

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL BURNOUT
From Surviving to Thriving Spiritually

Acts 18:5-11 Romans 12:11-12

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

January 31, 2016

Audio: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/overcoming-spiritual-burnout-from-surviving-to-thriving-spiritually

Survivor. It's not just a reality show on television. Most of us today feel like we are trying to survive. And to be honest, we feel like we're failing at it. One of my favorite Christian bloggers, Jen Hatmaker, tapped into this feeling a couple of years ago with a blog she wrote about being the worst end of school mom ever. I want to share a small part of that blog post with you this morning. Jen wrote this in late April near the end of a school year.

We are limping, limping across the finish line, folks. I tapped out somewhere in April and at this point, it is a miracle my kids are still even going to school. I haven't checked homework folders in three weeks, because, well, I just can't. Cannot. Can. Not. I can't look at the homework in the folder. Is there homework in the folder? I don't even know. Are other moms still looking in the homework folder? I don't even care.

I feel like any sort of school energy required at this point is pure oppression, like the universe is trying to destroy me. I'm so tiiiiiiiiired and I have five kids and that is just too many to educate well. I can only handle around two, so I'm going with Sydney and Caleb because they both like to read and the other three are just going to have to enroll in Life Skills Class one day and develop a trade. We were awesome back in October; don't you forget that. We used to care, and that counts for something.

Jen's blog post went viral. She ended up on the *Good Morning, America* show and a bunch of other things happened as a result of this little blog post that I imagine was written late at night in the throws of exhaustion and surrender. It resonated with millions because they (like so many of us) were limping, exhausted and just trying to survive.

We are not only trying to survive our daily lives as we seek to balance work and family and commitments but we often feel like we are just surviving spiritually. That **can** be because our lives are so crazy in every other area but they don't have to go hand in hand.

Some of us experience spiritual burnout even though everything else in our life is going fairly well. This is why we've been talking about spiritual burnout the past three weeks. There is a sense that a lot of us are just going through the motions - exhausted, depleted, and aimless. We are going through the motions in our relationship with God and with others and in our kingdom service. Like in the video we just showed, we feel the pressure and guilt of failing to do the things that Christians ought to do and we know our hearts aren't in it like they used to be. The guilt grows and the pressure builds and the chasm between God and us feels wider than ever. Nothing is more exhausting than going through the motions.

We weren't created to just survive. A survived life is not an abundant life.

We are created to thrive.

The Apostle Paul understood survival. Very literally. After surrendering his life to Jesus and devoting himself to preaching and testifying to all that Jesus was the Promised Messiah, Paul faced countless trials, abuse, and threats including the threat of death. In our text this morning we find Paul again speaking in a local synagogue boldly proclaiming Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. And, yet again, he is met with opposition and abuse from some of the Jews. At first they listened politely, but as the message became clear, a few believed and many rejected and reacted. Once these Jews began rejecting the Message and became abusive, Paul knew it was time to move on to the Gentiles.

He sounds real tough here in Acts 18. In fact, when you first read verse six - especially in the Message paraphrase - you kind of feel vindicated. Paul, this devoted, passionate follower of Jesus. Paul, the one who wins every Bible drill. Paul, who isn't missing a single foiled star on his Sunday School chart. This Paul loses it. Verse 6 says, *"Totally exasperated, Paul had finally had it with them and gave it up as a bad job."* I love that last phrase a little too much.

Ever get exasperated living out your faith or trying to make a difference? Ever had it with others who argue continually or seem to suck the joy out of everything? I mean, some people make a lemon seem sweet. Ever want to just quit some project, ministry, or relationship and simply chalk it up as a bad job?

Then you are loving Paul right about now. We've all felt to some degree what Paul is feeling and we've wanted to say and do what Paul said and did. But it can feel wrong. It feels like we're failing when we give up on anything. It feels like we are disappointing others. So we continue doing what we've been doing even though it isn't working because we are surrendered to our circumstances rather than surrendered to God.

A few years ago on one of our mission trips to the Dominican Republic, our team was tasked with helping to build a medical clinic, the clinic that is named after our own Dr. Lory Feeler. It was hot - Dominican Republic hot - and the ground was hard. Our job that first day was to pickaxe the ground, breaking up the rock and removing it. That first day our little team was getting pretty discouraged because we weren't making much progress at all and I know we were all thinking there was no way we were going to accomplish the purpose of our trip. We started the second day a little burned out (literally from the sun and in every other way) but continued to plow ahead. At one point, we were down to just a couple of team members plugging away when one of the Dominican men from the community jumped into the trench by Dale Feeler, tapped him on the shoulder and gave him a "thumbs out" motion. Then, he showed us up. Other community members joined in and began working alongside him and us, teaching us the best way to get the work done there in the DR. Even though the work was still difficult, it revived us as a team. We had more energy and more joy working with them than

alone. By the end of the week we not only made major progress on the clinic, we had more importantly built some great relationships. Best of all, the people joined in to invest themselves in the clinic that God has used to bring health to their community. God had bigger plans for that trip as long as we were committed to His purpose more than our process. I'm thankful for the young Dominican man who reminded us of that lesson.

