

The Challenge of Burnout

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1 and 2 Kings: Facing Life's Challenges Series

1 Kings 19:1-18

I want to begin by sharing with you the story of a pastor, who I'll call Bill, who left the ministry after serving faithfully for 15 years. Church ministry has one of the highest quit-rates of any profession in America. Bill was like a lot of pastors. He entered ministry with a huge sense of calling from God. He had a great love for the church. And he also had enormous expectations of what God could do in the life of a congregation. He was 30 years old when he became the senior pastor of his church. God grew the church. God blessed Bill's family. Money problems were always a source of frustration. Bill worried about being able to send his two kids to college. And over the last couple of years, it became evident that Bill's exhaustion and depression were growing worse. His family doctor prescribed anti-depressants. Bill took the pills for one week, but then got off of them because he hated the side effects.

There was some political infighting in the church with Bill's board. He used to come home with his stomach churning at night. He was suffering from an increase of migraine headaches. One day he was standing behind the pulpit listening to the special music that always preceded him getting up to speak. He had faced this moment hundreds of times before. This time he knew something was terribly wrong. His head was spinning. He felt the blood draining out of his body.

Bill passed a note to his worship leader saying, "I am sick." He left the church. And a week later, Bill quit.

Bill's story is in no way unique. In the work that I do, pastoral work, there are thousands of very productive Christian pastors who quit ministry every year saying they are exhausted, depressed; to use a term that has become very popular in the last 25 years – many pastors simply say they are "burned out."

I want to begin today by defining burnout – this feeling of total emotional exhaustion where someone feels that they have nothing more to give, they are totally depleted, is a very common experience especially in what has been called the caring professions – folks who are heavily involved in people work – teachers, social workers, nurses, legal aid workers. People go into the caring professions often filled with idealism: "I'm going to make a difference!"

I think of a young friend who worked in a NYC Junior High school for several years. She had this expectation that it was going to be tough teaching this Junior High school English class, but if she showed lots of love and lots of compassion,

the kids would rally and over the months they would develop a love for poetry. They would become this great family. They'd be motivated to learn and love learning. When I was a child, the vision would have been of trying to be like Sidney Poitier in "To Sir, With Love," as he converts this high school class in London. At the end they sing this song to him in this great celebration. He has won the whole class over. Right now, it would be like Hilary Swank in "Freedom Writers," who took these urban kids, many of whom were using drugs, and were in gangs. And at the end of the story, they are writing poems that get published and are sold around the country.

That was my friend's vision. But what she discovered was that she had no power to teach the kids that she was assigned. A third of the kids didn't show up on any given day. She spent all of her time trying to maintain order in her classroom. She had no backup from the administration. It was a joke to send kids to the principal's office, because the principal would send them right back to her class. She was cursed out by one of the mom's of a child she disciplined. She was punched and knocked down by her students. And one day, a very large boy simply lifted her off the ground and moved her aside when she tried to block him from leaving the room.

This idealistic young woman after two years of working in an urban school district, burned out. This feeling of total emotional exhaustion where someone feels they have nothing left to give; they are totally depleted. Burnout is very common in caring professions where people have frequent highly emotionally charged interactions – nurses, social workers, legal-aid workers, teachers in urban settings.

Burnout. I think of a nurse who worked on a pediatric burn unit caring for children who had been in horrible fires. After several years on the job, she simply suffered compassion fatigue. She couldn't get her legs out of bed one morning. She couldn't bring herself to go back to the hospital anymore. The whole thing just became too overwhelming for her.

In recent years, therapists have found that burnout doesn't just occur with those who are in the caring professions. We are seeing more and more people who are absolutely depleted in high stress professions like air traffic controllers, stock traders, emergency room physicians and police officers. I heard a story about one man who worked at a Wall Street law firm. He graduated from an Ivy League law school. He was snapped up by one of these big Wall Street firms. He worked for 16 hours a day, taking virtually no vacation, for five years. And then he quit to open up a general store. He was a highly trained corporate attorney, earning a significant 6-figure salary, with Ivy League credentials – and he quit to open a general store in a small country town.

