



THE FOCUSED **PASTOR**

# Why Pastors are **BURNT OUT,** **WANT TO QUIT, &** **WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

BY DAVID MURRAY



# Why Pastors are Burnt Out, Want to Quit, and What to do About It

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**David Murray** (DMin, PhD) is a PCA pastor serving as Senior Pastor of First Byron CRC in West Michigan. He has taught at various seminaries and written several books including *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture*, *Christians Get Depressed Too*, and *The StoryChanger*. He is married to Shona and they have five children aged 9-26.



For by grace you have  
been saved through faith.  
And this is not your  
own doing; it is the gift  
of God, not a result of  
works, so that no one  
may boast.

**EPHESIANS 2:8-9**

## Introduction

Fellow-pastor, do you feel as if your fire's gone out? Or, if not extinguished, you're barely smoking embers. You look back on your ministry of even just a few years ago and remember how on fire you were for the Lord, for his church, for his people, and for lost souls. But now you are painfully charred and barely smoldering.

You feel exhausted: You are emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, and relationally drained. The volume of work, and its sheer complexity, has left you empty and running on fumes. "How can I keep going like this?"

You feel cynical: You have negative perceptions and feelings about those you serve or serve with. When you think of your congregation, other leaders, or your staff, you feel numb, detached, distant, or skeptical. "They have no idea what they're doing, and they have no idea about all that I'm doing."

You feel ineffective: No matter how many hours you put in or how hard you work, you feel like you are just spinning your wheels. There's a lot of motion but little movement. "My work produces nothing worthwhile, and I don't feel equipped for all the roles I'm being asked to fill."

Do you recognize yourself? Does this toxic trinity of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness sound way too much like your own biography? If so, you've probably asked yourself: "What's wrong with me and how can I fix it?"

I've been there too, having burnt out three times, and asked that question many times. But God has also brought me through these painful times into better times, and he's taught me much about himself and myself in the process. I'm writing this to share some of what I've learned with you in the hope that God will use it to help burnt out pastors answer that painful question: "What's wrong with me and how can I fix it?" Let's start with a brief look at "What's wrong with me?" then a longer look at "How can I fix it?"

## What's Wrong With Me? The Toxic Trinity

Exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness are the toxic trinity that combine in different proportions to create burnout. That's why burnout has been defined as "a state of exhaustion in which one is cynical about the value of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform."<sup>1</sup>

This toxic trinity explains why in 2022, 42% of pastors considered quitting full-time ministry (exceeding the 2021 record of 29%). Think about it, that's almost half of all pastors who want to quit ministry altogether, not just their present church.

When asked "Why?" 56% of pastors identified stress, 43% underlined loneliness, 38% highlighted political divisions, 29% pointed to the toll ministry has taken on their families, and 29% said they were pessimistic about the future of their church. These and other less-frequently cited causes combine to create different ratios of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness, and ultimately result in burnout.

The first two times I burnt out in ministry were due to exhaustion. I had been working too hard for too long, and my body eventually said, "Enough!" I ended up with blood clots in my lungs that almost killed me. I made some big changes to my lifestyle, but they didn't last, and within 18 months I defaulted to overworking again.

When I ended up in a hospital a second time, with more life-threatening blood clots in my lungs, my wife, a family physician, warned me, "David, three-strikes and you're out!" This time I knew that the necessary lifestyle changes had to be permanent, and they were. I slept 7-8 hours every night, took a full day off every week, exercised regularly, ate better, went fishing more often, and strictly regulated my media and social media diet.

So, seven years later, when I found myself burnt out again, I couldn't understand it. My work-life balance was better than most and I was physically healthy, yet here I was, demotivated, de-energized, and depressed. I was mentally fried and emotionally frayed. "What's wrong with me, and how do I fix it?"

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<sup>1</sup> Maslach, C., Jackson, S.E., and Leiter, M.P. MBI: The Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1996), 20.

