

“After thirty-five years in ministry, I can say without hesitation that I’ve never seen pastors in crisis like I’m observing right now. I’m thankful that pastor Josh Taylor has written this book. It’s helpful in ways that bring the biblical and the practical together, both for the pastor and his family as well as the congregation itself. I hope you will benefit from the insights Taylor shares in these pages.”

—**Clayton King**, pastor and overseer, Newspring Church

“In *A Preach Well Church*, pastor Josh Taylor blends transparent testimony and careful research to expose challenges that confront pastors and lead to ministerial burnout. Taylor shares from his personal experience in ministry as well as survey responses from other pastors. While painting an accurate picture of the obstacles, Taylor avoids defeatist hopelessness by offering practical tips for churches and pastors.”

—**Kristopher K. Barnett**, associate dean, Clamp Divinity School,
Anderson University

“The ministry of the Word is an intersection of heaven and earth, for God places the treasures of his glory in jars of clay. Sadly, churches often expect heaven on earth from their ministers. In this much-needed book, Josh Taylor draws from a wealth of research to offer seven practical ways to support preachers in the work of ministry ‘that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you’ (Heb 13:17).”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

A Preach Well Church

How Churches Can Stop Burning Out Pastors

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A PREACH WELL CHURCH
How Churches Can Stop Burning Out Pastors

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To Mandy, Scotty, Haddon, and Baby Peanut

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Preach Well,
Josh Taylor

Introduction: Panic Attacks and Preaching

“The anxieties which we feel in connection with our pulpit work are enough to make us old before our time.”

—CHARLES SPURGEON¹

PASTOR ANDREW AND HIS wife have decided to resign from their ministry because of the stress and toxicity that has come with it. They have endured gossip and outright lies to malign their character. Despite seeing fruit in their ministry, it has become untenable, and their family is facing joblessness and homelessness.

Pastor Bruce’s church is facing financial disaster. The church has been hemorrhaging money for months, and the account is on track to be completely dry by the end of the month. Pastor Bruce is terrified of what this means for his church and family.

Pastor Charles’s church is growing rapidly, and he is struggling to keep up. He is working long hours, and his stress levels are through the roof. One day, he collapses from exhaustion and is hospitalized. His doctor tells him that if he doesn’t take some time to relax he is at risk of having a heart attack.

Pastor Dan is under a great deal of stress. He is guiding his church through changes and updates. The church asked him to make these updates, but the congregation is not always willing to

1. Spurgeon, “Burden of the Word.”

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follow through with these changes. Pastor Dan is trying to balance the church's needs with the congregation's wishes.

Pastor Edward is working hard to revitalize a church that has been struggling due to a drop in attendance. After all their revitalization efforts, the church decides to close. Pastor Edward and his wife have been offered positions outside the church and are in the process of transitioning.

These are just a few examples of real-life pastors in crisis, but they are not unique. Many more pastors are reluctant to open up about their struggles. Pastors all around the country are struggling to keep their churches alive. Many churches face closure, and their pastors feel overwhelmed and stressed to their breaking point.

Many things make it challenging to be a pastor. We are constantly confronted by our sins, pleading for God's mercy to make us sufficient for his call on our lives. We take on the burden of other people's issues. We feel their pain. We wrestle with their questions. We try to help them through their problems. We want to help everyone, but we cannot. When we do not measure up to others' expectations, we feel discouraged. We hate to disappoint our people. When we're not reaching people, we feel like we're not doing enough. We are pulled in many directions. We have families at home that need our attention, a church going through hardship, and personal issues we are dealing with all at the same time. Sometimes, it feels like the whole world is against us. We are fighting an uphill battle. If you're a pastor, this book is for you; more importantly, if you're a church member who loves their pastor, this book is for you!

The Problem

A special issue of *Measurement, Research, and Evaluation* provided examples of research on how work-related psychological health, stress, and burnout can affect clergy. The magazine had six empirical articles and five book reviews based on research among clergy in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The study

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found that clergy burnout is a common problem, no matter what religious denomination or country the clergy are from.²

Clergy shoulder a heavy burden. From providing grief counseling to officiating funerals, clergy willingly take on the challenging task of supporting people through life's most difficult moments. Nearly one-quarter of all people in the United States seek help from clergy for help with mental illnesses.³ Clergy often negotiate tricky situations, such as what role the church should play in the surrounding community and how to spend limited church funds. Those communities around churches vary. Some communities are doing well and growing, while others seem to be dying. Such situations do not seem to have right or wrong answers, exposing clergy to criticism. Within a single congregation, church members may have differing views on how to proceed, making it impossible for clergy to satisfy everyone. And on top of all that, church members often have different expectations of the pastor's family.⁴