What are we talking about by burn out? Some people describe their feelings using metaphors of emptiness. They say they feel like they're a dry teapot that's

just cooking on a high flame. The person feels like they've run out of gas. There is nothing left in the tank. They are like an utterly drained battery. They feel fried to a crisp.

A therapist by the name of Maslach actually created a burnout inventory that is widely used by various coaches and psychologists. On her inventory, Maslach measures six different criteria:

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The Maslach Burn-Out Inventory

1. Working too much
2. Working in an unjust environment
3. Working with little social support
4. Working with little control
5. Working in the service of values we loathe
6. Working for insufficient reward

The last one might be insufficient money, insufficient prestige, or just a lack of any positive feedback.

By burnout we're talking about the global sense that we're not making any difference at all. Despite all of our efforts, nothing is changing. We don't count and nothing that we do matters. There is this massive gap between our ideals and the reality of our lives.

The most tragic story that I've read in the literature on burnout involves a pastor whose car was found by a lake one morning. A suicide note was left in the car. The police investigated the scene. They sent divers down in the lake, but they couldn't find the pastor's body. They presumed that the lake's current had carried him out and he simply drowned. A few years later, a woman from the pastor's church was taking a bus trip in California. She looked across the aisle and saw her former pastor. His cover was blown. He simply ran away – ran away from his family; ran away from his calling; he said he couldn't take it anymore. He was burned out.

Today, as we continue in a series that I've titled "Facing Life's Challenges," we're going to read the story of a man who like that pastor ran away – the prophet Elijah. I've called today's talk "The Challenge of Burnout."

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:1-18

1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." 3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat

down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” 5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” 8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

9 There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.” 11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

15 The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

This story speaks to us about the prophet Elijah and how he ran away from his ministry. He wanted to die. He had given up any hope that he could make a difference. We'll look at some of these things in just a moment. But before we look at the symptoms of burn-out, certainly one of the points that this passage is making is to compare the ministry of Elijah with the ministry of Moses. Moses also grew despondent and wanted to die. We read in Numbers 11:14-15 these words:

SLIDE – Numbers 11:14-15

14 I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. 15 If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.”

The feeling of being so weighted down that you want to die is not uncommon even for those who love God and are committed to do his will. There are these links between the ministry of Elijah and the ministry of Moses that the author of 1 Kings clearly wants to establish. Anybody who is sensitive to the language of the Pentateuch would immediately pick up on 1 Kings 19:8 where it says:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:8

8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

That is the length of time that Moses stayed up on Mt. Sinai. And we read that Elijah journeyed to Horeb, verse 8:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:8

8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

Horeb is the other name given to Mt. Sinai in the Pentateuch. Elijah is right where Moses was. The clearest parallel involves Elijah standing on the top of Mt. Sinai. We read this in verse 11:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:11

11 The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

Just as God passed by Moses, he passes by Elijah with the same phenomena that were present at Mt. Sinai – the earthquake, the fire, and the wind. These are all present with Elijah, just as they were for Moses.

Elijah and Moses are paired together throughout the scripture. We find Elijah and Moses together on the Mount of Transfiguration speaking to Jesus. And Elijah and Moses are paired together in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 11 we read about two witnesses in the last day whose ministries will be like Elijah and Moses. Elijah and Moses are paired together throughout the Bible in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Moses and Elijah are linked together for one fundamental reason: because they are the two most prominent pointers to the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. There were never two men in all of history who served as greater sign posts, as greater pointers, to God's action in Jesus than Moses and Elijah.

So Moses is a pointer in Deuteronomy 18 with these words:

SLIDE – Deut. 18:18

18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their people, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.

Moses was a pointer to Jesus. Jesus was to be a prophet like Moses. What is the role of the prophet? The role of the prophet very simply is to do one basic thing – to show us God. Moses showed the nation of Israel God. And Jesus shows the whole world God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

Elijah was a pointer to Jesus Christ. In fact, in Jewish tradition Elijah was to be the forerunner of Jesus' coming. We read in Malachi 4:5 these words:

SLIDE – Mal. 4:5

5 "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

Jewish homes, like the one I grew up, at Passover time we always opened the door to welcome the prophet Elijah, because it is believed among Jews that Elijah will come at the Passover announcing the arrival of Messiah.

