

# The Family of God

(and How to Live With Them!)

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## Chapter 1

### The Burned-out Member

I was sitting in a doctor's office with a splitting headache. It seemed to permeate every pore of my being. I had been sitting there for over an hour with my head pounding. During that time I was thinking about why I was there and how much I had yet to do that day.

I had just finished a four-week evangelistic series a few days earlier and was currently in the process of hiring my staff for summer camp. That morning I had had three counseling appointments. The first one began at 7:30. One of these sessions had been particularly heavy—a woman had recently learned her husband was having sex with his sister. I was supposed to be at a conference committee at 2:00 P.M., and I had scheduled this medical appointment for the lunch hour. It was now 1:00 P.M. and I wondered, ‘WHO CARES THAT I AM WORKING THIS HARD?’

As I tried to relax and read, I found myself unable to focus on the words. The pain in my head was excruciating. Unable to take it any longer, I approached the receptionist and told her I either needed to see someone immediately, or I couldn't be held responsible for what I might do to the waiting room. She started to give me receptionist's speech number twelve (the one about the doctor being unavoidably delayed) when a nurse walked by and saw my condition. Without a word she took my hand and led me to an examining room. When she asked me about my problem, I told her I was in such intense pain that I just couldn't cope right then. If I didn't find some relief soon, I thought I would lose my mind. Even as I heard myself talking, I was thinking, “WHO CARES HOW MUCH I AM SUFFERING?”

The nurse busied herself taking my temperature, blood pressure, and every other vital sign she could think of to fill the time until the doctor arrived. As she checked me over, we talked. I didn't feel like talking, but it was better than sitting out there in the waiting room. It wasn't long, however, before I realized she was doing more than passing the time. She was probing! Inquiring about my daily schedule. Asking what I had been doing lately. When was my last vacation? How much sleep did I get each night? What did I do for a living? When she discovered I was a counselor and pastor, she sat down in the chair

opposite me, took my hands in hers, and asked, “Who is your counselor?”

That question sent shock waves through my body. I broke down and sobbed uncontrollably. I didn’t hold back. The more I cried the less pain I felt. Finally, after what seemed like hours of heart-wrenching sobs, the pain was almost gone. I had been to the brink of burnout! I was physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. As a member of the “balm squad” (a nickname for those in the helping professions) I was almost “balmy” myself. But, thank God, He sent someone who cared, to pull me back from the brink of a breakdown.

**What Is Burnout?** It is basically the result of an unbalanced lifestyle. It may be due to weeks, months, or even years of energy output exceeding energy input. It is like trying to start a car with a weak battery. There comes a time (usually on a cold winter morning) when it will no longer start the engine. One solution is a temporary “jump start” to get you going, but the only permanent solution is to recharge the battery—and keep it charged!

I had been overloading my circuits for months, perhaps even years. I thought I was invincible. Stress was something I thrived on. The more stress, the better I performed. I had been preparing<for and holding an evangelistic series in addition to my regular duties. What I normally scheduled into five working days was now done in three. Then I would spend the next four days visiting and holding meetings. In addition, I had been interviewing potential staff for summer camp and laying plans for our summer’s program. Counseling had been especially heavy the past six weeks, and the pressure had built up inside me until I was ready to explode.

Burnout is like a declaration of bankruptcy. It may be necessary at times but not always responsible. I felt like Linus (Charlie Brown’s friend) as he clutched his security blanket and lamented, “Only one yard of outing flannel stands between me and a nervous breakdown.”

**Stages of Burnout.** Cary Cherniss, in his book, *Staff Burnout: Job Stress in the Human Services* (Sage Publications, 1980), offers the following stages as symptomatic of burnout. The first is the *honeymoon stage*. This is a time of enthusiasm, tremendous commitment to the task at hand, and job satisfaction. You actually put too much into your work, but the excitement is so great that you pay no attention to your energy reserves. Without even knowing it, you begin to tap into and drain your reserves—the depletion chain has begun.

