



DYNAMIC GOSPEL  
NEW EUROPE

CONVERSATION  
AND GATHERING

# Summer CONVERSATION



# Table of Content

---

Welcome	3
Instructions	5
Reconciling a Wounded Planet in the Midst of a Pandemic	8
Burnout	14
Are you showing signs of a burnout? Test	16
Take Care of Yourself	19

# Welcome

---

The summer has arrived! We want to give you all a chance to rest so, for the months of July and August, there will be just be a single Summer Conversation page for the Lausanne Europe 20/21 Conversation. Your Impact Group can meet whenever you want over this period, and the themes have been chosen to echo the holiday season.

Firstly, we want to encourage you to marvel at the beauty of God's creation but also to recognise the mandate we have from God to care for it. And secondly, we want you to reflect on the part of that creation mandate that includes taking care of ourselves. So, this Summer's themes are Creation Care and Rest.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email us at [conversation@lausanneeurope.org](mailto:conversation@lausanneeurope.org)

And if you are just starting your Impact Group, or are confused about what they are about, then check out the introduction pages to the [Conversation](#) and [Impact Groups](#) to find out more.

## **Creation Care**

In preparation for your Impact Group, we would ask you to read the following article by Ruth Valerio. Her article “Reconciling a Wounded Planet in the Midst of a Pandemic”, makes connections between Creation Care and the themes of the last two month’s conversations, on Covid-19 and reconciliation.

## **Rest and Burnout**

Whilst Covid-19 has caused most church activities to be cancelled this Spring, it has certainly not stopped everything. In fact, the moving of so many activities online has meant that many of us have been busier than ever. Some of us have not been able to take any breaks for months. Therefore, part of the Summer Conversation involves us reflecting on the danger of burnout and what Scripture teaches us about the call to rest.

There are two things to read before your Impact Group: a short article written for aid workers and emergency responders to get you thinking about the topic, and then a chapter from Take Care of Yourself: Survive and Thrive in Christian Ministry by Pablo Martinez.

# Instructions

---

## 1. Introductions and Prayer

Take a moment at the start of the Impact Group to pray and, of course, if there is anyone new in the group, for them to introduce themselves.

## 2. Creation Care

Everyone should have read "Reconciling a Wounded Planet in the Midst of a Pandemic" by Ruth Valerio before the Impact Group. We suggest you then discuss the following questions:

1. Ruth Valerio says that "a Gospel that does not include our relationship with the whole creation is not the full Gospel". Do you agree? What are the consequences of preaching a gospel which does not feature our relationship with the whole of creation?
2. What would it look like if Creation Care were central to church life?

3. This world is wonderful but wounded. How have you experienced those two realities during the Covid-19 pandemic?
4. How did the article help you to understand more fully what it means to be made in the image of God?

## 3. Rest and Burnout

We really want you to take some time off this summer to rest. Perhaps you have already done that, but we do want you to discuss the importance of rest. After reading the two texts, consider the following questions:

1. "The divine design includes a balance between working and resting, giving and receiving" (Martinez). Knowing this, why do we find it so difficult to take care of our own vineyard? What insights did the book chapter give us in regard to this?

2. "The problem is not working too much but resting (renewing) too little." What practical steps can you take to find the right balance in the practice of the two movements (output/input; ministry/monastery)?
3. Did you agree with the Burnout formula of "Burnout = Overwork/Fatigue + Cynicism + Inefficacy"? Are there any other factors in your opinion?
4. The article from the Headington Institute concludes with some ideas to avoid burnout. What have you found to be the most effective tactics/ideas for you personally?

#### **4. Prayer**

1. Begin this prayer time with a time of repentance:
  - To repent of our actions that have dishonoured God's wider creation (eg. deforestation, air pollution, plastic pollution, animal trafficking etc.)
  - To repent of "neglecting our vineyard" through making work into an idol. Pray that God might reveal to us the areas in our lives that we have neglected to care for so that we may be brought back to finding

rest in God by just being and not doing (Matthew 11:28-30).

