

“Burned Out” Christian Workers

When a Christian worker describes himself as “burned out,” he is usually expressing a sense of having exhausted all his available physical, mental or spiritual resources. Those in such a state of mind find it a fitting analogy to compare themselves to a candle that has burned to the place of consuming itself, its flame flickering in its final moments before extinguishing with a faint puff of smoke. Such colorfully descriptive words are often used when continual hardship, fatigue or weariness of mind have begun to severely erode one’s sense of purpose, enthusiasm, or resilience to opposition. Just as often, however, this same expression is used to describe a wearisome monotony that can be associated with continual boredom, a lack of challenging goals, unfulfilled expectations or continual dependence on ones self rather than on Christ.

“Burn out,” or weariness, can be caused by one, or many underlying problems. It can be the result of something as simple as prolonged physical fatigue, or as complex as having chosen wrong goals, motives or priorities. Sometimes it is a problem that can be resolved rather easily with appropriate encouragement, adjustments in one’s daily routines, or information that provides a new or better perspective. Finding more effective ways to understand and resolve problems, making changes that alleviate unnecessary burdens, or redirecting ones energy and focus more constructively can produce a dramatic difference in one’s outlook and enthusiasm for Christian service.

While it would be cruel and insensitive to imply that weary Christians are all suffering the effects of sinful attitudes or rebellion, some “burned out” servants do require correction in areas of spiritual neglect or destructive misconceptions that have led to serious discouragement. Quite often, discouraged believers find no resolution apart from repentance for sinful thoughts or actions. Nevertheless, no matter what the cause may involve, in nearly every case where a Christian worker admits feeling “burned out,” he is also seriously contemplating quitting as a solution to his distress, at least to some degree and in some way. The problems are real, but the solutions are often blurred by a loss of hope in God’s promises.

The path that leads a Christian worker to the place of wanting to quit working for Christ seldom begins as a path that obviously leads to sorrow and destruction. Rather, the road to exhaustion most often looks like an inviting, if not exciting, way to go. If one life path appears blah and uninteresting while another beckons with apparent beauty and promise, most unwary travelers will choose the one that *looks* most desirable. Once headed in a wrong direction, however, each turn only leads one further away from finishing the course victoriously at the desired destination. So what kinds of hidden “wrong turns” lure a worker off course?

Wrong Road Number One – No Rest for the Weary

Perhaps the most beautiful “wrong turn” is the one that leads to a road with no hotels, no hospitals, no libraries and no park benches on which to sit and enjoy the countryside. The beauty is there and you can certainly look and enjoy—but you cannot stop and you cannot rest. It is the road on which the traffic always moves and never ceases or slows.

Very often Christian workers deceive themselves, or allow others to deceive them, into believing it is virtuous to work tirelessly for Christ without stopping to rest. If one ministry is good, two, three or four must be better. Or perhaps the work piles up and the laborers being few attempt to tackle the whole pile—as if by working tirelessly it will eventually be reduced to a manageable size. Or as if the work will one day cease to expand to fill a workers willingness to work. Very often travelers on this road experience guilt if they attempt to stop and rest too long, either because their own conscience wrongly condemns them or someone traveling nearby implies such resting is lazy or “unspiritual.”

Helping a worker on the “no rest” road will involve helping him realistically evaluate his daily schedule, hours he sleeps, his priorities, his physical and emotional needs, his limitations, his particular family responsibilities, and the biblical mandate God has given for us to stop and take adequate rest. Such a worker will need to recognize how his drive to arrive at a destination has become a cruel taskmaster and clouded God’s warnings against such shortcuts. God desires we enjoy the journey and reach destinations along the way. Most importantly, He *commands* us to stop and rest intermittingly so we, and those we travel with, can endure the “long haul.” The tireless worker will need to recognize the fact that he may be traveling on a beautiful road, but is a road ill equipped for restoration of strength. Sooner or later, exhaustion *will* catch up to him.

