

Strength to Go On

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1 Kings 19:1-18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18

Dear Lord,

I'm so tired. My strength is completely gone and so is my desire to go on. My spiritual resources are spent and all that remains is an empty, dry, shriveled shell. I'm exhausted. I'm tired.

I'm tired because it's so hard to satisfy people. I'm tired because the people I've tried to help want more and more and get angry when I can't provide it. I'm tired because so few say thank you.

I'm tired of being abused. I'm tired of being talked about behind my back by people who are supposed to be my brothers and sisters.

I'm tired of being ignored. I am tired of comforting grieving people who cannot see my own grief. I'm tired of bearing the burdens of others while I bear my burdens alone. I'm tired of binding wounds while I'm bleeding to death. I'm tired of drying tears when no one notices my tears. I'm tired of soothing hurting hearts while my own heart is breaking. I'm tired of feeding people while I'm starving to death.

I'm tired of expectations, of being asked for advice, of representing God. I am tired of the pedestal and I'm tired of performing for the crowd. I want to be human again.

I'm tired of people who don't seem to care, tired of the loneliness, tired of being rejected, tired of thinking that I don't really matter.

I'm tired of serving and giving and feeding and comforting and teaching and encouraging and ministering. Lord, I'm so, so tired. I don't have anything left to give. I've got to rest. I can't go on. Please let me quit.

This prayer is a combination of a real prayer handed to a counselor at the beginning of a session and my own experience in counseling church members and leaders.

When strength is gone, and we think we can't go any further, there is only one way to become more than a conqueror: turn to God, not away from God. Turn to the community, not away from the community. Turn to brothers and sisters, not away from brothers and sisters. Involve rather than isolate. He is the soul surgeon whose cuts are clean and whose hands heal. He has anticipated every struggle, every challenge. It may not be what you think when you read Heb. 4:16, but he knows our troubles.

Jesus identifies with our hearts, he is a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. Sometimes the pain is too deep for words, sometimes the decisions are painfully difficult, sometimes the advice received is conflicting, self-doubts come, in the midst of the worst storms, we cannot see. But God does not turn his back on us. The Father has had a Son in our shoes—he understands.

Elijah was a man of like passions as we, he prayed, no rain, rain (James 5)

But Elijah was not always so strong.

After winning the struggle on Mt. Carmel, because of the death threat from Jezebel, he fled to the wilderness, and asked to die.

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Prayer

This narrative is shaped by journeys—to Beersheba, wilderness, Horeb, Elisha. The entire narrative is directed by God, and God manifests himself.

When strength is gone, nothing is more important than seeing God, knowing God, reconnecting with God.

Elijah is a burned out prophet. He wants to die. He wants to quit. But God refuses to let him go. Elijah is pictured as a broken, disappointed man. Moping under a solitary, isolated tree.

He is suffering generalized depression resulting from stress, the stress of fear and the stress of victorious success. Sitting alone, contemplating death, contemplating quitting, hardly knowing how to go on.

Such depression doesn't make sense. He forgets Obadiah's 100 prophets; he ignores the victory and conversion on Carmel. He sees only the darkest side of the situation, ego-centered (see the I in v. 10,14).

1. God nourishes and sustains Elijah; God nourishes and sustains us.

God does this so we can go on. There is another journey ahead, and then another. Life goes on.

2. God questions him; God questions us.

What is really going on? What is the reality of the circumstance? God challenges him, calls him out.

3. God teaches him; God teaches us.

Elijah does not come out of his hiding place until it is all over and he hears a soft murmuring sound. Although he claims always to stand before the Lord (17:1; 18:15; 19:11), he fails to obey this time. He is unimpressed by the show, his complaint continues.

Depressed people can seldom be talked out of their gloom.

4. God commissions him; God commissions us.

What does help is a sense of purpose, and that is exactly what God gives with a new commission.

The failed pattern is complaint answered by theophany—a show of God.

The successful pattern is complaint overwhelmed by a new assignment.

Your task may not be the same as before, but God will not let you give up your work.

5. God comforts him; God comforts us.

Our comfort is a promise of future victory, Matt. 28:18-20.

God's therapy for burnout is the assignment of new tasks and the certain promise of a future that will transcend any success or lack of it in the past. In the light of such a future, life is indeed worth living.

For the present, there are tasks to be done, out in the real world, away from the security we seek, away from the comfort of our church building, away from any temptation to a pity party (woe is us, poor us), God has a plan for this church, God sustains, challenges, teaches, commissions, and comforts.

Churches, Christians, leaders who are shaped by God in the commonplace events of daily living train themselves to see God...everywhere. God uses the circumstances of our life to teach us, to send us, to comfort us. We may see nuisances, or insurmountable challenges, but God walks in the light when we are in the dark.

Consider the power of pain. Pain focuses our attention. C.S. Lewis gave us the wonderful insight that God whispers to us in our pleasure, and shouts to us in our pain. Everyone suffers pain, physical, psychological, spiritual. Pain is the work of God. Pain does not diminish this church—it strengthens and empowers it.

Geoffrey, swimming pool accident, cuts. Split open area below eye, had to be stitched. Precision, danger, had to be still. My job to help him be still.

Be real still.

Is it going to hurt?

Yes, at first, numbing, shots/sticks, then feel touching and tugging.

Do we have to do this?

Yes, be real still. I will help. Talk to you.

It really did hurt—me. Hard to watch. I held on.

Something to be learned about God in this ordeal. God takes no pleasure in our pain, he delights in our wholeness. You may feel pinned down by God right now. You may feel the difficulty of this moment, of this day, of recent days. You may be busted up and bleeding. You pray for deliverance, but everything feels like more shots and surgery. Knowing that God is not happy about your hurt, the key is to keep looking into his face and talking to him while this soul surgery occurs. Wriggling out of the situation may provide temporary relief from the immediate discomfort, but the real result will be emotional scars and spiritual disfigurement.

We ask God for relief, as Paul with his thorn in the flesh. In the midst of struggle, pain, disappointment, failure. We will survive, we will be stronger. We may walk with a limp because we have wrestled with God and he has touched us, we have been broken and then healed.

Elijah departed, answered the commission, and went forth in the power of God. Strength to go on comes from God.

It is the same for us—the strength to go on is from God. 2 Cor. 4:16-18; faith not sight.