

BURNT OUT!

1 Kings 19v1-18

Spring is here at last which is good news for many who feel at their lowest; during the winter months. The fact is most people feel low at times but some are more prone to it than others. According to a survey commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy depression and anxiety are endemic in Britain. (Source: *The Times*. April 15th 2006) Two thirds of us say we experience bouts of depression.

Why all this depression and anxiety when we have so many luxuries and conveniences and better health and a longer lifespan? The answer is “stress”.

Now, stress is a fact of life. No one escapes it. In fact it is necessary. Ask any athlete or actor. You can actually suffer from *too little* stress, and some people seem to thrive on stress. Sir Bobby Robson is over 70 and still wants to be in football management! The Queen is now 80 and still has a punishing schedule.

But we are usually aware of stress at the other extreme; suffering *too much* stress. It is this overload of “stress” that is at the root of depression and anxiety. The two biggest factors cited in this latest report are relationship problems (44%) and stress connected to employment. Then come finances and bereavement.

- For young people exams are a big anxiety and this is linked to the demands and complexities of modern life. House prices are high while jobs are short-term. Then there are the images of beauty and success that leave them feeling inadequate.
- Those aged 35-44 were the most likely to admit having suffered from either depression or anxiety. For this age group life is highly pressurised as they struggle to balance the demands of work with raising a family.
- In early middle age work related issues are likely to trigger depression in men, whereas relationship problems are more likely to be the cause with women. Many in this stage of life are also caring for ageing parents.

We know that some people can take more external stress than others before they feel overwhelmed. But when external stress *does* become too much for us, *internal* stress develops. We feel panic, depression, extreme, anxiety. And this often affects us physically; we may get ill.

Stress overload may also lead to something we call “Burn Out”. I suspect this is what Elijah is going through in **1 Kings 19**.

v1-5. Elijah has just had his great moment of triumph in chapter 18. God has answered him by fire and the prophets of Baal have been defeated. But the aftermath for Elijah is an anti-climax. The situation of conflict he has lived with for many years is still not resolved. His enemy Jezebel is still after his blood. This man who had been so fearless is now full of fear and despair. Elijah begins to sink. He is burnt out.

“Burn Out” is where stress paralyses you. You are emotionally exhausted and your mind shuts down as a survival mechanism. You lose your sense of purpose; you feel hopeless and helpless. Elijah’s “burn out” had warped everything. It magnified his failure, deepened his gloom, and multiplied his enemies and his obstacles. I know about this because I have been there.

So this chapter records God’s recovery programme for Elijah. There are three stages to it. Each echoes an approach to stress management today.

1. Take practical steps to alleviate physical symptoms of stress
2. Help the person cope with stressful pressures.
3. Eliminate the root cause of the stress.

Over the next week or two we will be looking together at this. If you are feeling the weight of different stresses then this is a timely word from God for you. If you are not, then this will give you some understanding of what others are going through; it will also give you helpful tools with which to help them.

So, let’s look together at God’s prescription when you feel burnt out.

1. GOD’S PRESCRIPTION FOR YOUR PHYSICAL NEEDS

The first approach to stress management is to take practical steps to alleviate physical symptoms of stress: i.e. to help the person to begin to feel stronger. In our text God starts with Elijah’s physical needs. Sometimes we can miss the blindingly obvious. Elijah is physically exhausted. So what is God’s prescription?

Meals on Wings. (v5,6; 7,8)

Stress can take you to two extremes with food and drink. Either it makes you over-eat or under-eat. In Elijah’s case food is the last thing on his mind. He’s stopped taking care of himself. That’s what often happens. So God arranges for a meal to be cooked for him. Supernaturally! By an angel! Not once, but twice! This is not so much “meals on wheels” - more “meals on wings.”

But this isn’t just about filling Elijah’s stomach. Think about occasions when someone has prepared a meal for you when you’ve been ill or feeling down. It is the love and the care behind the meal that is as important as the food. If you want to support someone who is going through a tough time – be an angel, invite them round for a meal. Alternatively bake them a cake and take it to them. All around us are needy people who never get offered a cup of tea let alone baked a cake. That’s what God arranged for Elijah.