In contrast, God’s “right road” is lined with stops after every sixth mile. Passages of scripture to consider would be as follows. “Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest; that thine ox and thine ass [as well as thou] may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.” (Exodus 23:12; see also Deuteronomy 5:12-15) “And he [Jesus] said unto them [the disciples], Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while; for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. (Mark 6:31) “And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves; but he [Jesus] was asleep.” (Matthew 8:24)

Pastors will need to carefully guard one day a week as a day of rest from the labors of home and ministry in the same way Christian workers need to seriously guard one day a week to rest from all their labors as well. Very often pastors take Mondays off, while Christian workers work a grueling five day work week only to put in two full days of Christian work on the weekend, leaving no adequate day or space of time to be refreshed, or to worship quietly. Every Christian worker needs to get adequate sleep and set apart adequate time for relaxation within the framework of his or her particular circumstances. More strenuous work requires more frequent times of rest in order to properly rejuvenate the body, mind, and soul. Electronic devices that make us accessible 24 hours a day sometimes need to be turned off or left at home. Family dinners, bedtime, special days and planned events all need to be guarded from unnecessary intrusions or urgent matters that in reality aren’t as important as rest.

The person who refuses to take vacations or engage in times of relaxation does not honor God; rather, he disobeys Him and chooses his own (wrong) path. Driving one’s self or

others to work tirelessly, week after week, in order to accomplish some self-imposed goal is condemned in scripture. In Ezekiel 34 the Lord pronounces woe upon Christian leaders who use people to accomplish their goals and disregard their limitations and needs. He tells them they have ruled others with “force and with cruelty” and have consumed their strength with hardships imposed upon them. “He that is cruel,” the Bible warns, “troubleth his own flesh.” (Proverbs 11:17)

Driven workers tend to drive others around them with the same relentless work ethic that they adopt for themselves. They show little or no regard for those who are weaker or those who have special needs. They are often very *unlike* Christ, who is compared to a good shepherd who slows His pace so He doesn’t overdrive the pregnant ewes or exhaust the littlest lambs. (Isaiah 40:11) The Lord, our good Shepherd, leads us by still waters that cool our feet and quench our thirst. He makes us to lie down in green refreshing pastures and restores our soul. Yes, He does lead us up the mountain and into the valleys along winding paths—but never without stopping. There are always shepherds who are impatient and cruel, who think they can achieve more and get more accomplished by driving themselves or their sheep harder. Perhaps such leadership appears to be working, especially if the cruel shepherd’s flock reaches the top ahead of others. However, there is often very little notice given to the many sheep along the way that have died of exhaustion, or of little ones that perished because they couldn’t keep up the pace. There is no room in this shepherd’s flock for average sheep, let alone for weak or sick sheep. Only the strongest survive for long, and even they eventually collapse.

God blesses those who walk righteously, speak uprightly and “despise the gain of oppressions...” (Isaiah 33:15) Driven people oppress themselves and others in order to gain something, and they keep up the practice because they wrongly believe it gets them ahead. God warns, “Envy not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways. (Proverbs 3:31) Rather than oppress others with hardship, we are to seek to relieve the oppressed and lift heavy burdens. Certainly we are to work hard—but never without sufficient times of refreshment! The Pharisees were condemned by Christ because they put on others “heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders...” (Matthew 23:4) Jesus, on the other hand, invited weary people to “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Christian workers who do not set aside sufficient time to rest physically, mentally, and spiritually soon come to believe Christ is a cruel overseer whose yoke is hard and whose burden is heavy beyond endurance. When this happens, the Christian worker needs to stop and recognize that he’s often taken a path Christ has not led him to take and has assumed burdens and hardships Christ has not ordered him to carry. If Christ has led us on a path of difficulty, it is temporary. He has given us sufficient help to make the journey tolerable or has offered to carry us in His arms. (1 Corinthians 10:13) Every now and then every Christian worker needs to remind himself that God’s requirements may not be those that he or others have imposed upon him. Micah 6:8 offers encouragement to these weary workers—“He hath shown thee O man what is good, and

what doth the Lord require of thee? But to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Wrong Road Number Two – Relationship Deficiency

There’s a second path that takes workers to the place called “burn out.” This path looks inviting because it’s not crowded. There are no family cars on this road—nothing but single passenger vehicles. Everyone’s in a hurry to get where they are going, so there’s no lingering, no time for making friends, no time to ask anyone directions, and no time to listen to others talk. People who travel this route don’t like to take the time to get real close to anyone, including their own family members. Consequently, relationships tend to be superficial—no time to cultivate genuine mutual intimacy. Acquaintances and admirers may be many, but companions are few. Sadly, this solo style of traveling tends to have its greatest impact on family relationships, but even worse, on one’s relationship with the Lord Himself.