Certainly one of the reasons why the writer of 1 Kings tells us this story of Elijah at Horab is to link the ministry of Elijah with the ministry of Moses – both of whom were sign posts to the coming Messiah. But there is another reason that we are told this story. Elijah was not only a man like Moses, in James 5:17, we read that

SLIDE – James 5:17

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are.

Elijah is not just this great pointer to Messiah. He is not only the upholder of the old covenant. He is not only someone just like the great prophet Moses. The story from 1 Kings 19 tells us that Elijah was a man just like us. And we see in the life of Elijah all of the symptoms of a good man who is burned-out. Let's look together at what's going on in the life of Elijah. Perhaps some of these things are going on in your life, or in the life of someone you love. You need to be able to recognize these symptoms. The Bible is written about people who are just like us, not just great heroes, but folks who share our humanity.

The first thing we see is,

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The problem of physical exhaustion

It says in 1 Kings 18:45-46 these words:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 18:45-46

45 Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. 46 The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

Now, while Ahab rode in a chariot, Elijah ran ahead. The distance would be 17 miles. In verse 3 we read these words:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:3

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,

The distance from Jezreel to Beersheba is another 20 miles. Then he takes another day's journey into the wilderness, verse 4:

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:4

4 while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

No wonder Elijah fell asleep. He was utterly exhausted.

I think of the over-loaded lives that many of us lead. We live in a society that suffers from what doctors and sociologists have called "hurry sickness." We push in more and more activity into shorter spans of time with the advent of email and cell phones and laptops and Blackberries. Some people call them "crack-berries" because they are so addictive. With all of this technology, it becomes virtually impossible to unplug from our jobs. We work at home and get way out of balance as work invades home through all of this technology.

We live in a society not only addicted to "hurry sickness," but a society that rewards the over-committed. I think of a woman that I will call Peggy, who suffered a bout of severe clinical depression, so severe that she attempted suicide. She went to several therapists to discover the roots of her clinical depression. It turned out that Peggy spent virtually every waking hour, seven days a week, working. Raising four kids under the age of 10 wasn't enough. She was always doing special favors and projects for her neighbors and for other people at church because Peggy didn't have a job. She also felt a responsibility for caring for her aging parents. Every waking minute was spent cooking meals, wiping runny noses, cleaning houses, running a car pool, meeting at her school's PTA. She was heavily involved in several church ministries, ran a special group for women who were praying for their kids' elementary school. She was also responsible for managing the family's finances, which weren't very good. One of Peggy's kids had a severe learning disability which required hours of therapy every week.

Physical exhaustion was certainly what was going on in the life of Elijah. It says in verse 3,

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:3

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,

Someone once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” In more general terms, we would say that physical exhaustion alters your emotional state. What you can handle when you are fresh, you can’t handle when you are exhausted. You no longer feel up to it. New challenges that used to energize you, make you just want to give up. In fact, we often confess physical exhaustion without realizing it. Whenever you hear yourself using the phrase: “I am so tired of...”

- I am so tired of people who criticize.
- I am so tired of working six days a week.
- I am so tired of complainers.
- I am so tired of this kind of pressure.
- I am so tired of eating the same food.
- I am so tired of this traffic.

Physical exhaustion opens you up to temptation that you could handle when you are not depleted – anger, irritability, depression, lust and even substance abuse. You might want to ask whether at the root of many of your temptations and struggles are you physically worn out.

And then in Elijah’s life we see:

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The problem of the second punch

Here is what we read in 1 Kings 19:1-2,

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:1-2

1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

Now, Elijah’s life, along with the other prophets of Israel, had been threatened before. And we read about that in 1 Kings 18. But then Elijah experienced this incredible victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. We talked about that last week. At that point you would think, “OK, the problem has been done. We’ve ended that negative chapter of life.”

But almost immediately in the aftermath of this great victory, there is another threat on Elijah's life. I call this the power of the second punch which is often much more devastating than the first punch. What am I talking about by the problem of the second punch? When a problem comes roaring back after a great breakthrough, when an issue returns after some powerful encounter with God, people often lose hope. It's one thing to get cancer. Virtually everyone I've ever met who gets a diagnosis of cancer is shaken. We fear for our lives. Those of us who are parents worry about provision for our children. We are struck by the reality of our own mortality.

