

Burnout and Restoration

Message for Sunday, August 11, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-8

1) Part 1

A school teacher had not returned her students' papers for over three weeks; they sat in a pile on her desk, but she could not muster the energy to look at them. A man building a new house sat in the unfinished basement for an hour, unable to grab the hammer and start moving. A minister who had been known as a good preacher found herself completely empty of ideas for sermons, and wondered if she could ever preach again. A high school student who had always made top grades was suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of writing a simple essay, and thought he would not be able to make it through exams.

You recognize the syndrome. It is called "burnout." It usually strikes people who have worked hard and been successful. But these are the very people in whom burnout is least expected; no one thought they would ever have problems.

They themselves cannot understand what is happening to them. They are tired and grumpy and depressed. They feel listless and powerless and unable to think clearly or creatively. Eventually they begin to have feelings of guilt and worthlessness and wonder if they will ever be able to cope with life.

QUESTION: Have you ever had that experience? Or know of someone who did?

2) Part 2

This is the way it was with Elijah. He was the greatest prophet the people of Israel ever had. Ahab was the king of Israel, and Jezebel was Ahab's wife. Together they were among the most wicked leaders the nation ever had. They worshipped the false god Baal, and didn't hesitate to kill anyone who got in their way. Yet Elijah boldly announced messages from God, many of them warning King Ahab to change his ways. Ahab and Jezebel hated Elijah.

Perhaps the climax of Elijah's service was when he had a competition with the prophets of Baal, to see whose god would answer prayer. The contest

revealed to the whole nation that Baal was just an empty name with no power. Elijah single-handedly destroyed the leaders of the Baal religion, which was corrupting Israel and turning people away from the Lord God. The people of Israel had witnessed a spectacular miracle of fire coming down from heaven. As a result, there was a great revival of worship for the Lord God in Israel. The people not only turned away from worshipping Baal; they joined Elijah in killing all the Baal prophets. They were 100% behind him.

Even King Ahab, who worshipped Baal, and who was Elijah's worst enemy, had witnessed the awesome sight, and had decided not to mess around any more with Elijah.

Elijah was in awe of what God had done. But his euphoria lasted only a few hours. When King Ahab got home that evening, he told Jezebel all that had happened. She sent a message to Elijah, vowing to kill him by tomorrow evening. The next thing Elijah knows is that Queen Jezebel has sent out soldiers to kill him.

That's when it hit Elijah. The day that should have ended with thanksgiving and worship, instead ended with despair. He ran into the wilderness to hide from Jezebel. Then he said to God:

1 Kings 19:4, New Living Translation:
"I have had enough, Lord. Take my life."

Elijah was experiencing burnout. He didn't know that's what was happening to him, but it was. After a period of enormous success in his life, he was exhausted and depressed.

He had done so much, and yet it seemed as though he had barely made a dent in the enormous problem which faced him. He had a sense of worthlessness and thought he would never again be able to cope with life.

QUESTION: When someone you know has life crashing down around them, how can you help?

3) Part 3

Fortunately, God came to his rescue. It is interesting to see how God did it.

First, God gave him nourishment, to strengthen his body.

1 Kings 19:5-7, New Living Translation:
Then he lay down and slept under the broom tree. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him, "Get up and eat!" He looked around and saw some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water! So he ate and drank and lay down again.

Then the angel of the Lord came again and touched him and said, "Get up and eat some more, for there is a long journey ahead of you."

Then God met with him at Mount Horeb, which is another name for Sinai, the most sacred mountain in Hebrew history, the one where Moses received the Law of God. God revealed himself to Elijah on that mountain.

1 Kings 19:9-13, New International Version:
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?"

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."

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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

First Elijah had a good night's sleep. He was exhausted, physically, emotionally, spiritually. He was burned out.

There was a mighty force which shook the mountain and shattered rocks. Since God is all-powerful, we might assume that was God trying to get Elijah's attention. But it wasn't. Same with the earthquake and the fire. There may be times when God captures our attention in a big way. Pain has a way of doing that! Pain sometimes is like the shepherd's crook, reminding us to come back to God.

Then there was silence—a void or a lull in all the activities of nature. And God was in the silence. The Bible says God spoke to Elijah in "a gentle whisper." The Hebrew words actually say, "a voice of gentle stillness." I love that expression—"A voice of gentle stillness"!