God created human beings in such a way that they would function best interdependent on one another. He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet [suitable] for him.” (Genesis 2:18) Marriage was instituted primarily for exclusive companionship, not procreation. Likewise, the entire family unit was something God designed for man’s benefit and well-being. Psalms 68:6 says, “God setteth the solitary [those that are alone] in families...” Friendship between Christians is encouraged and blessed by God. It was God who knit the hearts of Jonathan and David together in friendship and God who comforted Paul by sending Titus to him. (2 Corinthians 7:6) Christians are not just encouraged to love one another—they are taught and *commanded* to love one another and cultivate a spirit of unity. (John 13:34) Christ sent his disciples out to work two by two, or as a group, not one by one. Paul tells believers, “But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you; for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another.” (1 Thessalonians 4:9) Peter teaches Christians to love the brotherhood, to be of one mind, to love one another with a pure heart fervently. (1 Peter 1:22; 2:17; 3:8)

Fellowship and friendship between believers is so vital that we are warned not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. We are to coordinate our efforts together for the cause of Christ, operating as a team, working together, learning together, resolving problems together, and even taking responsibility to admonish and restore one another when we are overtaken in a fault. (Galatians 6:12; Thessalonians 3:14) We are told to bear one another’s burdens, to please our Christian brother or sister for his good, to edify one another, exhort one another, comfort one another, weep and rejoice with one another. This care for each other isn’t just to be some act we engage in so as to fulfill a duty. It is behavior that is to naturally spring from a heart of love as we deliberately cultivate loving relationships and partnerships with one another.

Many busy Christian workers become so focused on the work that they forget the importance of interacting on a meaningful level with individual people. They bear the greatest overall burden of responsibility, but have little energy left to simply encourage, be encouraged, and interact with likeminded *individuals*. When relationships become

superficial and lack closeness or depth, others aren't aware of inward struggles, personal trials, or discouragement. This leaves the solo Christian to bear burdens alone. Such a believer forgets that Christ tells us we *cannot* fulfill the law of Christ *apart* from bearing one another's burdens. (Galatians 6:2) The Christian worker needs to remember that this is to be a *mutual* activity. It is not something leaders are to do while others become sole recipients. Rather, every believer is commanded to engage in both giving and receiving the comfort, admonishment and fellowship of others.

Contrary to a popular notion that some Christian workers follow; it is not spiritually or emotionally healthy to *avoid* cultivating close friends. Rather, it can be downright dangerous *not* to. The idea that a pastor, pastor's wife, or Christian leader of any kind should refrain from having intimate friends of the same gender is not taught anywhere in the Bible! In fact, the Bible pronounces woe on those who are alone when they fall (Eccl. 4:9). Jonathan, Abiathar, Nahash, Hiram, Hushai, Ittai Joram and Ahaziah are among men that the Bible mentions as friends of David. David had friends who strengthened him in the Lord, friends he prayed with, friends who were close enough to give him advice and friends who had the courage to say, "Thou art the man" when he was living in sin. David knew the sorrow of being betrayed by a friend *because* he cultivated friends. No one enjoys the heart wrenching sorrow of a friend's betrayal, but we are not to avoid cultivating friendship in an effort to spare ourselves such disappointment. Christ, our example, made many close friends during his ministry--some who were a tremendous sorrow and disappointment.

Close friends are a blessing from God and should be purposefully, albeit carefully, cultivated. What gets leaders, as well as followers, into trouble is the way they conduct their friendships, or the place of importance friendships are given. Close friends wrapped up in each other when believers assemble do not minister unselfishly to others but rather alienate others and cause resentment. You will find Jesus interacting with His disciples when He was alone with them and ministering to others when He was in a group. We see Jesus engaged in relationships that were very close, such as the relationship He enjoyed with Peter, James and John and at the same time, engaged in relationships that were less intimate in varying degrees.

