PREVENTING SPIRITUAL BURNOUT

Zechariah 4:1-10

By

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Zechariah Lesson 5

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Zechariah 4:1-14

When I began to serve as a pastor 26 years ago, just six weeks shy of my thirtieth birthday, I was extremely unsure of whether or not I could do it. I didn’t know whether I could prepare new sermons each week without running dry after a short while. I didn’t know if I could handle the other aspects of the ministry: providing leadership and vision for the church, giving biblical counsel to those in need, working graciously with difficult people, discipling current and future leaders, conducting weddings and funerals, and handling day to day administrative tasks.

That church was small and had never supported a full time pastor before, and so there was the added concern of whether or not the finances would be there week to week to meet our needs. And so with some anxiety and an overwhelming sense of personal inadequacy, I said, “Lord, I’ll try this for three years and then we’ll see where we’re at!”

By God’s grace alone, here I am 26 years later, still with some anxiety and an overwhelming sense of personal inadequacy, hanging on! I am not exaggerating or being modest when I say that if God pulled the plug on me tomorrow, I wouldn’t last a month in this ministry. I have often felt like Peter, walking on the water, thinking to myself, “What am I doing out here? Why did I ever get out of that boat?” and at the same time praying, “Lord, if You don’t hold me up, I’m going under!”

Charles Simeon (Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible [Zondervan], 10:460) said it well, “We see how dependent a little infant is on its mother; and such must we be in the arms of God. We must undertake nothing in our own strength: in no circumstances whatever may we lean to our own understanding: whatever is devised, or whatever is done, the creature must be nothing; but God must be all in all.”

We hear a lot today about stress and burnout, especially in ministry. It’s a complex problem that includes many factors that I
cannot delve into in this message. Sometimes burnout stems from faulty time management or from being over-committed. Sometimes it results from trying to do it all yourself and not delegating properly. Our text does not deal with these aspects of the problem, nor will I. But it does give us two principles that offer significant help in preventing spiritual burnout:

**To prevent spiritual burnout, see the importance of God’s work and depend on the continual supply of His Spirit.**

The work that God gives us is to be His lampstand, both corporately and individually. The only way that we can fulfill that task is by depending on the continual supply of the oil of God’s Spirit. In that way, we will burn for God without burning out.

Zechariah’s fourth vision (chapter 3) encouraged Joshua the high priest with the message: “God will cleanse His chosen people through Messiah and use them to serve Him.” His fifth vision (chapter 4) encouraged Zerubbabel, the civic leader, with the message: “The temple that you have begun will be completed and My people will become a light unto the nations under Messiah. This will not be accomplished by human effort, but by My Spirit.” In the fourth vision we saw the cleansing that is necessary before anyone can serve God. In the fifth vision we see the testimony that results from a cleansed and Spirit-filled life. While our text will ultimately be fulfilled with Israel in the Millennium, it also applied to God’s people in Zechariah’s day and it applies to us as we seek to be God’s light to the nations.

Zechariah saw a lampstand of gold with seven lamps and a bowl at the top, which served as a reservoir for the oil. Two olive trees, each with a branch, stood beside the lampstand. A golden pipe extended from each branch to the bowl so that the golden olive oil poured from the tree. Out of the reservoir or bowl (according to most commentators) came 49 spouts or pipes, seven to each of seven lamps on the lampstand. This lampstand was similar to the one that stood in the holy place of the tabernacle, with three exceptions: (1) the bowl on top of it; (2) the seven pipes to each lamp; and, (3) the two olive trees. These additions point to the abundant, continual supply of oil to the lamps. In the temple, the priests had to keep the lamps full of oil, but in this vision, the supply of oil flowed constantly without help from any man.
The lampstand signifies the important task that God gives to His people to be a light to the nations, to reveal God and His truth to those who walk in darkness. The oil that flows in continual abundant supply so that the lamps can go on burning symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The two olive trees represent the priestly and kingly offices in Israel, with the two branches being Joshua and Zerubbabel. Together these two anointed ones were a type of the Lord Jesus Christ in His offices of Priest and King. Jesus is God’s Anointed One (that’s what “Messiah” or “Christ” means), who provides the Holy Spirit in abundant supply to His people.