2. Pray that as the body of Christ, we may be disciplined to genuinely care and nurture the natural world through our actions and speech as an expression of the full gospel.
3. Pray for the churches of Europe, to selflessly give up daily practices that cause pollution- e.g. unnecessary purchases that harm the environment, use of plastic bags, etc.
4. Pray for wisdom to know the source of our burn-out and be courageous to submit to God's leading in finding solace and rest.
5. May the Holy Spirit lead us in knowing when to stop caring for other people's vineyards and care for our own.

## **5. Make Your Contribution to the Conversation**

We really want to hear back from your Impact Group after each session. Please find a few minutes to summarise what you hear from God, the highlights of the discussion, and any questions that were raised, in the comments box immediately below.

Have a great summer. See you in September.

[GO TO THE CONVERSATION](#)

# Reconciling a Wounded Planet in the Midst of a Pandemic

---

By Ruth Valerio

[Go to the article online](#)

I am writing this looking out into my garden. I can hear the birds singing loudly and the silence from the lack of traffic noise is stark. If I stand outside and look up at the sky, it is clear blue with no airplane trails across it. The canal where I go for my daily walk is the clearest I've ever seen it, now that there are no boats using it, stirring up the mud. Walking with my daughter the other day, we stood in the middle of what is usually a busy road, with not a car on it, and I said, 'stand still for a moment and appreciate this. You may never experience this again'.

We are going through profound shocks: socially, politically, economically... and the impact of these will last for many years. Alongside the positives that some of us are experiencing, we are also facing fear, grief and

suffering. There are immense challenges that we are dealing with, in our homes, our churches and our workplaces. How does the theme of reconciliation contribute to this current time, particularly in relation to our relationship with the wider natural world?

Let me start with the fundamentals: God created a world that he declared to be very good, a world in which people and the wider natural order exist harmoniously in the presence of God. Relationship with God, with others, with ourselves and with the rest of creation is central to God's loving purposes. But those relationships very quickly went wrong, and the Bible then tells the story of how God works to restore them and put them back to rights – a plan that ultimately finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.



**“This is a world of awe and beauty; a world that God has created teeming with life, full of diversity and abundance and colour”**

The Gospel – literally ‘the good news’ – is thus a Gospel of reconciliation. Through Jesus we are reconciled with God, with the wider natural world, with other people and with ourselves. That means that a Gospel that does not include our relationship with the whole creation is not the full Gospel. How tragic that we have been content with such an emaciated Gospel! (1)

Through the pandemic I have been reflecting on how we live in a wonderful yet wounded world. As we saw at the top, many of us have been re-discovering what a wonderful world we live in. For those of us fortunate enough to have gardens or to be in countries where lockdown has allowed us a daily walk, we have come to appreciate getting outside more than ever. So many people have been reconnecting with the wider natural world in a way they haven’t done for years and realising just how nurturing and good for our wellbeing it is to spend time outdoors.

This is a world of awe and beauty; a world that God has created teeming with life, full of diversity and abundance and colour. And what neighbours we share this world with: the most incredible and stunning mix of strange, funny, scary, cuddly, scaly, odd, tiny, huge creatures that we could ever possibly imagine! (2)

Yet at the same time, we live in a world that is seriously wounded. Against what some church leaders are saying, I want to state that Covid-19 is not a judgment from God: he did not cause it or will it into being. Whilst the Bible indicates there can be times when someone’s sickness is the result of personal sin, if and when people fall ill, there is no biblical warrant for automatically linking that with a person’s sin and we must be very careful before we pronounce something as being God’s judgment.

Having said that however, as we have seen, the Bible is clear that God, people and the wider natural world are deeply interconnected. If one aspect of that set of relationships is broken then everything will be impacted. As hard as it is to hear, the outbreak of Covid-19 is not a ‘natural disaster’. Rather it is a disaster of our own making. Viruses jump species and get into humans, and environmental destruction makes this more likely to

happen, and with greater frequency, as people are brought into closer contact with virus-carrying animals.