No believer should center friendship on sinful behavior or conversation that is sinful. Friends who share information that belongs between a husband and a wife or information that is in some way sinful harm each other and the cause of Christ. Complaining and tearing people down doesn't honor God, knit hearts together in Christian love, or further the interests of Christ. However, when two friends work together for a common eternal cause, grow in grace together, admonish one another in love, laugh and cry together and share common interests and goals—both are strengthened and God is glorified and pleased. Healthy and godly relationships keep us from falling, offset discouragement, and spark creativity and enthusiasm. This is a tremendous antidote to what many describe as "burn out."

Christian workers put themselves at great risk when they fail to recognize the importance of being taught, not just teaching, of being admonished, not just admonishing, of sharing

burdens, and not just bearing them. Solomon tells us that it is better to be “a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.” (Ecclesiastes 4:13) This is one reason Peter exhorts *all* believers to submit themselves to one another in a spirit of humility, even while casting all our cares upon Christ. Is it any surprise that Peter follows this admonition with a warning that the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking someone he can devour? (1 Peter 5:5-9)

Believers who proudly “go it alone” are much easier prey for the evil one than believers who stick close together. And which one of Satan’s weapons slays more Christian workers than the weapon of discouragement? Many times discouragement could have been avoided had the Christian worker sought out wise counsel from others, or spent the time and effort to work together more closely with others. Friends, family, marriage partner and colleagues are all vital relationships that require much time and care if they are to function as God intends them to function for our benefit and protection as well as theirs. Human relationships, however, aren’t ever to act as substitutes for our relationship with Christ.

It is possible to engage in Christian work without depending at all on Christ. In fact, it is quite natural for human beings to rely on their own reasoning and their own strength when engaged in any activity, including activity that supposedly furthers the cause of Christ. The world views self-sufficiency as a virtue. God, however, views it as a grievous sin that has certain, devastating consequences. The Bible warns, “Cursed is the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord.” (Jeremiah 17:7) “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool,” Solomon warns. (Proverbs 28:26) “Without me,” Jesus tells us, “ye can do nothing.” (John 15:5) The sin of self-sufficiency is an extremely serious matter. Just look at the picture Jeremiah paints of a person who relies on human strength, found in Jeremiah 17:6. He is compared to a dead tumbleweed aimlessly blowing across a hot and barren desert. The ground is filled with salt, so nothing grows. It is a lonely place, uninhabited, unproductive and relentlessly monotonous. Perhaps no other single error is more devastating than self-sufficiency, or more apt to subtly deplete Christian workers of strength or courage in the face of difficulties naturally encountered in Christian service.

The more capable, talented, ingenious, and proficient a Christian worker is, the easier it is for him to deceive himself and others into believing he is depending on Christ rather than himself. Apparent success, as the world defines success, often comes easy to such a person. People naturally want to follow a strong and confident leader and be on a winning team, so he lacks no support from others. Many thriving ministries are built by talented people who claim to be filled with God’s Spirit and blessed by His power—who aren’t. And many struggling ministries are built by godly people who are. God gives us a method to discern who is truly filled with the Spirit of God and who isn’t. Those depending on the Bible and Christ recognize it, follow it, and emulate it. What they say and do is consistent with the Scriptures. A Spirit filled person looks like Christ, acts like Christ, and lives to please Christ. It’s not an act that requires effort—it’s a Spirit-filled person’s character.

The fruit of the Spirit is a natural by-product and includes among other qualities, a loving nature, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness [humility], and temperance [self-control]. James describes such a leader as someone who does not have bitterness and envy in his heart, who is not quick to fight and quick to become angry. A Spirit filled Christian is wise, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. He is a peacemaker, not one who is energized by a good fight. (James 3:13-18) He sees God in everything and is therefore able to give thanks in everything. Sound pretty impossible? It is—apart from daily dependence upon Christ and a genuine relationship with Him.

It is possible to have a huge following that see you as a successful Christian worker, and yet be a failure spiritually by this standard. It is also possible to have a small following and few who consider you a Christian success story, and yet be extremely successful spiritually in terms of Christian character. The fruit of the Spirit, as well as the fruit of the flesh, is revealed clearly in times of failure and hardship. Some would say, however, that great prosperity reveals true character best of all. Few remain humble and dependent upon God under such circumstances.