Many Christians are able to rally and trust God. They receive prayer. They claim God's grace. And for many, many people today they experience that cancer going into remission. They claim victory and a great breakthrough. Thank you, Jesus! I'm healed.

And then there is the power of the second punch if it comes back. There is another lesion. There is another tumor. It is on the second time around that I've often seen people immediately lose all hope.

The power of the second punch. I've seen it in folks who have overcome an affair. Someone's spouse has had an affair. They go through all the stages of grief in response to the discovery of that affair – denial, anger, depression. But often with faithful Christians, marriages that have even been rocked by affairs are healed. A couple goes into counseling, goes through our Begin Again program, each person discovers things about themselves that need to change, there is real repentance, and after a period of time a real release, a real letting go of the past. This chapter seems to be closed and we are in a new stage of our relationship.

But then there is the discovery of a second affair that often causes a spouse to lose all hope for their marriage. After all we've gone through, after all the tears and all the anger, and all the counseling, and all the prayers, after all that God has done, if that didn't take care of it, then what will?

Elijah was a man just like us. Defeated, exhausted, and reeling from the second punch. And we see the classic sign of burn-out:

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The problem of disappointed expectations

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:10 and 1 Kings 19:14

10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

And:

14 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

The problem of disappointed expectations. It is the feeling that all of our efforts have gone for nothing. Here I am, God, working, working, working, and it makes no difference; nothing has changed. I tried this new management approach at my job; I’ve tried rearranging things; I’ve had meeting after meeting; email after email; nothing that I do matters.

A lot of therapists say that stress is the reason for burn-out. I don’t believe that. I’ve watched people deal with incredible amounts of stress and not burnout. I’ve watched folks who carry extraordinary loads – illness, the loss of a loved one, financial pressures, but they keep going. It is not stress that burns us out, but distress.

Distress. The product of frustration and repeated disappointment. Distress. The gap between my ideals that I hoped for and my reality. Distress is the cause of burn-out. I think of that old Rolling Stones song: I can’t get no satisfaction. The reward of my work is so little. One researcher on burnout defines it as the moment when we wake up in the morning and realize that what we are doing has appalling little value.

And we have in Elijah’s life as in the life of most burnout victims, the

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The problem of isolation

SLIDE – 1 Ki 19:10

10 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

And in verse 14

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:14

14 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

Literally, verse 14 says:

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And I survived – I alone – but they are attempting to take my life.

I can't think of a clearer statement of a situation in which a man or woman burns out than this statement: I alone. I am alone. No one really quite understands what I'm going through. I tried to talk with my spouse, but they don't get it. I feel like I don't have any support at all. I feel like I'm drowning. And despite my pleas for help, no one hears me. I alone.

The "I-Alone Syndrome" is particularly a problem for us as Americans because we live in an incredibly individualistic society. One researcher found that in Mexico the rate of burnout for physicians was much lower than in the US. Even for physicians with much greater patient loads because in Mexico at noon, people go home, they eat, they see their families, and they are emotionally connected with other people. Physicians, along with so many other people in America, are isolated. They've done studies in Israel in which they found that the rates of burnout in Israel are much lower than in the U.S. even though people live with daily threats to their survival. I mean, you talk about stress! There are missiles flying overhead. People are afraid for their very lives, and yet, there is less burnout because there is more community connection.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, said this in his famous Table Talks:

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Solitude produces melancholy. When we are alone the worst and saddest things come to mind. We reflect in detail upon all sorts of evil. And if we have encountered adversity in our lives, we dwell upon it as much as possible, magnify it, think that no one is so unhappy as we are, and imagine the worst possible consequences. In short, when we are alone, we think one thing and another, we leap to conclusions, and we interpret everything in the worst possible light. On the other hand, we imagine that other people are very happy, and it distresses us that things go well with them and evil with us.

When we are alone and isolated, we can only see dark shades. Of course, the I-Alone Syndrome leads finally to the problem of an inflated sense of self-importance.