In her book *Breaking Busy*, Alli Worthington talks a lot about editing our lives. God sometimes calls us to quit things, even good things, in exchange for His plan which is better. Sometimes obedience to God requires some edits. Webster defines the action of editing as "to alter, adapt, or refine especially to bring about conformity to a standard or to suit a particular purpose." We altered our plans in the Dominican so that we might conform to God's particular purpose.

Sometimes edits are necessary. Sometimes edits are not by choice. Sometimes edits surprise us and look like failures to us and to the world around us. A job changes. A relationship ends. A child strays. A dream dies. A group of people you love refuse to accept the message that Jesus is the Messiah and persecute you. It can look like a dead end to us and to the world. But God doesn't see dead ends. God is still at work. When circumstances force us to depend on God instead of ourselves or others, we are actually going in the right direction.

Paul made some major edits in order to stay true to the greater purpose God had given him which was to proclaim Christ to both the Jews and the Gentiles. When circumstances would not allow him to live out that purpose, Paul didn't surrender to the circumstances. He surrendered to God and made the necessary edits. God led him next door and many became believers and were baptized.

When we are surviving, we have usually surrendered our lives to circumstances. When we are thriving, it usually is the result of surrendering to God and trusting Him rather than our circumstances. Most of us have surrendered. But many of us have surrendered to the wrong thing.

So how do we move from surviving to thriving? I think we can find some wisdom and encouragement from the Lord's words to Paul in verses 9 - 10. *"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people."*

1. **Don't be afraid. Speak and do not be silent.** We always think of the Apostle Paul as a tough guy. Leather hands, stern voice, and unwavering resolve. But in verse 9 God tells him not to be afraid. I'm betting God wasn't confused. He knew Paul was experiencing fear at the edits happening. Paul also wrote to the Corinthians later about his fear. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, Paul writes that he came to them in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. The Message paraphrase says "I was unsure of how to go about this, and felt totally inadequate - I was scared to death, if you want the truth of it." Perhaps Paul was fearful and trembling because of the trials he was facing in Corinth and the refusal of the Jews to believe the Message. This had happened to Paul before and many times he had to

flee for his life. Would the pattern repeat itself in Corinth? Perhaps Paul thought so, and was discouraged at his prospects. Perhaps he was experiencing anxiety from disappointing people or running into what might be perceived as failure by him or by others. Whatever the reason, Paul was experiencing fear and that fear had the potential to silence him. The Lord knew he needed reassurance.

In the movie *Selma* there is a powerful scene that captures a secret, crucial reassurance by telephone. Late at night, facing discouragement and fear about what was ahead in Selma, Martin Luther King, Jr. calls up Gospel singer and fellow freedom fighter, Mahalia Jackson, and makes one simple request, "I need to hear a word from the Lord." The woman begins to softly sing the classic hymn, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord", one of King's favorites.

Precious Lord, take my hand
 Lead me on, let me stand
 I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
 Through the storm, through the night
 Lead me on to the light
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home

In the moment when MLK was facing tremendous fear and exhaustion as he tried to stay true to Lord, he needed to be reminded not to be afraid and not to be silent. In the night when Paul was facing tremendous fear and exhaustion as he tried to stay true to the Lord, he needed to be reminded not to be afraid and not to be silent. In the moments when we are facing tremendous fear and exhaustion as we try to stay true to the Lord, we need to be reminded not to be afraid and not to be silent.

2. **Allow God to continue to work in you and through you.** The Jews, as a whole, rejected Paul and his preaching but there were a number of Jews who did believe and were saved. Titius Justus, the man from whose house Paul continued to minister, was a God-fearer who came to faith. And even Crispus, the (former) leader of the synagogue, believed, along with his whole household. Paul's ministry among the Jews at Corinth was not without its fruit, but there was even more fruit to come after edits were made, and most of this fruit came among the Gentiles. God provided the next step for Paul - literally next door. And God provides the next step for us - in unexpected places that can in many ways be next door to where we find ourselves now.

Jen Hatmaker had no idea that God would use a late night post about school mom struggles to introduce millions to her blog, her books, and her life - a life that boldly testifies in words and in action to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. After that blog, Jen gained thousands of new blog followers, she ended up speaking on television shows and tours and her family landed a show on HGTV called "My Big Family Renovation" where millions get to see them live their daily lives with all the mess and all the grace of Jesus. God works in surprising ways. God can take what looks like to us and to the world as failure and bring new life out of those circumstances.

Do not be afraid and do not be silent. The Lord is with you and working through you.

Right after verses 9 - 10 where Paul receives this powerful vision from the Lord in the night, Paul wakes up to a new day in verse 11 with fresh energy. In the Message paraphrase verse 11 begins, "That was all he needed to stick it out." Some translations begin verse 11 with the word "so." So having heard from the Lord to not be afraid and to not be silent So having heard from the Lord that He was with Paul and was already at work in him and ahead of him ... Paul stayed. He surrendered to God again and with a renewed spirit, served the Lord.

Don't lose heart and don't surrender to circumstances, Church. Don't be afraid and don't be silent, Church. Remember who God is and what God can do. Surrender to Him and with a renewed spirit, serve the Lord.