

Why Good People Burn Out Fighting Injustice

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. My name is Daniel. I'm one of our elders here at the table, part of our preaching team. If I haven't met you before and said hi, I'd love to just grab a few minutes with you out at your church. Let us see your first time here for a reason I hadn't talked before.

We're in week 10 of a series called What Lies Beneath? Moving from the crowded to the queer as disciples of Jesus. We've covered a lot of ground in this series discussing emotional and spiritual health, both as individuals and as a community.

This work of tending to our hearts and our souls is transformative. It brings us deeper into our authentic selves, brings us closer to God and closer to each other. We do this through countercultural practices of rest, silence, and interdependence.

We've also tried to emphasize that this is not about escapism or avoidism, but rather about disciplines of rest and reflection that empower us to be present to ourselves and the world around us.

But throughout this series, the question that has come back up for me repeatedly has been, how do I turn from looking inside to looking outside again? How do I remain present to myself and the world around me?

[1 : 1 9] And that question has been ever present for me in the last week. So last Sunday, Pastor Anthony talked about David and Goliath as an allegory for trauma, talking us through the ways that our bodies react to trauma and showing some practical ways to self-regulate.

I left feeling pretty grounded afterwards. I left feeling pretty grounded afterwards. And then on my way home, I checked my phone to see that just 45 minutes earlier as I was sitting right over there, Anis Al Sharif, a 28-year-old Palestinian journalist from Gaza, whose footage I have watched every day for two years as he documented the ongoing genocide, was assassinated, along with his entire media crew in front of a hospital.

And then Monday morning, it was announced that federal police agencies and the National Guard were being mobilized in DC. And throughout the last week, we've seen a flood of federal police across our city.

We have seen homeless encampments cleared. We have seen ICE agents making arrests. And so it's easy for me to wonder why I am up here right now, talking about arrests.

When what I really want to do is issue a call to action. To tell us to get out into the streets with our neighbors. To defend our communities and our loved ones with every ounce of strength that we have.

[2 : 4 3] I thought about that this morning as I received message after message of ICE agents in front of churches and apartments in my neighborhood. I thought of that as I walked here from the metro, walking past the library and the empty streets, wondering where my neighbors who are normally there were.

I'm wondering what their health looked like right now. But it's precisely because of this moment that we're doing a series like this. I know that our church is full of people who care deeply.

Our church is full of people who are not strangers to rage and to grief. Our church is full of people who are committed to justice. To do that sustainably, we have to build skills and practices around rest.

But before we get into today's scripture and the rest of today's sermon, I want to center us briefly in the current moment we're in.

So I'm a person with multiple privileges. And whenever I'm in a moment that feels unprecedented to me, I look towards movements that have been doing this work for far longer than I have.

[3 : 58] So first, I want to point us towards Palestine and the concept of Samut. Let me go to the first slide. Samut is an Arabic word that means steadfastness, resilience, perseverance.

It's often visualized with this image behind me of a Palestinian woman holding fast to an olive tree, to her culture, to her heritage. Palestinians have lived under military occupation for 77 plus years.

And their work of resistance is generational. And Samut says that they will be steadfast today, they will be steadfast tomorrow, and they will be steadfast for however many generations it takes until freedom comes.

To do that generational work takes emotional and spiritual strength. Second, I want to point us towards these centuries of resistance and survival in the US by black people and black liberation movements.

There is so much that can be said about this. I want to point towards the gospel song by Hezekiah Walker, I need you to survive. Some of the lyrics in the song go, I need you.

[5 : 14] You need me. You need me. You are all a part of God's body. You are important to me. I need you to survive.

I need you alongside me in this struggle. Both rest and resistance are about we and about us. And finally, I want to point towards the wisdom of Indigenous elders who have taught me that laughter is good medicine.

That humor is a powerful tool in time to struggle. This meme behind me, the horrors persist, but so do I, has gotten me through more than one bad day.

