

Ten Warning Lights for Highly Vulnerable Leaders

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I'm no auto-mechanic, but I do take note of the lights on my dash. I'm mildly concerned if the "out of gas" light starts flashing; I become even more attentive if the "over-heating" gauge swings to the red zone, or if the "oil is low" symbol appears. When these lights flash, I become anxious about my passengers, my own safety and my car.

Are any lights blinking on your ministry dashboard? If you are in a church leadership role, then please take note of the following warning lights:

1. **PRIDE:** Have you become too big for your boots?

The story of King Uzziah, recorded in 2 Chronicles 26 always gets my attention as I think of my propensity to listen to my own press. In verse 1-14 of this chapter, Uzziah was on a roll. He reigned successfully for 52 years. He was in touch with God, famous and creative. Verse 15 records a turning point—he was marvelously helped of God until he became aware of his own power. No longer would he listen to the reproofs of those closest to him, and he ended his days as a lonely leper.

I know I'm in danger when I hear myself embellishing my accomplishments.

2. **PRAYERLESSNESS:** Are you too busy to pray?

Imagine being able to tell whether something was accomplished through prayer or in the flesh. The scary thing is that churches and ostensibly flourishing ministries can run without prayer. Mark chapter 9 contains the story of the disciples' inability to heal a demonized boy. They couldn't work out why they were so busy, yet so powerless. Jesus' answer needs to become a motto in our churches: "This kind can only come out by prayer." Now there are some things I would try without prayer, but driving out demons is not one of them! Before you sit in judgment on the disciples, ask, "What has our church accomplished lately that could only be attributed to prayer?"

I know I'm in trouble when I'm too busy serving God (even making up sermons on prayer) to spend time on my knees.

3. **INSENSITIVITY:** Have you neglected those closest to you?

Thankfully, after attending a parenting seminar, early in our ministry life, my wife Elaine and I adopted a value that we come back to often: *No amount of success in God's service is worth failure at home.* We apply that to our marriage and to our family. I'm aware that 'success' at home base is all of God's grace, but we do need to take 1 Timothy 3:4-5 seriously. How can we manage God's household if we are making a mess of our own?

I know things are out of sync when I'm caring for God's family and neglecting my own.

4. OVERSENSITIVITY: Are you taking it too personally?

When a worship pastor friend told me about the unkind emails he receives most weeks, I told him of the advice of Ben Patterson's first boss, a seasoned pastor. It was: "Don't take it personally." He reminded Ben that we're in a battle (Eph. 6:12) and when a soldier is shot at, he isn't surprised. His feelings are not damaged. He doesn't look over his foxhole and say, "What have I said this time?" He is prepared for it; he's in a war (*Deepening Your Conversation with God*, 19).

I see a warning light flashing when I am oversensitive to the criticism of others.

5. JOYLESSNESS: Has the joy been drained out of your ministry?

The recurring refrain in the book of Ecclesiastes (in chapter 3,5,8 & 9) argues that enjoyment of life is a gift from God. Charles Swindoll picks up that theme in the opening line of his book *Laugh Again* (19), he says, "I know of no greater need today than the need for joy. Unexplainable, contagious joy. Outrageous joy (p.19)."

Do you hate the very things in ministry (like preaching the Word) that you once loved? Were you once full of vitality but are now dull and drab?

I know that my long-term survival is in danger when I allow ministry to rob me of joy and laughter.

6. FATIGUE: Has busyness made you run on empty?

I once read about an amazing plant called, "Ivervillea Sonorae." Apparently it can exist for indefinite periods without attention. One was placed in a display case in the New York Botanical Garden for seven years without water and soil. Even the plant had its limits. In the eighth year it died. Too many of us pastors are like that plant.

I've experienced two near flameouts in ministry—one just before God threw me a lifeline in the two and a half years He gave me at Dallas Seminary. In both cases, I became worn-out to the point I could no longer care. The thing that frightens me is that to my Christian friends, I appeared successful, productive and sanctimoniously busy.

I know a red light is flashing when my ministry output exceeds my spiritual intake.

7. IMMORALITY: Are you spying greener grass?

Have you been taking liberties—becoming more intimate with members of the opposite sex? Like King David have you begun to feel indestructible? It's as if everything was on the rise for David up to the affair with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel Chapter 11, and everything was on the decline after that. Joy disappeared from his life (Psa. 51:12), fatigue became the norm (Psa. 32:4), and his family disintegrated (2 Samuel 12-24).

In my seminary days I recall sitting with a group of 12 seasoned pastors. One (a handsome Nordic type) said, "Would you tell your wife if you noticed a woman in your congregation was romantically interested in you?" The group was split. Half said they would bear it on their own. The others said they would enlist the help of their best friend in life. I subscribe to the wisdom of that second group.

I know that the myth of the greener grass is a warning light I need to take note of straight away.

8. IMPATIENCE: Have you become tired of waiting?

In Numbers chapter 20, there were three things God wanted Moses to do—take the staff, gather the assembly of Israel, and speak to the rock. He did the first two, and then he lost it. He struck the rock twice. The one thing he didn't do is to trust God with the outcome.

Are you patient with your people? Are you tired of trying to do the right things, of applying church growth, then church health principles and then apparently failing? Craig Brian Larson in *Pastoral Grit* tells of one-step-forward, three-steps-back experiences in several small churches he pastored. Then he says, "I must have patience. I cannot be intimidated by the expectations of others but must have a sense of security about who God has made me. And I must have faith in God's Word despite what I see now. In short, I must follow in the steps of Abraham (17,18)."

I know I'm in danger when I get impatient with people and with God.

9. DISILLUSIONMENT: Are you disenchanted with the church?

Do you hear yourself say things like, "I love missions but hate missionaries," or "I love the church, but I hate the people." Those statements may be humorous, but they may reveal a cynicism that is like a warning beacon.

1 Kings 19:1-18 tells about Elijah's disillusionment with service for God. He was fed up with life, the results of his ministry and with God. Reading these verses makes me think several of the above warning lights were flashing. How is it with you?

I know I am in trouble when I hear myself repeatedly expressing my disillusionment with God's people.

10. THE BLUES: Have you come to the end of your rope?

I've had a couple of experiences of mild depression. On one of those occasions in a semi-burnt out state, I was sitting on a golden sand beach in New Zealand. I read an article in *Moody Magazine* about a man who tried to be the perfect husband, father and teacher. He looked at things like taking lunch with the staff as a waste of time. He would go to school early and leave late. His wife started to worry when he slowed down. He had headaches for two years and had forgotten how to laugh. He used to shrug those things off by saying that hard work never hurt anyone. On the first day of September 1986, he snapped. He woke up in a psychiatric hospital. When I read that, I did something I've only done three other times in life—I cried uncontrollably. He could have been describing me.

I know the warning bells are ringing when I'm incredibly driven and unusually down.

If you were the sole driver in a car and took no notice of the warning signals, that would be sad. But if you were the pilot of a large plane, responsible for hundreds, or an air

traffic controller accountable for thousands and you ignored the flashing lights, the results would be catastrophic.

I'll never forget teaching these ten warning lights to a group of young leaders at a seminar. Three of them approached me afterward and said, "Our worry is that, *several* of those lights are flashing. What should we do?"

Which of the ten warning lights do you need to heed?