In 2014, 1 in 4 pastors admitted they have struggled with mental illness. Half of those pastors said the illness had been diagnosed.⁵ Stress has been a big problem for Southern Baptist ministers especially. In 2002, the number one and number two medications prescribed for Southern Baptist ministers were for stress-related diseases.⁶

Burnout

According to the International Classification of Diseases, burnout is now a legitimate medical diagnosis in the World Health Organization's handbook. According to the manual, a doctor may diagnose someone with burnout if they exhibit the following symptoms: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased

2. Lewis et al., "Clergy Work-Related Psychological Health," 1–8.

3. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Glory of God," 705.

4. Proeschold-Bell et al., "Glory of God," 705.

5. "Acute Mental Illness."

6. Hawkins, *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 49–50.

mental distance from one's job, negativism or cynicism related to one's job career, and reduced professional efficacy.⁷ In terms of "people work," burnout is a "syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do people work of some kind." It results from the long-term emotional stress that one experiences from dealing extensively with people regularly. Burnout has also been called compassion fatigue.⁸

Burnout occurs more often in vocations in which helping people is the primary focus.⁹ Pastors are susceptible to burnout because they are frequently in direct contact with people's needs. Over a long span of time, the pastor, who was once brimming with passion, initiative-taking, inspiring others to service, suddenly finds himself reduced to an ineffective and useless state. He gradually becomes isolated and depressed, remaining in bed and hiding in secret. Pastors can become overextended, over-engaged, and altogether overburdened by the emotional demands that others place upon them. The greater the number of people a pastor feels responsible for, the greater the risk of burnout.

The Priority of Preaching

Why write a book about burnout among pastors and discuss preaching? In one of my first pastoral ministries undergraduate classes, I had a professor ask the class to list the top ten things a pastor should do. Our classes' collective list looked something like this, in no particular order:

1. Administration
2. Visitation
3. Evangelism
4. Discipleship
7. Prior, "Burnout Is an Official."
8. Hart, "Depressed, Stressed, and Burned Out," 22.
9. Hart, "Depressed, Stressed, and Burned Out," 27.

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5. Counseling
6. Sermon Preparation
7. Preaching
8. Worship Services
9. Contacting Visitors
10. Meetings

I gave little thought to it. I guess I considered them all equally important, but the biblical reality is this: they are not. Notably absent was prayer—a sadly overlooked priority of pastors.

Good stewardship of a pastor's time and energy should not be measured by what they do but rather by what they focus on. Too many pastors overextend themselves and succumb to burnout because they can't say no to good things. And, equally too often, a relentless schedule filled with good things distracts us and leaves little room for our biblical primary responsibility: preaching and praying. Throughout this book, I will show how Scripture commands that preaching and praying be the pastor's priority. This is not just good advice—it is God's commandment. Preaching and prayer are Christ's priority for pastoral ministry. These responsibilities should be championed above any other task within a pastor's role. If we're going to burn out, let's commit ourselves to burning out in the pulpit and on our knees.

Another way of looking at this is instead of trying to rank a pastor's many duties into which are more important than the other, it's more fitting to conceptualize them like a solar system with planets orbiting around a sun. Preaching and praying are the sun. The importance of these two fundamental roles does not imply that all other responsibilities become insignificant or unnecessary. Instead, they become secondary in the sense that they orbit around and derive their place from preaching and praying. Pastors will take on different roles at particular times, depending on each context, but pastors must build their ministries around this core calling: praying and preaching. Make no mistake: to sacrifice preaching and prayer with some other pastoral duty would

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represent an abdication of the biblical view of the pastorate. All other responsibilities circle around this.

The New Testament repeatedly teaches that a pastor is responsible for preaching the word. As to the priority of preaching in the pastor's ministry, the apostle Paul charges young pastor Timothy in 2 Tim 4:1-2 to preach the word with five preceding intensifiers. "I solemnly exhort you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim 4:1-2). John Piper writes, "There is nothing quite like it anywhere else in Scripture. . . . I am not aware of any other biblical command that has such an extended, exalted, intensifying introduction." He continues, "I doubt that anyone has ever overstated the seriousness that Paul is seeking to awaken here."¹⁰

To be this kind of pastor, you must devote a significant amount of time and effort every week to faithfully complete the task, but once the realities of overseeing a church kick in, pastors scramble to devote time to preaching and prayer. On top of that, many church members have been under-disciplined as to preaching's importance. While some church members won't outright say it, many want their pastors to operate like successful CEOs or hospital chaplains rather than preachers of God's Word. "Of course," they say, "it goes without saying that preaching is important." Still, that sentiment betrays that preaching has been overshadowed by something more important, and leading and instructing a church about the priority of preaching is not an easy endeavor. To keep preaching the priority in the pastor's ministry will mean significantly shifting the way things have always been done for most church members. It will be exceedingly difficult for the pastor who wants to impart this biblical vision and shepherd them in this old but new way of church life.