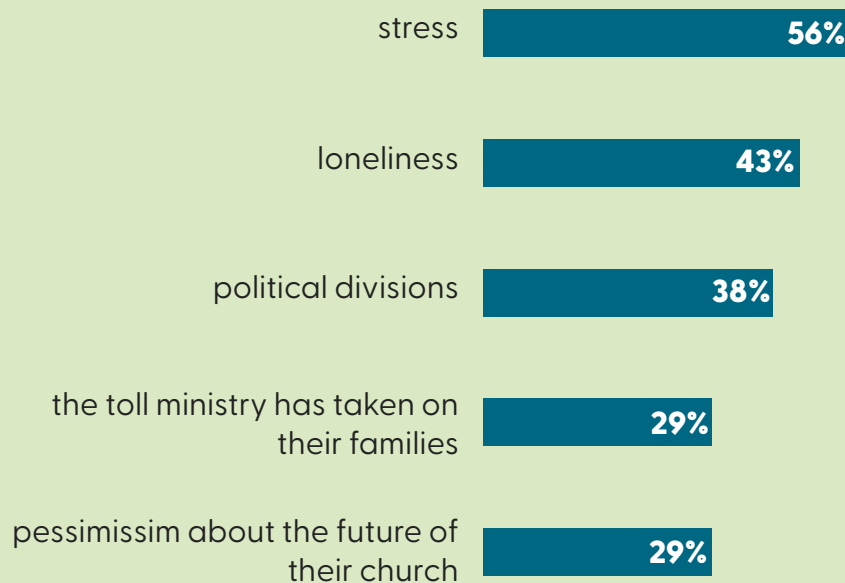
# The Toxic Trinity

EXHAUSTION  
CYNICISM  
INEFFECTIVENESS

In 2022,

**42%** of pastors considered quitting full-time ministry  
(exceeding the 2021 record of 29%)

Ministry challenges of pastors who considered quitting full-time ministry in 2022:



That's when I came across the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) online.<sup>2</sup> "I'll give this a try," I thought, hoping it might solve the mystery. When I filled out the questionnaire, it showed decent scores for physical energy and effectiveness, but my cynicism level was awful. It immediately made sense because I'd been deeply discouraged in the months prior by how Christians I highly respected dealt with a case of sexual assault. It was hard not to be cynical when people who preached and taught high morals seemed more concerned for the oppressor than the oppressed. I learned that burnout was much more complex than just physical exhaustion. Cynicism can drain our gas tanks as much as overwork.

Over the years, as I've written and talked about pastoral burnout, I've taken calls from many burnt out pastors. A common scenario is of pastors who become burnt out after moving to a larger church. Sometimes it's been exhaustion but more commonly it's been a horrible sense of ineffectiveness. While good at preaching sermons and pastoring people, many of these pastors were not gifted or equipped to manage staff, lead meetings, or organize the administration of a large organization. So much of their time was taken up with tasks and duties they were not gifted or trained for, that they had little time for preaching and pastoring, their primary skills and joys. In their case,

burnout resulted from their horrible sense of being ill-equipped and ineffective in their roles.

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**Cynicism can drain our gas tanks as much as overwork.**

Each of these factors—exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness—have multiplied in frequency and intensity because of the political and pandemic

divisions of recent years, both in our society and in our churches. Little wonder that so many pastors are burnt out and considering quitting the ministry altogether.

So, before going any further, I recommend that you take the Maslach Burnout Inventory

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<sup>2</sup> Maslach Burnout Inventory, mindgarden.com, <https://www.mindgarden.com/117-maslach-burnout-inventory-mbi>. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is recognized as the leading measure of burnout and validated by 35+ years of extensive research. The MBI measures burnout as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and it is used in 88% of burnout research publications (Boudreau, Boudreau & Mauthe-Kaddoura, 2015).

(MBI).<sup>3</sup> Select the one that includes the Workers in Human Services questions (MBI-HSS) and use the extensive feedback to identify the particular mix of the toxic trinity—exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness—that may be poisoning you and your ministry.

You may think you don't need this because you already know what's wrong. Or, more likely, maybe you know you need it, but you don't want to hear the diagnosis. We like to view ourselves, and be viewed, as super-human and super-spiritual. We tend to think that we'll let God and the Christian community down if we admit our weaknesses and struggles.

The Apostle Paul would think we're mad. "Have you not read my second letter to the Corinthians?" he would ask us. There, as nowhere else, we see the naked honesty of burnt out Paul and his temptation to give up due to exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. He doesn't hide it but lets it all hang out (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 2:1-4; 4:7-12; 6:3-12; 7:2-3; 10:9-10; 11:23-29; 12:5-10; 13:1-4). Why? Because he had learned that the way to escape exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness was to start by admitting them—admitting them to ourselves, to our family, to our friends, and even to our church.

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This is where the MBI can be so useful. It helps us to face ourselves honestly, face others honestly, and face God honestly. We see objectively where we are, who we are, and how we are. All our denial, lying, deceit, and confusion are chased out by this objective assessment and analysis. However, while the MBI tells us what's wrong, why it went wrong, and provides some practical suggestions for making things right, it's not a Christian resource and therefore cannot recommend the extra resources that Christians need. That's what we want to turn our attention to now. Having figured out what's wrong, we can now, by God's grace, begin to make things right. And it's God's grace that's the main solution.