“Blessed,” (or as we would say, “How happy!”) “is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted y the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so; but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” (Psalm 1:1-5)

The promise of strength to the weary is given to those who wait upon the Lord for it. “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength...But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 4:27-31) We, like those Paul speaks to in Hebrews 10:36 “have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”

Paul warned Timothy to strive to please Christ and please Him alone—not people. The moment we make pleasing people our criteria for success, we are not pleasing God. Paul asks, “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10) Paul prayed that Timothy, a dear fellow laborer, would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, wisdom, and spiritual understanding so that he would live to please Christ and thus be spiritually fruitful and be strengthened with patience, longsuffering and joy. (Colossians 1:9-11) He tells him to follow God’s commands, not that which may seem most logical or desirable to him. (Colossians 2:8-10) Finally, Paul tells Timothy, “And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.” (2 Timothy 2:5)

The ends do not justify the means in God's kingdom. Building a thriving ministry by our own means and methods may impress other believers and win praise and adulation here on earth--but it wins no praise from God and no rewards in Heaven. Success, as humans want to define it, is never to be our goal. Making success our reason for living is a sure way to wind up defeated by sin—and burned out. Paul lists numerous faithful Christians who served Christ and saw incredible victories, but he lists just as many who were driven into caves, horribly persecuted, abandoned, and rejected. He himself suffered rejection and hardships as a result of people he gave himself to minister to. Paul enjoyed times of prosperity, but just as often, he endured times of suffering and need. His goal in whatever situation he found himself was always the same, however. His consuming passion was simply to know and to please Christ.

Paul tells us, “But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness; nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others...” (1 Thessalonians 2:4-6) How many servants of God become disillusioned, bitter, or envious when they suffer hardship? How many others resort to sinful methods such as flattery, bribery, self-exaltation and deceitfulness in order to manipulate people and win a following? Not surprisingly, these Christian workers eventually become exhausted and find themselves caught in webs of their own making. Sometimes we see their loss and error in this life, sometimes it follows them into eternity and is made manifest at the judgment seat of Christ.

Wrong Road Number Three - Malnourishment

A third road to burn-out is one having no restaurants, no warmly furnished kitchens and dining rooms and no refreshing drinking fountains available to its travelers. There are only fast food restaurants, left-overs and pre-packaged food available on this route. Such food can keep one alive, but it can never impart health or cause a weary traveler to thrive with energy. A steady diet of it will quickly erode one's health and lead to all kinds of weakness and limitation. Christian workers who believe they can stay spiritually alive and enthusiastic by feasting on books, sermons, seminars and radio broadcasts while neglecting personal Bible study commit a grave error. Reading *Our Daily Bread* never has and never will substitute for coming to the Bread of Life for daily spiritual nourishment.

Jesus defeated Satan's temptations only by countering them with truth written in the Word. He tells us repeatedly that we cannot survive on physical food alone, but “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4-11) Job learned this lesson and declared that he esteemed the Word of God more than his necessary food. (Job 23:12) Jeremiah tells us that, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart; for I am called by thy name, O Lord God of hosts.” (Jeremiah 15:16) Find a true servant of God who successfully withstood trials and hardship and you will also find a servant of God who gave the highest priority to personal study of the Word. Though they sometimes experienced discouragement, always they came to the Word for renewal and strength--and always found it. The Psalms are literally filled with testimonies of God's faithfulness in giving

needed strength and comfort when the Psalmist sought the Lord and depended on the promises in His Word.

A Christian worker has nothing to give those in need unless he first goes to the Father and asks for bread so he can give it to others. The reason many Christian workers come to the place where they feel spiritually depleted and exhausted with giving is because they try to give from what they have rather than from what they receive from God day by day. A story is told by Christ in Luke 11 of a man whose friend comes at midnight to stay with him. He has nothing to feed his visitor so goes to another friend and asks him for needed loaves of bread. The friend, because he is asked, gives what he has to help. Jesus concluded the story by drawing a comparison with our need for spiritual bread in order to have for others. He asks, "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:3-13)

