

BURNOUT- A REFINING FIRE

A Testimony

By Reverend Austin Miles
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BRENTWOOD, CA (ANS) -- To suddenly find yourself piled up in an ash-heap of burnout is, by its nature, a defining moment. A significant milestone that subtly offers two choices even though no options of choice appear conceivable to the fractured heart. Natural impulse takes control.

Whether the burnout arises from the stress of overwork, lack of time for oneself, trying to be too many things to too many people or callous mistreatment and injustice by others, the symptoms are the same; severe hurt, an intense, growing feeling of hopelessness, betrayal, self-doubt, anger, bitterness, outrage and often, a thundering passion for revenge.

I went through it all, and every one of those reactive traits developed rapidly within me. Not possessing the maturity to assess the lesson that might be learned through the experience, and what role my own personality may have played in the events, I automatically chose retreat instead of regroup, and began to strike out at everyone who had hurt me. And I did it publicly, taking the dispute to national television.

I defiantly left the ministry with a vow never to return. The worst years of my life followed. My rebellion grew to the point that God found it necessary to send me to the pits where I could truly hear His voice.

When I first entered the ministry, I had plenty of money and recognition. I was doing most of it in the flesh instead of depending upon God to guide me. My self-sufficient attitude had blocked me from true usefulness in the ministry. Everything that was important to my life had to be stripped away.

When my rebellion would not subside, my wife Shirley, who had been trying to get me to focus on God instead of man, finally said, "You are like Moses out in the desert. He was kept there for 40 years while God tried to work out something in his life. (As it was, we were living in a desert town in California.)

"Now if you want to keep wandering around in this desert for 40 years, I will of course stay with you, but you could make it so much easier for all of us, you, me, and God and everybody else if you would just yield and try to find out exactly what God wants to do with your life. And by the way, you're even beginning to look like Moses!" (Editor's note: Austin has a full white beard.)

Life became meaningless. I had gone back into show business, but found it totally empty and unfulfilling.

Plus there were growing health problems. The conflict I wrestled with took its toll, which increased my anger.

I published a scathing book titled, "Don't Call Me Brother," as an outlet, detailing all that had happened to me. The book, which immediately became a bestseller, created a furor in the church world that resulted in harassment and death threats, which only served to turn the anger I had toward Christians into hatred.

While the book did well, it did not give me the peace or satisfaction I had expected. Panic attacks became prevalent. The anxiety became unmanageable. Death would have been welcomed.

In the midst of the chaos, God had a Divine plan and used three men and a poodle to get me back on track.

One of those men, David Balsiger, who was working on the CBS TV Special, Ancient Secrets of The Bible, called me after reading my book and asked me to appear on the special as a skeptic, which I eagerly did. David was a solid Christian who treated me with refreshing acceptance, warmth and respect.

Two other men, Rev. Lee Regier, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Concord, California, and Rev. Rick Hahn of Sebastopole (California) Christian Church, reached out to me with unconditional love when I was at my worst. They showed me great understanding while at the same time exemplifying what a Christian should be. And my poodle, named Deputy, defined what unconditional love really means.

It was the unexpected death of Pastor Lee Regier, with whom I had formed a close relationship, that turned the tide. Even though I had vowed never to enter a church again, I did for his funeral. The 500-seat church was packed to overflowing, with people spilling out into the street. This was not just a gathering of people fulfilling the rites of a ritual. No, every one of the people squeezed in and around the church had each one, individually, been deeply touched for the good, by the life and love of this gentle giant who walked with God. His congregants reflected what kind of man Pastor Lee was. These Christians were not nutty, fanatic or hate-filled. They were loving, beautiful people.

The crowd consisted of weeping teen-agers, young people, old people, rich people, poor people, a couple of mentally handicapped people, two disabled people in wheel chairs, an attractive woman on crutches, all who had been deeply touched by this pastor who had enriched all of their lives. They all felt equal, at home and loved by him. His departure left an enormous gap in the area and deep sorrow.

Five ministers and two lay ministers participated in this extraordinary, moving tribute. I have never seen so many men...macho men, (try in vain to) fight back tears over another man. All the speakers had a rough time keeping their composure. Pastor Lee was the pastor's pastor, a gift from God. What a loss! I realized it too late.

Then I got mad. I thought of how I had allowed my bitterness to rob me of the blessings I could have received at the hands of Pastor Lee. I chose my times with him to unload on him all of my anger and resentment toward everything he represented instead of tapping into the wellspring of knowledge and spiritual uplifting that was there for the taking.

Pastor Lee graciously allowed for me to dump all of these things on him while he continued to love me. He was interested only in my spiritual welfare.

As that service went on, I realized exactly how much I had missed. Oh I was indeed blessed greatly by knowing him, but I could have enjoyed him more had I not been in a state of blindness, a state that I voluntarily entered.

A perfect example of Christian conduct and responsibility had been presented to me. And unbeknownst to me at the time (I just didn't grasp it), God had sent me a mentor and an example to follow.

I vowed then and there, at that funeral, that I would return to my calling and seek God unlike any time in my life. I vowed to make peace within myself (which would take some major house cleaning).

Turning to Shirley, I said, "You may think that I am crazy, but I am going to return to the ministry and God's service."

Shirley was not only supportive but also relieved. She had lived through the anger and resulting defeat that I was wallowing in. And I surely had been most difficult to be around.