SLIDE

The problem of an inflated sense of self-importance

Every thing, finally, is up to me. Elijah is saying that all of God's activity in the world has come down to a single point – I'm the only one left. The work that God began through the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the nation of Israel – it now has come down to a single point – me.

Most of us don't have that huge of an ego. Most of us don't suffer that degree of megalomania to believe that of all of God's activity in the world, it has all come down to a single point – namely us. But, it is not hard for us to be convinced that we are indispensable. Those of us who find it impossible to rest, what are we saying? Something is going to collapse if we just stop.

Leaders often struggle with this, especially Christian leaders. Everything in this ministry will collapse if we're not present. It's all up to me.

Do any of you feel that way? Your parents' salvation, your child's salvation, your husband or wife's salvation – it's all up to you. If you don't pray enough; if you are not an effective enough witness; they are going to face eternity without Christ. The whole burden of this other person's salvation rests on you. The entire pyramid of life is turned upside down and it's all sitting on you.

Do any of you feel that way? I alone. I'm carrying the weight of the world, the weight of another salvation on my shoulders. You are never alone. As the old saying goes: there is a God and he's not you.

What I love about the text is the way out of burnout doesn't demand a thousand more activities from the burned out individual. Here is a checklist of 50 more items to do, if you want to get well. Rather, we live in a world that was created and sustained by God, a world in which God does things apart from us, apart from our activity, apart from our great prayers, apart from our capacity to hold him in our minds. We live in a world in which God's actions are the most important ones.

And if we are going to be healed from burnout, we have to start with God. Elijah was a man just like us. And God provided for Elijah. God will provide for you. Concerning Elijah,

SLIDE

God provides new physical strength

Here is what we read in verses 5-8,

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:5-8

5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."

8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

What an amazing, loving God we have. He cares about our whole existence; not just our spiritual needs. He cares about our physical and emotional needs. We read the story in the New Testament in John 21 following Jesus' resurrection. Jesus is standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. His disciples have been out all night fishing and working. They are exhausted. What is Jesus doing? He is standing on the shore, by a fire, cooking them some food.

One of the ways that God provides is that he shows care for our bodies and our souls. Listen to me. I believe that if you are in a state of near collapse, the Holy Spirit may bring some conviction to you and say to you that one of the issues in your life is that you have not been a good steward of your body.

It would be interesting to do a survey of those who say they are burned out to see if there is a correlation between the way that people are treating their bodies and emotions and that person's feelings of burnout. I would venture to guess that many people who are burning out have unhealthy diets, are not experiencing adequate exercise, and rarely get even 6 hours of sleep a night.

A number of years ago, Pastor Bill Hybels of the famous Willowcreek Church used an illustration that I have found very helpful over the years. He said that many of us as Christians act as if there is only one warning light on our dashboard – the spiritual warning light. When we think about what God wants from us, we pay attention to spiritual activities:

- Am I having an adequate devotional time with God?
- Am I praying and reading my Bible?
- Am I involved in church?
- Is there any prolonged pattern of sin in my life?

Hybels wisely pointed out that in many cases of burnout there are two other warning lights on the dashboard that are flashing that we aren't paying attention to: the warning light regarding our physical condition and the warning light regarding our emotional health.

About 15 years ago I had a personal experience with burnout. We were building here at Cooper Road. The church was growing rapidly. We had a very small staff. Not only was I preaching every week, but I was also overseeing all of our small groups, and I was responsible to oversee all of our finances and administration. The other two pastors just didn't feel gifted in dealing with financial matters. I was negotiating all of our building contracts; dealing with banks. Month after month I never worked less than 70 hours in a week.

I was walking around a park on one of my rare day offs with my wife, Marlene. Marlene said, "How are you doing?" The question arrested me. It was like God's question to Elijah where he said two times, "What are you doing here?"

How are you doing, Rich? I stopped as we were walking and I stood there thinking, “How am I doing?” How am I doing? And I thought to myself, “I can’t remember the last time that I felt really good.” I was flat as a pancake. There was no joy in my life. And the Holy Spirit led me to do a very simple exercise, which might be of help to some of you. I sat down with a blank sheet of paper. I felt the Holy Spirit leading me to write down those activities that emotionally nurtured me. Those things that made me feel good. For example, taking walks with Marlene; spending time with good friends, who at the end of the evening I didn’t have to do a deliverance on one of them, which actually had become a regular occurrence for me and Marlene; riding a bicycle; reading for no work purpose, but for sheer enjoyment.