Deforestation, mining, the bushmeat trade, animal trafficking and unsustainable agricultural practices are all likely factors at play. It is tempting to see this pandemic and the climate breakdown as having their origins elsewhere, to point the blame at people, governments and organisations in other parts of the world. But, Europe is certainly no innocent bystander.

In 2008 the European Commission pledged to halt deforestation, but in 2019 recognised its goals are unlikely to be met with current trajectories. (3) While Europe's forestation plantations are booming, European consumer practices are still stimulating global deforestation importing nearly a quarter of products which have been cultivated on illegally deforested lands around the world. (4)

A 2010 study revealed that concerning quantities of bushmeat was being illegally imported from Africa into Europe, posing significant health risks to people and livestock. (5)

Alongside this, the virus has spread so rapidly because of our dependence on flying. We've known for decades how environmentally harmful flying is, yet we have been steadily increasing our flights in, from and to Europe, amounting to over a billion passenger flights in 2008. (6)

The desperation of poverty and the greed of wealth underpin a global system that is fundamentally at odds with God's original intention of shalom between all things, and the current pandemic is a terrible consequence of that. And of course, whilst we may be focused on Covid-19, the disasters of climate breakdown, biodiversity loss and plastic pollution are still continuing and we still need to tackle them urgently.

**“The desperation of poverty and the greed of wealth underpin a global system that is fundamentally at odds with God's original intention of shalom”**

So how do we bring a Gospel of reconciliation into this situation? One answer to that is found by looking at what it means for us to be made 'in the image of God' (Gen.

1:26-28). This description places humans in a particular relationship with God and looks in two directions.

Firstly, it looks in the direction of our relationship to others and speaks of the absolute equality between people: all people have been made in God's image. That absolute equality means that poverty is an absolute abomination. Covid-19 challenges us here. It exposes the stark inequalities of our world as it wreaks havoc most on those for whom lockdown means no money and no food and who don't have access to the basics of clean water and soap let alone a garden or park.

Reconciliation with others includes responding to the needs of neighbours both near and far. In Europe, 1 in 5 people are living in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion and research is indicating that this makes them especially vulnerable to the virus, as does living in areas with high air pollution.(7) People in refugee camps are particularly vulnerable in Europe during this pandemic (8).

Reconciliation with others means not only responding to the needs of our immediate communities and nation, but also looking to our global neighbours and the needs of

those living in countries that do not have the financial protection or health equipment that we do.

Secondly, being made in the image of God looks in the direction of the whole creation. Like an image in a temple, we are God's representatives, created to serve and look after the rest of what he has made. Covid-19 challenges us to recognise how far we have fallen from doing that well, but it also presents us with a unique opportunity for change. As we emerge from lockdown and stimulate our economies, will we do so in a way that does not take us back to pre-pandemic levels of pollution? Will we prioritise tackling deforestation and unsustainable agriculture? (9) Will we push our governments to ensure that economic recovery happens within the parameters of keeping within a 1.5°C future? It is encouraging to see Amsterdam deciding to build back its economic activity in a way that meets the core needs of all but within the means of the planet, and the state aid being given to Air France has come with strong climate conditions. (10)

At Tearfund, we are working hard on the ground with our partners in many countries around the world, responding to the urgent needs of the pandemic. And, we are looking at these underlying systemic issues and stimulating a

stimulating a conversation with churches to ask, how can we build back a better world that is fairer and greener?' ( see [https://www.tearfund.org/about\\_you/action/the\\_world\\_rebooted/](https://www.tearfund.org/about_you/action/the_world_rebooted/) for more)

As Christians and churches we can have a central role in calling for, and working towards, a world without huge gaps between rich and poor – one that enables us to live in harmony with the whole creation. We know we won't see it fully until Christ returns to this earth and he dwells in our midst, in the transformation of all things (Rev. 21 and 22), but we are future-oriented people and we can let that hope motivate us now in how we live, act, pray and speak out.