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3 Maslach Burnout Inventory, [mindgarden.com](https://www.mindgarden.com/117-maslach-burnout-inventory-mbi), <https://www.mindgarden.com/117-maslach-burnout-inventory-mbi>. The one you want is [Report About Me: Toolkit for Human Services](#). You may also want to take the Pandemic Experiences and Perceptions Survey.





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## How Do I Put It Right? God's Grace Fuels Us

Having experienced burnout a few times myself, and having counseled many pastors through burnout, I've noticed that most of us had major deficits of grace in our lives. It wasn't that we didn't believe in grace. Not at all. We all preached the saving grace of God every Sunday (Eph. 2:8-9). But for all our faith in and proclamation of saving grace, there were five other kinds of God's grace that were missing in our lives (or at dangerously low levels). Over time, I saw that the answer to burnout is to grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18), and therefore I want us to fill up at five pumps of grace we may not have visited for a while.

### Motivating Grace

What motivates you? What makes you do what you do? If you want to burn out, here's how to answer that question: money, people-pleasing, reputation, guilt, and so on. These are contaminated fuel that will damage your engine. The only motivation that prevents burnout is the grace of gratitude, which is gratitude for grace. We connect to this premium fuel by daily asking ourselves this question: "In view of God's amazing grace to me in Christ, how can I, fueled by gratitude, serve God and others?"

Two pastors can do exactly the same things outwardly, but they can be doing them for two completely different reasons, with two completely different results inside. The pastor who is motivated by money, or ambition, or guilt, or pleasing people, is literally burning out. Stress hormones such as cortisol will eventually take its toll on his whole body. It's not called "burnout" for nothing.

On the other hand, the pastor who is motivated by grace, who is motivated by Christ's love (2 Cor. 5:14), while looking like the other pastor on the outside, looks totally different on the inside. His joy in the Gospel releases pleasure hormones such as dopamine and oxytocin, which will have a more positive physiological effect.

Motivating grace says, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." That's a Gospel fuel that not only powers the soul but heals the body.

We Can Avoid Burnout  
When we are Fueled by...

grace

Motivating

Moderating

Multiplying

Receiving

Releasing



## Moderating Grace

Perfectionism is a common factor in burnout. We demand perfection in every area of life and berate ourselves if we fall short in any way. We exhaust ourselves trying to be perfect, get cynical about ourselves when we don't, and end up feeling ineffective in all we do.

Gospel grace, though, moderates our expectations (of ourselves and others) because we've learned at the foot of the cross that we are not perfect and never will be. We don't torment ourselves with this, however. Rather we take our failings to God knowing that he forgives every shortcoming and lovingly accepts us and our work as perfect in Christ. We don't need to serve, sacrifice, or suffer our way to human or divine approval because Christ has already served, sacrificed, and suffered for us (Heb. 10:12). Grace changes our pace and our peace.

Moderating grace says, "Accepted, accepted, accepted" (Eph. 1:6). After a day of fails and falls, that will help us sleep quicker, deeper, and longer.

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## Multiplying Grace

If everything depends on us, then we're going to be totally stressed and totally depressed. But if we depend on God for everything, we bring our meager abilities, energies, and efforts to the God who in his grace can multiply them way beyond our expectations (Matt. 14:13-21). We will give him our few loaves and fishes, knowing that his multiplying grace can expand them into a feast for thousands.

Multiplying grace stops us from working so long and so hard that we damage ourselves. Instead we work reasonable hours at a reasonable speed with reasonable expectations of ourselves because we recognize that one plants, another waters, but God alone gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

Multiplying grace says, "Multiply, multiply, multiply." When we feel our lives are full of division and subtraction, God's grace not only gives addition but multiplication

## Releasing Grace

Some pastors have controlling tendencies and refuse to delegate or trust others. They are micro-managers who try to be sovereign in every area of their lives (and of others). But an ongoing experience of God's sovereign grace releases control to the sovereign God.

Yes, we work carefully and responsibly, but also humbly submit to setbacks and problems accepting them as tests of trust in God's control. Yes, we urge staff and our congregation to excel for the edifying of the saints (1 Cor. 14:12), but we also accept that even the best people will disappoint us at times (2 Tim. 4:16). We release ourselves and others from our sovereignty.

