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## GUARDING AGAINST DROUGHT: AVOIDING BURNOUT

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### Introduction

The Texas A&M Forest Service reported the 2011 drought, the worst in Texas history, resulted in the death of 301 million trees.<sup>23</sup> Unlike sudden disasters, drought is a slow-moving killer that chokes life from the land over weeks, months, or even years. As such, drought becomes a useful analogy for the spiritual life. The psalmist appeals to this picture when he says, “For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer” (Ps 32:4 NKJV).

Many resonate with these words. Feelings of despair and a lack of joy can be caused by various circumstances and situations that arise from living in a fallen world. One of the more common experiences that leads to feeling as though one’s “vitality is turned into the drought of summer” is burnout. We can define burnout as being chronically overwhelmed and feeling physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually depleted.

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<sup>23</sup> “Texas A&M Forest Service Survey Shows 301 Million Trees Killed by Drought,” *Texas A&M Forest Service* (blog), September 25, 2012, <https://www.tfsweb.tamu.edu/texas-am-forest-service-survey-shows-301-million-trees-killed-by-drought>.

Church leaders especially struggle with burnout. In a 2024 article, Religion News Service reported that fifty-three percent of American clergy had considered leaving the ministry due to burnout.<sup>24</sup> This feeling of exhaustion is not limited to church leaders. According to a 2014 article, Lifeway Research notes that seventy percent of mothers with children at home reported feeling overwhelmed by stress and not getting enough rest.<sup>25</sup>

How can Christians protect themselves from this trend? To help us minimize the possibility of burnout, I would like to direct our attention to three biblical principles that will help us become, for the sake of the analogy, a well-watered tree. These principles include being grounded steadfastly in the Word of God, relying entirely upon the Lord through prayer, and training our expectations to be realistic and in line with God's will.

### **Principle One: Be Grounded in God's Word**

It would be laughable to expect a car to work without a power source, whether gasoline or battery. Even more ridiculous is the idea that a Christian could thrive in life without a continual grounding in Scripture.

The Bible consistently testifies to the importance of the Word of God in the life of a believer. One of the ways Scripture illustrates this is by portraying the Word's relationship with its hearers as water nourishing the land. For example, Isaiah pictures the Word of the Lord as rain or snow that comes down to water and refresh the land (Isa 55:10–11). Similarly, Psalm 1 portrays the man of God as a

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24 Michael Woolf, "Burned Out, Exhausted, Leaving: A New Survey Finds Clergy Are Not OK," January 25, 2024, <https://www.religionnews.com/2024/01/25/burned-out-exhausted-leaving-a-new-survey-finds-clergy-are-not-ok/>.

25 Chris Adams, "5 Ways to Help Stressed Out Women in Your Church," October 30, 2014, <https://www.lifewayresearch.com/2014/10/30/5-ways-to-help-stressed-out-women-in-your-church/>.

well-watered tree, planted by the streams of water (Ps 1:3). The reason Psalm 1 describes this individual as a well-watered tree is because “his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps 1:2), linking the meditation on God’s Word to the picture of being a steadfast, flourishing tree.

The Word of God is essential for the believer who desires to live a life of fulfillment, pleasing the Lord in every area. Here are three reasons being grounded in God’s Word is a potent antidote to burnout.

### *God’s Word Reveals His Will*

Organizations or companies that lack a clear goal or purpose often die the death of impotency. It is a simple truth that people who don’t know what they’re trying to accomplish will lose focus and become discouraged. However, God has not left His people without guidance. His Word gives us insight and direction into our purpose and how we can discern God’s will for our lives.

Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” It is God’s Word that helps us see the path we must follow. This gives us a purpose. It should come as no surprise that the key to fulfillment for us as creatures is to obey what the Creator has mandated. Here are just a few of the things God has mandated:

1. The believer is to obey God’s authoritative structure in creation (Rom 13:1).
2. The believer is to obey God’s call to holiness (1 Pet 1:16, 1 Thess 4:3).
3. The believer is to obey God’s call to love God and others (Matt 22:37–38).
4. The believer is to obey God’s command to be filled with the Word (Col 3:16).

One reason Christians become discouraged and disheartened is that they're not following God's plan for their lives. Christians who are grounded in God's Word will have the confidence that they are doing what God wants them to do. Following God's will gives the believer a sense of purpose and confidence that begets endurance even amid difficulty.