Burn out is an expression we associate with a sense of weariness, a lack of available strength or energy. It is interesting that Jesus reminds us it is His Spirit that energizes us and provides the inertia we need to do His work. He enables us, sustains us and motivates us to do His will. Many wonder what means He uses to do this. We are told in John 6:63 that God's Word is that energizing force and our human efforts of no value. "It is the spirit that quickeneth [energizes]; the flesh [human efforts alone] profiteth nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." When Christian workers are weakened through neglect of the Word, their faith wavers and they become prime targets for an all out attack by Satan. It is our faith that shields us from the enemy and our source of faith is the Word of God. "Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked." (Eph. 6:16) "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom 10:17)

When the storms of life come—and they *will* come—the Christian who withstands them is the Christian whose foundation for his life is the Lord Jesus Christ. In everyday applicable language, this refers to one who builds his life on the rock of Christ by hearing and doing those things that are written in God's Word. We see this in the familiar story of the wise and foolish man, one who built his house (life) on the sand and one who built on the rock. Jesus tells us, therefore whosoever heareth these saying of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock; And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock. (Matt. 7:24-25)

Wrong Road Number Four – The Path To Nowhere

The fourth path to burn out is one that is a bit more difficult to identify. Most people believe they are on the right road, until they've traveled quite a distance. Everything looks great until one rounds the bend finds himself in the middle of nowhere. That's when the road gets bumpy, the weather turns nasty, and the terrain abruptly turns from beautiful to ugly and you can hardly see where you are going for all the fog. It's easy to

just stop and hope the weather improves—but it doesn't. And stopping only leaves you in that mess longer. Making things even more difficult, there are all kinds of detours and splits in the road and it's sometimes quite challenging deciding which way to go. Servants on this road to nowhere need to consult their map, get out a compass, and determine which direction leads them out of these endless dead ends. The more they depend on their instinct to choose the right direction, the more lost and confusing the road becomes. They won't emerge from the fog until they ignore their instincts, trust the compass and obey it. It might take awhile to get back on track, but once headed in the right direction, it's only a matter of time before the fog is gone and the road to nowhere is behind them.

It is possible for Christian workers to do all the right things for all the wrong reasons. And because they are doing the right things, it's hard to recognize the fact that they are being done without understanding or with immature motives. In fact, it is probable that our motives for serving Christ are tainted to some degree by our sin nature, and are on the immature side until we grow in grace and become more experienced and seasoned in our understanding. So, sooner or later, every growing Christian worker is faced with difficult trials that will reveal areas of weakness and give great opportunity for change and growth. What he does with that opportunity will greatly depend on what he uses to get a sense of direction and that in turn will greatly determine the course his life takes.

Sometimes, it is only when everything we depend on for security and strength is taken away that we realize how little we are actually relying on Christ for direction and strength, or how little we actually trust Him to provide a way of escape. It's during times like these that our motives and understanding can really be transformed into something that, as Peter said, will make us mature, establish, strengthen and settle us. But this will require a willingness to deliberately humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and believe we really can commit the keeping of our souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4 and 5) The only other option is to refuse the path on which God wants to lead us, and take a wrong turn. No matter what other road we decide to head down, it's sure to be wrong. When we rely on our own understanding and choose a sinful way of escape, we always forsake our own mercy and choose the consequences of our error. And like Job, we'll end up weary of our life (Job 10:1) and like David, we'll soon become weary of our groaning (Psalm 6:6). Our way of escape is the same as theirs—we must look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Paul addresses believers in 1 Corinthians who are having difficulty in their Christian life because they haven't yet grasped difficult spiritual concepts. It's not that they don't know facts—they got the lingo down pat. Like a lot of Christian workers, they may have been able to quote the Bible backwards and forwards. What gives them difficulty isn't a lack of knowledge but a lack of understanding and ability to apply truth in their life when the going gets tough. As a result, they are caught up in all kinds of strife and error. They see God's works, but they don't yet understand God's ways. Like children, they can memorize and quote, but they have little depth of understanding and can apply little of what they are quoting. So while they can happily teach the Bible to others, they have

great difficulty living it in everyday life or experiencing the fruits of Christian maturity (unless everything is going wonderfully).