It's even what Jesus did in those early days after His resurrection. His disciples were still confused. Peter was full of guilt. Then one morning Jesus surprised them by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Not with an impromptu prayer meeting, but with a cooked breakfast. (John 21v9,10)

Peaceful Sleep. (v6)

In Elijah's case it wasn't that he couldn't sleep, but that he needed *the right kind* of sleep. You know how it is when you go to bed full of fear and anxiety, your sleep is not peaceful. When morning comes you still feel exhausted and pull the covers over your head. So God woke Elijah from a despairing sleep, fed him, and only let him go back to sleep when he knew that he was loved and cared for.

When you read in the Gospels about Jesus sleeping peacefully in a boat during a storm on the lake don't think it was because Jesus was a heavy sleeper. It was because there was no more secure man in the whole of history than Jesus; He knew who He was; the beloved Son of the Father. For the Christian too, knowing who you are in Christ is such a key for a mind at peace; knowing that you are loved and cherished by God.

Peaceful sleep has a healing function. It has the power to restore us and refresh us. After a good sleep we may see our circumstances differently; our burdens may feel lighter; we may see solutions to problems that seemed hopeless.

Alternative Stress. (v7,8)

God took Elijah's flight and transformed it into something purposeful. He took him on a long walk and then up a mountain!

A report last year from The Mental Health Foundation said that exercise could be just as effective as antidepressant drugs. Just 10-15 minutes exercise can improve your mood. It is highly recommended as a first line of self help. Doctors often prescribe "alternative stress" for people who are emotionally overwhelmed. One writes; *"The best way to unwind is to switch to something else which involves different circuits of the brain and body. Thus, obviously stressful activities such as racket sports or mountain climbing have tremendous value in the reduction of stress"*. (Dr. Peter Hanson)

Some high flyers with stressful jobs go in for adventure sports. Even God would have a job getting me rock climbing or pot holing or parachute jumping. There are safer and less expensive ways to alternative stress: walking, running, tennis, golf. Liz prefers an hour or two gardening.

When you have a stressful lifestyle, having other absorbing dimensions to your life can prevent you becoming intense and one-track. One of Billy Graham's biographers, commenting on his ability to keep fresh, writes: *"One secret of the evangelist's poise is that he is an integrated, balanced*

personality.” His reading is wide, he spends time in the mountains with his family, and he plays golf.

Spiritual pilgrimage. (vv8,9)

God didn't send Elijah to any old place. He directed him to Horeb, “the mountain of God”. This was Mount Sinai where Moses had met with God. It was a holy place. Non-conformists are a bit dismissive of holy places and spiritual pilgrimages often with good reason. Anyone who has been to Israel knows only too well the dangers. But let's not miss what God is doing here. He is taking Elijah on a physical journey to a place with weighty spiritual significance and associations, for his well-being.

In 1984, when I was dealing with my own “burn out”, I spent two months in the land of the Bible – not visiting holy sites, but off the beaten track. Travelling through the Sinai desert and climbing Horeb played a significant part in the first stages of my own recovery. Having climbed in the early hours, before the sun baked everything, I sat alone on the summit for an hour with my Bible, enjoying God's presence. Of course, I didn't need to go all that way. I could just as easily have met with God in my home or the park. But sometimes we need to *get away*. In our text God took the prophet *away* to a special place with holy associations. If our friend Adrian Smith were here this morning he would be able to name several locations in this County to which he returns on personal spiritual pilgrimage. They are places where, in the past, he has had vivid encounters with God. For some Holy Island is such a special place.

This then is **stage one** of God's recovery programme for Elijah. Too often when we feel burnt out we lose our grip on our basic needs. We go to bed too late, we snatch meals, we have no time for enjoyable activities – no recreation, no fun; we are ruled by the clock and the phone and the diary. We get trapped in a narrow little world which seems to close in on us, like the moving spiked walls in an Indiana Jones movie. Perhaps this describes someone here.

God started with Elijah's physical needs. Not very spiritual of Him you might think. Sometimes (as Gerald Coates wrote) “*we are more spiritual than God.*” If you are feeling low this may be the starting point for you. Even if you are not burnt out, do you need to take some preventative measures?