The Lord encourages Zerubbabel (4:7-9) by assuring him that in spite of the mountain of problems in rebuilding the temple, he would finish the task. This would confirm to all of God’s people that He had sent His Messiah-Servant (“me” in 4:9b), in the person of the angel of the Lord, to His people. The old timers, who were disparaging this temple in comparison to the former one, should not despise the day of small things (4:10). Under God’s perfect providence (the seven eyes of the Lord, which range over the earth to watch over His people), the project will be completed. With that as an overview, let’s look at the two main principles.

1. To prevent spiritual burnout, see the importance of God’s work.

We tend to burn out when we lose motivation, and we lose motivation when we lose perspective on the importance of the work to which God has called His people. That work involves being God’s lampstand to the world (see Rev. 1:12-20). It involves building God’s temple where His light shines forth. The world ought to see Christ, the light of the world, both in Christians individually and in the church corporately.

That is no insignificant task, because it involves displaying the light of God’s glory to a world that loves darkness rather than light! The apostle Paul said that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The only way that such blind people can see is if, as Paul goes on to say, God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness” shines into their hearts “to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” God does that by putting His
treasure in earthen vessels, “that the surpassing greatness of the
power may be of God and not from ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:6-7). Our
task, as God’s people, is to be His lampstand, shining forth with
His glory to this sin-darkened world.

But there are some negative things that can cause us to lose
sight of the importance of God’s work.

A. We must be aware of some seeming negatives in God’s work.

(1) God’s work seems beset with problems.

“What are you, O great mountain?” (4:7). This refers to the
mountain of difficulties that Zerubbabel faced in rebuilding the
temple. There had been opposition from enemies without. There
was spiritual lethargy and discouragement among the Jews within.
But God promises Zerubbabel that this mountain of problems
would become a plain and that he would complete the temple by
bringing forth the top stone with shouts of “Grace, grace to it.” All
that we accomplish for the Lord is by His grace!

But God didn’t remove the mountain in one magic moment!
Zerubbabel had to keep working for about four more years before
the temple was finished. And then there was the further problem
of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, which didn’t get completed
until Nehemiah’s time, almost 100 years later.

The point is, you will always encounter a mountain of prob-
lems when you seek to build God’s temple. Commenting on this
point, Dr. James Boice said, “As I counsel with people in our day,
many of them young people, I am convinced that one of their bi-
gest problems is that they expect shortcuts” (The Minor Prophets
[Baker], 2:510). He goes on to say that people want some simple
principle to understand all the Bible apart from diligent study. They
want some experience that will transport them effortlessly to a
higher spiritual plateau, without daily discipline. They want a nearly
perfect church, without the hassle of working through difficulties.
But that is not the way God gets His work done.

(2) God’s work seems incredibly slow in its progress.

Zerubabbel must have been thinking, “This project will never
get done!” The work had begun over 20 years before. It would still
take another four years. But God assures Zerubbabel (4:9) that his
hands, which had laid the foundation of the temple, would finish it. Eventually, it was completed.

As I read the Bible I am amazed at how long God takes to accomplish His work through His people. God appeared to Abraham and promised to make him the father of many nations and to bless all nations of the earth through him. I wonder if Abraham thought, “Wow, I’d better start building a baby crib and Sarah needs to start sewing some baby clothes.” If they did that, those baby items sat around collecting dust for 25 years before Isaac was born! Isaac spent his life digging some wells out in the desert and raising Esau and Jacob. Jacob spent about 20 years working for Laban before he finally got back to the land of Canaan. But then the small clan moved to Egypt where they were enslaved for 400 years. Then came 40 more years in the wilderness. Later there was the Babylonian captivity and then 400 years without a word from God. He didn’t send His Messiah until 2,000 years after His promise to Abraham! Obviously, God isn’t in the hurry that we are in!

