

Pastoral Burnout: Dangers and Encouragements

Mack Tomlinson | *Interview*

James: You maybe already answered this, but has there been a season in which you've struggled with being burned out as a pastor? And if so, what helped you to get out of that season?

Mack: Well, in the last 18 years of pastoring in the same church, I don't think I've had burnout. What I would call that: seasons of discouragement, seasons of weariness, tiredness. But we have to learn to pace ourselves. We have to learn to intentionally rest. Renew ourselves. Step aside and rest awhile as Jesus told His disciples. And I think what's helped me to avoid sinking into times like that is being intentional about times of rest, times of going to a lake house three days with my wife. And literally doing nothing. No agenda. No schedule. No social media. Reading my Bible. Taking a nap. Being with her. Sitting on the back porch looking at the lake. No schedule. Just unwind. I have a pastor friend of mine who after 40 years of ministry one day, his body literally shut down. He was used to preaching and teaching six times a week. He ran five miles every day. He was athletic. And one day his body shut down and he had a breakdown. And what was determined ultimately was the ministry, the teaching, the lack of breaks - his body could not continue to go on the adrenaline physically. The adrenaline needed to preach and be before people. It was overload. His body finally said: I can't take anymore. I'm stopping. (incomplete thought) And he recovered, but he had to stop doing 40% of what he had been doing. John Piper said we have to pay our debts to our body. And so we have to know ourselves. We have to intentionally plan time off. Vacations are a spiritual thing. They're spiritual. To get away, there's all kinds of effects, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, socially. We've got to have that change to disconnect and reboot. And so that's what I've learned. We renew our strength that way. And it's actually a spiritual thing because it enables us to have longevity of fruitful ministry more.

James: Have there been any other pastors who you've known who have gotten burned out in the pastoral ministry and they never got back into it? And if so, what was going on there?

Mack: I have several close friends over the years, that that very thing happened to them. In their cases, they were pastoring churches - these were very good men, sound men, good preachers, real pastor's hearts. They weren't hirelings. And their churches treated them wrong or put pressure on them wrong or were demanding too much of them. And they began to burn out. And/or they were forced out of their church because they weren't producing enough. And the power players in the church were controlling things which is obviously very unbiblical. Your church government and what kind of leadership you have will control that issue. Because when you have a plurality in ministry and a team of elders and a team of deacons that serve at the pleasure of the elders, a couple of couples can't resist a team and try to attack them. But anyway, I saw these friends have to leave pastoring. They were wounded, discouraged, and then they're at this crossroads. Can I take it again? I'm too hurt. I can't do it now again. But they have children. They take a job. They settle in to raising a family, providing. And they get settled where they are. And then they get to be 40 years old, even, and they're settled in their career. And I'm sure the calling of God is still on them. But they can't find a way back. They don't feel like, for whatever reason, they can stop everything, start all over again. Will the same thing happen to us that happened before? I couldn't take it again. And maybe they don't feel like they could plant a church. So they never pastor again. And it's really sad to me because the burnout got them.

James: And there's not enough good men out there as it is.

Mack: I mean, I would say to any brother like that who's got a pastor's heart and was in ministry, and he's not anymore, and he's trying to be faithful, but the nagging is there, and he knows the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. If I was ever called to preach the Gospel, and I haven't disqualified myself through sin, am I not still called? Lord, I'm willing. Show me what You want.

James: What have been your greatest encouragements as a pastor?

Mack: For me, I think, as pastors and preachers, we're first Christians. And we need fellowship. And it's easy for preachers to be in the preaching mode and not maintain real fellowship just as Christians. And so maintaining real fellowship, being with brothers, sitting under preaching that feeds me, doing the things that I need to do as a Christian to stay encouraged and grow, never mind being a preacher. Those are the things that have encouraged me the most - to be with the brethren, and be stirred up. And I think even more specifically, to pray with brothers. There's something about praying with another brother in your church or

a fellow pastor or a brother in the Lord that likes to pray. Praying with them always is a real encouragement to me.

So those things are basic things, but the things God uses to bring encouragement into our lives are the basic things: His Word, true fellowship, and keeping myself under edifying preaching that feeds my heart. You know, at this point in my life, I'm not interested in intellectual, high theology preaching that just feeds my mind or just gives me information. I want something that will stir my heart, that will stir my love for Christ, that preaches to my conscience, my affections, and really brings me in touch with God. And automatically, encouragement comes.

Along that line of encouragements, one of the biggest means of encouragement in my life, to stir me, to refresh me, to encourage me, to inspire me, really has probably just been the regular reading of Christian biography and the lives of the saints in the past. Because you see how God worked in their lives when they were sinful, when they were needy; how He shaped their lives, and equipped them; how He kept them and provided for them; how He used them. And reading the lives of saints from the past is just a huge inspiration. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says reading Christian biography was the biggest tonic for his soul. He'd be refreshed so much. And that's been the case with me too. Only when you do it and experience it does the reality and the fragrance of another Christian's walk in what they experience becomes communicated to you. It becomes incarnational. And you see, man, his life is such an inspiration to me. And you go away longing to be that way. And you go away with new lessons of: I could do that that he did. I hadn't thought about that, you know. And you're adding to your faith and you're growing. So it really is true.