10. Piper, *E* *a* , 66.

The Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning

The prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, stated in a sermon, “I do not know what you think about sermons; you imagine preaching is straightforward work. It is not so for me.”¹¹ The regular preaching of God’s word to God’s flock is a sacred trust that demands the utmost devotion. Even preaching can rapidly become a “burdensome joy,” as James Earl Massey dubbed it.¹² In an interview titled “The Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning,” Gardner C. Taylor said, “There is a sense, of course, in which preaching is an albatross on all of us. I go through a dreadful time on Sunday mornings getting ready to preach. Sometimes I pass laborers on my way to church and wish I were doing anything except having to come over here and get into that pulpit again.”¹³ Massey also describes the burden of preaching as “an inward pressure—indeed, as a distress.”¹⁴ He says that this feeling can be caused by many things, like our fears or doubts about our abilities, not being able to accomplish what we want, failure, or our creative juices running dry. All of these fears can make pastors want to give up!¹⁵

In an interview, when asked how preaching had affected him personally, Haddon Robinson responded, “There are all kinds of things happening in me that would shock the people in the pew if they knew. The trumpet doesn’t give an uncertain sound, but there are times when a trumpeter is uncertain.” Inevitably, pastors come to the place when they think, “Who am I to preach this? That clouds your life.” Robinson related how his wife could easily ruin him on almost any given Sunday if she just asked him when he got home from preaching, “How committed are you? Is that really true about you?” Robinson answers, “Yes, it is true. But not totally true. I can easily be made to feel like a hypocrite.”¹⁶

11. Spurgeon, “Dire Disease Strangely Cured,” 286.

12. Massey, *Burden of Preaching*, 13.

13. Muck and Robbins, “Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning.”

14. Massey, *Burden of Preaching*, 14.

15. Massey, *Burden of Preaching*, 20.

16. “Pulpit’s Personal Side.”

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On the first page in the preface of his little book *Preaching Well*, Willard F. Jabusch writes:

Sometimes preachers get discouraged, not so much because of worries concerning content or technique—as important as these are—but rather because of who we are. For preaching has a way of revealing our personal weaknesses. We tend to get weary, drained of physical and mental energy; we feel the weight of a weekly obligation. We feel guilty about our superficiality, glib and banal words, our lack of prayer and preparation. But most of all, in our most honest moments, we know we are really not worthy of such a role in the Christian community.¹⁷

Henry Baker Adams, professor of pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School, explains that it is fitting for pastors to experience exceptional stress. It is audacious to speak on behalf of the Almighty. He maintains that the pastor should spend much time meditating on what it entails to stand behind the sacred desk. Talk of sufficiency betrays one's lack of appreciation for the high responsibility and heavy burden of preaching. The prophets depended upon God to sustain them because, ultimately, preaching is supernatural. Only divinely-given capacities can accomplish the task.¹⁸

The Essential Stress of Preaching

Hans Selye, the father of stress research, defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand.”¹⁹ Based on this definition, no one can avoid stress. Donald H. Weiss observes in *Managing Stress*, “When something happens, we react to it. Stress is a part of our interpretation of the events in our situation. Only the dead cannot react to the world around them or inside themselves.”²⁰ Not all so-called “stressors” are inherently bad stress. The human body reacts in the same manner to any stress,

17. Jabusch, *Preaching Well*, 9.

18. Adams, *Preaching Well*, 83.

19. Hart, “Depressed, Stressed, And Burned Out,” 23.

20. Weiss, *Managing Stress*, 1.

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good (eustress) or bad (distress). The excitement of preaching a sermon can be as stressful as confronting an upset church member after a church business meeting. Both eustress and distress place similar demands on the human body and can wreak havoc.

So, experiencing stress related to preaching does not mean there is something wrong with the pastor. Not experiencing stress at all would seem more questionable. There is an essential stress to preaching. The hours that pastors put into praying and preparing a sermon strain the mind and the body. They wrestle with honest questions regarding the text and the discrepancies they perceive in their own lives. Pastors pour themselves out, pleading with listeners to repent of their sins and wholeheartedly entrust themselves to Christ. Often, no one seems to change. It's also not unusual for fatigue to set in after the adrenaline rush of preaching. There are reasons pastors talk about the "Monday blues."

