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 Bridgeway Community Church
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SUMMER SPEAKERS SERIES: “God’s Grace for Burned Out People”

Good morning, Church! It’s such a gift to be with you all today.

First, I’d like to begin by thanking Dr. Anderson and the Elders for this opportunity to open God’s Word for us. Let’s continue to pray for our Pastor as he takes some rest and seeks the Lord during his Sabbatical.

INTRODUCTION

Today, I want to talk about something we don’t usually talk about in church. I want to talk about **burnout**. Why? Because in 2019 the World Health Organization identified a major uptick of people all over the world who were reporting occupational burnout¹... in 2019... a year BEFORE Covid. 2020 was like, “Aw you think you’re feeling burned out now? Just wait...”

The team at Mayo Clinic define burnout as “*a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.*”² Burnout isn’t the same as exhaustion, where you just need more sleep or a good vacation to refill your physical and emotional reserves. It’s when the bottom drops out of your emotional bucket...

- No matter how much sleep you get or how much vacation time you take, you’re constantly exhausted and unmotivated
- You find yourself easily irritated and overwhelmed, and it just keeps coming out sideways. Snapping at your kids, your spouse, your coworkers, people who drive too slow in the left lane... I know you’re out there
- You feel like you’re living life in a gray fog and have lost touch with who you are

Not all of us will necessarily experience full-on burnout. But if we live long enough, all of us will hit a **Wall** where our faith feels like it’s burned up & breaking down...

¹ “Burn-out an ‘occupational phenomenon’” *World Health Organization* (May 2019)
<https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

² “Job burnout: How to spot it and take action” *Mayo Clinic* (June 2021)
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642#:~:text=%22Burnout%22%20isn't%20a,influence%20who%20experiences%20job%20burnout.>

- Your boss tells you that you and your team are getting laid off
- Your doctor tells you that the cancer is back; and its spreading
- You have a deep unfulfilled desire to be married and have children
- Or maybe you're just disappointed with God & the church

One writer on the spiritual life defines “The Wall” this way:

“The Wall” is where we question ourselves, God, and the church. We discover for the first time that our faith does not appear to “work.” We have more questions than answers as the very foundation of our faith feels like it is on the line. We don’t know where God is, what he is doing, where he is going, how he is getting us there, or when this will be over.³

And as we look today at a scene from the life of the Prophet Elijah, we see that anyone – even the most spiritual and resilient among us – can experience burnout. But more importantly, we also see **God’s heart and his special grace** for burned out people...

So please open your Bibles with me to **1 Kings 19**. And let’s receive with Elijah:

1. **God’s wise grace**
2. **God’s gentle grace; and**
3. **God’s freeing grace**

First, God’s WISE grace...

I. GOD’S WISE GRACE

When [Elijah] came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” 5 Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

(1 Kings 19:3-5 NIV)

How does Elijah, the Man of God, get here? A little context on what Elijah’s been through...

Elijah is a prophet in Israel at a time of intense spiritual and political corruption. The Rulers of Israel, King Ahab & his wife, have abandoned the true God and are worshiping an idol named Baal. And through Elijah, the Lord tells King Ahab that there’s not going to be any rain until Elijah calls for it.

No rain means crops, which means economic instability and food insecurity. None of this was to punish the people, but *to wake them up*. To get their attention and turn their hearts back to the Lord.

³ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 101-102.

And this drought goes on for **three years!** There were some stories of faith & renewal during this crisis, but no big “come to Jesus moment” where the people rededicate themselves to God. Finally, after three years of this, God tells Elijah: *It’s time. “Go and present yourself to King Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.” (1 Kings 18:2 NIV)*

So Elijah goes out, confronts Ahab and says, “Alright, let’s just settle this once and for all. Send all of your prophets to Mount Carmel and we’ll set up two altars. One to your god, one to mine. It will be 750 prophets against 1. Both of us will call on our gods to send down fire on our altars, and whoever’s God answers is the real one.

So they go to Mount Carmel, they set up the altars. And I feel like this just shows Elijah’s personality— he says, “You know what, pour some water on my altar. Not a little. Four jars please.” I mean he’s just showing off. The prophets of Baal call down fire and nothing happens. No response.

Elijah steps forward with a beautiful prayer to the Lord, crying out: ***“Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” (1 Kings 18:37 NIV)***

Fire comes down, consumes the sacrifice, and the people fall to their faces and worship the Lord. They kill all the false prophets of Baal and then...

All the people turn back to God and live happily ever after? King Ahab and Jezebel repent, cast down their idols, and serve the Living God? No. They put out a hit on Elijah. He really thought the revival was going to come! But the resistance just gets stronger.

Have you ever thought God was going to do something *and nothing happened?* Your heart is in the right place, you want a good thing, you’re giving it all you’ve got... But it doesn’t happen. All of those prayers, all that investment, all that FAITH...

You hit a wall. Elijah hit a wall.

