

November 1, 2020

Surprise: You Don't Need to Burn Out

Exodus 18

Do you tire more easily? Are people telling you you look tired? Are you increasingly cynical? Often sad? Forgetting things? More irritable? Disappointed with people? Do you get angry easily? Feeling physically drained? Is joy elusive? Unable to laugh at yourself? Do you have new aches and pains? Having fun is more trouble than its worth?

Those questions come from a lecture on burn out by a colleague who had been down that road. I've been close to that point too. Many of us feel we're there, in our current circumstances: a pandemic, a fragile economy, winter coming on, racial tensions, a climate crisis, a very charged and polarized election and political tone. It's a very difficult moment. How can we find Good News in an exhausted, cynical, divisive, polarized culture? How can we BE Good News in a divided, bitter, scared, angry world?

A Diagnosis of Burnout

What happens when you burn out? What are the symptoms?

- You feel drained
- You become your own worst critic
- You become irritable, angry, and cynical.
- You become discouraged, cranky, and pull away from those who love you.

Think about our world right now. Cynicism, a loss of passion and numbness characterize our society. People are angry, frustrated, and outraged to the point that civil conversations become arguments. Discussions become brawls. You don't have to watch the news very long before you see that as an entire culture we are burned out.

A final sign worth noting is that people who are burning out often self-medicate. That usually takes the form of addiction. The addiction can be something as 'virtuous' as work. For me, I worked far too many hours. Other times you can get addicted to eating, spending, gaming, binge watching, exercise or anything else that helps you numb out or escape. And, of course, people also self-medicate through the use of alcohol, drugs, sex, and gambling.

In Exodus 18, Moses is burning out. His father-in-law, Jethro, makes a diagnosis: *"This is not good!" Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. "You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself"* (18:17-18). Providing an accurate diagnosis is important. Not knowing what's wrong makes it very difficult to make things right. Some of us are taking on too much, too.

A Treatment Plan

Second, a diagnosis points the way to treatment. Jethro says, *"You should continue to be the*

people's representative before God, bringing their disputes to him. Teach them God's decrees and give them his instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives. But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten ... They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you. If you follow this advice ... then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace." (18:19-23).

1. Back to Basics

Blogger Carey Nieuwhof comments, *"It's not your imagination, your social media feed and news feed are hard to take right now."* The news and social media feed our stress and anxiety. What used to feed your mind and your soul now feeds your fear and despair.

Jethro reminds Moses he needs to get back to *"God's decrees and instructions."* We need to drink from a deeper well than the news and social media. We need to spend time with Jesus. We need to spend time in Scripture. I think it's significant that, as a church, in our daily readings we're going through Romans right now. Romans takes us to the core of our faith: salvation and new life in and through faith in Jesus. Nothing less than a whole new identity and a whole reality. Nothing more than Jesus. Certainly nothing less. What I'm missing in my social media is any good news about Jesus ...

In a divisive, divided world, we need to get back to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Forget politics. Forget outrage. Forget QAnon. Forget Antifa. Forget the US Election.

We need Jesus. So spend time reading Romans with us. Or reread one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Don't let your news feed inform your reading of scripture. Let your reading of scripture inform your news feed. The first fuels stress. The second reduces it.

Whatever you do, don't read the Bible as one more way to find ammunition to attack the other side or prove your point. Read it as the joyful gateway to life – a rich, full, satisfying life, right now, with Jesus.

2. Bring Healing, Not Division

When people are hurting – and most people are these days – ask yourself whether your goal is to bind their wounds or irritate them. There were disagreements and squabbles in Moses' day. Jethro encourages Moses to find healthy ways to settle them – to bring healing – to find unity – and then call people back to God, first and foremost. Are healing and unity our goal?

Right now, it feels like many people are choosing aggravation and division over healing.

- What if you just decide your approach in life and online is going to be to bind wounds, not irritate them?
- To try to heal your enemies rather than harm them?

Mom used to say, *"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."* What if we

actually took that advice? In person? On social media? If what you're about to say or do doesn't help your neighbour, don't say it and don't do it.