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This leads to the *fuel-shortage stage*. Now you begin to notice the effects of depleted reserves. Exhaustion sets in. Detachment becomes the norm. You may begin to experience a wide variety of physical illnesses. You become irritable and angry. Sleep becomes more difficult, and you find yourself waking up periodically through the night. Depression sets in, and you may begin to engage in escapist behavior such as drug and alcohol abuse or excessive TV viewing.

All systems are go for the final *crisis stage*. Pessimism descends with a vengeance. Self-doubt plagues your every move. Whereas you were always confident and even cocky, now you are tentative and unsure. Apathy at work and an obsession with your own problems become the norm. You become disillusioned and may quit your job or initiate a career change.

During this time of crisis the question that may plague you day and night is “WHO CARES?” Even if you are successful in your career, it may not be enough. I remember reading about an experience that happened to TV anchorman Tom Brokaw. He was wandering around Bloomingdales in New York City shortly after being promoted to co-host the “Today Show.” This was a pinnacle of sorts for Brokaw after years of work in less prominent positions. He had worked in Omaha, then for NBC in Los Angeles and Washington before getting his big break on national television. He was feeling good about himself. He was in the *honeymoon stage*. As he shopped, he noticed a man watching him closely. The man kept staring at him and finally, when the man approached with recognition in his eyes, Brokaw was certain he was about to reap the first fruits of being a nation television celebrity. The man pointed his finger at Brokaw and exclaimed, “Tom Brokaw, right?”

“Right,” replied a smiling Brokaw.

“You used to do the morning news on KMTV in Omaha, right?”

“That’s right,” responded Brokaw with a widening grin, as he waited for the accolades to follow.

“I knew it the minute I spotted you,” his admirer continued. Then pausing thoughtfully for a moment, the man added, “Whatever happened to you?”

Perhaps that is the best experience Brokaw could have had during his honeymoon stage. It kept him from taking himself too seriously. It taught him a lesson we all need to learn, that the world will not stop tomorrow if I do not make it to work. As my father was famous for saying, “A hundred years from now no one will ever know the

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difference.” Keeping a realistic appraisal of our own importance (or lack of it) can prevent the first stage of burnout.

Scripture records the experience of another burnout victim—Elijah. See 1 Kings 18, 19. With tremendous enthusiasm he challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to offer a sacrifice to their gods and have it consumed by fire in front of all the people. As the day wore on, the prophets of Baal worked themselves into a frenzy, but to no avail. Elijah taunted them. Obviously, Elijah was in control of the situation. In fact, when it was his turn to offer a sacrifice to God, Elijah soaked his offering three times with water. As he called upon God to reveal Himself to the people, God not only consumed the sacrifice, but also the water, dust, and even the rocks of the altar.

Elijah then supervised the slaying of all 450 prophets of Baal. Not a bad day’s work for anyone, including a prophet of God. But, the day’s events were just beginning for a successful Elijah. Next he prayed for rain. Before long thunderclouds rolled in, and Elijah, filled with the power of the Lord (and a great deal of adrenalin) literally ran before Ahab’s chariot all the way to Jezreel. What a great day in the career of Elijah! Talk about riding on a cloud of accomplishment and success! Elijah was definitely experiencing his *honeymoon* stage!

That very night, however, Elijah received word that a revengeful Jezebel had threatened to take his life. Should Elijah worry? Don’t be ridiculous! This successful prophet of God worry? Hadn’t he brought down the false worship of Baal? Hadn’t he prayed successfully for rain? Hadn’t he jogged before Ahab’s chariot without tiring? Yes, he had done all these things. But, he had been running on reserves. Without even knowing it, Elijah had crossed over into the *fuel-shortage* stage of burnout. When he received the message that Jezebel had taken out a contract on him, Scripture records, “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.” 1 Kings 19:3, NIV. Why was he afraid? Hadn’t he just been on the mountaintop of success? Yes, but at the expense of his inner reserves. Now he was exhausted. He needed rest to replenish his depleted physical, emotional, and spiritual reserves.