### *God's Word Sanctifies*

In one of the most emotional passages in all of Scripture, Jesus prays for His followers that God would "Sanctify them in the truth" (John 17:17). To remove any doubt as to what He is referring to, Jesus clarifies, "your word is truth." In this brief statement, the believer receives guidance on where to find the means of spiritual growth and sanctification. Sanctification occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit, mediated by God's Word.

It is sadly the case that church leaders (and Christians generally) often try to serve the Lord while besetting and unconfessed sins plague their lives. This is a recipe for disaster! I've known individuals who are laboring in ministry while struggling against the sins of lust, pride, anger, or envy. It is no wonder they feel exhausted and drained.

Being consistently in the Word helps feed our souls and provides the antidote to sin. God's Word shines like the light of the sun, its brilliant rays sweeping through the hidden corners of our hearts and banishing every lingering shadow. Therefore, we must be grounded in Scripture to foster the sanctifying work of the Lord in our lives.

### *God's Word Restores and Refreshes*

One of the beautiful qualities of God's Word is that it revives the soul and rejoices the heart (Ps 19:7–8). I recall speaking with a young man who was deeply struggling with life and felt no joy. When I asked him about his daily Bible reading, he mentioned that he hadn't read the Bible in weeks. After gently admonishing him, I encouraged

him to spend time daily in the Word. A week later, I asked him how things were going, and he said it was as if a fog had been lifted. He was encouraged to fight against sin, and his soul had been revived. It was the work of the Spirit of God through the Word of God.

Whenever we're feeling discouraged or down, even if there is no unconfessed sin in our lives, the solution must involve spending time in the life-giving Word of God. The Word is not simply a philosophical treatise on a variety of issues. The Word itself performs a supernatural work in our hearts, reviving them and bringing us joy. Neglecting regular time in the Word is like removing yourself from the very means God has given to nourish your soul.

### **Principle Two: Rely on the Lord through Vibrant Prayer**

I have never met someone who thinks their prayer life is exactly what it should be. Churches are filled with conversations where someone asks, "How is your prayer life?" To which the response comes quite naturally, "It could be better." However, the sad reality is that for many Christians, a prayer life needs to exist before it can be improved.

The Bible teaches us that prayer is not an optional addition to the believer's life. It's a foundational part of what it means to be in relationship with God. Someone has said that prayer is to the Christian what breathing is to the human. Without prayer, there can be no spiritual life.

Prayer is the most direct way by which we relate to and connect with God. The command to pray is frequent throughout the New Testament. For just one example, in Philippians 4:6 Paul writes, "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." When we live life this way—submitting our anxieties, worries, and difficulties to the Lord in prayer—we are promised, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). There's a direct connection

between our faithful and genuine prayers and the promised peace of God which will guard our hearts and minds.

Many times we struggle in doubt or exhaustion because we've not availed ourselves of the ever-present help that the Lord loves to provide. Sometimes we forget that the Lord wants us to cry out for help. As the psalmist says, "When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles" (Ps 34:17). Indeed, the very next verse emphasizes, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

The point is simple. A life of constant prayer is not only commanded (cf. 1 Thess 5:17, Col 4:2) but also essential. We don't have the strength on our own to live as we ought, so we rely on the Spirit through prayer to give us strength. To deprive ourselves of a vibrant, intensive prayer life is to cut off the connection to the very giver of life itself.

### **Principle Three: Have the Right Expectations**

Unmet expectations are often the cause of unhappiness or emotional exhaustion. In the words of Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life." Thus, it's imperative to have the right expectations in the Christian life to avoid the emotional rollercoaster that can be a persistent temptation.

#### *Paul's Ministry Advice (2 Tim 2:1-7)*

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the

first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

One of the most profound texts on the Christian mindset is 2 Timothy 2:1–7. In this text, Paul reminds Timothy that the Christian life can be illustrated by three pictures: the good soldier, the athlete, and the hard-working farmer.

The Christian ought to think of his life like the life of a soldier. A soldier doesn't get days off. He must be ready for battle every minute of every day. A soldier knows that a loss of focus will result in disaster for the whole army. Christians need to have a passion to serve their master in the same way the soldier is obligated to serve his commanding officer.