A Shared Burden

So, why write to church members about a pastor's problem? One of the first lessons that my pastor growing up passed along to me, from a long line of sage advice from pastors, was this: this calling is the best because of the people, and this calling is the worst because of the people. My contention is that pastoral burnout is a shared problem, so it requires a shared solution. It's time to recognize that pastoral burnout is a church problem. The best remedy lies in a collective effort. It will require the love and sacrifice of those within the church to overcome it.

Pastors are often surrounded by people, but that does not mean they receive support from them. Besides other pastors, few people understand the isolation of the pastorate. One survey found that 23 percent of pastors "sometimes get the social and emotional support [they] need," while 6 percent "rarely" or "never" get it.²¹ When pastors do reach out to others for help to cope with ministry demands, they usually speak to their spouses.

21. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *ad ad ed*, 128.

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Research participants were asked, “What relationships have been most significant in supporting and empowering your preaching ministry?” The most significant support comes from the pastor’s relationship with his wife (see figure 1).

What relationships have been most significant in supporting and empowering your preaching ministry?



Figure 1. Most Significant Supportive Relationship.

Research participants also were asked, “How do you evaluate your sermon?” A pastor asks his wife for feedback on the message (see figure 2).

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How do you evaluate your sermon?



Figure . Sermon Evaluation.

Confiding in and sharing emotions with someone makes you feel less lonely and stressed. This is often helpful, even if you don't get any new ideas or observations.²² Sadly, some pastors do not feel comfortable talking about their problems with other pastors in their local associations and state conventions because they feel like there is too much competition between them. In addition, pastors sometimes feel it is risky to be transparent with church members. Even if they take the plunge and are rewarded with a reliable friendship with a fellow church member, it often doesn't last long because people move to other churches or communities. However, pastors must not face stress alone.

When a pastor exhibits symptoms of burnout, it is often difficult for local churches to address the issue gently and frankly. Church members perceive "something is off" with the pastor. He

22. Proeschold-Bell and Byassee, *a a d a c e d*, 68.

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is different from what he used to be, but they cannot pin down the cause. Most churches want their pastors to be successful, but they don't always know how to help. The church may choose to look the other way, hoping it will resolve on its own. Churches too easily end up with patterns of behavior that make it harder for the pulpit and the pew.²³ All the while, the pastor may be unaware of the problem, too embarrassed to address it, or does not know how to approach the church about it. Churches can fix this by setting reasonable minimal commitments to help create a "Preach Well" church.

Commitments of a Preach Well Church

A Preach Well Church is a church whose concern for the overall well-being of their pastor reflects their priority for the preaching of the word. Each chapter in this book is a commitment developed from research to help churches help their pastors preach well. Each commitment has clear, concrete actions that pastors and churches can prayerfully consider to create a church culture conducive to keeping preaching as the priority of the pastor's ministry. The following commitments should be tailored to fit a specific church's unique context, purpose, and financial ability.

Also included in each chapter is "A Word to Pastors." No matter your job or who you are, you will experience stress. Pastors can do some things to help them not feel as stressed before, during, and after preaching. Those who address the following problems are more likely to become better pastors and preachers.

The Research

I reviewed the written works and stories of historical and contemporary homileticians and pastors who shared their firsthand experiences with stress related to pastoral ministry and preaching. Based on this literary research, I designed an online survey

23. Keck, *et al.* *et al.*, *et al.* *et al.*, *et al.* *et al.*, 99.

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and distributed it to Georgia Southern Baptist pastors. I adapted the survey questions from portions of older vocational clergy surveys and asked them about their preaching, stress, and coping mechanisms. At the end of the survey, I asked them if they were willing to answer some more open-ended questions about their personal experience with stress.

The research study looked at ninety-seven Georgia Southern Baptist pastors. The pastors were chosen because they are responsible for preaching regularly. The study focused on senior pastors, including “solo” pastors. These pastors usually preach at least once a week to the same congregation. This limitation was put in place to focus on how preaching affects the stress of the pastor who preaches weekly to the same people.

These Georgia Southern Baptist pastors were a reasonably homogenous group. Ninety-eight percent were male. Eighty-two percent were older than forty-five years old. Ninety-three percent were white. Ninety-seven percent were married. Eighty-three percent completed some degree of higher education. Sixty-eight percent were from a rural setting. Twenty-three percent served as a bi-vocational minister (employed as a pastor and in another job outside of ministry), and 53 percent served as a full-time employee (forty or more hours per week) by a church. Forty-four percent served as a senior pastor (other ministry roles on staff), and 39 percent served as a solo pastor (only pastor on staff). Still, the results may well apply to pastors of other congregationally-governed churches and possibly to other denominations.