It's like put my sunglasses on, get my hot pink car, and just embody this. I think it's a mouse. I'm not an expert on my rodents, but I think it's a mouse. You're good. To persist, I have to rest though.

So today we're going to talk about rest and resistance. Our scripture today is going to come from a scripture that we haven't looked at yet in the series. It will be 1 Kings 19, 1 through 18.

[6 : 23] So I encourage you to pull that out on your phones. I'll be reading from the Common English Bible. We'll have it on the screen behind me as well. We're looking at the prophet Elijah.

The story of Elijah is the story of someone who has worked tirelessly for the good of his people. He has poured himself out confronting injustice.

And as we are about to see, he is hopeless. He's despondent. And he's giving up entirely. Before we get into the scriptures, I want to share a little bit of context.

There's a lot of backstory here. The bullet points of what you need to know before we look at the story. That this is taking place around three generations after the time of David and Solomon. So the northern kingdom of Israel is ruled by two people, Ahab and Jezebel.

Under their rule, the worship of a local deity, Abol, has become normal. The people have abandoned their covenant with God. Because of this, God sends Elijah, a prophet, to call the people back to him.

[7 : 30] Now, whenever you see the word prophet in the Bible, you can basically think of them as a covenant commentator. Their job was to remind Israel of the covenant that they made with God, and to then provide commentary on what's happening around them through the lens of that covenant.

This was an inherently political role that involved confronting idolatries such as putting profit over people or putting narrow nationalistic interests over the well-being of humanity.

These were idolatries that were done with official state backing. Elijah's life, like most of the prophets, was often at risk. And just before the scripture that we're about to read, there's this dramatic event where Elijah confronts the leaders of the Baal religious community, and he demonstrates God's power over them.

Elijah confronts idolatry, and finally, it feels like he's going to win. It feels like the tides are turning. And that scene brings an end to a three and a half year period of time where Elijah's work was deeply intensified.

So now if you have your phones out, we're going to go to 1 Kings 19, 1 through 18, and it'll be on the screen behind me as well. So Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, how he had killed all Baal's prophets with the sword.

[8 : 58] And Jezebel sent a message to Elijah with this message. May the gods do whatever they want to me, if by this time tomorrow I haven't made your life like the life of one of them.

Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life. He arrived at Beersheba and Judah and left his assistant there. He then went on further into the desert about a day's journey.

He finally sat down under a solitary tree, and he longed for his own death. It's more than enough, Lord, he said. Take my life because I'm no better than my ancestors.

He lay down and he fell asleep under the tree. Then suddenly a messenger tapped him, said to him, get up, eat something.

Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baking on flowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and he drank, and then he went back to sleep.

[10 : 04] The Lord's messenger returned a second time and tapped him. Get up, the messenger said. Eat something. You have a difficult road ahead of you. Elijah got up, ate, drank, and refreshed by that food, traveled for forty days and forty nights until he arrived at Korob, also called Mount Sinai, God's Mountain.

And there he went to a cave and spent the night. While he was there, the Lord's word came to him and said, why are you here, Elijah?

And Elijah replied, I have been passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars. They have murdered your prophets with the sword.

I am the only one left. Now they want to take my life too. The Lord said, go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by.

And a very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake.

[11 : 13] But God wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But God wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound.

Thin. Quiet. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat and went instead of the cave's entrance. The voice came to him and said, why are you here, Elijah?

And Elijah said, I have been very passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars. They have murdered your prophets with the sword.

I am the only one left. And now they want to take my life too. The Lord said to him, go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king of Aram.

Also anoint Jehu as king of Israel and anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet. Whoever escapes from the sword of Azriel, Jehu will kill. Whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill.

[12 : 17] But I have preserved those who remain in Israel totaling 7,000. All those whose knees haven't bowed down to both.

To help paint this scene, I want you to think about an injustice in the world that you care about. Something that's important to you. Now imagine that you're working towards ending that injustice.

It's hard work. It's scary work. And it puts you at great personal risk. After three years of working towards that, you have a breakthrough moment. You might actually succeed.

