

BOB CARES—OR AT LEAST HE USED TO. Bob cared about his family. He was actively involved with his children and felt disappointed whenever he couldn't regularly take his wife on a date. Bob cared about people—coworkers, fellow Christians in his small group, children, the homeless, and the lost overseas. Bob cared about his work. He was passionate about his career, advancing up the corporate ladder and wanting his reputation to be a good reflection of Christ. Everyone liked Bob and wanted to be like Bob. (P1)

“Caring” is a fire that burns, and burning fires require fuel. The problem was that the better Bob did at anything, the more everything came to him as a “great opportunity.” Bob cared, so he tried to honor every “open door” God brought into his life. Soon there were more care-fires than there was Bob to burn, and he started to be consistently tired; not just physically tired, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually tired. (P2)

Frequently Bob began to find that he didn't have “it” to give to his family, work, church, or friends. His talent and likability covered his feelings well enough that few people (other than his wife) noticed his lack of enthusiasm. But instead of taking this as a caution to slow down, Bob felt guilty that he wasn't able to give his best anymore, and he secretly began to wonder if he had risen above his actual ability in every area of life (if he could continue to be a good husband, good father, good manager, good small group leader, and so on). At first this guilt and shame provided a great energy boost and got him “back in the game.” This happened several times over the course of a couple of years. He thought maybe it was a mild bout of depression or fatigue, so he started taking some vitamin supplements and trying to work out more often. That helped . . . for a while. (P3)

But the fatigue kept returning. Bob tried not to notice, but he could tell he was becoming more cynical. Bob was a caring guy who was starting not to care. He would help when needs arose, but doing so felt like a burden, and his once-tender heart toward others was growing callous. Now even the guilt he felt about not caring wasn't enough to jar him back into tenderhearted love. A sense of duty and not wanting to disappoint his family was all Bob had left. Strangely, this began to cause Bob to resent his family. As he realized this, he saw that he had already begun to avoid his friends. He reasoned that those who wanted him to be the old Bob just "don't understand me anymore and create too much pressure." He began to believe that only Bob was going to take care of Bob; everyone else would just take from him. (P4)

While Bob was going through the motions of work, home, and ministry (in that order of priority now), he was making sense of life in a whole new way. Life had become a black-and-white movie with a theme of duty and responsibility. Now anything that introduced color with freedom and excitement was deemed "good." Surprisingly, Bob kept wrestling with the fact that these things had all been deemed "bad" before—the attention from his secretary who was there to serve him and seemed to genuinely care, the couple of drinks at night that were faithful to take the edge off, and the impulse purchases that proved to Bob that he could do as he pleased. Bob's wife and "old friends" (as he now thought of them) raised concerns about these things. This only reinforced his now firmly held cynical belief that they didn't care about him and were judgmental, and pushed him further into isolation. (P5)

Predictably, Bob's work performance fell, his care for his secretary evolved into an affair, and the drinking grew beyond "a couple." During a two-month period his behavior started to come to light—his wife noticed the extra spending and found "questionable" (as she tried to politely call them) e-mails with the secretary, confronted him, persisted through his denials, and started to piece together the truth. With the separation that fol-

lowed, the affair became public knowledge at work too. Within two more months Bob was fired, got a temp job, moved in an apartment with his secretary, was only able to see his kids for about an hour a week at McDonald's, and was under discipline at his church. When the dust settled, Bob was shocked and sickened. When he permitted himself to ask, "What happened?" his emotions fluctuated from intense shame-guilt to cold anger-bitterness and then retreated back into numb callousness. (P6)

How could he have gotten here? How could he have been as mean to his wife and friends as he was when his sin came to light? How could his conscience have missed that he was slipping into such dangerous patterns? He had taught classes at church on the dangers of everything he had done and gotten rave reviews about how good his insights were. Why was he just now beginning to care again? Now caring hurt so badly that he almost didn't want to come out of his cynical stupor, and when Bob talked to any of his "old friends," he found himself quickly getting defensive and retreating within his calloused conscience. (P7)

These questions are answered by the fact that Bob experienced burnout. This doesn't excuse any of the sins he committed, but it does mean that Bob started to place himself in "the danger zone" when his life looked good. The "time bomb was ticking" when it only looked like his "stock was rising." This means the changes Bob needed to make should have started in paragraph one, not paragraphs five or six.

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout is more than fatigue. When you're tired, a three-day weekend will improve your life. But when you are experiencing burnout, an extra day of rest won't cut the darkness anymore . . . even if you would allow yourself to take it.

Burnout is more than too much stress. When you're just stressed, completing a project or getting past a deadline creates

a sense of relief and satisfaction. But when you are experiencing burnout, milestones don't satisfy like they did before; they get lost in the continual onslaught of "next."

Depression comes closer to capturing the experience of burnout. But depression is merely the absence of hope, and while it often involves isolation, it does not capture the level of cynicism or rebellious-escapism frequently associated with burnout.

It might be surprising, but more accurate, to think of burnout as a midlife crisis that can be experienced at any age. As burnout sets in, each dream and relationship that once promised life seems to be an emotional net loss even as it is fulfilled. Each accomplishment begins to feel like a mirage in the desert. The dry, draining heat of expectation and personal drive promises refreshment at the next milestone, but then vanishes as you approach it, only to be replaced by the next expectation with its new "promised mirage." The only way to protect yourself (it seems) is to become callous. Life requires you to still try, but life is cruel (as it becomes increasingly obvious).