If you’re going to commit yourself to building God’s temple, the church, be prepared for the long haul! Just about the time you think you’re getting somewhere, the key disciple you’ve been working with decides to move! There are many other setbacks. You never reach a point in the local church where you can stand back and say, “It’s all done!”

(3) God’s work often seems insignificant.

As we saw in our study of Ezra 3, many of the old timers wept when they saw this puny temple because they compared it to the glory of Solomon’s temple. God refers to this group in verse 10: “For who has despised the day of small things?” From the perspective of world history and the then-mighty Persian Empire, of what significance was this little band of Jews who were attempting to reconstruct a place of worship out of the ruins of Jerusalem? Their project certainly would not have made any headlines!

It’s easy to get discouraged by thinking, “What difference does it make that I teach Sunday School or come out for a work day at church or take a meal to a family going through hardship or share Christ with my neighbor?” If we think that way, we’re more likely to burn out than if we see the importance of God’s work.
In contrast to these seeming negatives that can obscure the importance of God’s work, there are some sure positives that will impress on us the importance of His work.

B. We must keep in mind the sure positives of God’s work.

(1) God’s work is the focus of His delight.

God is saying to Zerubbabel (and us) that small is great if God’s eye is upon it. The seven eyes of God (4:10) signify God’s full attention and care. The point is that God, who sees everything on the face of the earth, takes note of Zerubbabel’s building project and that God delights in it.

If you are committed to building the church by winning people to Christ and helping them to grow in Christ, God delights in what you are doing. You’re doing what Jesus said He will do, namely, “I will build My church.” What could be more important than to commit yourself to doing what Jesus Christ is doing?

(2) God’s work is a worldwide work that will prevail.

The Lord is referred to as “the Lord of the whole earth” (4:14). He promises Zerubbabel that what He is doing will get done in spite of the mountains of opposition. God’s purpose is that the knowledge of His glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). There will be some from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation around God’s throne (Rev. 5:9). We have the great privilege of joining in God’s worldwide cause that will certainly prevail! We are His lampstand, the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).

(3) God’s work is the work of revealing God in and through us.

That’s what the lampstand and temple were all about. Everything in the temple pointed people to God. We now are God’s temple and His lampstand! By our lives and our verbal witness, we should point people to Jesus Christ. His presence and very nature should be displayed in our lives, beginning in our homes and extending to the world. Although we are just earthen vessels, we contain the treasure of Jesus Christ that the world so desperately needs. Keep in view this vision of the importance of God’s work and your individual role in it and it will help you not to burn out.
Zechariah’s vision gives us a second key element for preventing burnout:

2. To prevent spiritual burnout, depend on the continual supply of God’s Spirit.

This vital truth is seen both in the symbolism of the olive trees and in the direct word of the Lord to Zerubbabel (4:6), “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit.” Jesus Christ (pictured by the two anointed ones, 4:14) mediates His Spirit to His people so that they will burn brightly for Him. Three observations:

A. We must ask God to open us to the supply of His Spirit.

There are two ways to work for God. One is “by might and by power” (4:6). This refers to human energy and effort. G. Campbell Morgan paraphrases it, “Not by resources, not by resoluteness” (The Westminster Pulpit, Vol. VI, p. 53).

That is to say, you can utilize your human talent and be as determined as a bulldog and you will see some results. But when you stand before Christ, it will be as wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12), because it came from the flesh. When you work in the power of the flesh, you get the credit because the results were due to your ability and your hard work. God may get a tip of the hat, but He was not at the center and so He is robbed of glory.

The other way to work for God is “by My Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts” (4:6). This does not imply that there is no toil and sweat when you labor in the power of the Holy Spirit. Zerubbabel and his men still had to clear away the same mountain of rubble and lay the same heavy stones. But when God’s Spirit motivates and energizes the work, there is conscious dependence on Him, and He gets the glory.