## References

1. For full Bible reference and to look at this more see R. Valerio, Just Living: Faith and community in an age of consumerism (Hodder & Stoughton, 2016, p17-24). For much more on this, and an exploration of Genesis 1 and how we can relate the themes of the Days of Creation to issues today, see, R. Valerio, Saying Yes to Life (originally the Archbishop of Canterbury's 2020 Lent Book).
2. For much more on this, and an exploration of Genesis 1 and how we can relate the themes of the Days of Creation to issues today, see, R. Valerio, Saying Yes to Life (originally the Archbishop of Canterbury's 2020 Lent Book).
3. See 'Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions; Stepping up EU Action to Protect and Restore the World's Forests' <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1565272554103&uri=CELEX:52019DC0352>
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/30/europes-contribution-to-deforestation-set-to-rise-despite-pledge-to-halt-it>
5. <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1755-263X.2010.00121.x>
6. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10265946/7-06122019-AP-EN.PDF/8f2c9d16-c1c4-0e1f-7a66-47ce411faef7>

7. <https://www.eurofoodbank.org/en/poverty-in-europe;>  
[https://www.newsmax.com/health/health-news/hardest-hit-communities-lower-income-elderly-cdc-death-records/2020/04/01/id/960944/;](https://www.newsmax.com/health/health-news/hardest-hit-communities-lower-income-elderly-cdc-death-records/2020/04/01/id/960944/) <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/04/200406100824.htm>
8. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/refugees-left-behind-in-coronavirus-crisis-aid-groups-warn>
9. In relation to the current pandemic, tackling unregulated 'wet' markets is also critical
10. [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/amsterdam-doughnut-model-mend-post-coronavirus-economy;](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/amsterdam-doughnut-model-mend-post-coronavirus-economy) <https://www.businesstraveller.com/business-travel/2020/04/30/air-france-told-not-to-compete-with-the-tgv/>



# Burnout

---

By The Headington Institute

[Go to the article online](#)

**B**urnout is something I hear about often in my conversations with people. Our self-test for burnout (Are You Showing Signs of Burnout? Take the test here below.) has been a very popular resource over the years. Through my consultations with aid workers and emergency responders, I began visualizing the burnout problem in terms of building a sandcastle on the beach. Work pressure and demands are like the ocean waves—they will always be there. If the sandcastle is the rest of your life (family, friends, health, personal goals), it has to be built with the constant pressure of work in mind.

I'd like you to consider how you currently define burnout. Most people associate burnout with high workload and the fatigue or stress that results. This is a very important component to burnout, but research indicates that it is not the full picture. With fatigue alone, many people can

figure out a way to cut back, take a break, or even adapt to working more hours in a week (if they love their work). Burnout seems to occur when two additional factors are present with fatigue: cynicism and inefficacy. Cynicism about our work means we no longer feel that the larger mission or project goals are attainable or meaningful. This can be caused by different things, such as lack of cooperation on a team, or the various structural barriers that can make development and emergency relief work inefficient. People are capable of stretching themselves and accepting challenges when they feel like their efforts will amount to something, but not when they feel there is no point to the work. Inefficacy refers to our personal sense of reduced productivity or effort. Often I will hear people describe this dimension as the experience of working the same amount of hours, but having less and less to show for it. The self-observation that one is no

longer “performing” can be a distressing experience by itself.

So think of burnout like a formula that consists of three parts:

Burnout = Overwork/Fatigue + Cynicism + Inefficacy

Now, certain organizations, jobs, and roles may put you at greater risk in any one of these areas. The field of aid work is notoriously demanding. But there are also ways that you can be strategic in avoiding burnout. Here are some ideas:

- Committing to work-life-balance habits can help, like making sure that you’re away from your work computer after a certain time, or scheduling things during your breaks that are fulfilling and restful. Adequate sleep, nutritious diet, regular exercise, and accessing social support are all things that can work preventatively against fatigue, but you have to keep them in place for them to work!
- Know what you are susceptible to. Some people are predisposed to feel cynicism or inefficacy about work,

because they have felt this way in other areas of their life.

- Maintain awareness of how you are feeling. Signs of cynicism and fatigue never show up all at once; they develop gradually.
- Don’t ignore the early warning signals. Often the most effective time to intervene is when you start to feel stressed, but many people wait until they are on the verge of collapse before giving themselves permission to ask for help. If you’re just feeling just one or two of the components of burnout—this is a very important time to ask for support from family, co-workers, friends, or a mental health professional.