With this said, burnout occurs when the things that we once relied upon for life and energy become a source of discouragement and a drain. Burnout occurs when we begin to live as if caring were a necessary enemy, and we begin to prefer the "living death" of numbness to "caring exhaustion" of Christian relationships and service. Whether we can articulate this poetic distinction or not, it becomes painfully obvious that our long-awaited and hard-worked-for hope cannot give us what it promised.

Let's go back and explore what happened with Bob.¹

Paragraph One (Prerequisite: Caring)

Too often we think of burnout as a weakness instead of the result of an overdeveloped, underprotected strength. Those who

1. The outline of these materials is a gospel-tailored modification of the four-stage burnout progression observed by Mark Gorkin (contained in paragraphs three through six). A brief summary of his approach to the subject of burnout can be found at: http://www.stressdoc.com/four_stages_burnout.htm.

are not passionate about life do not experience burnout. We should all want to be burnout susceptible, because the alternative is directionless indifference toward the endless monotony of tasks life requires. This is not to make burnout the glorified “purple heart” of the Christian life, but to identify burnout as the temptation of choice for believers wanting to leave a mark on the world for God’s kingdom in their sphere of influence with their God-given talents and gifts.

Paragraph Two (Unfocused or Unrealistic Discipline)

Every good opportunity is not from God or, at least, is not necessarily God’s will for *your* life. Burnout is generally a struggle for the high-achieving person. They do good work, so their involvement is highly desired. This is affirming and, at first, energizing. However, with time, the fuel of affirmation becomes a drug. Affirmation (or other motives listed below) mutates from part of a healthy relationship diet to an internal parasite that insists on being fed before its host.

Paragraph Three (Fatigue)

Unrealistic discipline can only have one outcome—exhaustion. Good life management only delays the inevitable and increases the collateral damage when the crash comes. But fear and skill do not allow the crash to happen early in the process. The unsustainable life is prolonged in spite of the mental, emotional fatigue that mounts; ways are found to stimulate continued performance that does little to replenish life in the person serving. At the core, the person becomes more and more hollow while the exterior becomes more and more impressive and depended upon by others.

Paragraph Four (Motivation by Guilt or Shame)

It is easy to see how guilt and shame become the adrenaline button for someone marching toward burnout. Good things are happening. People are relying on him or her. God’s kingdom is

being advanced. The only thing that can interrupt this ideal circumstance, at least it seems, is the unwillingness of the burnout-in-waiting person to continue. When they stop doing, good stops happening, people are let down, and God's kingdom stalls (or so they think). This motivation "works," at least for a while. It simultaneously boosts the ego (pride) and lashes the conscience (guilt and shame). Both yield an artificial sugar-boost type of emotional energy. The problem is that the energy boost is void of any nutritional truths of the gospel, which nourish God's servant to a degree greater than his or her service drains.

Paragraph Five (Callousness and Cynicism)

When it feels as if God and others are manipulating you by your conscience, then the logical solution is to turn the conscience off. This conscience dimming is frequently accompanied by beginning to distance yourself from God (e.g., less prayer and Bible reading) and those who would want anything from you. While not addressing the larger life dynamics and heart issues, these changes are believed (if they are done intentionally) to be done as a healthy form of self-preservation. In actuality they are like the chemotherapy patient who stops his or her treatment for cancer because it seems to only make him or her sicker. In the case of isolation, we begin to solve the problem with a new and opposite form of exacerbation. The problem continues to get worse, but in the opposite direction, so we initially experience the progression of our malady as relief.

Paragraph Six (Failure and Crisis)

Not every case of burnout will be as morally dramatic as Bob's case study, but eventually the house of cards must fall. The fall may be moral, logistical, financial, or spiritual. But an unsustainable life will always break. The only questions are when, how, and with what consequences. The response of the cynical, calloused burned-out person is usually anger and defensiveness,

but sometimes just despair. It makes sense to lash out against those who benefited from your excessive service and are now “pointing out” (regardless of tone or motive) the failure. “If they were really so ‘concerned for me,’ why didn’t they notice the problem before I crashed?” The consequences of the failure or crash only serve to further enflame the deep sense of anger or despair. The size of their “opportunities and abilities” now becomes the size of their mess—one they feel utterly incapable to fix.

Paragraph Seven (Realization)

Once the dust settles from the frantic stage of failure and crisis, we begin to see that this was the inevitable outcome of the life we were trying to live. Those with adequate humility and reliance upon the gospel are able to embrace this realization. Those who are still trying to rely primarily upon self resist this realization because it creates the same guilt and shame that stoked the fires of their life toward burnout. If the gospel is embraced, then hope enters and begins to reinterpret the life that led to burnout in a way that makes service safe and enjoyable again. If the gospel does not transform the person’s life (thinking and choices), then, at best, the person learns to manage life in a more functional but fearful way. Or, at worst, burnout is merely used as an emotionally forced time-out that serves to rejuvenate the person enough to start the cycle again.

QUESTION 2: WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

Burnout is never caused by a single area of life. Burnout is a function of our total life management. One area of life cannot get out of order without overt choices of neglect being made in other areas of life. This means that if we managed the other areas of our life well, we would have contained the area (e.g., work, ministry, parenting) that was the primary cause of burnout. We