My Story

In the spring of 2012, I was newly married, working as a full-time associate pastor, and enrolled in a full load of classes in my first graduate semester. Crippling panic attacks began to control my life. I had never heard of panic attacks, but they are debilitating. I remember some of the irrational thoughts that swirled in my mind. I was stuck in imagining the worst was going to happen, like getting food poisoning at a restaurant, getting into a

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car accident, or getting sick in the pulpit. I felt like my wife was my only safe person. If I went anywhere beyond home and work, she had to be by my side. I read and quoted Scripture, but my anxiety did not stop. I had thought and felt myself into a rut, and my body was past the point of a change of heart and mind immediately reversing the consequences.

It finally came to a head on a Sunday morning. My tightly-held composure finally gave way. I could not preach. My heart was beating out of my chest, and panic took over. I felt like I was losing control. Afraid of how the panic might distract the church during the worship service, I retreated to my office. There a friend and my senior pastor were waiting for me. I explained what was happening. My senior pastor stepped into the pulpit for me, sent me home, and suggested that I see a doctor. It became clear that significant life changes needed to be made. I needed to rest and pay attention to my mental health.

I visited my family physician for help. I told him that there must be something wrong with my heart. He strapped an EKG on me and showed me. There was nothing wrong with my heart. I was experiencing textbook definition panic attacks, symptomatic of generalized anxiety and panic disorder. Ongoing, unaddressed panic attacks often leave people with an anxiety disorder: stuck in a perpetual cycle of staying alert in case of further panic attacks, which induces more panic attacks.

My panic attacks were like a menacing shark dwelling in the ocean, waiting for the opportunity to strike. With prolonged stress, it rises from the depths. It creeps up, swimming just under the surface of the waters. Then, it breaches and wreaks havoc on its unsuspecting victim. Despite initially feeling powerless against this creature, I eventually realized that there were some things I could do to reduce the stress and return it to the depths.

My doctor prescribed two medications to treat my anxiety, each addressing a different issue. One medication was an SSRI, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. Serotonin is correlated to mental well-being. An SSRI blocks your brain from reabsorbing all the serotonin, leaving a reservoir of serotonin to maintain

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levels for future stress. The other medication was a minor tranquilizer to relieve panic attacks.

For some Christians, considering the role of medications for mental well-being poses a problem. Though I do not present the following as medical advice, I am persuaded that mental health is affected by both spiritual and physical factors. The relationship between mind and body is analogous to Mozart sitting behind an out-of-tune piano. No amount of talent can make up for an instrument that needs adjustment. Conversely, I could sit behind a brand-new baby grand piano, but its excellency will not make up for my lack of skill. Similarly, mental health issues can be caused by complex interactions between body and soul. A holistic approach that addresses both the physical brain and the spiritual mind is necessary for effective treatment and healing—an integration of spiritual practices rather than relying on psychological or physiological approaches alone.

The doctor forewarned me that I could experience some side effects through the first two to three weeks, and then it would ease up, and I would feel in control. Sleep was now possible. I feel like I slept for two weeks. One time, I came in from work, leaned forward into a recliner with my knees in the seat and my face in the back of the chair, and immediately fell asleep. Little by little, each good night's rest restored balance until, eventually, something changed. One day, I felt like my old self. I could sense myself regaining control over my mental health. Anxiousness would pop up every now and then, but it was nothing compared to how it affected me.

Per the doctor, the medications were biding my time to address the sources of my long-term stress. Through professional help and much reflection, I identified some personal variables that probably precipitated my panic attacks and several coping mechanisms that have helped with my stress. In the fall of 2012, my doctor took me off one of my medications due to the progress he observed. Today, I am no longer on any medication. I believe the Lord used this experience to awaken a curiosity in me for researching how pastors and churches can address stress and burnout in ministry. This book is the result of that curiosity and

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research. Stress and burnout among pastors is an all too common reality. Empty preachers are filling pulpits. What can churches and pastors do to preach well?

Summary

Clergy burnout studies have consistently shown that clergy members feel a lot of stress, no matter their denomination or country. Pastors can feel burdened by preaching. Nevertheless, preaching should be the priority of the pastor's ministry. This book aims to encourage pastors and show church members the incredible weight of delivering God's word and to equip them with practices they can commit to in order to help their pastors preach well. In the next chapter, churches are challenged to take "The Control Commitment" and let go of control over their pastor's schedule.