined and worked really hard at God's ministry.** They labored more and harder than you would think possible for a person to do in one lifetime. Jonathan Edwards on average spent 13 hours a day in his study, writing. George Whitefield preached on average 40 hours a week.
5. **They all had a lot of hardship in life...**from physical ailments, opposition from people, persecution, betrayal, growing ministry responsibilities, and just the wear and tear of ministry, the elements. They all went through very difficult times. So expect that.
6. **They all went through seasons of discouragement and disappointment, from setbacks, health issues, trials, and even personal depression.** Spurgeon had gout; early in his ministry there was a fire at one of the churches where he was preaching and people died. Jonathan Edwards was kicked out of his own church. Whitefield was constantly worried about fundraising for his orphanage. Brainerd basically did all of his short, but highly effective ministry while suffering from TB.

But, they were able to endure these things because they had a high view of the sovereignty of God. Suffering happens to us, but God is still sovereign and he still loves us.

So, those are some of the common things I discovered about great saints who were effective in their respective ministries. Do you resonate with those things? How would it change the way you serve if you shared those elements in your own life? Burnout comes because we lack these things.

Now, I've made another list of things that will help us not only to avoid burnout, but be effective for ministry:

- Being holy---

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

² Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin." (Psa 32:0-5 NIV11-GK)

This passage tells us there is a connection between sin and the impact it has on the rest of our being. It impacts our spiritual lives. We all understand that, but it impacts our emotional life and even our physical lives. So, living in sin will keep us from enjoying serving the Lord and we'll suffer burn out.

Sin also destroys assurance, confidence. It can make us into a terrible and dangerous servant, because it makes us live the lives of a hypocrite and that is one of the most dangerous things.

Sin pollutes our ability to respond to God's call to do something radical and powerful for God. Not that we have a righteousness of our own, but when we are living in debilitating and habitual sin, we're constantly doubting and questioning, how God could possibly use us.

But, on the other hand, there is a real sense that we can't be used to our full potential by God because of our besetting sins. One young Scottish minister of the 1800's Robert Murray M'Chenye said this in his journal. "My people depend on my holiness."

Burnout happens because we are not doing well in our relationship with God. If we were to really probe ourselves and be honest with ourselves, When we feel like quitting or taking a break, it's almost always because we are not doing well with God. Sure, there are external things like a new job or a family emergency or something like that, but I think when we say we need a break, it's a reflection of our relationship with God. Almost always when we are not doing well with God it's because of sin. Everything becomes a chore. So, to pursue holiness and finding success in holiness in the Lord is a great way to sustain your ministry.

- A vibrant spiritual life results in Joy in the Lord. Without Joy, you **have** to do this. You have to do that. But when there's joy, we say, "there is nothing I'd rather do than worship, than serve, than give, than help others. Joy is the key. Have to vs get to.
- It's about the Lord, not people. When we look at the Apostle Paul, we see him finding his joy in the Lord, more than in any other thing. Serve Lord not men.
- It's about the people, not the project. And then when he thought about the people he was serving and partnering with, that's when he got really excited.

- Working together with others interdependent with them will help us stave off burnout.

“for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” (Phil 1:19 NIV11-GK)

Are you a silo working on your own or are you a part of a network of relationships where people are praying for you and supporting you. We could be serving, yet still isolating ourselves from others. Perhaps we have too much pride to ask folks to pray for us and help us. I asked for prayer...I have people that I can vent to.

- Check, check, and re-check your motives. Why is it that you are serving? Why are you quitting?
Quitting serving really doesn’t address the problem.
Take a purposeful break. Diagnose with a mentor if you need to take a break. And if you do, what you will do while you are on that break.
Repent of your apathy. The myth of, “if my heart is not in it...then I don’t want to do it.” First that’s a really bad reasoning for anything we do.
- At the end of day, it’s your relationship with God, your connection for your community, your belief in God’s calling and mission for your life.
 1. Do you realize that you are not your own and that you were bought at a price?
 2. Do you realize that even though you are a free being, God is sovereign as your creator and redeemer and can thus ask anything of you?
 3. Do you realize that to be called to be a Christian is a call to be his servant/his slave?
 4. Do you realize that you’re identity is found primarily in your relationship with Christ, not in what you do, whether at work or school or even in the church?

Jesus says in Matthew 11:

“28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:27–30 NIV11-GK)