

October 20th: Burnout

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. We will identify certain stories, songs, and wisdom from the Bible that can teach us more about these needs, conditions, and experiences, and help us connect with God and with each other. Last month we discussed foundational topics, and now we’re in our October series called “Being Human.” In this month, we’ll be looking at experiences that are pretty close to universal—and we hope that what we learn together will offer you hope and healing, no matter what you are going through.

If that sounds good to you, I’m so glad you joined us today. As we get ready to hear more about our topic for this morning, I invite you to pray with me.

Enduring God, our souls cry out to you, we are eager for your healing touch. We are eager to release the tensions of our days and to find a cure for emptiness that fills us. We know that something needs to change, but we are uncertain about how to work towards the kind of world you have promised us. We need your guidance and wisdom to lead us in a better direction. Be with us now, in these moments of reflection and in the quiet of our hearts. Amen.

If you were here with us last week, you might remember that we discussed the topic of stress, and its profound impact on our souls. We discovered that stress

not only wounds our bodies, but places a heavy burden on our spiritual lives, and that long term stress can have very real consequences for our health and wellbeing. Today, we're going to take this topic one step further, we're going to be looking at a topic that is closely related, but different enough that we felt it merited its own discussion. And that topic is burnout.

Some mental health experts say that burnout is stress's big sister, and I do think that's true, to a certain extent. Getting to a state of burnout certainly does happen alongside a long standing experience of stress, but burnout isn't just about stress—it's bigger than that.

So first, let's define burnout.

If you looked up burnout in the dictionary fifty years ago, all you would have found is a definition to do with chemical reactions or mechanics. In those contexts, burnout has to do with the depletion of a fuel source or the failure of a part like a motor due to overheating—nothing about human beings. Burnout was a thing that happened to things, not something that people experienced, or at least that what we thought. But now, we see that those chemical reactions and mechanics do actually have human equivalents, there is a very real parallel to the situations and circumstances that we find ourselves in. Over time, medical and mental health experts have concluded that just like overheated motors or depleted fuel sources, we are vulnerable to collapse. We are vulnerable to breaking down.

So in the context of humans, **burnout refers to a specific type of chronic exhaustion**—it is the result of feeling too much physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual fatigue. It's the culmination of just too much pressure, too many expectations, and too little hope.

You might be thinking that burnout can be hard to identify, and you're right. Burnout can look pretty similar to conditions like clinical depression, and the freeze response that is typically seen in burnout sufferers can look a lot like the executive dysfunction that is sometimes part of ADHD. All three of these

conditions can result in lethargy, lack of interest in hobbies, disconnection from important relationships, and an overall loss of momentum. All three of these conditions can bring about isolation and deep unhappiness.

So how do we know when it's burnout that is the problem? How do we know if that's what our soul is struggling with?

Experts on the subject agree that most modern burnout is seen in relation to work or vocational environments—people often reach burnout as a result of long term issues within their job or job environment. Burnout is sometimes the result of too much overtime, or a busy season, or a toxic workplace with unrealistic expectations. Our culture is also seeing an increase in burnout amongst a specific demographic, and that is parents. Whether it's a working outside the house parent, or a working at home parent—we've seen that burnout is a very real danger for moms and dads who are trying to juggle school schedules, doctors appointments, extracurriculars, family needs, food prep, cleaning, and more. Especially over the past few years, we've seen that the demands of each week constantly exceed parents capacity to cope.

But unlike stress, which can make us feel more frenzied and on edge than usual, burnout is characterized by its depletion of our energy—it leaves us feeling empty, without emotion, or without the ability to maintain our normal routine. Burnout makes our life feel devoid of pleasure, it robs us of our ability to be present during special moments. Burnout removes the joy from our lives, it sucks out the fun, and makes us a shell of our true, vital selves.

And that isn't what God wants for us, is it? That doesn't sound like the life that Jesus promised us when he said in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

So what do we do? What answers does our Bible have for us if we find ourselves in this deep hole of burnout?

Well, our scripture passage for today brings us back in time to the early days of our Old Testament—to a place in the wilderness. The great leader Moses had successfully led the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt, but now they are wandering around in the desert, and everyone is getting cranky. It's like thirty minutes into a road trip, when your kids start to ask "are we there yet?" but you know you still have hours to go.

In verse ten, we hear that Moses is among the Israelites, and he "heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents." Imagine thousands of people wailing, each with their own needs, and stories, and suffering. That's what Moses is dealing with. And even though Moses is a good and thoughtful leader, he is stressed from trying to take care of so many people at once, and he can feel his energy draining away. He's approaching empty, running on fumes. He's reaching a level of burnout that is new for him, and he doesn't know what to do.