2. GOD'S PRESCRIPTION FOR EMOTIONAL PRESSURES

There's no avoiding stress and it's no good pretending it doesn't exist, so the second approach of stress management is to help the person cope with stressful pressures.

This has become a priority focus in the workplace because depression alone costs the economy £10 billion a year. A few years ago, at Xerox, it was estimated that the loss of a senior executive because of stress cost them in excess of £300,000. (The cost to the executive's family would be even higher.) So they initiated courses, counselling sessions, support groups & techniques for relaxing. This was to help executives cope better with the stress.

But what exactly is the emotional pressure weighing so heavily on Elijah? We have already seen that he has lived in a situation of conflict for many years and it's *still* not resolved. After the triumph at Carmel, his great enemy Jezebel is breathing vengeance. She has sworn to kill him and this results in a serious spiritual assault on Elijah. This man who had been so fearless is now full of fear and despair. (v3,4) He has reached breaking point.

These stresses are not going to disappear overnight for Elijah. That's how it often is; so some of us may need the same prescription as Elijah.

God unlocked him with a simple question. (v9)

Notice how God begins by asking Elijah a question not preaching a sermon. **"What are you doing here, Elijah?"** The right question can unlock us. It can probe and search us and find us out. It can make us look deep inside ourselves. A good counsellor knows this very well. Sometimes it may be the simplest and most innocuous of questions.

God is the most Wonderful Counsellor; no one is more able to ask the right question. And God wasn't ignorant when He asked the question. He knew Elijah inside out. The prophet might have said *"I'm here because You brought me here, Lord."* But instead the question opened him up. It was part of God's prescription for stress. When we are feeling depressed and anxious and needy we don't need someone haranguing us. We need someone to unlock us with the right question; to release us.

Many times Jesus used questions to unlock people and offer emotional healing. A woman touched his robe in a crowd and was healed. The Scripture says Jesus realised that power had gone out from him, so he asked *"Who touched my clothes?"* He could have just carried on with His pressing appointment with a sick girl in the home of Jairus; but he paused to ask a question that seemed strange. It resulted in the woman having more than her body healed. *"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."* (Mark 5v25-34)

He asked a blind beggar called Bartimaeus *“What do you want me to do for you?”* (Mark 10v46-52) When had this man ever been asked such a question? Most times he would have had abuse or silence. To an adulterous woman he had saved from being lynched, Jesus asked *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* *“No one, sir”* she said. *“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”* (John 8v10,11) After the resurrection he asked Peter one question three times, *“Simon, do you truly love me?”* (John 21v16-17.) Peter had denied Jesus three times and still felt shame and guilt. But these three questions were more effective than Sir Alex Ferguson’s “hairdryer” treatment, or throwing teacups against the wall.

He poured out his heart to God. (v10)

Elijah is given permission to pour out his feelings in the presence of God. Elijah’s speech is raw and honest. He feels that all his zeal for God has been for nothing; instead of revival the nation is still rebellious, and he, Elijah, has been the only faithful one. Elijah pours out frustration and self pity and disappointment and perhaps even anger.

Yet there is no condemnation from God. There is no slick answer. Instead we have a picture of a God who listens and cares. God even listens as Elijah repeats himself – and doesn’t interrupt him. (v14)

According to the Survey commissioned by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy doctors now accept that, rather than prescribing tranquilizers, many who suffer from depression and anxiety, simply need someone to talk to. Most people value talking through their problems with someone who has time to listen; someone who will not be judgmental and who has experience in helping people like themselves. For the Christian, having someone to talk to is equally important. This is at the heart of mutual love; supporting and encouraging one another, and weeping with those who weep.

But there is more. Like Elijah, we have God to pour out our heart to in prayer. There is nothing we cannot say to Him. Things we would draw back from admitting to the best counsellor in the world we can say to God. We can bring our strong negative feelings to God. The Psalmists did this, pouring them out in songs & prayers. So often we treat prayer as saying the things we think God wants to hear. Prayer is being real with God. We see this in Psalm 38, written by David on a very rainy Monday! David sounds very “down” . It doesn’t make uplifting reading. The one thing you can say - is that he poured it all out to God.