And depending on our background or family of origin, the message many of us have received is that we’ve got to just push harder and power through. Stuff it. Don’t look weak! Or we’ve got to pray and fast our way to victory, and spiritually muscle up. *And grit, prayer, & fasting are good!* But look at the wisdom of God’s grace, and how he comes to Elijah at his Wall of burnout...

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. (1 Kings 19:5-6 NIV)

And then in **verse 7**, the same thing happens again! ***The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” (NIV)***

For all our “progress,” we in the modern West have such a diminished view of what a human is...

- *Are you sad? It's all about your **mind**, just think happy thoughts.*
- *Or it's all about your **body/physiology**, just take this pill & get more sleep.*
- *Or it's all about your **soul**, “Just trust God!”*

Do you see the *holistic* wisdom of God’s grace for Elijah? He could have just given him supernatural energy to press forward. But God meets him *at his limit*, sends an angel, and says: **“Here’s a snack, now take a nap.”** He wakes up, and the Angel says: “Here’s another snack, now nap again.”

In his book on prayer, Pete Grieg says this: “I’m convinced that the main gift God wants to give some Christians is common sense.”⁴

If you’re struggling with mental health - *Yes, pray; but also go to therapy!* Talk with your doctor about *medication*. Or maybe change your rhythms. If I break my foot, I’m gonna pray for healing and keep reading my Bible... but I’m not going to just rub the Bible on my foot and pray it feels better. I’m gonna go to the doctor!

Can I say something as one of your pastors? *Sometimes you don’t need to fast; you need **a snack**. Sometimes you don’t need an all-night prayer session. You need **a nap**.*

God starts with the BODY. And like the Angel, God calls us as his servants to help care for others in tangible ways. **Home Cooked meals**. Intentional **questions**. Holding **space** for others to just cry and grieve. A time to pray and to give advice may come. But often we need to start with the body...

Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God... (1 Kings 19:8 NIV)

TRANSITION: In God’s WISE grace, he starts by caring for Elijah’s body. But he knows a nap and a snack won’t beat his burnout. Elijah needs a deeper, transforming encounter with God’s GENTLE grace. Look with me at the second part of **verse 9... *And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”***

⁴ Pete Grieg, *How to Pray* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 160.

II. GOD’S GENTLE GRACE

Do you see God’s gentleness with Elijah in his emotionally fragile state? He doesn’t scold him – “Elijah, stop whining! You’re such an ungrateful baby.”

He asks Elijah a *question*. A question that invites him deeper into his own heart and motives. To stop and really consider... **What is he doing there?** What’s beneath his burnout?

Look at how Elijah responds in **verse 10**: *He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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.”* (1 Kings 19:10 NIV)

Elijah thought he could change Israel’s heart through his own zeal. He believed that if his faith was big enough, if he set his sails just right, God would move so powerfully through his ministry that the people would HAVE to change. But they didn’t. What else could he do? How could he possibly top what he did on Mount Carmel?

But look at how the Lord shows Elijah his gentle grace in **Verses 11-12**...

11 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. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:11-12 NIV)

Elijah believed it would be a spectacular sign of great power that would change people's hearts.

That was what Elijah thought he’d find on Mount Carmel...

*But on this Mountain, when ELIJAH needs to see God’s power for himself, he finds it in a **gentle whisper**.*

And if we look back at **chapter 18**... God never said to do a showdown on Mt Carmel. God said **“Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.”** (1 Kings 18:1 NIV)

That’s it. That’s what God told him to do...

And just a few verses later in chapter 18, Elijah is talking with Ahab’s servant, Obadiah.

And Obadiah tells him: *Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the Lord? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. (1 Kings 18:3 NIV)*

So there's AT LEAST 100 more of the Lord's prophets that Elijah knows of... Why does he keep saying, *"I am the only one left?"* (1Kg 19:10)

A.W. Tozer writes this:

Our mistake is that we want God to send revival on our terms. We want to get the power of God into our hands, to call it to us that it may work for us in promoting and furthering our kind of Christianity. We still want to be in charge...shouting "Glory to God," it is true, but modestly accepting a share of the glory for ourselves in a nice inoffensive sort of way. We are calling on God to send fire on our altars, completely ignoring the fact that they are OUR altars and not God's.⁵

Don't you see now why the grace of bread and rest wasn't enough?

In God's wisdom, he knew that Elijah needed it. WE need it – we need to start with our bodies and minds. But there's something else that's broken; there's something else that needs to be healed inside of Elijah and inside of us...*Something better rhythms & habits can't fix.*

Being a prophet is hard work, but that wasn't what burned Elijah out. *It was the work under his work* that left him so burdened and bitter...

- The work of trying to do what only GOD can do
- Trying to be the savior of Israel who held it all together

Friends, *how much* of our burnout comes from trying to do more than God's asked us to? How much of our relational stress comes from trying to do for ourselves and for others what only GOD can do for us?

You will get stuck at the surface if you don't get at the deeper impulse behind your impulse...