So he goes to God and makes this speech: "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me."

Anyone have any empathy for Moses? Anyone ever cried out to God with a similar complaint? I know that I've had some not so nice things to say to God when I've been on the brink of my own seasons of burnout.

Thankfully, God listens to Moses, and proposes some advice. God says, "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. 17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will

share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.”

God tells Moses that he shouldn’t have to carry these burdens alone.

If you’re listening to this, you might be saying to yourself, “Hey this sounds just like the sermon from last week! Pastor Meg, you just preached about asking for help, we’ve already heard this!” And that is true, I did preach about how asking for help when we need it is a way that we can reduce our stress.

But I want us to pay attention to what God is doing here—I want us to look at God’s proposed plan with a little more attention to detail. Because God didn’t just tell Moses to find one person to help him, God instructed Moses to find seventy leaders to help him. God didn’t just tell Moses to chat about his stress with his friends and get some support, God actually commands Moses to do something completely new.

Moses had been operating under the assumption that God’s people needed a singular leader, and so he believed that all the work and all of the decision making should fall on one person’s shoulders. This might have been familiar to God’s people, who were used to living under the rule of an Egyptian king called a Pharaoh, but that doesn’t mean it was the right way to lead. And so in this conversation with God, Moses actually learns that there is a different way of doing things, a way that creates mutuality and strength rather than burnout and emptiness. God doesn’t just ask Moses to get some help, he asks Moses to reevaluate the whole system. And so this idea of bringing together seventy leaders isn’t just a change made to assist Moses, it’s a change that is meant to reshape Israelite society as a whole. It is meant to restructure their concept of leadership and responsibility, so that the whole culture can be more at peace.

And I think this highlights something important for us to understand. In our modern world, burnout is often framed as an individual problem—but it’s not—it’s a societal problem. Burnout might happen to individuals, but it is the result of a system that never had our flourishing in mind in the first place.

Burnout might be a condition that you've experienced, but it's not a result of your own failure or unworthiness, it's a condition caused by the demands of a culture that doesn't prioritize health and wellbeing. It's not you, it's the world we've created.

Burnout is a systemic issue that needs a systemic solution.

So what if God is telling all of us that we need to be like Moses? What if God is asking us to reconsider the assumptions that we've been operating under in order to reshape our world?

I imagine that a lot of us feel powerless to fix the system or situations that we find ourselves in, right? We feel unable to make any kind of change, because so much of our life is riding on our ability to cope with our current schedule and roles that we play. Most of us aren't CEOs or senators or admirals, and so we feel like we don't have the agency to transform our city, much less our nation. Most of us don't own businesses or have billions in the bank, so what could we possibly do to shift our culture in a more positive direction?

I get it, I really do. I feel this way sometimes, but I think this passage can remind all of us that God doesn't call us to do this work alone. It isn't our burden to bear alone. God always intended that leadership would be a task that we share. And so God invites us into this work of transformation so that our souls can flourish as God intended.

If we're feeling overwhelmed, here's where we can start: I want each of us to think about our own sphere of influence.

Maybe you're not a CEO, but you manage a team. You have several people that report to you, whose workflow you control. You might not have a say in the direction of your company, but the way you work with your colleagues can show them a better way to share responsibility and allow for rest. You can cut a team member some slack when they make a mistake, you can decide not to

schedule meetings after noon on Fridays, and you can create a healthier culture of respect and support.

Maybe you're not the Mayor, but you're a parent who leads your household. You may not be able to control the school calendar, but you get to decide what clubs and activities your kids participate in, you get to set boundaries with family and advocate for what you and your kids need. You can decide that dinner together is your highest priority, you can make the choice to step away from relationships that increase stress, and you can model self care for your kids so that they know the value of their souls.

And maybe you're not ever going to be a billionaire, or even a millionaire, but you are a person who participates in our culture in some way. You may not be able to control the media companies, or the marketing firms, but you get to decide when and how you spend your money. You are free to make choices that align with your values, you can reject certain news outlets, or stay away from certain products, or whatever else makes sense for you. You have more power than you think. And together, we have more power than we think.

I'll close with this: burnout is a very real thing for many of us right now, but it isn't something that we have to tolerate. Burnout may be the status quo, but it was never God's intention that our souls be empty. Burnout may not be something we can fix overnight, but it is something that God commands us to take seriously if we value our flourishing.

So my friends, how might you take a step towards relieving your own burnout this week? How might you take a step towards creating flourishing for someone else? What action can you commit to, either by yourself, or in community, that moves us closer to a better world?

May God be with us as we pursue this vitality and purpose together.

Amen.