# Are you showing signs of a burnout? Test

---

By The Headington Institute

[Source: Headington Institute](#)

**Download standalone PDF**

Please note: this scale is not a clinical diagnostic instrument and is provided for educational purposes. It merely identifies some of the more common symptoms of burnout. If you have any concerns about your state of emotional health, you should consult with a mental health professional.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** In the last month, how often has the following been true for you?  
Write the number that fits your reality on the line before each question.

0 | Never

1 | Seldom

2 | Sometimes

3 | Often

4 | Always

- \_\_\_ 1. I feel tired or sluggish much of the time, even when I'm getting enough sleep.
- \_\_\_ 2. I find that I am easily annoyed by other people's demands and stories about their daily activities.
- \_\_\_ 3. I feel detached, like I don't really care about the problems and needs of other people.
- \_\_\_ 4. I am having more and more trouble being interested in my work.
- \_\_\_ 5. I feel sad.
- \_\_\_ 6. I have become absent-minded. I forget appointments, deadlines, and personal possessions.
- \_\_\_ 7. I find myself avoiding people and do not even enjoy being around close friends and family members.
- \_\_\_ 8. I feel drained; even routine activities are an effort.
- \_\_\_ 9. I've been experiencing physical problems like stomach aches, headaches, lingering colds, and general aches and pains.
- \_\_\_ 10. I have sleeping problems.
- \_\_\_ 11. I have difficulty making decisions.
- \_\_\_ 12. I feel burdened by responsibilities and pressures.
- \_\_\_ 13. I have little enthusiasm for work and when I think about my work my feelings are mostly negative.

- \_\_\_ 14. At work, I consistently fall short of expectations that I have for myself or that others have for me. I am less efficient than I feel I should be.
- \_\_\_ 15. I've been eating more (or less) or drinking more alcohol.
- \_\_\_ 16. I feel like I can't solve the problems assigned to me at work.
- \_\_\_ 17. I feel like my work is insignificant/doesn't make a difference.
- \_\_\_ 18. I feel "used" and unappreciated at work.
- \_\_\_ 19. I get easily frustrated & irritable over small inconveniences.
- \_\_\_ 20. I have trouble concentrating & completing tasks at work.
- \_\_\_ 21. I feel like I have too much (or too little) to do at work.
- \_\_\_ 22. I work long hours (more than 10/day) or do not have at least 1 day off work each week.
- \_\_\_ 23. I find myself involved with conflicts at work or with family.
- \_\_\_ 24. I have trouble caring about whether I complete my work or do it well.
- \_\_\_ 25. I feel like my co-workers are largely incompetent/not doing their jobs well.

**TOTAL SCORE:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **INTERPRETATION GUIDELINES**

0 – 25:

A score in this range suggests that you are probably in good shape and experiencing little burnout.

26 – 50:

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing low to moderate degree of burnout.

51 – 75:

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing moderate to high degree of burnout.

76 – 100:

A score in this range suggests that you may be experiencing a very high degree of burnout.



# Take Care of Yourself

---

By Pablo Martinez

[Go to the article online](#)

The first chapter of Martinez, *Take Care of Yourself: Survive and Thrive in Christian Ministry*, Hendrickson, 2018, reproduced with permission of the author. If you find this resource helpful and would like to purchase the whole book, you can do so [here](#).

*"All the unhappiness of men comes from one thing, which is not knowing how to be at rest in a room."* Pascal [1]

*"They made me keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard I have not kept!"* Song of Songs 1:6b, RSV

Some people never think of others; that is the paradigm of a selfish person. Others, on the other hand, never think of themselves and become the paradigm of a fatigued person with a restless life. Neither of these two ways of living pleases God, even though the latter may sound more 'spiritual.'

When Robert Murray McCheyne, a young Scottish minister, lay dying at the age of twenty-nine, he turned to a friend and said: 'God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message.' What a graphic picture of spiritual passion turned to overexertion.

