

Q & A WITH JIM CYMBALA
AUTHOR OF *FAN THE FLAME*

Q: *Fan the Flame* is your first new book in over a decade. Why this book and why now?

A: According to a survey from the Barna Group, about 1,500 pastors leave the ministry every month. Even more telling is that half the pastors polled said they would leave the ministry if they had another way to make a living. That's staggering! And the stress is taking a toll on pastors' families. In fact, over 80 percent of clergy spouses want their spouse to leave the ministry.

And surveys and statistics aside, my personal experience tells me that a great many pastors are discouraged, disheartened, and all but defeated. Laboring in the vineyard for years with little spiritual fruit to show for it can be discouraging. Even if a leader has been truly called, the lack of spiritual fruit leads to hidden frustration and discouragement. There comes a day when the leader can't hide it anymore. No matter how they try to cover it up, their discouragement affects everyone around them. Perhaps most tragically, it affects their family.

For many years I've felt a special burden for men and women in ministry. I've been blessed with many invitations to speak at conferences and seminars directed to leaders. But I've also had countless opportunities to sit down with small groups of pastors—one or two or five or ten at a time, from all denominational backgrounds and theological persuasions, often with their spouses—and I've listened to their stories. I ask them how they were called into the ministry, what challenges they face, and how they think God wants to use them going forward. Many of their stories are inspirational. Many blessed churches dot the landscape.

For many other pastors, though, their tone changes as the conversations deepen. I share with them some of the difficulties and discouragements Carol and I have faced over the years. Then they share their own experiences, slowly and hesitantly at first but then, as their defenses weaken, in torrents. Defeats, frustrations, personal challenges, family strains. Often tears flow. The most common, and most crushing, are the accounts of feeling as if they have failed and let God down. They try to drum up more faith and persevere; but it's tough sledding when you're just "doing church." And too many feel like they want to quit.

Q: What do you say to pastors who feel alone in their discouragement or weariness?

A It happens to us all. Sometimes Satan attacks and tries to take us out with a single blow. But most of the time, his strategy is simply to keep us under the pressure of financial, pastoral, and family concerns—hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month. We run around preaching, teaching, and helping people until we are spiritually run down and soon want to run away from it all.

We're in good company. Remember the story of Elijah? After a long series of spiritual battles, he received word from Jezebel that she intended to kill him. Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. He journeyed into the wilderness, sat down under a bush and prayed that he might die. Then he lay down and fell asleep.

How could Elijah be God's mighty prophet and yet run for his life when Jezebel threatened him? He was human. But notice what happened. First, God sent an angel to minister to Elijah. The lesson is that even when we are at our lowest, God is mindful of our situation and will come to our aid. Second, the angel brought Elijah bread and water. Elijah ate and drank and then lay down. This provides good advice on how to take care of our bodies, but it was also likely a symbol of the spiritual food we receive from God's Word and in prayer. Third, Elijah was restored to the point that he was able to travel forty days and nights to Mount Horeb, where God spoke to him in a "gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:12) and gave Elijah a personal word of instruction as to what to do next.

Sometimes we miss out on our calling not because God has changed his mind, but because we get so tired, perplexed, and discouraged that we lose sight of it. We can recapture our calling and pray with David, "Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope" (Ps. 119:49).

Q: You write that “God uses people, not programs, to bring about his kingdom on earth.” Tell us more.

A: God has never sought clever methods or techniques to get his work done. But today’s church is looking more and more like corporate America, reducing every activity to a method, a formula, a marketing design for our “brand.” The message we hear from many quarters is, “Here’s the formula. Follow these steps and you can’t miss.” Over the past years, new formulas have come and gone, each one promising to be the answer. But how can any formula be from God if it’s going to be replaced a few years later? The truth is, God doesn’t use formulas or methods. He uses people. He uses frail people, simple people, sinful people. Why? Because that’s all he has!

Jesus picked fishermen and tax collectors to be his first disciples. He chose people who would be helpless and who would need to depend on the Holy Spirit in all things—men and women whose prayer would be, “Oh, God, help me!” Personally, I feel the most God has ever used me is when I’ve been hanging by a thread.

God is waiting on many of us, today’s church leaders, to pull away from our busy schedules to receive a fresh word and fresh direction from him. How could he, who has given us his only Son, fail to equip and energize us anew for the work he has called us to do? Does our Father delight in frustrating us with promises he will fail to keep? Never! He works for those who wait for him (Isa. 64:4), and his power released among us can accomplish more in one month than an entire year of human activity. We too often forget that “unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Q: How do you personally find rest and renewal when ministry demands are at their highest?

A: Exhaustion is a common problem for those in ministry — physical, mental, and spiritual. I remember when we realized it was time for our church to move out of the remodeled theater building we’d been meeting in for years. It was bursting at the seams, and sometimes people had to be turned away. I consulted our pastoral staff about seeking a bigger space as soon as possible.

I naively thought it would take only about eighteen months to find a new building and move in. Wrong. We ended up adding a fourth service on Sundays and each service was about two hours long. We did that for six years. I woke up exhausted every Monday morning.

The question all pastors have to answer is, *Where do we go to get spiritually renewed?* We pour ourselves out for others. Who’s pouring into us? We call people to church on Sunday so we can feed them the Word of God. But who’s feeding us?

We can exercise regularly and eat healthy foods. These are good physical habits, but they are of no help to the inner being that determines our spiritual strength and vitality. We need the Spirit himself to come and renew our hearts through the Word every single day.

For me to be renewed every day, I have to receive something fresh from the Lord. My own practice is to have something of a church service just for myself. I go somewhere I can be alone. I listen to Christian music. I even sing along. I read and meditate on Scripture. (I do everything but take an offering.) I often read one or two sermons that I gather from my library, because I need the Word ministered to me just as the congregation does on Sundays. And I spend time in prayer. When I’m done, I find I am spiritually renewed.

Fan the Flame: Let Jesus Renew Your Calling and Revive Your Church

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