With God's perfect timing, The E.C. Reems Bible Institute of Oakland, California, announced a course for ministers at their Pittsburg, California campus, which was a black church called Center of Hope. I enrolled rather anonymously which was not easy considering that I was the only white person in the class.

But the professor, Herma Ross, was not concerned about who I was or was not or who I had been. Her only interest was that I was there to learn from her. She welcomed me and opened the Bible to me like it had never been opened before. She was (and still is) an incredibly gifted instructor.

The graduation took place at the Center of Hope Church in Oakland. Professor Ross asked me to give a mini-sermon. I stood behind a pulpit for the first time since I had retreated in burnout several years before, something I had said I would never do again.

It was another defining moment. The message (on the Apostle Paul) took hold unlike anything I had ever preached. It had become obvious. The message came from the heart. During the years before, the message came from head knowledge.

During the service, several in the congregation from the Institute suddenly realized with amazement who I was; that I had been a regular on the PTL Club and other major Christian telecasts, then later appeared on major secular telecasts denouncing the church and had written a book.

They knew about me but had not tied any of the connections to my name. Herma Ross said that she could not understand why she, as the dean of the institute, had asked me to speak at the graduation since I was so very quiet in class. She came to know the significance of the occasion and her encouragement continues to this day.

During my time in the pits, or perhaps God's Boot Camp, I came to the realization that I would have been hard to take in those days of my previous ministry. My attitude provoked much of the hostility against me. I was indeed full of myself (as Joyce Meyer would say) along with a strong ego, which had carried over from my life in an ego-driven business.

It is our ego that can't take criticism and causes us to strike back at any perceived slight and to stand up and vigorously defend ourselves. I could identify with St. Augustine who said that he had an uncontrollable lust to vindicate himself.

And yes, my ego demanded that I be constantly recognized which resulted in too much attention, which stirred up a lot of resentment among Christians. That ego had to be tossed out the window. As Oswald Chambers wrote, we must give up all rights to ourselves.

God commanded me to forgive those who had hurt me and to ask for forgiveness. This was the toughest assignment of all and I had to ask God's strength and love to attempt to do it. I really had to put myself aside in order to accomplish this. I traveled to many places to do this personally and the blessings that resulted surpassed anything I could have imagined.

I gave away all the money I made from my book, actually more than I earned--over \$100,000 to various ministries until I had nothing left in my bank account.

And I tried to undo any harm I had caused by my denunciations of the church and religion in general, hoping desperately to reach any soul I may have turned off.

While the attacks and persecution from the church was severe, I now thoroughly understood how I managed to bring out the worst in people through my own self-centeredness.

And during another attack from an unexpected source, God spoke to me and said that he would not change the problem, but would change me through the problem.

Then He said, "Through this you will have the opportunity to develop character, humility and grace. You have never excelled in grace. I will walk with you through this and if you will obey Me, you will come out the other side in victory and then be truly fit to be My servant. Until you learn what I am trying to teach you, I will keep sending you problems until you do."

Starting all over, with nothing, not even a favorable reputation due to the incredible stories being circulated about me, I devoted two years to working with the homeless and addicted, preaching, teaching, helping serve food and cleaning up afterwards.

It was there that I really learned how to preach the Word rather than making a presentation.

I enrolled in college for the first time to begin a degree program, and graduated with honors.

The ministry has been restored and more fruitful than ever. I have never enjoyed it more, and my relationship with God is finally on solid ground.

David Balsiger called me to do a second Ancient Secrets of the Bible Television Special for CBS TV. I told him that there had been a change in my life. For this one, I worked as a researcher, writer and technical consultant.

I had brought on the burnout because of my lack of total focus on God. My own insecurities, precisely because my focus was in the wrong direction, made me appear overbearing and self-centered. The grace that God wanted for me to exhibit was not there. Yes, I would have been hard to take. This is why I have deliberately not elaborated on what was done to me or by whom. This is all over and buried. Thank God my old self has finally been buried as well; cremated through the flames of burnout. The defining moment became a refining moment.

I have learned that burnout, properly handled, can indeed be a refining fire that allows you to regroup and come forth as gold. Remaining in the smoldering ashes of burnout is to experience hell without passing Go and without collecting \$200.

I urge all of you who are in the midst of burnout and those who may be approaching it to take charge of it without delay instead of it taking charge of you.

Don't throw in the towel or even think of quitting. Instead, consider it a time of learning and a time for expansion. Dare to examine yourself critically. Be honest with yourself. God is trying to do a new thing in your life through the trial. Let Him have His way. Consider any trial the beginning of a new miracle.

Let the ashes of burnout return to ashes...dust to dust. Which takes us back to square one, a place and time for a new beginning. Then rise from those ashes with a new purpose, a regrouping and a new you. With your diploma from God's Boot Camp, you will be able to experience what real spiritual power is.

With God foremost in your life, in your work and focus, no man, thing, committee or hierarchy will ever manage to get between you and God again. This is the way it has worked for me.

I would try to impress this upon all Christians: Every soul you encounter, even those who observe you from a distance (such as the supermarket or on the street) has been entrusted to your care. You will be accountable for that soul and how your conduct affected it. A sobering thought and challenge indeed. You never know who may be struggling, even those who appear secure. Don't let anyone down.

The boot camp required of me was tough but essential. It has proved to be the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I no longer have the need for man's approval or acceptance. I am now serving Him on His terms. And the entire ministry today, for me, is joy unspeakable and full of Glory!

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