Jesus knows how we feel when we are low. He experienced depths we will never experience as He faced the cross with the terrible prospect of taking our sin on Himself and being separated from the Father. So what did He do? In the garden of Gethsemane he poured out His heart to the Father. Luke 22v44: *“And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”*

In the book 'Taken on Trust', Terry Waite recalls his experience of being a hostage in Beirut from January '87 to November '91. He is very open about his anguish and the assault on his faith. He writes: *"It's as though I am blindfolded within as well as without."* *"My faith has been exposed for what it is - uncertain, questioning, vulnerable."* *"Despair grips me..."* *"Each day I have walked through the Psalmist's valley..."* Terry Waite discovered his faith was not as strong as he thought it was. But he could be honest before God; and he discovered that God was still with him and able to keep him through the darkest hours.

Because Jesus knows all about suffering, listen to the invitation Scripture gives us. *"Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Hebrews 4v14-16) We are invited to pour out our heart to Him.

He received a fresh revelation of God. (v11-13)

When we are not coping the familiar cry is *"Where are you God?"* So where is God on Horeb? Not in the wind; not in the earthquake; not in the fire. God had revealed Himself to Moses on this mountain in fire and thunder. Elijah himself was accustomed to dramatic revelations of God. But now he needed God to reveal Himself in a different way; in *"a gentle whisper."*

Many of us only experience a fresh revelation of the grace of God through great distress. That was my experience and it may have been yours too.

The Chinese Christian leader Watchman Nee tells of an occasion when he felt overwhelmed by a particular issue. He dreamt he was in a river boat. Ahead he saw a large boulder blocking the narrow river. In the dream he prayed, *"Lord remove this obstacle"*. The boat got nearer and the boulder remained. He was going to crash into it. Then in the dream the water level gradually rose and he sailed over unharmed. God said to him in the dream. *"My grace is sufficient for you."* Nee comments: *"The Christian life is not one of removing boulders but of deeper water."*

God Himself is with us to help us go through times of difficulty, especially when our troubles do not quickly disappear. Many of us have found the promise in Isaiah 43 v1-3 to be true. *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the fire you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.. For I am the Lord your God. the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."*

This then is **stage two** of God's recovery programme for Elijah. Next week we look at the third and final stage.

3. GOD'S PRESCRIPTION FOR THE ROOT CAUSES.

The third approach to stress management is to eliminate the root cause of the stress. We see this in God's dealings with Elijah.

v15. The LORD said to Elijah, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus." No more running away from Jezebel, Elijah. You are always more vulnerable in retreat. Turn around. Face up.

Having been brought this far Elijah is now ready to go back. He would not have been ready 40 days earlier. Stages one and two of God's recovery programme were necessary before root causes could be identified & addressed. That's the way it is for us too. It may be harmful to try & address root issues before someone is ready. So what were Elijah's root issues and how are they of relevance to us today?

Face up to your fears.

Elijah had run away because of fear. (v3) Now God was sending him back to face his fears. Yes, it is painful, but there is no other way. Sometimes, even when we recognise a root cause we opt to live with it. We prefer the familiar, even though it's painful, to the risk of change. For example, one of the issues that overwhelms people today is debt, yet a common reaction is denial; the letters arrive and are left unopened. The issue is pushed under the carpet instead of being faced head on and so the debt piles up. For others here it may be memories you have to confront, or words or actions; or even certain people. When we face up to root issues we may need to forgive someone. Both *forgiving* someone and *being forgiven* are wonderfully stress-relieving.

Elijah turned round and started back. It was a long journey. The desert of Damascus is hundreds of miles from Horeb. This journey would take some time. But the point is this; as soon as he took the first step on his journey he was no longer in retreat. It's the same for us. Dealing with root issues and working things through does not happen overnight. But acknowledging your fears could be the first step on the journey. As soon as this happens, you are no longer in retreat. You have taken your first steps. Just admitting there is a problem or talking to someone or asking them to pray for you. You are on the way back.

Face up to the reality of spiritual attack.

Jezebel's enmity was more than that of a wicked woman who hated Elijah. She represented occult powers; she was a dedicated follower of a demonic cult. Elijah had come under massive spiritual attack. He faced what the apostle Paul described in Ephesians 6v10-12. This was Elijah's "day of evil", and he had been caught off guard and off balance.

