

Text: 1 Kings 19:14-21

"He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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 all whose mouths have not kissed him." 19 So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. 20 Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" 21 So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant."

Do you get tired easily? Do you feel tired all the time? Do you have trouble getting to sleep at night? Do you wake up grouchy? Are people telling you, "You know, you don't look so good lately"? Are you working harder but getting less done? Do you feel constant pressure to succeed? Do you forget "little" things more than you used to -- appointments, deadlines, names, dates, promises? Are you more irritable? Do you feel sick a lot -- aches and pains, headaches, a cold than won't go away? Have you lost your sense of humor? Do you find it impossible to laugh at a joke about yourself?

The literature calls it "burnout." It's a major problem in the business world. An article a few years ago called "How to Survive Burnout" said: "Burnout is a stage of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, way of life, relationship or belief that failed to produce the expected reward." Similar articles say that preachers and teachers are not immune. The most likely candidates are "Type A personalities." They are ambitious, they are high achievers, they play every game to win and they find it impossible to say "No." One behavioral scientist estimated that one clergyman in four is functioning burned out. That same scientist wrote a brochure about pastoral burnout for the Ministers Life Insurance Company; more than 101,000 clergymen requested copies.

Now, of course, some people could never burn out because they were never on fire. But you may be a candidate for burnout. Or you may be burned out right now.

The name for it, is more modern, but the problem is not. It's as old as Elijah, if not older. And the good news is that God understands it, and that He can do something about it. Today we get to see:

The Savior's Comfort for Burned Out Believers

The Lord says,

1. "You're not the only one who takes a stand for me."
2. "You're not the only one who can give service to me."

1. "You're not the only one who takes a stand for me."

I'm not a psychologist, and neither are you, at least most of you, so I suppose there are some risks if we play "shrink" with this obviously troubled man whom we meet in this piece of the first book of Kings. Nonetheless, **if you were** a psychologist, and **if** Elijah were camped out, not at the mouth of a cave at Mt. Horeb (Mt. Sinai), but on the edge of the counseling couch in your office, what symptoms of "burnout" could you detect in his angry little speech?

For one thing, I hear **frustration**, don't you? "*I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites . . .*", notice how Elijah put distance between himself and the people? He was an Israelite too, you know, yet he said, "Look what they are doing!" "**They** have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword." Elijah had just provoked that dramatic showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. And Elijah and the Lord had won that showdown. Yet it seemed to make no difference. Queen Jezebel was still ruling. Baal worship was still thriving. Elijah was frustrated: "How can I soar with he eagles when I have to put up with the turkeys?" There was frustration, but there was also resentment. Elijah was frustrated with God too. Unspoken in Elijah's complaint is a question,

“Lord, how long will **you** let this go on? Aren’t **you** going to do something about this? I can’t fix everything myself, you know!”

I hear some loneliness here too: *“I am the only one left.”* Elijah had said that before. *“I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left,”* he had said at Mt. Carmel (*1 Kings 18:22*) Some of his loneliness was by choice. No one had told him to go from Mt. Carmel, not far off the Mediterranean coast, down to Jezreel, and from there farther down to Beersheba, and from there way down to the Sinai mountain range. That was Elijah’s idea. He wanted to do this all by himself

And there is some plain old fear in Elijah’s words: *“I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”* Elijah was right about that. When King Ahab had told his queen about what had happened at Mt. Carmel -- 450 prophets of Baal were slaughtered, and Baal worship, you know, was something the queen had tried to make popular in Israel, Jezebel had sent a messenger to Elijah: *“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.”* (*1 Kings 19:2*)

Do you blame Elijah for feeling burned out? I don’t. Does it surprise you to see this sturdy, fearless man of God huddled under a broom tree, spitting out his bitterness. *“I have had enough, LORD,”* he said. *“Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”* (*1 Kings 19:4*) It doesn’t surprise me. Please don’t think that just because the Holy Spirit decided that the stories of these men and women were to be included in the pages of this book, that somehow these believers were manufactured heroes -- stained glass saints! They had all the enthusiasm, all the anger, all the joy, all the passion that you and I have -- sometimes, I think, a lot more.

