

I was watching a news broadcast the other day. There was one particular spot that was about farmers. Not big agribusiness farmers, but small-to-smallish type farmers. Family farmers across America who have inherited their land and business and keep it going because it's in their blood. It's part of their heritage. It's what they know and what they love, and can see doing little else. The spot was about the way these farmers are struggling. Not financially. Though they are certainly struggling to keep their books balanced. It was more than that. It was about the way they struggled mentally and emotionally with the demands and isolation of farming while there are fewer and fewer of their kind around. The rates of mental illness among these folks is skyrocketing, partly because of the kind of work they do, partly because of the suck-it-up-buttercup culture that tells them they got nothing to be sad about, and partly because mental health professionals are few and far between in their rural corners of America. All the wrong numbers are skyrocketing.

MD's are experiencing these trend lines as well. Yes, they've got money. And they've got access to professionals. But the hours they push, the tragedy they witness, the school debt they carry, along with inefficiencies in the system drive them to burnout at alarming rates.

One could go on and on with examples... Burnout is a state that is not just exhaustion but despair. It's not pretty. But it's real.

My dad, as a banker, bumped into many people with lots of money and a few with unreal amounts of money. From the outside it always looked good. But I'll never forget one thing my step-mom sometimes said after bank cocktail parties... "You never know what burdens someone else is carrying... You never know what goes on behind closed doors."

Creative writers and those who teach writing all know that abstract ideas don't communicate or translate well in fiction or even creative non-fiction. My college writing professor always said, "Don't tell me what's going on,

show me what's going on." Concepts don't mean anything until they live in real things, and real people. Not once does the Bible utter the word "burnout," or "depression," but the Scriptures go right into the heart of it. It's felt all over Elijah the prophet. How was it that this saint of a man, this prophet of God who had just called down fire from heaven is now dragging himself into a desert wishing God would take his life. How is this man of God who had vanquished 450 of Baal's false prophets now wondering if he ever did anything worthwhile in his life? ...Yes, Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel, the king and queen of Israel, have some pretty bad dudes chasing you down to take your life, but do you remember that awesome display of God's power and faithfulness back there?! But it doesn't matter. Elijah can't be consoled, cudgeled, or convinced. This is not the melodramatic response of an overly passionate prophet. If you've seen depression up close, it looks like Elijah. It looks like someone who won't eat. It looks like someone who only wants to sleep. It looks like someone who doesn't believe in themselves or much else. And it can happen even to the greatest of people.

What's amazing is that God never gives up on Elijah. God tries everything to call Elijah back to life. Like a parent wringing their hands with a distressed heart is God who hovers over Elijah. A messenger of God taps him and says to him, "Get up, eat something." He reluctantly eats something and goes right back to sleep. The Lord's messenger returns a second time, taps him, and says, "Get up, eat something, because you have a big journey ahead of you." Elijah, God seems to say, you depressed heap, you still matter to me greatly. There is a journey left in you.

By some feat of strength (or divine grace) Elijah got up, ate and drank, and was sustained by the food for a journey of 40 days. When at last he arrived Mt Horeb where he was going he plops down in a cave to go to sleep yet again. Elijah does not want to be bothered. He's had enough. The Lord tries again to coax him out of the cave by saying, "Elijah come out. Come out of the cave. I'm going to pass by. I want to see you and I want you to see me." Elijah stays in the cave. He stays put in the place where danger

and disappointment can't possibly reach him. God got him this far, and that's it. No amount of pyrotechnics can draw him out of this cave. And God, never one to give up on his children, sends a powerful mighty wind. But it didn't register for Elijah that God was in the wind. Then God sends a magnitude 10 earthquake, but Elijah didn't sense God in the earthquake. Then God sends fire to engulf the surrounding land. But Elijah did not perceive God in the fire. After the fire there was a thin, small, gentle whisper of a sound. And Elijah heard it. Of all things, Elijah heard the nearly imperceptible sound of God's silent presence simply waiting.

The pain of depression is strangely felt by *all*. The absence of a loved one while they are present can be immense. The pain of depression was felt by more than just Elijah. It was felt by God. The powerlessness that comes with it makes one want to shoot off all kinds of pyrotechnics to draw the person from death back to life. But not even God's greatest pyrotechnic displays could bring his loved one out of the cave and back to life. It would seem even God is powerless in such a situation. But as the Bible

says, God was not really “in the wind, the earthquake or the fire.” God’s desperate heart may have shot off those attention seeking rockets, but the God’s true healing, redemptive presence was not there. It was found in God’s waiting. It was there in God’s sitting outside the cave. It was there in the still, small whisper that did not ask anything, but only said ‘I love you.’ It was there in the cakes and the jar of water set out for Elijah near the sulking broom tree. The simple gesture of love that nourishes. In that way the cakes are the very presence of God. The bread of life that abides. The presence that remains and sustains. That waits. That listens. That whispers.

God is the Bread of Life. Those who eat of this bread shall not die, but have life. And offer that life to the world.