The story is told of an old woodsman who came into town for supplies. He needed several items, including a new axe. On the counter of the general store was advertised a new chain saw which was guaranteed to cut down twice as many trees in one day as any previous one. He eagerly purchased the saw.

A week later he was back in the store, demanding his money back. When asked why, he said that before he was chopping down ten trees a day with his axe, but that now with much more effort he
was lucky if he could fell one or two. The store owner looked the machine over very carefully. He checked the chain and the spark plug. He could find nothing wrong with it, so he flipped the switch and pulled the cord to start it. As it roared to life, the woodsman jumped back in surprise and exclaimed, “What’s that noise?”

We’re often like that woodsman. We’re gutting it out for God and using some of the tools that are available. But we need to ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit.

To use the lampstand analogy, the power for light does not come from the wick, but from the oil saturating the wick. As long as the wick is saturated, it will burn brightly. But if it closes itself off from the supply, it will smolder, char, and go out. Even so, we must allow God’s Spirit to saturate us so that we will burn brightly for Jesus Christ.

B. We must open ourselves continually to the supply of God’s Spirit.

A woman asked D.L. Moody once, “Why do you talk so often about the need for being filled with the Holy Spirit. You always are stressing the need to be filled again and again. Why isn’t once enough to be filled?” Moody replied, “I leak.”

Every Christian receives the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:2,3). But we must learn to walk by means of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), continually, repeatedly depending on Him.

In this vision, the angel had to awaken Zechariah from a sleep-like condition and then direct him to the vision by asking what he saw (4:1-2). Later, Zechariah has to ask twice regarding the meaning of the two olive trees (4:11-12). The trees provided a continual flow of golden oil to the lamps so that they did not burn out. All of these features are designed to show us that we must depend on God alone and that we must do so continually.

F. B. Meyer (The Prophet of Hope [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 58) observes that the wick is dependent on the source of oil moment by moment. It has no storehouse or backup supply. It is always on the edge of bankruptcy, but always supplied.
C. We must allow the supply of God’s Spirit to benefit others through us.

What good is a light under a basket, as Jesus observed (Matt. 5:15)? The whole point of a lampstand is to give light so that people will not stumble in the darkness.

Dr. Charles Feinberg (God Remembers [American Board of Missions to the Jews], pp. 74-75) points out the appropriateness of oil as a symbol for the Holy Spirit. He lists seven functions of oil. First, oil lubricates, thus minimizing friction and wear. Second, oil heals. The Spirit of God heals hearts wounded by sin and the sorrows of life. Third, oil lights. The Spirit illumines God’s Word and gives us direction in life. Fourth, oil warms. The Spirit melts cold hearts that are unresponsive to God. Fifth, oil invigorates. The Spirit gives divine energy and strength. Sixth, oil adorns. In the Old Testament, it was used to adorn the body at a time of joy. Even so, the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is God’s joy. Seventh, oil polishes. The Spirit smooths the rough edges from our lives as He produces His fruit of kindness and gentleness in us.

As we continually open ourselves up to the abundant supply of God’s Spirit, we will be used of God to impart the benefits of the Spirit of God to others.

**Conclusion**

I’m no mechanic, but I do know that you can’t run a car without oil or you’ll burn up the engine quickly. I am a pastor, and I also know that you can’t serve the Lord without the continual supply of the oil of God’s Spirit or you’ll burn out.

The solution to burnout is not to quit working for the Lord. Working for the Lord—being His lampstand—is the greatest thing you can do with your life. The solution to burnout is to see the great importance of God’s work and then to open your life to the continual, abundant supply of God’s Spirit as you do His work. Have you checked your spiritual dipstick lately?
Discussion Questions

1. Is the high incidence of burnout because our day is inherently more stressful than previous times or because we are not relying on God’s Spirit as we should?

2. How can we know when to say no to opportunities to serve the Lord? What principles help us to draw the line?

3. How “together” must we be (as earthen vessels) to display God’s glory? Is there a difference between imperfection and clinging to known sin?

4. What does it mean to be “filled” with the Holy Spirit? How can a believer be filled? Can we always be more filled?

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