

“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 10% of the people end up doing 90% of the work. I’ve even heard this said about our own congregation as we strive to do ministry together in service to the LORD and maintain this ministry with all its responsibilities.

In many organizations it seems that there is a small percentage of the people who end up doing the majority of the work. In one respect this is natural since the LORD gives various gifts to people which require varying degrees of responsibility. 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 it’s so easy to lose hope whenever you don’t see the results you expected. It’s easy to give up whenever you’re being told by the people with whom you have covenanted together to do this ministry, “I don’t want to do it! Go find somebody else!” or “I put in my time! Now it’s time for somebody else to put in their time!” If it isn’t excuses many times it can be outright rejection.

How do we avoid servant “burn out” as we strive to be faithful to the Lord Jesus in the midst of the relationships that we encounter each day and persevere as His servants to others? Whether it’s in the congregation or personally, “burn out” comes when things are not happening the way that **we think they should happen . . . or . . . we don’t see God working the way we think** He has promised to work. Satan gets a foothold in such situations and turns our servant focus inward on ourselves so we are tempted to give up serving the LORD.

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.

Elijah was running for his life because the king of Israel at that time wanted

to kill him for speaking out against the idolatry into which King Ahab had led all of 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 his perception of God's Church in verse 10 of our text: *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*. 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 day the LORD had all those false prophets killed, which made the king's wife so angry that she vowed to kill Elijah. 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."

It's easy for any Christian in their dedication to become frustrated in the midst of the spiritual battles they face as they strive to serve the Lord Jesus in this world. One of the biggest temptations is giving up hope in the midst of rejection. Satan wants to fill us with despair so we lose perseverance and quit.

However, no matter how far away we may try to run in our frustrations, we 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 our best for the LORD we can get too focused on results. We get too focused on **our own perceptions, our own work** and what **we’re trying to accomplish**. 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 us!

Elijah also learned that he was not indispensable. That’s another mentality which feeds servant “burn out.” Satan can deceive us into thinking that we’re indispensable—like we’re the only ones who can do it right. After all, “if you want a job done right, do it yourself.” This is a very self-righteous 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 the LORD, despite Elijah's feelings and perceptions! He learned that, despite feelings to the contrary, God's work revolves around the LORD, 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 the study of His Word, 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.

To avoid this kind of serving our commitment is first and foremost based upon God's commitment to us in the accomplished work of Jesus Christ for us

broken, frail sinners. God is committed to you! 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 failure or unfulfilled expectations, you can't go forward.

Commitment is based upon what God does for you in Jesus Christ with His forgiveness in the midst of failure, with praise to Him in the midst of accomplishments and with His Spirit's power in the midst of continuing service!

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!

Overcoming servant "burn out" begins and continues with the focus on Jesus' victorious servanthood on your behalf! He followed the LORD's agenda! He followed God's plan for your salvation perfectly **so that** you can serve Him in confidence, even if things don't appear to be happening the way that you think they should be happening. You can be confident and perseverant even in the midst suffering while serving, knowing that He is doing His work. That

empowers you to “let go and let God.”

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 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)