- E.g. *Impulse to open laptop and work more at night*
- E.g. *Impulse to argue and push our perspective on others*

Deep down: *Why* do we overcommit? *Why* do we people-please? *Why* are we so driven? *Why* do we work so much when our family and our body tell us to slow down?

I think if we were honest, we'd say it's because we feel like there's something broken inside of us...

⁵ A.W. Tozer, *The Size of the Soul* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1993), 8-9.

- And if we can just land that big part we've been auditioning for
- If we can just become our own boss
- If we can just get this person to think we're attractive and desirable
- Or if we can just get a certain # of zeros in our bank account

THEN, then we will feel whole and safe and worthy.

Friend's, can I be transparent? **Too many** of my most passionate prayers have been asking God to GIVE me something that only He could BE for me...

Elijah wanted something that would PROVE He was keeping his Word... but what he really needed was for God to send the Word itself, whispered to his heart. The Promise didn't need Elijah; *Elijah* needed the Promise!

And what's *concealed* in the OT is revealed in the NT. The same gentle Word of grace that came to Elijah at his Wall and in his Weakness has taken on flesh and come to us in JESUS, saying: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am GENTLE and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.***

(Matthew 11:28 NIV)

Jesus is the TRUE and BETTER Elijah– the prophet that Elijah *couldn't be*.

Like Elijah, Jesus "came to his own, and his own did not receive him" (John 1:11).

Like Elijah, Jesus didn't get a revival, *but got a "hit" put on his life...*

- **But unlike Elijah**, *Jesus really was* "the only faithful prophet" who never sinned
- **When Elijah despaired** in the wilderness after 1 day, *Jesus surrendered* in the wilderness after 40 days!
- **When Elijah fled for his life**, Jesus LAID DOWN his life to die for the sins of his enemies–US!

I know some of you are going through incredibly painful things. Some of you are so tired, you feel so exhausted and broken, like you've got nothing left.

The Lord knows what it's like from the inside. Not just in his divine wisdom, but his own human weakness.

My friends, *no one* hit a larger "Wall" of burnout than Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Betrayed by his closest friends and ministry partners. Slandered and wrongly convicted. About to suffer unimaginable pain in his body, mind, and soul...

And at the very place where we would despair or try to power up, Jesus *powered down and surrendered*.

In His weakness, He entrusted Himself to the care of the Father and the Spirit; and through his gentle grace at work in us, we can too.

But how does this work? What does this look like practically?

TRANSITION: So we've seen God's Wise Grace and God's Gentle grace meet Elijah in his burnout. Finally, let's look at God's FREEING grace that freed Elijah, and can free us as well...

III. GOD'S FREEING GRACE

After God gives Elijah this gentle grace of his Word, look at what God does next in **verse 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 whose mouths have not kissed him."*

Do you see what the Lord's doing here? In other words, the Lord is saying to Elijah: *"My plan and my purpose is so much larger than you think..."*

Your salvation, the salvation of Israel, and the salvation of the world don't depend on King Ahab; they don't even depend on you and your faithfulness! It all depends on ME – MY power, my glory, my righteousness and my faithfulness.

YOUR FUTURE IS SECURE IN MY HANDS... So often, when our backs are against the Wall, *this is just what we need to hear*, isn't it? No matter what you're up against, if you're in Jesus, it's all gonna be alright...

Ultimately, that's what freed Elijah – and trusting that promise can free any of us today... In JESUS, we have a Savior who meets us in our weariness, promises us rest, who strengthens us by his Spirit, and who secures a future for us where we will never experience burnout again

When God brings us to the Wall, he begins to free us by transforming the things we trust...

- BEFORE the Wall, we trusted more in our own power and abilities
 - AFTER the Wall, our deepest trust is in God's power and promise
- BEFORE the Wall, we trusted in our own faith & what we could do for God
 - AFTER the Wall, our heart trusts less in itself and more in God's love and what he has done for us in JESUS

Remember our core verse for this ministry year? **Psalm 118:8 (NIV):**

- ***It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humans.***

The grace of God frees us to take God more seriously than take ourselves or other people. Not in a way that causes us to love them less, but more – because we aren't looking to them for our validation and salvation. We aren't asking them to give us what only God can give & BE for us. Elijah needed this, and so do we. It was what freed him to obey the Lord when He said, ***“Go back the way you came...”*** (1 Kings 19:15 NIV)

In other words: *You've still got purpose, Elijah; I'm not done with you yet! I've got more work for you to do!* BUT it's different this time...

Why? Because God's grace has removed the work beneath the work!

Friends, I want you to know God's grace for burned out people. God's grace met Elijah at his Wall. And I believe the same God wants to meet you today at your Wall through the grace of Christ and the comfort of the Spirit.

And as the Lord says to you, *“go back the way you came”* – I want you to leave from this space hearing Jesus's voice, not mine. I read this promise from Jesus earlier and I'll read it again in a different translation...

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”
(Matthew 11:28-30 MSG)