Billy Graham was once asked, 'What would you change if you could start your life again?' He replied: 'I would preach only once a day.' The words of this respected man of God echo a profound and most important principle: a fruitful ministry is not the same as a full ministry packed with activities and unceasing action.

After many years of counselling Christian workers about the danger of exhaustion and about its prevention, I have come to a conclusion similar to Billy Graham's: the problem is not working too much, but resting (renewing) too little. The purpose of this book is not to make you work less but to help you rest more and renew yourself better.

### **We are not human doings but human beings**

Many times we neglect the care of our 'vineyard' because we want to deny God's original design for us: he made us human beings, not human doings. Our identity and value before God come primarily from who we are, not from what we do. This divine design includes a balance between working and resting, giving and receiving. If this balance is broken, there is a danger that, like the writer of the Song of Songs, we will neglect our own vineyard while we are caring for the vineyards of others.

Caring for our own life means guarding our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. According to the Bible, this is not only a right but a duty; it is part of good stewardship to care for ourselves. To put it in other words, in the same way that we have a ministry, we also need a

'monastery,' a place and time to rest, to be still and to refresh our whole person. Our public ministry will be greatly enhanced if we learn to spend time in our private 'monastery.'

### **Caring for Your Own Vineyard: Waste of Time or Wise Investment?**

Why is caring for your own vineyard not only a right but a duty? In a selfish society where 'feeling good' and 'being happy' are idols worshipped by many people, this might sound like self-centredness.

God has a lot to say on the care of ourselves. We need to regain the divine wisdom on this issue and escape the hedonism that entangles our world today. God created work, but he also created rest. There is indeed a biblical teaching—a theology—on work and leisure.

The biblical description of human beings—biblical anthropology—explains who we are and, particularly, how we are—our condition—after the multiple fractures caused by the Fall. From this reality we can outline three reasons why we should take care of ourselves.

- Because it is God's will for us: We were created in his image, so this is related to God's original design. God included rest in his creation, and he commanded rest. Caring for ourselves is therefore an expression of obedience.
- Because of our fragility: We are jars of clay, not of iron. Caring for ourselves is related to our human condition. It is an expression of humility—of dependence on God's grace.
- Because it is part of good stewardship: We are temples of the Holy Spirit, so caring for ourselves is part of our responsibility and is an expression of maturity.

In summary, the practice of rest and the care of yourself, far from being a selfish act, is an exercise of godliness and an expression of holiness.

The consequences of not keeping your own vineyard can be harmful, even disastrous. They affect other people besides yourself, especially your loved ones, and also your work (1 Timothy 5:4,8). So neglect of ourselves, far from being a sign of a spiritual attitude, can be a serious mistake and even a sin. Paul urged Timothy to learn this

principle when he was still young, in his learning years. His warning 'take care of yourself' (see 1 Timothy 4:16) contains one of the keys in Christian work. Notice the order: first the person has to be all right, and then comes the work (the teaching). If the person is not all right, the quality of the work will be affected. A healthy minister is likely to have a healthy and fruitful ministry.

It is noteworthy that Paul approaches this issue with exquisite balance. His advice to Timothy is immediately preceded by an exhortation to effort and consecration: 'Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress' (4:15). A clear appeal to a consecrated life is followed by an equally clear call to 'take care of yourself' (see v. 16). How much we need the same balance in our lives!

### **Thank God for leisure times!**

It may surprise you, but some Christian workers feel guilty when they rest. They have a mistaken concept of leisure and they wrongly believe that God wants them to be doing something all the time (they are 'human doings'!). It is important to remember that leisure and laziness are very different things. [2] Laziness is wrong because it is a waste

of time; leisure, [3] on the other hand, can be a wise way to invest your time. In laziness you do nothing; in rest you are actively engaged in renewing yourself, restoring your physical, emotional and spiritual energy. By so doing you are obeying God, renewing your dependency on his grace, and acting as a good steward of your time and your life.