Apart from the explanation of burnout, Elijah’s actions make little sense. Here was the most popular and successful man of the hour running for his life. Not only was he afraid, he was also discouraged and depressed. Depressed enough to consider suicide! “He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, Lord,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’” 1 Kings 19:4, NIV. Elijah had come to the final *crisis* stage

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of burnout. He was filled with self-doubt, disillusioned with his career, and obsessed with his own personal problems. From this perspective Elijah cried, “The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” 1 Kings 19:10, NIV.

It is important to note that God did not argue with Elijah then. He did not try to point out how successful Elijah had been a few days before. Instead, God began to meet his needs.

First, God provided food and rest to restore him physically. Verses 6, 7. Then He refilled Elijah’s emotional reservoir by providing a much-needed change of scenery. Verse 8. Finally, God rejuvenated Elijah spiritually by providing an object lesson on the nature and power of God. The Creator of the universe did not appear in the whirlwind, earthquake, or fire. The Creator displayed His power in a “gentle whisper.” Verses 11–13. Do you think this was an important spiritual object lesson for Elijah? Do you think God provided spiritual insights for Elijah and gave him much-needed confidence? Evidently all of Elijah’s needs had been met and he was restored to full health, because God promptly gave him his next assignment, “*Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.*” 1 Kings 19:15, NIV.

Certain temperaments are more inclined to experience burnout than others. Those who suffer from “hurry-up-itis” may be the most susceptible. The choleric\* (type A personality) is a prime candidate. He may honk his horn while waiting in traffic, finish the sentences of others, play every game to win, have a fetish about being on time, and seek work as his sole source of personal validation.

A friend of mine is a contractor and works fourteen hours a day six days a week. In addition to an already full schedule, he is a church elder, chairs several church committees, and is active in volunteer work in the evenings. He has only one major problem. He is seldom seen by his family.

Another choleric friend happens to be a conference president. His work day begins around 4:00 A.M. when he arrives at the office. He returns home about 7:00 to eat breakfast with his wife, and they both

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\* One of four human temperaments characterized by strong-willed, self-confident, domineering, and impetuous behavior. See *Why Can't My Mate Be More Like Me?* Pacific Press Publishing, 1986.



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return to work at 8:00. He often works until 11:00 P.M. and is known for taking “red-eye specials” when flying on business across the nation. Because he’s also an ordained pastor, he often works seven days a week, with Sabbath being one of the busiest days of all. Often he will attend three or four separate services during that 24-hour period, and will often conduct all of them himself.

Melancholy personalities<sup>†</sup> are also likely to suffer from burnout because they often base their personal worth and self-esteem upon results obtained in the work place. They will work all day for a compliment. For two compliments they will work all night. They feel really good about themselves only when successful in their work. Success means meeting deadlines, quotas, goals, *etc.* When you combine the melancholy and choleric, you have an interesting type of individual who lives and breathes his/her occupation or career twenty-four hours each day. You may notice them in the hospital cafeteria—stethoscope around their necks, furrowed brows, and intense posture-sitting around a table discussing their patients. Work never ends for them. You wonder if they take their stethoscopes to bed with them. Inevitably you will notice another group in the cafeteria as well. They are rowdy and loud, laughing and comparing ball scores, disrupting everyone within 30 feet of their table. Both groups are equally skilled physicians. One group has learned how to compartmentalize—to divide their lives into detached segments—while the other has not. Compartmentalization is an important tool in preventing burnout.

Much is said today about stress and its effect on the human body. Actually, stress may be a positive force. Many people thrive on stress. The real culprit is DISTRESS. Distress is caused by frustration and continued disappointment. It is the result of bad chemistry between individuals. I vividly recall a distressing situation that happened on one of my first jobs.

My immediate supervisor was the kind of man who would find fault with everything you did and make you feel like the world’s greatest simpleton in the process. He literally gave me ulcers. Actually, I permitted him to do so, but the result was the same. Try as I might, I could not work for the man without feeling used and resentful. The final straw came one day when I asked him to help me find a problem with a calculator I was repairing. He came to my workbench, took all of

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<sup>†</sup> Melancholies, though usually gifted and creative, tend to be perfectionists, moody, pessimistic, and given to depression.