But then a very powerful person steps in, says not so fast, and you see your victory fall out of reaching him. And that's where we find Elisha in First Kings.

Years of hoping and fighting and struggling and finally getting close to fulfilling his mission. And seeing it all disappear. So there are four scenes within that larger narrative that we're going to take a look at one by one.

[13 : 25] First, we see that Elijah flees and he despairs. So after his victory, Elijah's life is threatened and he reacts in fear. He runs away.

He travels around 120 miles on foot into the desert. He's getting the hell out of there. And then after traveling 120 miles, we see how deeply he is in despair when he leaves his assistant behind and wanders off for another day into the deep desert with no food, with no water, with no supplies.

Elijah gives up. He's done with his mission. He's done with his prophetic calling. He is emotionally and physically exhausted. He lies down and he falls asleep.

But then in the second scene, Elijah meets a messenger in the desert. After he's slept for a time, somebody taps him on the shoulder and wakes him up.

The Hebrew word here, malach, just means messenger. The same word is used earlier when Jezebel sends a messenger to Elijah.

[14 : 41] And sometimes the Bible translates this as an angel of the Lord. But we see this messenger wake Elijah up. We see this messenger bake flatbread for Elijah.

And we see him bringing Elijah a jar of water. Elijah eats, drinks, and falls asleep. After some more time passes, the messenger comes back, taps him on the shoulder again, tells him that there's a difficult journey ahead of him.

The text is very unclear about who this messenger is. It could be an angel. But we see that this messenger is doing pretty normal human things too.

Like faking flatbread, shaking Elijah away, and speaking to him. So what's clear is that this messenger is there to care for Elijah physically while he's in the desert.

After eating and drinking and sleeping, we get to the third scene where Elijah journeys to Mount Sinai and meets with God. After being fed, Elijah travels to Mount Sinai, which is where God gave the covenant that Elijah has been fighting for day in and day out for years.

[15 : 58] Now, God does not actually tell him to go there, which could be a whole sermon on its own, but nowhere does God say go to Mount Sinai. But it makes sense that Elijah would go there.

It's a sacred site for him. It means something important for him. Unfortunately, for someone who has walked slash ran 120 miles, it's also 250 miles south of him.

So after running for 120 miles, after wandering into the desert for a day, he goes for a very, very long walk. I like walking around the city. I love that D.C. is a walkable city.

250 miles is a little bit outside of my walking regime right now. So he walks. He's also probably staying alert for anyone who might tell Jezebel and Ahab of his presence.

He eventually arrives to Mount Sinai, he finds a cave, and he falls asleep yet again. At some point in the night, he wakes up and God says to him, Elijah, why are you here?

[17 : 04] Elijah pours his heart out. He's faithfully carried out his work. He's passionately called Israel back to the covenant. And now he's the only one left in all of Israel who cares.

God then tells Elijah to step outside of the cave and there's this dramatic scene involving wind, an earthquake, fire, and then finally, a quiet, still sound.

It's implied that God meets Elijah in that silence. From there we see a repeat of the previous scene. God asks Elijah, why are you here?

And Elijah gives the exact same answer as before. So then the narrative concludes when Elijah is sent back out with a renewed mission and calling.

So this time God responds directly to Elijah. God tells him that he will indeed fulfill his prophetic calling. God tells him that there will be a new political and religious order.

[18 : 11] Ahab and Jezebel will be replaced. And Elisha will become his successor. God tells him that he isn't alone, that there are thousands who are still faithful.

In the spirit of kind of looking at the Bible and the Old Testament as an allegory, 7,000 there probably refers more so to God telling Elijah that there is a complete number of faithful out there.

Not literally 7,000, but enough. That's what God is saying. That's what God is saying. There are enough people out there for you, Elijah. And then God sends Elijah back out into the world with a renewed sense of calling and purpose.