Yes, we use digital media to stay informed about what's happening in God's world, and we use social media to promote the Gospel in God's world, but we also practice releasing there too. By grace, we release the pressure to know everything, comment on everything, and keep up with everything. Releasing grace says, "Release, release, release." What a gift it is to give up control to God.

## Receiving Grace

God loves to give good gifts to his children (Matt. 7:11; James 1:17). Weirdly, though, his children don't always want to receive his good gifts. God offers the daily gift of sufficient sleep (Ps. 127:2), the weekly gift of a full rest day (Isa. 58:13; Mark 2:27), and the regular gifts of exercise, friends, Christian fellowship, hobbies, vacations, etc. Yet, instead of humbly receiving these beautifully wrapped and good gifts of God, we say, "No thanks. Don't need!" and reject them as something only for the weak or the half-hearted Christian.

But receiving grace says, "Receive, receive, receive." By grace, we humbly and gratefully accept, receive, and use God's good gifts for our good and his glory. And we do so without any guilt.<sup>4</sup>

These five deeply energizing grace-fuels—Thankyou, Accepted, Multiply, Release, and Receive—will replace grace deficits grace surpluses. As we fill up at these always-open pumps, we'll replace exhaustion with enthusiasm, cynicism with optimism, and ineffectiveness with productivity.

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4 For help in building better habits when it comes to diet, exercise, sleep, rest, etc. I recommend James Clear's book, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*.



We are not all-powerful like God. Rather, we are limited creatures with limited power. We can glorify God better if we learn to manage the energy supply he has given us. Doing this doesn't replace our dependence on the Holy Spirit. It relies on the Holy Spirit to lead us to know our limits.

## The Energy Project

Having filled up with God's fuel, we now need help with managing our new God-given energy levels, if we want to keep running happily and efficiently. Better energy management may seem like a strange concept, especially if we are used to thinking that better time management is the answer to burnout. But I agree with Tony Schwartz of The Energy Project, who famously and frequently says, "Manage your energy, not your time."<sup>5</sup> His basic idea is that we cannot increase our hours without burnout, but we can increase our energy to avoid burnout.

He explains this further in his book, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to Performance and Personal Renewal*.<sup>6</sup> Although not an explicitly Christian book, if we use care and discernment, we can use it to learn how to please God by being better stewards of our God-given energy (1 Pet. 4:10-11), one of the most valuable gifts God gives us (Matt. 25:14-30).

We need help with energy management. We are not all-powerful like God. Rather, we are limited creatures with limited power. We can glorify God better if we learn to manage the energy supply he has given us. Doing this doesn't replace our dependence on the Holy Spirit. It relies on the Holy Spirit to lead us to know our limits.

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**Our biggest problem today, and a huge factor in every burnout I've seen, is that there is no clear separation between working and resting.**

Our biggest problem today, and a huge factor in every burnout I've seen, is that there is no clear separation between working and resting. We are never in full expenditure mode, and we are never in full income mode. We are never 100% working, and we are never 100% resting. We do personal stuff while at work and work stuff when at home, on our day off, and on vacation. The result is that we are neither working well nor resting well. Mixing work with rest and rest with work results in poor work and poor rest.

People's expectations of 24/7/365 pastoral availability and of immediate digital responses to emails, texts, calls, voicemails, messages, have demolished the boundary

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5 The Energy Project, [theenergyproject.com](http://theenergyproject.com).

6 Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to Performance and Personal Renewal* (Free Press, 2003).

between work and rest, resulting in worse work and worse rest. Rebuilding the work/rest wall will result in far better work and far better rest, far more work and far more rest.

Older pastors may say, “Well I was always available.” That may be, but they didn’t have a digital device glued to their hand beeping and buzzing at all times of the day and night with multiple communications through multiple channels. Those who try to be always available will end up being unavailable, as the pastoral burnout figures prove.

It’s going to take some work to change people’s expectations, but it can be done by communicating clear boundaries, explaining the “Why?” behind them, delegating care and communication responsibilities during stated times, and then letting the results speak for themselves. I know from my own and other pastors’ experience that this will result in better sermons and better pastoral care, as well as better pastors and better churches.

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**With God’s help and blessing, we can fix our complex problem of burnout by fueling with more of God’s grace and stewarding that God-given fuel more wisely.**

“What’s wrong with me and how can I fix it?” With God’s help and blessing, we can fix our complex problem of burnout by fueling with more of God’s grace and stewarding that God-given fuel more wisely.



1-877-233-4455

[thefocusedpastor@fotf.org](mailto:thefocusedpastor@fotf.org)  
[focusonthefamily.com/pastor](https://focusonthefamily.com/pastor)