Additionally, the Christian life mirrors the athlete's journey, marked by discipline, endurance, and unwavering focus toward a defined goal. Athletes are marked by sacrifice. I was particularly impressed years ago when I read about the routine of twenty-three-time gold medal athlete Michael Phelps. When I read of his workout routine—three-a-day practices, extra dry-land workouts, regimented naps, and dietary restrictions—I was blown away. He had no life outside of swim training. He had denied himself many legitimate enjoyments in life that we often take for granted, but he did so for a greater goal of competing to the best of his ability. The Christian life is quite similar; we should be willing to deny ourselves and even suffer discomfort for an ultimate goal.

Similarly, the picture of the hard-working farmer is appropriate for the Christian. The farmer doesn't get vacations. He plants regardless of the circumstances, because if he doesn't plant, there will be no harvest. Farmers are tenacious examples of hard work, often making significant personal sacrifices for the sake of their work.

This threefold picture of the Christian life is powerful. When we come to Christ, we aren't signing up for a self-centered form of living. We come to die to self and live for Christ (cf. Luke 14:26–27).

Keeping in mind the pictures of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer will help us keep the right mindset as we face trials in this life.

### *Wrong Expectations Will Lead to Unfulfillment*

Expectations often color a situation either negatively or positively. How many of us have gone somewhere expecting to have a terrible time, and when our expectations were exceeded, we enjoyed ourselves? On the other hand, unmet expectations are the cause of conflict and dissatisfaction (cf. Jas 4:1–3). For example, if I give you a thousand dollars, you will probably be happy enough. I mean, who wouldn't appreciate such a gift? However, if I promise you a million and then fail to deliver, giving you *only* a thousand, you'll be disappointed and, most likely, angry. Interestingly, the context of a situation and the expectations involved often determine the emotional outcome. One's expectations or perception will influence the emotions positively or negatively.

The same principle applies in the spiritual realm as well. My wife and I have the privilege of doing a fair bit of premarital counseling. One of the things we often stress to soon-to-be-wed couples is that expectations can be quite dangerous in marriage. A wife can quickly find herself upset with her husband because he violates her preconceived expectation of what their time on Friday night would look like, and the husband can become frustrated with the wife because she doesn't think like a guy. Having the wrong expectations in marriage can lead to conflict, sometimes significant conflict.

In a similar sense, if we hold incorrect expectations in the Christian life, we will be unhappy and unfulfilled. If we expect God to give us something, or we expect people to treat us a certain way, we will regularly face disappointment and emotional distress. Having the wrong expectations is a sure-fire way to face burnout in the Christian life.

In an interview, John MacArthur was asked a question about discouragement and its relationship to ministry. This was his answer:

So, you know, don't be under any illusion, men, that this is a bed of roses, and you—I tell you what; people talk about burnout all the time, "Well, you know, burnout, burnout, burnout." Nobody ever got burnout from hard work. Plumbers don't get burnout. Ditch diggers don't get burnout. This kind of burnout, this kind of discouragement usually is connected to unrealistic expectations ... of yourself, for yourself, for your ministry that aren't met. And that's what winds you down into depression. So, what I tell people is expect nothing. You don't deserve anything so expect nothing.<sup>26</sup>

This is good advice for Christian ministry, but it is also good advice for the Christian life. We ought to strive to model the attitude that Jesus told us to embody—"We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). Whatever the Lord wants to do with us, may He do so for His glory. Ironically, when we lower our expectations and take the mindset of the slave, serving for the glory of God, it is that much more difficult to burn out.

### Practical Advice for Avoiding Burnout

Having examined three biblical principles that will help provide a proper foundation, it would be helpful now to offer some practical advice for avoiding burnout. Obviously, the above principles are the core strategy for combating burnout. But as image bearers of God, we are both physical and spiritual beings. As such, our physical habits impact our perception of life. Thus, even non-Christians in the medical field have observed that physical habits improve one's mental

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26 "A Personal Glimpse: Al Sanders Interviews John MacArthur," *Grace to You*, March 8, 2001, <https://www.gty.org/sermons/GTY76/a-personal-glimpse-al-sanders-interviews-john-macarthur>.

stamina and state.<sup>27</sup> It is with this in mind that I offer seven practical pieces of wisdom.

### *Get Physical Exercise*

We are told explicitly that “bodily exercise profits a little” (1 Tim 4:8, NKJV), but unfortunately, many Christians live as though “bodily exercise profits not at all.” Yet, physical exercise has many benefits—both in the long term and the short term. Regular exercise helps alleviate stress and enhances your body’s overall efficiency. God created us to do physical hard work, and those of us who sit for long periods of time especially need to engage in regular exercise.