So I want to focus in on one part of the story by using a tool that I found really helpful over the last couple of years. So a few weeks ago, Pastor Anthony shared with us the concept of the rescue triangle.

You can go to the next slide. So it's a framework and family systems theory that describes relational dynamics. You basically have three roles.

[19 : 15] Rescue, victim, and persecutor. We'll go to the next slide. So you have a rescue role, which is where you're doing more than your share and or more than you want to.

The rescue role says someone has to do this job. Nobody else is stepping up. It's going to have to be me. And then you kind of swoop in to commit an act of rescue.

From rescue, because you've been doing more than you want or more than your share, you begin to experience burnout and slide on down to what's called the victim role.

This is where you're doing less than your share and or less than you actually want to do. Sometimes that's an intentional choice to pull back. Other times it's because you don't have the power, the energy to do anymore.

This place is often characterized by isolation and withdrawal. After being in that victim role, rebellion begins to pop up where you're saying, actually, I don't want to do this at all.

[20 : 22] And you move over towards the persecutor role. That place is often characterized by frustration, irritation, and blaming others. But that doesn't really feel good.

And so guilt begins to creep in and you move over to rescuing again. The cycle starts over. It's imperfect like any framework, but I find it a really helpful tool to understand relationships, organizations, and even what goes on inside of a relationship.

And what goes on inside of myself. So let me just give you a practical example. Let's say that I attend a church and I volunteer at this church once a month because I like volunteering there.

And once a month is all I have time for. Eventually, though, this church needs more volunteers. I'm asked to show up two times or three times or even four times a month.

Sometimes on very short notice. That's more than I want to do. That's more than my share. I also don't want to leave the church without volunteers. So I start rescuing, doing more than my share and more than I want.

[21 : 34] But the longer I do this, I start to experience burnout and I move down the triangle towards the victim role. Where I start showing up late for volunteer shifts. I restrict my availability without explaining why.

And I just say things like, I'm just really busy these days. And from there I move towards the persecutor role. Where I blame other volunteers for not doing their share.

I blame the staff for not caring enough about other people. I'm irritable and I'm frustrated. Finally, I either feel guilty and begin volunteering again.

Or just say I'm done and exit that church. Now, if that is how this dynamic can show up in volunteering, imagine the ways it can show up in intensified moments like the one we're in now.

I've seen this pattern happen in every organization I've been part of. Where people rescue, burn out, isolate, and blame. I have done this many times myself.

[22 : 37] More than I would care to admit. As a quick acknowledgement here, there's a lot of good legacy about how organizations actually enable and sometimes rely on people staying in that rescue triangle.

It's also helpful to think about organizational health too. So I said earlier that this is a story about Elijah and his hopelessness.

That's true. But it's also the story of how God breaks him out of the rescue triangle of those dynamics. So let's look again at the story. So prior to the scripture read, Elijah is in the rescue space.

He's doing more than he wants to. And he's doing more than his share. In fact, later in the story he tells God, I'm the only one left. He feels like he is the only one who can rescue Israel.

But then he's threatened. So he goes to the desert. He's burning out. He's moving over towards the victim space.

[23 : 43] He's isolating. He's doing less than his share. He's doing less than he actually wants to do. And finally, Elijah goes to Mount Sinai and he moves towards the persecutor sites.

We see in the way that he responds twice to God, that he is frustrated. He is irritated. And he's blaming other people for not doing their part. So how does God break Elijah out of that dynamic, out of this cycle?

First, God cares for Elijah physically. So if I talk about how Elijah has abandoned the fight.

Shortly after a monumental victory, Elijah calls it quits. But instead of dragging Elijah back to the battleground, God cares for his physical needs.

Feeding him. And giving him time to sleep and to rest. And that means that there is work being left undone. Back where Ahab and Jezebel are plotting ways to restore all worship.

[24 : 53] But God's first response to Elijah is to let him sleep and defeat him. For me, in moments of crisis, sleep and food are the first things to go.