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my tools off the bench, and began by saying, “Now, Len, the first thing you do is put your shop towel on the right-hand side of the machine. Next, you lay out a number 2 common screwdriver, then the hemostats followed by the...” By that time I was ready to explode! There was a bad chemistry between us, and our relationship (or lack of it) was causing me such intense distress, that I was forced to change occupations.

Distress can happen to anyone. Housewives who are busy with family, marriage, community volunteer or church work, *etc.* can suddenly find themselves overwhelmed. A woman came to me one day who was terribly depressed. As we talked about her life, I learned that she was working full time, cleaning the house and cooking for the next day every evening, trying to be mother to two separate families (second marriage), and trying to be a loving and thoughtful wife to impress her new husband. The stress of that situation became distress, and she could no longer handle it. Her body began to shut down, and she found herself in the *fuel-shortage* stage of burnout. Her unrealistic enthusiasm in the *honeymoon* stage had established certain behavior patterns that the rest of the family took for granted. Namely, that she was an indestructible superwoman.

Often those in the helping professions experience burnout due to distress. The task never seems to be finished. One sick body or mind is followed by another until you begin to wonder if anything or anyone is normal. Our next-door neighbor was a building contractor, and I was quite surprised to learn one evening over dinner that he had previously been a surgeon. As his painful story unfolded, he told of serving the last year of his internship on the children’s ward. Most of the children on the ward were terminal or at least doubtful for any long-term recovery. One day he was assisting with an operation on a child who died on the table. It was the third one that week. My friend said he walked out of the operating room and never looked back. Distress caused him to change his career.

**PREVENTION IS THE BEST DEFENSE AGAINST DISEASE!** This is especially true with burnout. Slowing down is often the advice given, but it really may not be the answer. Often it is not *how much* we do, but *how we do it!* Burnout is caused by taking on too much for the wrong reasons. Prevention is learning to do the right things for the right reasons. That means having the freedom to say Yes to some things and No to others—without feeling guilty. It is the discovery that God provides the needed time and energy for everything He expects

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you to do. Paul recorded the secret of burnout prevention when he wrote, “I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be a full stomach or hunger, plenty or want; for I can do everything *God* asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and the power.” Philippians 4:12, 13, LB. Understanding and claiming those verses can mean the difference between productive stress and destructive distress.

**Submit your will to God.** It is actually dangerous for us to try to control our own wills. “What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” Romans 7:19, NIV. When we try to control our own wills we stop thinking clearly, and this often leads to an internal conflict of guilt, anger, and frustration. Distress is the result of such a conflict, and we end up doing things we really don’t want to do. The flip side of that coin is that what we set out to accomplish, we can’t seem to do. If God is in control of our lives, He will guide us toward those things that will be positively fulfilling.

God will never ask you to do more than you are capable of doing. He will never drive you to the point of burnout. You are truly in good hands with God. He is not a manipulator. Employers, spouses, children, pastors, teachers, and anyone else you might name may use guilt to their own advantage—but not God. I remember reading how Elizabeth Brinton sold 11,200 boxes of Girl Scout cookies at the age of thirteen. Her secret? “You have to look people in the eye and make them feel guilty.” For this ability she received an award as the BEST YOUNG ACHIEVER! God is not in the cookie business. He is concerned with our eternal salvation. He will never ask us to do more than we are capable of doing.

**Do what you enjoy doing.** Few burnouts are caused by what we really enjoy doing. Most burnouts occur from doing things we really do not enjoy doing, or doing them for the wrong reasons. James reminds us, “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” James 4:14, NIV. Life is too short to use it for any purpose other than to know, love, and glorify Jesus in our lives. If we center our lives around Him, we will learn how to pace ourselves and to spend time doing those things that make us happiest.