### *Get Enough Sleep*

Although some Christians think they are capable of surviving on less sleep (especially with the power of coffee), the majority of Christians need more sleep than they usually get. Sometimes that’s just the season of life that we are in, but we should prioritize sleep as a way to serve the Lord. Sleep is an underutilized tool in preparing us for faithful ministry.

### *Eat Healthy*

We live in a time where eating habits are emphasized, so I don’t need to comment much on it. I will simply say that it’s now beyond doubt that our diet affects our emotions and energy. If athletes and

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27 Christopher James Holland, Michale Cole, and Jennifer Owens, “Exercise and Mental Health: A Vital Connection,” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 58, no. 13 (July 1, 2024): 691, <https://www.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2024-108562>. According to the authors, “Regular physical activity significantly reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress while enhancing cognitive function and self-esteem. Even a single bout of exercise can reduce anxiety, and short-term engagement can buffer against stress-induced negative mood states.”

academics recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy diet for physical and mental well-being, shouldn't Christians also view this as an essential part of stewardship?

### *Avoid Screen Time*

Although screens are a relatively new challenge, we can already see that excessive screen time is having adverse effects on society.<sup>28</sup> One is that prolonged screen time from TV, phone, iPad, computer, etc., results in a feeling of lethargy and exhaustion. These feelings of emotional exhaustion can be dealt with easily by putting the phone away and going for a walk.

### *Rest without Being Lazy*

Rest is an important part of our lives. We need it, and we need it regularly. However, we live in a society where we can rationalize the pursuit of pleasure under the heading "rest." But we ought to train ourselves to find rest in things that truly refresh us. You may think you are resting by watching an all-night Lord of the Rings marathon, but that will not bring rest. R. C. Chapman was well known for his Saturday resting ritual of woodworking. We need to be intentional about how we rest and train ourselves to rest in productive ways.

### *Avoid Overcommitment*

One of the most common culprits of exhaustion is overbusyness—often resulting from the inability to say no. Church leaders especially are tempted to get involved with everything, but the wise Christian

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28 Brett McCracken and Ivan Mesa, eds., *Scrolling Ourselves to Death: Reclaiming Life in a Digital Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025).

understands that we have limitations. Our main focus should be on clear, God-given priorities.

### *Train Yourself in Thanksgiving*

This may seem like an odd practical step to avoid burnout, but it's important. When we train ourselves to be thankful (and we can!), we're filled with joy and wonder at what God is doing in our lives. It's difficult to become discouraged or burned out when you're constantly reminded of the blessings God has graciously given to us. The psalms are filled with the call to remember the blessings of God (cf. Ps 77:11; 103:2; 105:5; 143:5, etc.). When we meditate on God's goodness, maintaining the proper perspective on life becomes easier.

### **An Important Clarification**

At this point, I need to make a necessary clarification. It is *not* inherently sinful to feel overwhelmed or physically exhausted. We all go through difficult days or even seasons of life where we struggle, and that is not evidence of a sinful life. It is, of course, possible that unconfessed sin is the cause of feeling overwhelmed or physically exhausted. Solomon noted that "envy makes the bones rot" (Prov 14:30b), and David said before he confessed his sin, "my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long" (Ps 32:3).

However, even if we are unaware of unconfessed sin, we need to prudently evaluate our lives to see whether we're being unwise in how we're living. Even then, if we endeavor to live a life of wisdom (which includes adequate rest), it may be that the Lord has allowed us to experience emotional challenges as part of the normal struggle of humanity living in a fallen world. There should be no guilt over this, but Christians should soldier on, casting their troubles upon the Savior (1 Pet 5:7) through a life of prayer (both their own and the prayers of others).

## Conclusion

In the same way that a tree can't thrive in parched soil, the Christian cannot endure life's difficulties without being rooted in the living water of God's provision. By anchoring ourselves in Scripture and by coming before the throne in ceaseless prayer, we rely on God's strength, not our own. When we also embrace realistic expectations—seeing ourselves as soldiers on watch, athletes in training, and hard-working farmers—we guard our hearts against the temptations and distractions of unfulfilled longings and desires. The principles in this chapter won't keep us from difficulty, but, Lord willing, they will help us endure the trials of life. God, in His grace, will sustain us through obedience to the commands of Scripture and by applying wisdom to our daily lives.