The Corinthian believers are really very much like Israel in comparison to Moses. We learn in Psalm 103:7 that, “The Lord executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed. He made known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel.” Stop and ponder that statement—God is able to explain His ways to Moses who has mature understanding. Israel, on the other hand, isn’t mature enough to grasp the reason behind the powerful things He is doing. They see it, but they don’t understand the events God is allowing them to experience. They see all the provisions of God, but they never associate the provisions they enjoy with the wonder of God’s love and care, or the absolute faithfulness of His wise management of their lives. When things get tough, they imagine God has forgotten or rejected them. When things go well, they imagine they are responsible for the blessings and forget God altogether. They engage in an immature kiss and make-up relationship with God and remain bent on catering to their egos and selfish desires. Spiritual growth isn’t really what they have in mind. Like children, they live for recess and care little about the classroom that will prepare them for eternity.

Paul calls the Corinthians babes in Christ. Because they, like Israel of old, lack understanding, he tells them he is going to go back to basics and lay a foundation that he prays will bring them to maturity. He wants them to know Christ, not just know about Him. He wants them to experience a change in their perspective, their priorities, their motives, and their allegiance. Paul deeply longs for maturity in these believers so their attention is turned from earthly things and people that in all of eternity will not matter to things that *will* matter for all of eternity. Most of all, Paul wants these believers to understand that it is only in their relationship and union with Christ that they will experience true freedom and joy.

Throughout Paul’s exhortations to the Corinthian believers he urges them to reconsider many of their motives, and to alter their priorities. Paul tells them their Christian works will one day be tried at the judgment of Christ. They will either prove to be the real thing, or they will be revealed as wood, hay, and stubble. The real thing will be made brighter by fire, while work done for wrong motives will be burned up. He talks about the wisdom of this world and how it is foolishness with God and urges the Christians to take pleasure and delight in knowing God, not in knowing men. Paul’s lessons direct them consider the importance of faithfulness to Christ and the purpose behind the varying talents and abilities Christ Himself has given to each of them. He wants them to recognize there is a greater purpose to live for than one’s own success and prosperity.

It seems that pride and arrogance were a problem for many of these believers and was causing them to err in their judgment. Paul warns them and admonishes them not to rely on their own methods of dealing with problems but rather to deal with them as God instructs them to. Over and over Paul alludes to the motives of the heart and the reasons one does what he does. He is teaching them to see the spirit of the law, not just the letter for God wants their heart, not just their compliance. Then in chapter 10 Paul directs them to consider Moses, ancient Israel and the many events they experienced before entering

the Promised Land. He explains that their history has been recorded to provide examples and warnings for all believers in order to help them avoid the mistakes they made in their desert experience. He warns them not to complain and rebel against Christ, so they are not destroyed as some were then. It's at this point that Paul gives warning to believers who think they are standing strong, but in reality are in danger of a fall.

He says, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation [trial] taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful [He cannot lie], who will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted [tried] above that ye are able; but will with the temptation [trial] also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. Wherefore [therefore], my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry." There is a wealth of encouragement in these few passages that provide tremendous help to servants experiencing weariness of mind, trials that drain one physically and bring one to the very edge of despair. Burned out Christian workers ready to quit in despair desperately need Paul's message!

Notice that Paul directs the believer to find hope, not in himself, but in the promises of a faithful God. He assures those who suffer that God does not allow a trial without also providing ways of escaping or coping with the trial. Therefore, their expectation and reliance must be on God, and not on anything or anyone else. What Israel loved most was made manifest during those times of trial. Rather than look with confidence for God's way of escape, or trust God's wisdom in what He was doing, she complained and demanded. And when she did not get what she wanted when she wanted it, she ultimately quit. As a result, this generation never inherited the land it could have enjoyed.

When difficulties and perplexing situations exhaust our strength and understanding, we are most vulnerable to solving problems by quitting, complaining, finding comfort in indulging our selfish desires or devising solutions that are in violation of God's instructions. We, as Israel, often fail to overcome temptation in times of trial because we fail to obey God's Word and keep Him foremost in our love and worship. God wants our love and devotion, not because of the gifts He gives, but because of who He is. Putting anything, including our own desires, before God is *idolatry*, therefore, Paul correctly identifies this as Israel's motivating sin and cause of despair. He not only exhorts us to put our trust in the promises and shepherding care of Christ during times of difficulty and hardship, but also warns us to flee idolatry at the same time.

