

A Sure-Fire Way to End Burn Out

Isaiah 40:21-31

We live in a crazy time. There is, in the air we breathe, a sense of freneticism that buzzes around us all the time. People are busy. Too busy. It can be seen in the life of the church, where people who once gave of time and energy, now curtail their efforts because "work" demands so much. Many churches now offer dinner at Bible studies and church meetings because people work so late they don't have time to squeeze a meal in if they are planning on coming to church that evening.

Each one of us can certainly offer examples of the new era of overwork. Stress related diseases are on the rise for both men and women and burn out is something that many people experience across the spectrum of their lives.

Have you ever felt burned out? Have you ever felt "extra crispy"? or had someone tell you that looked a little "charred"? A colleague of mine recently called on the phone and referred to his burn out, saying "stick a fork in me, because I'm done...." We invent humor around this so that we can cope with it all, but it's a serious issue. From postal workers to social workers; from executives to assembly line jobs, burn out is a growing phenomenon.

We burn out, of course, because we work too much, and because we do not play enough. We burn out because work takes precedence over relationships. We burn out because we define ourselves, not by what is in our hearts, but by the tasks we are assigned. We also burn out for another reason. Burn out comes because we shoulder a burden that is not ours to assume. Too often, we look at life and assume that all the problems, conflicts, and struggles belong to us and us alone. We assume, many of us, that unless we jump on something, it won't happen. We assume that we're in it alone. Moreover, we assume that it's our responsibility. We believe that the results of our actions, the end goal of our grand strategies is in our hands.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" cries the prophet. "Has it not been told you from the beginning?" It's God who is in charge, not us. It is God who "sits above the circle of the earth," and "makes the rulers of the earth as nothing" (Isaiah 40:21, 22, 23). It's God whose almighty and loving presence walks with us through our day-to-day lives and struggles. We do not need to carry it all by ourselves. Indeed, we cannot.

Most people, if they are honest, wrestle with this. Our lives, and the actions we take, are so wrapped up in our investment in being in control of what's happening that we sacrifice our well-being and the well-being of others in the process. We are, in truth, a society of "control freaks." Of course, some sense of control is appropriate. Our sanity, in fact, depends on a moderate sense that we can control our lives, and to a degree, our surroundings.

But in our culture today this has been taken to extremes that are undergirded and nourished by mass media and the pervasive ethic of consumerism. Certainly, only those in charge — those at the top — will purchase the product being promoted. Media plays constantly to insecurities and the need for control, and the result is a neurotic culture trying to consume its way out of insecurities and fears that are fed and fanned into flames from every television screen and radio in the nation.

In the midst of it all, we should know that this is all an illusion. Our faith in God should alert us to what's really going on here. We are not in charge. We have little or no control over how things work out in our own personal lives, let alone in the swirling world around us. It is God who finally, and always, is in control. The outcome is in God's hands.

This doesn't negate our own accountability for the way we behave. It doesn't even give us a free pass out of social and political work. We are still accountable to God for how we spend the gift of days that has been given us. Right action, good works, compassion are still at the core of God's summons to us in our daily lives, but the outcome? It's not in our hands, and the more we fret, worry, maneuver and manipulate to achieve our desired outcome, the

farther we travel from God. It is also a sure-fire way to flame out and find ourselves burned out, exhausted, and empty.

There is a cliché that surrounds these ideas. It says that we should work as though everything depends on us, and pray knowing that it all depends on God. This, of course, is not easy. How can you put all your heart and effort into something and then not be concerned with the outcome? How can anyone plan, strategize, and work for a goal and not be invested in the conclusion?

My own feeling is that this illustrates how far we truly are from giving our lives over to God.

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not grow faint or weary ..." (Isaiah 40:28). You see, you and I are limited by our physical realities, limited by our humanness, limited by our own egos and transient desires. But God is God. God is the Creator of the Universe. God doesn't burn out. God goes the distance and calls us to put the final results into God's hands.

It is only when we can give it over to God that we begin to find the clarity of what it means to live life God's way. If we give all this over to God, we won't burn out. If we place our focus on the things we can control, on our daily living, on the choices we make about hope, healing, and justice, then we will cry out for God and God will say, "Here I am". For God gives power to us in our weakness. If we "wait on the Lord", if we put our trust in God, we will find that we don't get tired.

In our arrogance and our self-centeredness, it is not easy to respond to a call to surrender, but that's exactly what God calls us to do. We are to surrender our investment in results to the one who is in charge of it all. We are to let go of our need to control and give that to the one who is in control anyway. If we can do that, if we can give it all over and "wait for the Lord," our strength will be renewed, and we shall soar like eagles. We shall run and not get tired. We will walk and not grow faint. (Isaiah 40:31).

All of this is one reason that God gave us the gift of a faith community. For it is here, together, in struggle and ministry that we strive to give it over to God. It is in partnership with each other and with God's Holy Spirit that we move forward in faith, trusting in God, hoping in love, and knowing that we throw our hearts and our efforts into the fray in the service of God's way ... and not our own.

All this calls us to step ever closer into relationships with one another. It beckons us to deeper levels of trust and discipleship and invites us into broader circles of connectedness with one another.

So, there it is, in all of its simplicity and complexity.

We are called to give our lives in faith, while letting God handle the outcome. We are called to offer our spirits in love, not fretting about where that love will lead us. We are called into lives of wonder and power, as we wait for the Lord. Let us move forward as we answer that call each day in our lives as Christ's people in this place.

Amen.