Anyway, I made this list of about a dozen items. I looked at the list and I realized I wasn’t doing any of the things that were on that list. And God led me into a long-term plan of life change. And maybe he will lead you into a similar way.

God provides for Elijah’s physical and emotional needs.

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God provides new grace

Grace means help from outside of us. The grace of God comes along to a burned out individual not provoked by anything in that burned out person, but simply from the goodness and love of God. I think of the way that God’s grace works for those of us who are under severe pressure and who are facing burn out. I think about Paul’s statements in 2 Cor 4:7-10,

SLIDE – 2 Cor. 4:7-10

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

And look with me in particular at verses 8-9,

SLIDE – 2 Cor. 4:8-9

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

There is a little word in here that we easily miss, but it is the heart of this text. It is the word “but.” Paul writes:

SLIDE – 2 Cor. 4:8-9

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

The circumstances that Paul found himself in are circumstances in which we would expect someone to implode. They're crushing circumstances. He is under enormous stress. What keeps him going is not his strength because he is hard pressed. It is not his smarts because he is perplexed. It is not his situation, it says he is persecuted and struck down.

What is it that sustains us when we face overwhelming pressure? Paul tells us the secret in verse 7. He says:

SLIDE – 2 Cor. 4:7

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

He says: I am just a broken clay pot. I am nothing. It is not because I've employed all of these methods that I'm able to deal with what's happening to me on the job, or in my family. It is the grace of God at work in me. The power is not in the clay pot. The power is from Christ. I've heard from people over and over again offer a testimony like this: I was at such a low point; I felt so far from God and I was so bitter. And then for no particular reason at all, I just felt my heart soften. I wasn't doing anything different, but gradually, almost imperceptibly, I found myself being drawn back to church, drawn back to God. I felt myself believing again. It wasn't just this sudden revelation. I can't point to anything I was doing differently. It was just the grace of God. Something outside me. And there is grace for you, friend. Power outside of your situation and your capacities.

And then we read in verses 11-13 that,

SLIDE

God provides a new paradigm for Elijah

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:11-13

11 The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

God provides for Elijah's physical and emotional needs. God provides grace. God provides a new paradigm, a new understanding regarding the way that God works in the world. Elijah is standing on top of Mt. Sinai and there is a whirlwind. But it says in verse 11,

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:11

11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind.

And then there was an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

SLIDE - 1 Kings 19:11

11 After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

And then there is a fire,

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19: 12

12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

And then there is a gentle whisper, sometimes translators call it a “still small voice.”

You know, burnout victims need to readjust their understanding of who God is and the way that God generally works in the world. Elijah’s case is such a classic; it is so typical of our own thinking about God. Elijah has this extraordinary experience on Mt. Carmel. The prophets of Baal are shown to be nothing but frauds. God has dramatically broken in. And Elijah’s expectations sky-rocket. He thinks, “Well, certainly, this will bring about a revival in the nation of Israel.” But it doesn’t. And so Elijah thinks, “Well, if fire coming from heaven didn’t do it, what will?” Elijah is a man just like us. We have the exact same thoughts.

- If so and so could be healed, then all of my family would be saved. I just know it. They would be so impressed.

But I can tell you, friends, from decades of experience of seeing God’s power that often in the long-term there is very little spiritual change as a response to an exhibition of power. I think of one man in particular, who is a brother of a friend of mine who was dramatically healed from a weird disease. The doctors had told him that he was going to have all of these long-term complications. My friend and I had an opportunity to pray for him. Without getting into all the details, there was an absolute experience of God’s power. And within a week, he was totally well, and totally symptom free.

I visited him a number of times following that dramatic healing because I believed that someone who had been healed so profoundly would clearly wish to acknowledge Christ and become one of Christ’s followers. But after 3-4 visits, it

was apparent that he was grateful that he was healed; but, he had no particular interest in making deep changes in his life.