I stay up later and I eat less. I hate to give him credit, but Snickers really got it right when they said, you are not you when you're hungry. Now imagine that you are not you when you're hungry and there is a flood of federal police in your city.

You are really not you. And when I'm not meeting my physical needs, I follow into this rescue dynamic without even thinking about it. I say yes to things without even considering if I should say yes.

If it's my role. If it's what I want to do. I say that God sends Elijah a messenger who makes food for him.

Who gives him water. And so this moment in our city I'd encourage you to think about right now. If you're more in the shoes of Elijah, where you could use somebody to help you.

[25 : 57] You could use somebody to provide for you. Or you might be more in the messenger's role. Where you are on the lookout for people who you can support and care for. And second, we see that God cares for Elijah emotionally.

Again, the story is ambiguous on if Elijah was called to go to Mount Sinai. But regardless, 250 miles later, he shows up.

And all he does there is complain. He's asked twice why he's there and both times gives the exact same story. His life is at risk.

It's too dangerous. He's the only one left who actually cares and is doing anything at all. Even after meeting God in the thin, quiet sound, Elijah goes back to that story.

I'm the only one left. Although God does later correct Elijah's misconceptions, God's response to Elijah's grumblings is presence.

[27 : 00] It's through asking questions. And through giving space for a small, quiet sound. God simply meets Elijah where he's acts emotionally.

God gives Elijah space to express his feelings just as they are. Then, God creates the conditions for Elijah's life. And he's like, I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure.

I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. I'm sure. Again, in this moment where there seems to be something new happening every day, I encourage you to think about where are the quiet places in your life where can you carve out silence for yourself?

[28 : 06] How can you accept and embrace your emotions just as they are in a current moment, but not stay there? Finally, God cares for Elijah spiritually.

So God responds to Elijah by giving him a renewed sense of calling, purpose, and community. Elijah is comforted by a messenger, by the knowledge that he'll have a successor, by the reassurance that there are still so many others who follow God.

Elijah is renewed because of the presence of God and the presence of other people. Elijah now sees himself again as part of a long prophetic chain that did not start with him and will not end with him.

He is renewed by resting in God's presence, by the assurance that he's not alone. He goes back into the world to continue his prophetic ministry. Just like Elijah, without time to rest, it is easy for me to lose sight of the mission that I have as a follower of Jesus, which is an evergreen following to proclaim God's love and God's justice, regardless of worldly powers.

So, I know your point in the sermon, I struggled with the urge to add asterisk and lots of disclaimers clarify that there is a big difference between rest and avoidance.

[29 : 34] They are substantially not the same type. So I add disclaimers that for folks of privilege like me, a big part of our work right now is to do things that we might not want to do.

It is to be uncomfortable and to stretch ourselves. I've struggled to figure out what's the balance between encouraging us to rest and encouraging us to work so that other people can rest.

There's a saying, to have a village, you have to be a villager. And one way we've tried to express that here at the table is the question, how do we create these for one another?

How do we create more space for each other? And that's the path that I'm trying to go down in these coming days and weeks and months. It's a difficult road to travel and one that I need your help with.

As I move towards doing more than my share in my part, as I move towards isolation, as I move towards blaming, because I guarantee you that in the next days, weeks and months, all of us in different ways will move in those directions.

[30 : 40] And we need each other to come back to God and to our mission. There's a quote from one of my heroes, the Palestinian author and poet, Hisan Kanapani, who I want to leave you with.

Do not die before you become a worthy adversary. Do not die before you become a worthy adversary.

And my hope and my prayer is that we take those words to heart, committing daily that physically, emotionally, and spiritually, we will do everything in our power to survive, to ensure that our neighbors survive, and to become worthy adversaries to idolatry, worthy adversaries to dehumanization, into everything that goes against the life-giving way of Jesus.

As we move into a time of communion here, I encourage you to reflect on the very acts that we're about to participate in, of giving and receiving, breaking and feeding, in the ways that you in the days to come are called both to give and to receive as well.

Thank you. Thank you.