But notice the Savior’s answer. He has comfort for this burned out believer, and part of His comfort is to correct one of Elijah’s notions -- You’re the only one. No Elijah, it only feels that way. *“I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”* Seven thousand is undoubtedly a “rounded off” number. I don’t know how many people were in Israel. A couple of million, maybe? Statistically, maybe seven thousand wasn’t a big number, not a huge percentage of the population. The prophets later on talked about a remnant that believed -- only a small scrap. Yet **the Savior’s comfort for a burned out believer** still holds: **“You’re not the only one who takes a stand for me.”**

And the Savior’s comfort for burned out believers today is, in part, that same message, **“You’re not the only one who takes a stand for me.”** For with Jesus Christ as our big brother, we are simply never, ever alone. That big brother of ours stood alone in Pilate’s judgment hall, stood alone under the whip of Roman soldiers, hung alone on a shameful cross so that we don’t have to be alone ever again! He lived in our place. He died in our place. He called us through the Word to be His, to be part of His Father’s family again, and He says, *“I am with you always.”* (*Matthew 28:20*) It may feel lonesome. It may look lonely. But the Savior says, “You’re never alone.”

And sometimes the Savior lets us see there are other believers hurting the same way we hurt, fighting the same battles we fight, taking the same unwelcome stands we take. Do you catch yourself lamenting, “If it weren’t for me, our while family would be falling apart. I’m the only one holding this marriage together.” Have you ever commented, “There are so many people in this church who hardly bother coming to worship, who don’t want to do anything for this church, who probably give a few dollars here and a few dollars there if they feel like it. Who’s going to hold this church together? I’m here every week. I give up things I’d like to have so I can give more to church. I’ll serve on any church committee there is. But how many of us are there?” The Savior’s answer is, “More than you think. There are more believers than you think struggling to hold marriages and families together. There are more believers than you think supporting church and school, setting examples for their children, giving costly hours and costly dollars to the kingdom.”

Remember that when you feel burned out. **You’re not the only one who takes a stand for Jesus Christ.**

2. **“You’re not the only one who can give service to me.”**

The literature says that some candidates for burnout, at least in the clergy business, are those ministers who base their success on the membership numbers, the statistics, the percentages, or those, as he put it, who are “24-hour pastors” and who “over-identify with their professions.” If that’s true, then the comfort the Savior gave Elijah would be helpful for them too. Not only did the Lord say to Elijah, **“You’re not the only one who takes a stand for me.”** He also said there are other people

who can do the job: **“You’re not the only one who can give service to me.”**

There are others who can be designated for the task. *“The LORD said to [Elijah], “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.” (1 Kings 19:15-16)* Now, in fact, Elijah didn’t anoint any one of these three himself. He did go straight back up north to Elisha’s home town, which was on the eastern side of the Jordan River. *“So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.” (1 Kings 19:19)* This cloak -- the overcoat -- that Elijah wore was the symbol of his function as a prophet. Without a word, merely by putting this cloak around his shoulders, he was designating Elisha to take over for him. Hazael became king of Aram -- Syria -- and Jehu became king of the Northern Kingdom long after Elijah was gone. But this comfort from the Savior reminded the burned-out prophet, “I understand that you’re ‘*very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.*’ But **you’re not the only one who can give service to me.** I’m still the Lord of history. I’m still in charge of my Church. Others can be designated to the task.”

As for Elisha, he told Elijah, *“Let me kiss my father and mother good-by . . . and then I will come with you.”* Elijah’s reply is a little hard to understand: *“Go back . . . what have I done for you?”* How about if we said, “Go ahead. Have I done anything to stop you?” Or “Go ahead, but remember what I’ve told you.” Elisha had to remember there was no turning back to what he used to do. He had to put it behind him. And, apparently, he did. *“So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.” (1 Kings 19:21)* That’s leaving the past behind, isn’t it? Elisha, all his life, was dedicated to his task.

So you can’t do it all? You can’t single-handedly solve all your children’s problems? You can’t on your own guarantee that everybody in your family will keep the faith? All by yourself it’s impossible to fix everything that’s wrong at the shop, or on the farm, or in the church? Who ever said you could? Who ever said you should? That’s a word of comfort for burned out believers, isn’t it? **“You’re not the only one who can give service to me.”**

Counselors agree there are cures for burnout. Get away from the rat race. Take time off. Learn to enjoy other things besides work. Talk to people. Appreciate beauty in life. Get some exercise. Laugh at things. Laugh at yourself. Change your habits. Decide there are some things you can’t do, and then don’t do them. Pray more. Be realistic about your work and your life. All of that will help, but the most basic help begins with the kind of **comfort the Savior offers to burned out believers: “You’re not the only one who takes a stand for me.” “You’re not the only one who can give service to me.”**

For twentieth century Elijahs, that’s good news.

Amen.