### **‘Jars of Clay’**

*“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”*  
(2 Corinthians 4:7)

We are jars of clay, not jars of iron or broken jars! The Christian worker must be aware of the glorious nature of the ministry—‘that treasure’—but also of the fragile nature of the minister. We need to start here, knowing our natural condition. This will deliver us from making life mistakes, errors that affect our life profoundly. Notice that the two extremes are equally wrong: we are not jars of iron, all powerful and never failing individuals; but God does not want us to be broken jars either. Thus, we have to be careful with our fantasies of omnipotence, and we should

not praise exhaustion per se as an expression of zeal and commitment.

### **Fragility has a purpose**

What is the benefit of our being ‘jars of clay’? Clay is a fragile material. It gets broken easily. Our fragility makes us depend fully on the divine supply of grace and strength every day, ‘to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us’ (2 Corinthians 4:7).

In this sense, our limitations and our fragility are to our soul what tiredness, hunger and thirst are to our bodies. They are warning signs that urge us to seek a daily renewal of God’s provision. It is through our fragility—and not in spite of it—that God fulfils his purposes for our lives and ministries.

### **Handle with care**

We need a clear sense that we are jars of clay if we are to start caring for ourselves. If we don’t grasp this, we will not see the need. We must handle a fragile object with care because it is easily broken. It is the same with our lives. Because God made us ‘jars of clay,’ we are to handle ourselves carefully. I am firmly convinced that our Master

does not want his servants to be broken jars. Far from it—God has always intended to protect our fragile vessels from dangers that could spoil them.

As a medical doctor I am fascinated by the Ten Commandments, a superb programme of social, spiritual and personal health. If you study each of the commandments thoroughly, you will discover their unsurpassed preventive (prophylactic) value. Their purpose was to preserve and to promote a good quality of life at all levels. Through the Ten Commandments, God is sending us a clear three-fold message: take care of your relationship with God, take care of relationships with your neighbours, and take care of yourself.

God wants to accomplish his purposes through fragile, even weak servants—jars of clay—but not through burned-out, exhausted servants—broken jars. These broken vessels are in need of prompt repair because the divine design is for us to be healthy and whole, not broken into pieces.

On the other hand, workers who view themselves as iron jars overvalue their capacity and undervalue their limitations. This will lead to problems with boasting and self-sufficiency, the temptation Paul had to face. 'In order

to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh' (2 Corinthians 12:6-7). Awareness of our limitations greatly helps us to set limits in our life programme.

We have looked at our condition, what we are like. Let us now consider another clue in the care of ourselves: the sort of life God wants us to live.

### **'Make It Your Ambition to Lead a Quiet Life'**

At first sight, this is a surprising statement. Even more surprising is the context in which Paul places it; namely, the kind of life that pleases God: 'As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more' (1 Thessalonians 4:1). It sounds like an important appeal. By the end of the section, verse 11, he adds: 'Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.' Therefore a quiet life is part of holy living. It is not only good for ourselves, but it pleases God.

What is a quiet life? Let Paul himself answer this question on the basis of his own testimony. In his second letter to



the Corinthians, the most autobiographical of all the epistles, Paul opens his heart and makes some personal confessions that are very helpful to us.

A quiet life is not a life without problems. 'As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger . . .' (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). Paul is realistic. Christian ministry is not a holiday experience but tough work! Paul does not hide the cost of discipleship. Our salvation is free, but there are no bargains in discipleship. Following Christ has a cost.

A quiet life is not a life without stress. 'Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches' (2 Corinthians 11:28). Pressure and concern could be also rendered as worry and anxiety. The modern word that best defines this pair of emotions is stress. The conclusion is clear: troubles and stress are inevitable for any Christian worker who takes their calling seriously. [4] There is no blessing without sacrifice. Dangers, toils and tribulation are a frequent companion in Christian service.

Our goal as servants of God is not to live a life free of trouble or pressures. This is not a biblical idea and it is not realistic either. The goal is to avoid permanent stress. Occasional stress is like an ally that helps us overcome difficulties and troubles; permanent stress is an enemy that drains our energy and causes dryness in our vineyard. To live under permanent stress cannot be pleasing to God, who established different sorts of rest in his creation (see chapter two). Permanent stress is an enemy to be defeated, a signal that something is going wrong in our life and needs to be corrected.