A good friend of mine was recently elected conference president of a rather large constituency. On his third day as president, he found himself waiting in line at the airport to attend another meeting. He had just spent two days in meetings and as he stood there, he asked himself, “Is this what you want to do the rest of your life?” The answer came

back loud and clear, “No!” The very next day he resigned as president and returned to his first love—pastoring. I hold him up as a model in my own mind of a man who determined to do what he enjoyed doing. Not even the ego-boosting or career-challenging office of president could manipulate him into settling for second best. God had given my friend a tremendous gift—the gift of preaching—and he knew that by returning to the pulpit, he was actually doing the will of God and what he enjoyed most.

My friend reminds me of a valid lesson I have learned as a hobby gardener. The easiest time to pull a weed in the garden is when it is very small. Then it will not take nutrients and strength from the other plants, nor will it disturb them when you pull it out. The longer you let the weed grow, the more damage it will cause when it is finally removed.

**Get adequate rest.** Each person needs his/her own amount of sleep. Make certain you understand your own metabolism and provide adequate time for renewal. I have learned how to take little “cat naps” of no more than ten to fifteen minutes at a time. These provide me needed “mind rest” and rejuvenate me for another eight to ten hours.

**Get proper nutrition.** Skipping breakfast to sleep or skipping lunch to save money robs you of needed energy during the day. We often compensate for our behavior with high-sugar snacks that throw us into a roller coaster ride for the rest of the day. Eating too much can be just as damaging as eating too little. The emphasis is on “proper” nutrition.

**Take time out for FUN.** Become good at something else. Begin a hobby that is exciting and rewarding for you. I enjoy working on classic automobiles as well as gardening and landscaping. All provide a change of pace and the opportunity to create something tangible with my hands. I have restored a 1957 Chevy convertible, a 1968 Cougar, and I’m now working on a 1978 Corvette. When I finish each one, I sell it because the therapy and fun come from the process of restoration. My wife enjoys another type of hobby—“digging up bones.” By that I mean she is an amateur genealogist. She enjoys spending hours in the library or county court house digging up the records of our ancestors. She is all the way back to the Pilgrims on one side of the family and enjoys every minute of it.

**Exercise regularly.** Fatigue may often be more mental or emotional than physical. Exercise relieves tension brought on by distress (negative stress). I used to jog at least two miles every morning

(now I jump rope instead). I remember initiating my camp staff into the pleasures of jogging at summer camp. They were at least half my age, and their enthusiasm carried them far ahead of me for the first mile. By the time we were halfway through the second mile, however, most of them had fallen by the wayside. Many start exercise programs with the same degree of enthusiasm, but by the second week they find a number of reasons to quit.

The best exercise to relieve negative stress is aerobics.

Stress gradually builds up through the day, and we hardly notice its effects until we stop. It's almost like slamming on the brakes in your car to avoid an accident. Without proper exercise the body is liable to turn upon itself with muscle aches, headaches, or even stomach and intestinal problems.

**Create a support network.** We all need someone we can talk to when we're down. That person must retain our confidentiality and prove trustworthy. It is beneficial for us to cultivate at least one or two such friends for our support network. It takes work and effort, but it is worth the investment. My wife has become my best friend, and I find it extremely beneficial to be able to share with her my fears and frustrations and know that she will never betray my trust. In addition, there are several male friends that I have developed over the years who are only a phone call away if needed.

**Reserve time for God.** It is in this quiet time with Him that we will find total recharging of our spiritual batteries. As we feed upon His Word we will experience the filling of His spirit. "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you....Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." James 4:7–10, NIV.

God promises that if we are filled with His Holy Spirit, we will also receive power. See Acts 1:8. The Greek word used for power is *dunamis* from which we derive our words *dynamite* and *dynamo*. However, even though both words have a common root, their effects upon an individual are quite different. Dynamite goes off with a big explosion and is burned up and gone. A dynamo, on the other hand, continues to produce power day in and day out.

God's plan for our lives is that we will continue to produce POWER on a daily basis. There should never be a power shortage or blackout in our lives. God never intended that we should explode in a flurry of activity and "burn out." God has provided the keys to prevent burnout, but it is up to us to implement them in our lives. We need to

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take care of ourselves now, so others won't have to take care of us later.