Jesus said about the people of his own day that they're judgment would be worst than the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah because the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented if they had seen any of the miracles that the people of his day had seen.

God not in the fire; God not in the earthquake; where then, is God? If we are talking about conversion, if we are talking about people becoming followers of Christ and obedient to the will of Christ, then the way of God generally is not the way of great displays of power. The way of God generally has to do with internalized convictions that are quietly and secretly deepening in a person's soul. Internalized convictions. A deepening of your set of beliefs about God, about life, about what's important, about your relationships, your family, your friends.

And you know, friends, most people don't get these deep internalized convictions in drama and fireworks. We want to have an encounter with God. You say, "Where is God in the world? I don't experience very much of God. How can I personally experience God is enough?" Let me suggest how you might in your own life have an experience with God.

In the morning or evening where there is a quiet space in your apartment or house, and there is a quiet room, sit in a comfortable chair. If you are wide awake and you are not going to just drop off to sleep, quiet yourself before God. Open up your hands and your heart and welcome the presence of Jesus. Don't try to produce anything. Don't try to force anything. Don't try to have an experience. Just be before God. Don't say anything. Don't even try to think great thoughts about God. Just be before God. Rest in God's presence.

Initially, that is going to be very hard for you to do – to just be before God for even 60 seconds. But over a period of time, you might find yourself being able to be before God for 2 minutes, then 5 minutes, then 10-20 minutes. And you will find so much healing for burnout as you learn how to commune with God heart to heart, spirit to Spirit.

Finally, in healing Elijah's burnout,

SLIDE

God gives new marching orders

SLIDE – 1 Kings 19:15-18

15 The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel

Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Burned out people have lost their vision. Burned out people have lost a sense of purpose. Burned out folks are so disillusioned that they can't imagine how their life could make a difference. They feel so powerless and impotent. And God in his grace comes to burned out people and gives us new marching orders. When people fail, God in his kindness comes along and, in grace, gives that person a new sense of direction. “Here's what I want you to do now...”

He did that with Jonah when Jonah ran away from the Lord and was swallowed up in that fish. It says in Jonah 3:1-2,

SLIDE – Jonah 3:1-2

1 Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

He gave new marching orders to Peter after Peter denied him, suffered implosion, completely collapsed. The Lord re-envisioned Peter. God did that with me a number of years ago. I was going through a devastating personal time in my own life. I came as close to quitting ministry as I've ever come in 20 years. I thought to myself, “I can't do this. I can't keep going. I'm going to tender my resignation.” I was experiencing so much personal pain.

One evening I went out and I took a walk. I talked to God and I said, “God, I can't do this anymore. Nothing that I'm doing is making any difference. My prayers are not making any difference. My activity is not making any difference.” And as I took that walk, I began to cry and I felt like I had a complete meltdown before the Lord. I just gave up. I said, “God, if anything is going to happen, it's got to be you.” And the Lord, who is so kind, spoke to my heart by the Holy Spirit and said, “Rich, here is what I want you to do. I want you to show people how to keep going when they are in personal pain.” That simple word, “I want you to show people how to keep going when they are in personal pain,” was all I needed. It was my new marching orders.

Friend, God has marching orders for you and for your life. Even in burned out, fried to a crisp, feeling like you failed, feeling like life has failed you, one little word from God can make all the difference in your life. You need not remain in your condition. God has new marching orders for you. Let's pray.

The Challenge of Burnout

Rich Nathan

August 11-12, 2007

1 and 2 Kings: Facing Life's Challenges Series

1 Kings 19:1-18

I. The Victims of Burnout

II. The Model of Burnout: Elijah

- A. A Man Like Moses
- B. A Man Like Us (James 5.17)

III. The Problem of Burnout

- A. The Problem of Physical Exhaustion (1 Ki. 18.45-19.3)
- B. The Problem of The Second Punch (1 Ki. 19.1-3)
- C. The Problem of Unrealistic Expectations (1 Ki. 19.10, 14)
- D. The Problem of Isolation (1 Ki. 19.10, 14)
- E. The Problem of An Inflated Sense of Self-Importance (1 Ki. 19.10, 14)

IV. The Healing of Burnout

- A. God Provides New Physical Strength (1 Ki. 19.5-8)
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