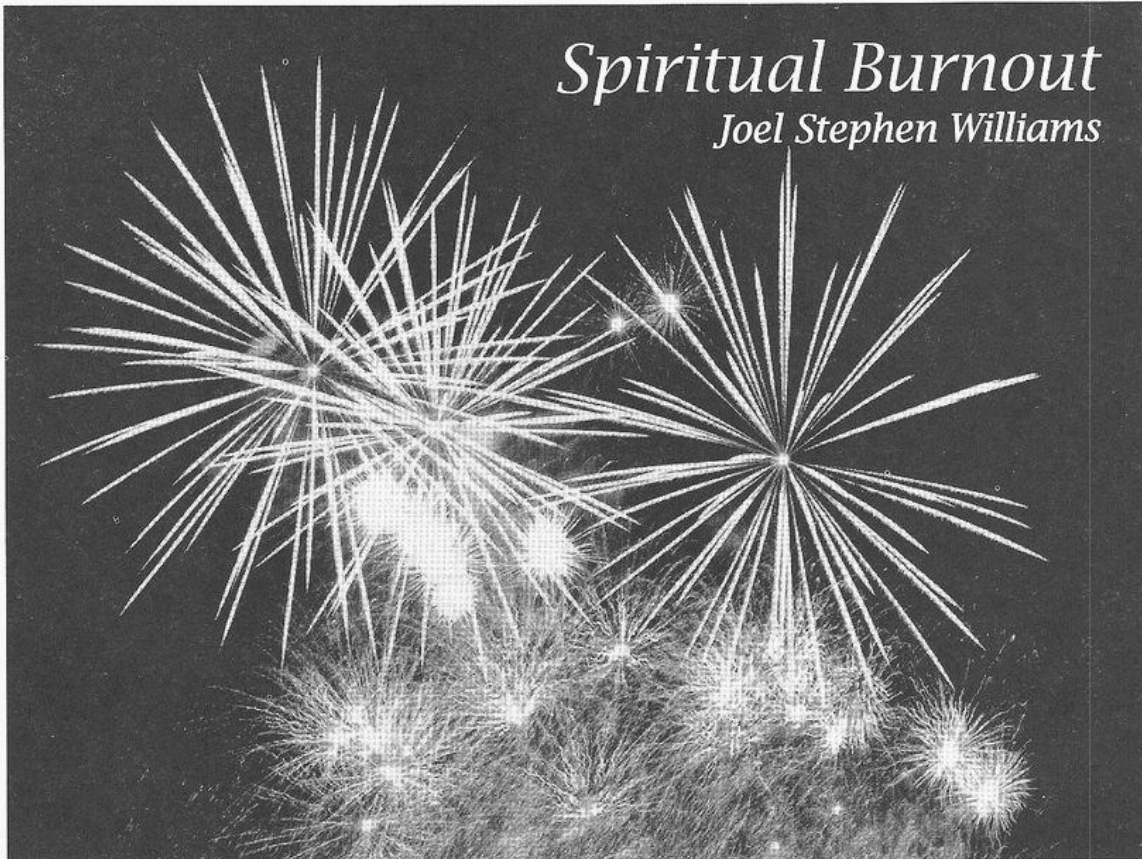


Spiritual Burnout

Joel Stephen Williams



As you make, and break, New Year's resolutions, or at any other time of the year, beware of the burn-out cycle. Devoted Christians are especially open to this problem. The spiritual burnout cycle starts when godly saints realize that they have not lived perfectly before God. In fact, they have not even lived as well as they would like to according to their own self-evaluation. When this negative calculation causes guilt, the devoted saint repents and pledges to do better in the future.

In a burst of zeal, a Christian often makes commitments which are even greater than before. If one had planned to read one chapter of the Bible per day, and failed at that task, the new commitment is to read two chapters a day. Similar resolutions are made in regards to prayer, visiting the sick and numerous other good deeds.

The next step is failure once again. It is not usually failure due to

a dishonest heart or rampant sin and rebellion. It is failure due to being overextended.

A child gets sick and we miss out on our Bible reading. A special project in school consumes all our time for a month and we fail in other commitments. A heavier than expected work schedule causes another person to have to trim time for family obligations. The distraction which caused us to fail at our new resolutions may have been a worthwhile one—is there anything more important than a parent caring for a sick child?

Nevertheless, one who is serious about spiritual commitments may still feel guilt about missing out on that Bible reading.

The next step is repentance and a renewal of commitments, only the bar may have been raised once again. This, of course, is a recipe for further failure and a continuation of the cycle.

To help avoid the spiritual burnout cycle, begin by setting for yourself reasonable goals. Do not make resolutions which only a billionaire monk with no family, no job, no e-mail and no telephone could possibly accomplish. Next, when you are unable to fulfill your own self-imposed regimen, before you punish yourself, do some self-examination. Are the other tasks, which are taking you away from your commitments, evil and immoral? If they are not sinful things, then simply readjust your schedule and your resolutions in light of the unexpected. Do not be harder on yourself than God is. God wants our spiritual life—our prayer, our Bible reading, our attendance at the assembly of the saints—to be rich and rewarding, not a burdensome duty. As the apostle John wrote, “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2).