QUESTION: How have you experienced God? Do you sense God's presence, or discern a message from God?

4) Part 4

1 Kings 19:15-16, New Living Translation:
Then the Lord told him, "Go back the way you came, and travel to the wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive there, anoint Hazael to be king of Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi to be king of Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel-meholah to replace you as my prophet."

Then God went on to say,

1 Kings 19:18, New Living Translation:
"Yet I will preserve seven thousand others in Israel who have never bowed to Baal or kissed him!"

God listened to the litany of Elijah's complaints and worries; and then God told Elijah what to do to overcome his situation. God sent him back into the conflict with renewed energy and told him to appoint his successor, who would for a time be his servant and helper in the prophetic role.

Perhaps the important thing for us today is to realize that God answers our needs as he answered Elijah's. The schoolteacher who cannot look at the papers on her desk, the house builder who can't lift the hammer, the minister who cannot prepare another sermon, the student who can't face another assignment, can all learn something from the pattern of God's dealing with the ancient prophet.

First, rest and nourishment are vitally important. People who are suffering from burnout often have trouble sleeping. The sleep they do get is disturbed. They wake up grumpy and irritable. They may not be eating well, or they may eat too much, and they need to bring their diets under control again. If we will allow it, God will give us peace when we lie down at night, and we can sleep. And then, with a sense of God's presence and guidance, we can bring

order into our diet again, so that our bodies can function at their best to help us with our distress.

Next is meeting with God. When pressures overwhelm, and responsibilities are too much, it is OK to get away. Many times Jesus needed to withdraw from the pressures of work, to be alone with God. So do we.

It is perfectly acceptable to say to your family and friends and your church, “I’m overloaded. There is too much on me, and I need a break.”

The government requires that employers allow their employees time off each year for this purpose, as vacation. Furthermore, public holidays are declared throughout the year, again to give people a chance for recreation.

Recreation: literally “re-creation.” It means restoring something to its original condition, as God made it.

Something happens to us when we get away from things that way. We slip out from under the burdens that have crushed us. We get a new perspective on ourselves and our jobs and our situations. We can hear the “voice of gentle stillness,” and something inside us snaps into place. We have the energy to go back again.

We may even reconceive our mission in life, and go back to do things differently. Elijah did. He saw, for one thing, that he wasn’t alone in what he was doing, the way he thought he was. “I am the only one left,” he had moaned to God. That was why he was so frightened; he didn’t have any partners in his great undertakings. But God told him there were still seven thousand faithful Israelites in the land—seven thousand that hadn’t “bowed the knee to Baal.”

Moreover, God gave him the name of his successor, Elisha, and told him to anoint Elisha for the day when it would be his responsibility to be God’s prophet in Israel. This gave Elijah a proper perspective on himself as one in a great line of prophets, so that he didn’t feel so alone in history. He had a new friend and ally in his work. His horizons were expanded. His sense of what God was doing was enlarged. His spirit was revived.

That is the way it can happen for all of us when we are feeling tired and discouraged and burned out. When we see that God is still at work in the world, and that we don’t have to carry our burdens alone, it does something to the way we feel about everything. Our hearts are lifted, our steps are quickened, our shoulders are thrown back. New energy surges through our bodies, and we want to get back into the fray again.

That’s what the “voice of gentle stillness” is about, my friends. God can take our brokenness, our failure, our pain, our discouragement, and lift us up out of the pit.

Isaiah 40:30-31, Good News Bible:

Even those who are young grow weak;
young people can fall exhausted.

But those who trust in the Lord for help
will find their strength renewed.

They will rise on wings like eagles;
they will run and not get weary; they will walk and
not grow weak.

Next Steps:

- Pray: make that vital connection with God. *God is the least demanding person you’ll ever know. He doesn’t demand your attention, like some people. In fact, God is easy to ignore completely, without even realizing it. So it’s important to make this a priority in our daily lives.*
- Give the hurts, the discouragements, the worries to God. “Lord, this is too much for me to handle. I’d like to trade all this for your presence and your strength.” Know that you are not alone.
- Be sensitive to others who are going through difficulty. Offer to listen, to pray, to help. Let them know they are not alone.