

“Overcoming Servant ‘Burn-out!’”—1 Kings 19:9-10

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Overcoming Servant ‘Burn-out!’”, is 1 Kings 19:9-10 → *The word of the LORD came to Elijah, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

When it comes to how organizations function I’ve heard it said that ten percent of the people end up doing ninety percent of the work. I’ve even heard this said about Christian congregations as they strive to do ministry together in service to the LORD and maintain that ministry with all its responsibilities. A small percentage of the people doing the majority of the work could be natural since the LORD gives various gifts to people which require varying degrees of responsibility. However, it can also be a result of sin in the form of control issues, apathy, complacency and laziness. The struggle comes when those to whom more responsibility has been given experience “burn out” as they strive to motivate other people in their commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The experience of “burn out” is difficult to avoid because of the temptation to lose hope whenever you don’t see the results you expect. Continually seeking people to serve and continually being turned down can become very disheartening. It is very hard to understand since, by joining an organization, you place yourself in a covenant with others to carry out the responsibilities necessary to fulfill its mission. So, how do you avoid servant “burn out” as you strive to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in the midst of the relationships that you encounter each day with a desire to be His servant to others?

In our text we meet Elijah, considered by Jews to be the greatest of all the prophets, experiencing servant “burn out.” Why? In the person of Elijah we see the struggles which any servant of the LORD can face—even to the point of wanting to give up. You see, in the midst of “burn out” the devil also strives to get a foothold, tempting you to turn your servant focus inward on yourself so you’ll give up serving the LORD and others.

Elijah was running for his life because the king of Israel’s wife, Jezebel, wanted to kill him for speaking out against the idolatry into which she and husband, Ahab, had led God’s people. Elijah had been pursued and rejected so much that he was fed up! Figuring there were no believers in the LORD left, he decided to run away. He went into the desert so discouraged that he simply wanted to die.

God appeared to him and gave him nourishment for the journey ahead because, **from God's perspective**, Elijah wasn't done yet. Yahweh also reassured Him of His presence on the mountain through *the sound of a low whisper*. (cf. 1 Kings 19:12)

Elijah felt all alone at this point in His ministry. He described to God his perception of the Church at this point in his life. He said in verse 10 of our text: *The people of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away*. Talk about the feelings of isolation, alienation, depression and loneliness in the midst of serving a people who claimed to be God's people. And it was a feeling he went through even after many displays of God's power, protection and providence in his life.

Previous to this God provided for Elijah during the drought and famine when He gave him water from the brook and was fed by ravens. God took care of him. When the brook dried up God provided for him by staying with a widow, whose oil and flour never depleted. The LORD always took care of him.

Elijah had also just experience Yahweh's power on Mount Carmel. The prophets of the false god Baal watched as the LORD sent fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice while nothing happened when they called on their false god to do the same thing. That was the day the

LORD had all those false prophets killed, which sent Elijah running in fear from Jezebel. Even in the midst of experiencing all of that power, providence and protection of God, Elijah still went through the human feelings and temptations connected with servant “burn out.”

In the midst of the spiritual battles you face as you strive to serve the Lord Jesus in this world, the devil’s temptation is very real: to lead you to hopelessness and despair so you lose perseverance and quit . . . maybe even give up the faith. However, no matter how far away you may try to run in your frustrations, you still have to face this battle. The old adage is true: “You can’t run away from your problems. They just follow you wherever you go.” Eventually, you still have to face those problems and challenges.

Listen to the LORD’s instructions after Elijah “poured out his heart” to Him in 1 Kings 19:15 → *Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.* What? Go back to where he had just been? Most people would want God to say: “I’ll take care of it. I’ll get rid of all the problems for you. I’ll make it easier for you.” Go back to the people who were trying to kill him? Going back into the struggles was probably the last thing that Elijah wanted to hear at this point.

However, it was the only way to go. A great challenge of servanthood is to recognize that the LORD is **always at work** in the midst of the muddle of the sin in our lives. In the midst of striving to do your best for

the LORD you can get so focused on desired results that **your own perceptions, your own work** and what **you're trying to accomplish** become priority. We forget Who is really at work in our efforts according to Philippians 2:13 → *It is God Who works in you, both to will and to work **for His good pleasure***. Notice it's God Who is at work in us as we serve. To do what? To do what I want? No! *To work **for His good pleasure***. He wants to accomplish His will and His power in and through you!

Elijah also learned that he was not indispensable. That's another mentality which feeds servant "burn out." Satan can deceive you into thinking that you're indispensable—like you're the only one who can do it right. After all, "if you want a job done right, do it yourself." This is a very self-righteous sinful attitude.

The LORD told Elijah to return to Damascus and *anoint . . . Elisha . . . to succeed him as prophet* and that there were *seven thousand in Israel whose knees had not bowed to Baal*. (cf. 1 Kings 19:16,18) These were words of hope for Elijah. God had specific plans to carry on His ministry through Elisha and that there were still others in Israel who were faithful to Yahweh, despite Elijah's feelings and perceptions. He learned that, despite feelings to the contrary, God's work revolves around Himself—Yahweh—not Elijah and his perceptions. Discouragement

comes when you lose sight of God's Lordship over **all** and when you lose sight of the promise given us in Zechariah 4:6 → *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit”, says the LORD Almighty.*

God is always trying to get us focused on Him—**His** power, **His** working, **His** Spirit—so that we recognize that Jesus is Lord of our service. Overcoming servant “burn out” happens as we encounter the LORD's power and His presence regularly as His Holy Spirit works through His Word as we read it and use it to worship Him, through participation in the Lord's Supper (where we encounter His presence) and through the encouragement of one another as fellow servants of Jesus Christ.

To avoid servant “burn out” you must also understand commitment properly. If you fail to be committed for the right reasons you will become vulnerable to servant “burn out.” When you focus on your own definitions of commitment you actually become committed to yourself and your ways rather than to Jesus and His ways. Serving Christ's way will always be challenging because it is submitting to His direction and control, even while the devil strives to sabotage your service.

To avoid servant burn-out, our commitment must first and foremost be based upon God's commitment to us in the accomplished work of Jesus Christ for us broken, frail sinners. God is committed to you in His grace. It is His commitment of love toward you in Jesus Christ which

determines your commitment in service to others. Thus you move forward in the new life of forgiveness which God gives you in Jesus, not look back to the old life of sin. Jesus said it this way in Luke 9:62 → *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.* If you put yourself to the task and look back with regrets or perceived failures or unfulfilled expectations, you can't go forward.

Only sinners get “burned out.” **God never gets burned out striving to bring His plan of salvation into peoples' lives!** He doesn't give up! He doesn't quit! Thus, commitment is based upon what God does for you in Jesus Christ with His forgiveness in the midst of your failures, with praise to Him in the midst of your accomplishments and with His Spirit's power in the midst of your continuing service!

Because God is **always** at work by His Holy Spirit's power in the lives of His people, as a fellowship of believers we can encourage one another in service to the LORD. When we are called upon to serve, instead of immediately looking at our own inabilities, excuses, expectations, past experiences and fears, we can recognize this isn't about ourselves and seek the Spirit's guidance with a willingness to serve. Then we can go forward, confident in His power. It's a confidence knowing that we can go back into the muddle of sin with God's grace, forgiveness and love, all served to us by Jesus Christ everyday! Amen.

**Therefore**, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable,  
always abounding in the work of the Lord,  
knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:58)

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