

*See, I have set before you (the nation) today life and prosperity (good), death and adversity (evil). This is an allusion to “the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” The point is that good, which may lead to prosperity, is associated with life just as evil, which may lead to adversity, is associated with death. Choose the good so that you and your descendants may live.*

The psalmist reiterates this point in relation to the individual. Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord, they are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season. The wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Job questioned this theology. Job was righteous and suffered adversity. He lost his family and his fortune and was challenged, by his wife, to give up on God. Job speaks for all the people who choose to do good and yet suffer adversity.

Paul claims the authority to order Philemon to free Onesimus, presumably his runaway slave. Moreover, Philemon owes Paul his life. But Paul wants Philemon to choose to do the right thing for the right reason. We don't know what he did.

*Now large crowds were traveling along with [Jesus].* Jesus warns the crowds that following him will be costly: it will cost you your family, your fortune, and to go Job one better, your life. Jesus was interested in creating a new order, a new way of ordering life together, so that all, not just the powerful, can prosper.

Moses, the psalmist, Paul, and Jesus, knew and made clear to their hearers, that choices have consequences. Choosing to follow Jesus means carrying your own cross. I wonder if we have come to believe we can pick up one end of the stick without picking up the other.

The consequences of the choices we, as a nation, have made in the last few years are becoming clear: 34% of nurses say it's very likely that they will leave their roles by the end of 2022 and 44% cited burnout and a high-stress environment as the reason for their desire to leave.

States are resorting to unheard of measures to recruit teachers, qualifications be damned. 72% of principals do not have enough applicants to fill teacher positions. In addition to asking our educators to teach, we want them to be mental health professionals, magicians when it comes to resources, and the first line of defense against active shooters, and to do all this while working a second job to make ends meet.

Trish Harrison Warren is an Episcopal priest and opinion writer. In her latest piece, she describes a recent study from Barna, a Christian research organization, which showed that pastors are struggling with burnout at unprecedented levels.

Barna reports that in March 2022, “the percentage of pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry within the past year sits at 42%.” 46% of pastors under the age of 45 say they are considering quitting full-time ministry, compared to 34% percent of pastors 45 and older. There are also higher levels of burnout among clergy women, compared to those for men.

Most pastors, Warren says, enter ministry because they love people and the Gospel and want to offer hope. They recognize that it is a great honor to walk with their church in good times and in bad. But after the last few years, pastors are exhausted and discouraged.

In the Barna study, the top reported reasons for clergy burnout were: stress, loneliness and political division. Shawn McCain Tirres, rector of an Episcopal Church, explained: the pandemic, church members getting sick and dying at a higher than normal rate, political polarization, church members losing jobs and struggling financially, disputes over race after the murder of George Floyd, and the 2020 election created a combustible cocktail.

Michael Keller is the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in NY City. He said that as the Black Lives Matter protests were happening in his neighborhood in 2020, if he brought up justice in his church, some people said, “How dare you?” or “Your talking about it too much.” But if he didn’t talk about justice or talk about it in a certain way, the people would say, “You aren’t talking about it enough.”

After hearing from clergy friends across the country, Keller said that people “are leaving churches not because of theological differences, not because of scandal, but because of political and pandemic-related conflict and policies that people don’t agree with and they don’t know how to handle it. Anything you said, someone was about to leave your church, and that’s really demoralizing.”

Warren concludes that ministry in America is not sustainable if nearly half of younger pastors feel burned out and are considering leaving their jobs. But as a Presbyterian pastor in New Mexico noted, his discouragement and weariness have mirrored those of others in helping professions, including those of his wife, who works in education, and of his friends who are physicians.

This is not a matter of pastors/priests feeling sorrow for themselves, nor is it a matter of educators feeling unappreciated and harassed, nor is it a matter of nurses, physicians, and first responders feeling overwhelmed and under supported. This is a matter of being hit in the head with the other end of the stick we chose to pick up.

In response to the possibility of nuclear war, Thomas Merton wrote, “The temptation to despair is something we can hardly avoid, but there is a fruitfulness and a possibility of new life in the very threat of despair. It forces us to choose. And we will always have the strength to choose life, unless we are so ill and so destroyed that we are no longer ourselves at all.”

*See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. Choose life, choose the good, so that you and your descendants may live.*

May God, who knows your path  
and the places where you rest,  
be with you in your waiting,  
be your good news for sharing,  
and lead you in the way that is everlasting.