A quiet life is a life without turbulence. Remarkably, the Greek word rendered as 'lead a quiet life' literally means 'without turbulence.' It conveys the idea of silence (it was used for the quietness of the night), peace, rest and even leisure. It implies being still, exactly the opposite of stress. A quiet life reflects the deep peace and rest that come from God's presence with us.

Exhaustion does not make us more holy. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 we discover an important principle on giving (offering) and self-giving: generosity is not measured by the total quantity you give but by your attitude and purpose. The churches in Macedonia 'welled up in rich

generosity. . . . Entirely on their own . . . They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us' (8:2,4,5). Paul is impressed by—and praises—primarily the spirit behind their self-giving.

### **Great zeal for the Lord does not mean great stress for you!**

We tend to believe that the more we give ourselves—quantity of time, energy, etc—the more holy we are. But quantity per se does not make you more spiritual. A generous self-giving ministry does not imply a masochist spirit that leads you to exhaustion. It cannot be God's will for his servants to jeopardize their health or their family life. Generosity in God's service is not at odds with order and balance, two features that God stamped as a seal on his creation and on his creatures. Notice that 'order' (cosmos) is one of the hallmarks of God's world. Order and balance, therefore, should be a hallmark of God's servants too.

### **A quiet life is a life of glorious paradoxes**

This quiet life is not incompatible with the cost of discipleship. Paul would never have advised the Thessalonians or Timothy so earnestly on this line if he

believed it was utopia. The apostle was a deep thinker, but he also had a practical pastoral heart.

The coexistence of a quiet life with the troubles of Christian ministry is better understood through a passage like 2 Corinthians 4:8-9: 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.' Notice this text follows straight after the statement that we are 'jars of clay.' A parallel text is 2 Corinthians 6:9-10: 'Known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'

These glorious paradoxes reveal to us that the secret of a quiet life does not depend on the absence of problems but on the presence of Christ with us through all these troubles. God's mercy and comfort in Christ make it possible for us to live a quiet life in the midst of any storm. This is what Paul describes in the first chapter: 'Praise be to the God . . . who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God' (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). We

cannot avoid the storms in Christian ministry, but we can indeed avoid the turbulence of these storms.

### **A 'Minor' Issue with Major Consequences**

'As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.' (Ecclesiastes 10:1)

You may think neglecting your vineyard is a minor issue in your life, or that you have much more important things to do than caring for yourself, so you keep postponing any action related to it. Beware! The small enemy may become the greatest enemy. Small does not mean unimportant.

The wisdom of the Bible warns us that in the same way a bottle of perfume can be spoiled by a dead fly, 'a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.' Neglecting your vineyard may seem like a 'little folly' to you, but it can bring forth major consequences.

Nature, an endless source of practical lessons, confirms the wisdom of the biblical advice. Did you know that the tiny mosquito is responsible for killing more human beings per year than wars or homicides? A small bug, apparently insignificant, is more dangerous than the fearsome wild beasts. Be careful with the 'mosquitoes' of

the Christian life! The devil is a specialist in taking advantage of our weak points. Even when we feel strong, or precisely because we feel strong, we are reminded: 'So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Caring for your own vineyard is not a minor issue. Your own life, the wellbeing of your family and the quality of your ministry are at stake. God wants his servants to be good guards of their own vineyards because that is one of the secrets of a fruitful and blessed ministry.

## Notes

[1] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, ed. Michel Le Guern, Folio classique (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), fragment 126, 118.  
French original: 'Tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne pas savoir demeurer en repos dans une chambre.'

[2] For a further study on the subject, see Leland Ryken, *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987).

[3] Leisure –from the Latin *licere*, to be allowed—is the time at one's disposal, free time, a time that is not under obligation or duty.

[4] For more on this, see experienced missionary psychiatrist Marjory F Foyle, *Honourably Wounded: Stress among Christian Workers* (London: Monarch Books, 2001).