3. Bring Hope, not Hype and Hate

Our world is looking for alternatives right now. We've had enough hype. We've had enough hate. What we desperately want now is hope. Is Good News. Is a Saviour.

Many churches (and many Christians) have defined themselves by what they're **against**. Being against something takes almost no work. I can easily come up with criticism of almost anything. Criticism is easy. It's easy to be part of the problem of negativity and division.

What if we become known by what we are **for**? What if we stood **for** Jesus? Not the negative-Nellie-Jesus some people present, but the REAL biblical, unconditional love Jesus who welcomes people from all nationalities and social strata, who welcomes sinners as well as saints, who cares for the sick and whole, who loves the poor and the wealthy alike. Who calls people to UNITY – UNITY in welcoming Him as Saviour and following Him as Lord. Everything else that divides people – ethnicity, politics, gender, ability – is irrelevant to Jesus.

Following Jesus is not actually about things we're against. It's about things we're for. Hope in Jesus. New life in Jesus. Healing in Jesus. Unity as the people of Jesus. The church in the first century risked becoming polarized and divided as well, but they chose to be centred on Jesus: known for what they were for – love, equality, generosity, sacrifice, caring for the outcast, marginalized, and least important. That outward thrust of the Gospel – a commitment to know Jesus and Jesus alone – reshaped the world and reshaped history.

At their best, people of Jesus unite around the one and only thing that matters – Jesus. In a stressful, divisive culture, Paul writes, *"I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2).

People today are looking for an alternative to hype and hate. They're looking for hope. We, the church, are their best hope for finding that. But we have to remember who we are and whose we are: to *"know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified."* *"Always be humble and gentle,"* Paul says. *"Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all"* (Ephesians 4:2-6)

4. Take Care of Yourself

This is a long, tiring journey we're on. It's a marathon, not a sprint. The crisis we thought would last for a few months is dragging on with no end in sight. In Moses' day, their desert wanderings would last 40 years (let's hope Covid doesn't last that long!). Jethro knew Moses couldn't do it alone. He had to care for himself. It meant prioritizing and letting things go.

The most important verse in this passage is 18:24: *"Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions."* He actually made changes in his life.

In my life, I've had to learn similar lessons the hard way. Early in my time here, I was running in a million different directions and getting frazzled. Glen Alexander took me aside and wisely helped me work through my gifts, skills, and priorities, so I could manage the load.

Carey Nieuwhof writes, *"The mantra I've lived by for the almost 15 years since my burnout is live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow. I've adjusted everything in my life to try to make sure that happens: My sleep, diet, exercise, time off, the kind of work I do and so much more ... If you don't put some margin in your life today, you won't have much of a tomorrow."* That's wise counsel. We have to actually make changes in our lives.

Think about that: What do I need to do today so I can thrive tomorrow? Pray? Read Scripture? Say no to something causing me stress? Go for a walk? Get to bed early? Read a book? Make a (positive) phone call? It's probably a combination of all of that (and more).

One of the ways I've found to care of myself is to take more control of my social media. I've "unfollowed" more people on Facebook – including 3 Baptist ministers – in the last year than in all previous years combined. They are people who take partisan political stands and fuel division and hate, rather than principled biblical positions of unity and hope. I was getting so agitated and annoyed that unfollowing just seemed the best option for my mental health.

You may want to consider tuning out a few people. It's hard to find hope if you constantly fill your mind with hate. It's hard to find and bring peace if you only fill your mind with division.

Recovery

And third, diagnosis and treatment ultimately offer hope for recovery.

I've found recovery happens when I rediscover Jesus as the foundation of my life, the heart and soul of my being. The most important person in my life is not a Prime Minister or a President, but Jesus. My moods, values, emotions, and beliefs are not be squeezed into a political agenda but moulded by Jesus – only by Jesus. Having my identity grounded in my relationship with Him puts everything into perspective and helps me cope with the storms.

One pundit wisely commented, *"Ships don't sink because of the water around them. Ships sink because water gets in them. Don't let what's happening around you get inside and weigh you down."* I've found that when I *"resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified"* – when I silence those other voices – only then can I recover from the stress and burnout I feel. What do you need to do, today, to lower your stress?

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