Paul concludes first Corinthians with a mature description and godly perspective of love as God loves us. He urges believers to follow after charity and desire growth in their efforts to love God and love one another. Without the love of Christ, Christian workers will find it impossible to love the unlovable, the immature, the selfish and the sinful. So then we come to a favorite passage of Christian workers that offers comfort to those who labor among such difficult people. "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." (15:58)

The second letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians contains a much different message and addresses a more mature group of Christian workers. Evidently they took Paul's words to heart and grew tremendously, as evidenced by their obedience and application of Paul's instruction. Chapter three and four contain more encouragement to those who are serving Christ. Paul mentions the change that has taken place in believer's hearts and declares the source of all change and all sufficiency to be of God. He says, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." (3:18) The very next verse begins Paul's testimony as to why he does not faint and quit in light of all the difficulty he endures. "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not..." (4:1)

Paul's focus is not himself. He says plainly that he does not elevate himself, but Christ Jesus the Lord and gladly considers himself a servant for Jesus' sake. Further into the chapter he tells us that the light of the glory of God is a treasure we who believe enjoy. What a treasure it is to have Christ! What a privilege to know the Gospel and be given the ministry of taking such good news to those who are living in darkness and sin! Our human nature is weak and frail, and yet God so empowers and enables us that we can carry out the supernatural work of God. Clearly, such a miracle demonstrates, not our strength, but that the "excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." (verse 7)

Paul then describes the kind of trouble that can be expected by every Christian who labors to help unbelievers and young Christians grow in grace. Yet in spite of it all, Paul's confidence is unshaken and his determination unmoved because he draws upon an inward renewing, a wealth of sustaining grace, comfort, and provision found in Christ. He tells us plainly why he does not faint. He does not neglect to keep himself inwardly focused on Christ, and on an eternal perspective. His thoughts are not on his temporary problems, but on the purpose for his life and ministry, and on the plight of souls that exist for all eternity. He tells us, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." (4:17-18)

Before a weary traveler will ever find the supernatural sustaining grace of God, his perspective will first need to be aligned with Christ. Without a committed relationship with Christ, and a clear sense of eternal direction, practical considerations as to which step to take next will be unclear. All the advice in the world, no matter how good, will not heal a broken or discouraged heart. When Elijah became discouraged and wanted to quit, the ministering angel God sent didn't scold or berate him. Elijah was allowed to sleep, was given food to strengthen his body, and was led to a quiet place to be alone with God. God didn't leave him without direction, comfort, or sustaining grace, but provided all he needed to keep going and finish the work he was called to do.

Helping a Christian who is tired, wounded, confused or perplexed starts with encouraging rest, providing plenty of genuine love and friendship, sitting down to eat some good biblical food together, and then entering into prayer and intercession for spiritual growth

and God's supernatural grace. Earthly priorities will be impossible to sort out if first priority isn't given to one's relationship with Christ. Amazingly, when our heart is fully trusting our Lord and our focus is realigned upon the author and finisher of our faith, the circumstances of our life begin to fall in place, one step at a time, and we are able to see clearly those ways of escape that are always there.

In closing, I want to quote a favorite prayer that many workers can relate to and find comfort in, and *pray themselves*. David knew all about Christian worker "burn out," and he triumphed over it. Read slowly and listen to his heart and his prayer to the Lord. Notice the many things he requests of God with full confidence that they will be received.

"In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be put to confusion. Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape; incline thine ear unto me, and save me. Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort; thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress. Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man. For thou art my hope, O Lord God; thou art my trust from my youth. By thee have I been holden up from the womb; thou art he that took me out of my mother's bowels; my praise shall be continually of thee. I am a wonder to many; but thou art my strong refuge. Let my mouth be filled with thy praise and with thy honour all the day. Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth. For mine enemies speak against me; and they that lay wait for my soul take counsel together, saying, God hath forsaken him; persecute and take him; for there is none to deliver him. O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste for my help. Let them be confounded and consumed that are adversaries to my soul; let them be covered with reproach and dishonour that seek my hurt. But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee more and more. My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof. I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only. O God, thou hast taught me from my youth; and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things; O God, who is like unto thee! Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shall quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God; unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed. My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long; for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt."

Psalm 71