As Christians the root cause of depression or anxiety or "Burn Out" may be spiritual. The Bible says we have an enemy of our souls. Spiritual warfare is a reality. For some this may mean facing up to precisely what Elijah faced; a

malign and manipulative Jezebelic spirit. *(This has received attention in recent years. I recommend David Devenish's book 'Demolishing Strongholds' where he devotes an entire chapter to this subject.)* We will look at this more closely later in the series.

So how do we face up to spiritual attack? We only have time to glance briefly at Ephesians 6v10-18: "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power." This says: give your first and most important attention to the Lord, not demons or the devil. Know who the Lord is, and know who you are in Him. Paul uses three words (*dunamis, kratos, ischus*) he has used earlier for the power which raised Christ from the dead. (1v19) This is the power of the Lord available to us "in the Lord." Paul also uses a passive present with the verb "be strong". So, literally, Paul says "strengthen yourselves in the Lord." (cf. 2 Tim. 2v1) We do not wait helplessly for the cavalry to ride over the hill to rescue us; we have all that we need in God to strengthen ourselves.

"Put on the full armour of God."(v11) This is a theme Paul develops from v13-17. God's truth holds us together. Christ's righteousness covers us. We can walk every day in the peace of Christ. Faith overcomes every assault of fear. A mind fixed on Jesus as your Saviour. Such spiritual armour has the power to protect us; and spiritual weapons have divine power to demolish anything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. (2 Corinthians 10v3-5): weapons like God's word, prayer, the name of Jesus, the blood of Jesus, praying in tongues, forgiveness, repentance, acts of love.

Face up to the truth about yourself

Sometimes the hardest thing of all is to face up to something about yourself. When I went through my painful experience of "burn out" I had to face up to a painful truth about myself: I had become a man-pleaser instead of a God-pleaser. This was at the root of my stress. I had to face up to this unpleasant truth and make some big changes. In the process I discovered that God was much easier to please than man.

What about Elijah? **v15-18:** He needed other people. He had been too much of a loner. Elijah, you cannot carry on as a one man army! You are driving yourself too hard. This is one of the most common characteristics of burnt out people. So hear this. You cannot avoid pressures but you don't need to face them on your own. There are others who can help you. Elijah needed to address this root issue. In his case it involved anointing other leaders, including his own successor. Elijah was not to wield a sword anymore. That was for others. He also had to realise there were 7,000 others besides him.

Some of us need to recognise root issues of pride and independence and self-sufficiency here. We need to learn about leaning on others, or delegating to others, or concentrating on what we are good at. Most fundamentally of all, we need to be built into a loving community of God's people. And if you have leadership gifts – make sure you are accountable and part of a team.

In stress management a new job description is often part of the answer. Elijah's "burn out" had dimmed his vision of God's call on his life. So God gave him fresh direction and he entered a whole new phase of his life's work. You could say there was a change in his job description. This next stage of his life would be mainly concerned with empowering and anointing others. And behind these instructions God was saying to Elijah, (and to some here): "This is not the end for you. You are still significant. You still have chapters to come."

For some your root issue is that you need to experience God's love in Christ *for the first time*. Your life needs the most fundamental redirection of all, repentance, turning around; beginning to get in line with God. You need to be rid of the most stressful factor in life – sin. This is more than something you *do* wrong; it is a terrible disease of the soul which eats away at you. It stains you, enslaves you, makes a fool of you and aims to destroy you. Worst of all it separates you from God. In Acts 16 it took an earthquake for a jailer to cry out "What must I do to be saved?" Some only realise their need of Jesus when they experience an emotional earthquake.

John Wilthew . April / May 2006.

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1. God's prescription for your physical needs. (v1-9)

- Meals on wings
- Peaceful sleep
- Alternative stress
- Spiritual pilgrimage

2. God's prescription for emotional pressures. (v9-14)

- God unlocked him with a simple question
- He poured out his heart to God
- He received a fresh revelation of God

3. God's prescription for the root causes. (v15-18)

The LORD said to Elijah, "Go back the way you came"

- Face up to your fears
- Face up to the reality of spiritual attack
- Face up to the truth about yourself