

PASTORS

# Vol. 09 -- Encourage the Weak

*Pastoral care for the emotionally fragile, burned out, doubting, and spiritually depleted: how to see them, reach them, and accompany them toward genuine renewal*

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*Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.*



# The Weak in Your Congregation: Who They Are and How to See Them

Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians is surprisingly specific: "Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). He does not treat these three categories as a single undifferentiated group. The idle, the fainthearted, and the weak each require a different pastoral response. The fainthearted (*oligopsuchoi* in Greek -- literally "small-souled") are those whose capacity for hope and resilience has been diminished by difficulty. The weak (*astheneis*) are those who lack the spiritual or emotional resources to carry what they are carrying. Both require the pastor's active attention, and neither typically announces themselves.

The greatest challenge in ministering to the struggling is the pastoral task of seeing them. Weakness rarely presents itself publicly. The person who is barely holding on comes to church because church is one of the last relational anchors they have, not because they are visibly in crisis. They smile at the door. They participate in worship. They answer "fine" to the question "how are you?" And behind that "fine" is a private reality of depression, doubt, exhaustion, fear, or shame that no one in the congregation -- perhaps no one in the world -- knows about.

The pastor who has developed what Henri Nouwen called "eyes that see" -- the capacity for pastoral observation that notices what is not said, who is absent, whose engagement has changed, whose eyes look different -- will see people that others miss. This is not a supernatural gift available only to exceptionally intuitive pastors. It is a learnable skill, cultivated through the habit of prayerful attention to specific people, through the deep knowledge that comes from sustained pastoral relationship, and through the willingness to ask the follow-up question when the first answer is clearly incomplete.

*"A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice."*

-- Isaiah 42:3

Isaiah's portrait of the Servant who does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoldering wick is one of the most tender images of pastoral care in all of Scripture. The bruised reed -- still technically intact but so damaged it cannot bear weight -- and the smoldering wick -- still technically burning but barely, one breath away from darkness -- these are images of people at the edge of their capacity. And the Servant's response is not to repair them forcibly, not to lecture them about their condition, not to encourage them to be stronger. He handles them with extraordinary gentleness because he knows exactly how fragile they are.

## Mapping the Landscape of Weakness and Struggle

### Burnout: The Epidemic in the Pew

Pastoral burnout gets all the attention, but congregational burnout is just as prevalent and far less discussed. The lay leader who has been serving in the same role for twelve years without a break, whose family never sees them on Sunday morning, whose spiritual life has been desiccated by the demands of ministry to others. The small group leader who carries the burdens of every person in her group without anyone carrying hers. The elder who has been navigating the same congregational conflict for eighteen months and has stopped being able to pray. These people need encouragement, not another ask.

Burnout is not laziness, spiritual weakness, or inadequate faith. It is a physiological and psychological response to sustained high demand without sufficient recovery. The person experiencing burnout has often been one of the most committed, most giving people in the congregation. Their burnout is, in one sense, a casualty of their faithfulness. The pastoral response must honor that faithfulness while helping the person recognize the signals their body and soul are sending, and create a pathway to genuine recovery.

### **Spiritual Doubt and Crisis of Faith**

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is, in most cases, a stage of faith -- the painful, disorienting process through which a faith received secondhand becomes a faith owned firsthand. The young adult who has grown up in the church and is now in college encountering serious intellectual challenges to Christian faith for the first time. The person whose theology of suffering was untested until the death of their child, and who cannot reconcile that death with the God they believed in. The long-time believer who has prayed for years for a specific healing or restoration that has not come, and who is beginning to wonder whether any of it is real.

These people desperately need a pastor who is not threatened by their doubt. The pastor who responds to expressed doubt with alarm, defensiveness, or the kind of theological arguing that treats doubt as an intellectual error to be corrected rather than a spiritual experience to be accompanied, will lose the doubter. The pastor who can receive the doubt with steadiness -- who can say, "Tell me more. This is important. I'm not afraid of your questions" -- will often be the person through whom the doubter finds their way to a deeper, tested, more resilient faith.

The great doubters of Scripture did not lose their faith by doubting -- they found it. Thomas's "unless I see" (John 20:25) led to the most explicit christological confession in the Gospel: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). John the Baptist's "Are you the one, or should we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3) received from Jesus one of the most tender and comprehensive answers in the Gospel narrative. The Psalms of lament -- Psalm 22, 42, 73, 88 -- are Scripture's most sustained and honest engagements with the experience of God's absence, and they are in the canon precisely because they are the actual experience of real believers and deserve theological legitimacy.

### **Depression, Anxiety, and Emotional Fragility**

The statistics on mental health in congregations are not significantly different from the general population: approximately one in five adults will experience a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year. This means that in a congregation of 200 adults, approximately 40 people are actively experiencing significant depression, anxiety, or another mental health challenge. They are in the worship service. They are serving on teams. They are leading small groups. And the vast majority of them have never disclosed this to a pastor or a church community, because they do not know whether the church is a safe place to do so.

The pastor who creates a culture of mental health openness -- who from the pulpit normalizes the experience of depression and anxiety, who shares (appropriately) his own experience of seasons of struggle, who preaches the emotional honesty of the Psalms and the Prophets, who publicly affirms medical and therapeutic treatment as gifts of God's common grace -- will find that people begin to bring their whole selves to the pastoral relationship. And that is precisely what pastoral care requires.

## **How to Encourage the Weak: Practical Pastoral Approaches**

### **The Gift of Presence Without Agenda**

The most powerful thing a pastor can offer a struggling person is often not a Scripture verse, not a plan of action, not a referral to a therapist, not a theological framework for their suffering. It is unhurried, non-agenda-driven presence. The willingness to sit with someone in their pain without needing it to resolve, to progress, or to produce a visible pastoral outcome. This is extraordinarily difficult for task-oriented pastors who measure their effectiveness by movement and resolution.

Elijah under the broom tree (1 Kings 19) is the paradigmatic biblical portrait of care for the burned out and despairing. God's response to Elijah's "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life" was not a theological lecture, a spiritual discipline assignment, or a rebuke for lack of faith. God sent an angel to touch him, give him food and water, and let him sleep -- twice. The basic human needs (rest, nourishment, physical care) were addressed before anything theological was introduced. Only after Elijah had eaten and rested was he ready for the "still small voice" that gave direction. The lesson for pastors is clear: start with presence and care, not with instruction.

### **Specific Encouragement: The Power of Naming**

Generic encouragement ("You're doing great! God has a plan!") costs nothing and often accomplishes very little for a person in genuine struggle. Specific encouragement -- encouragement that names what you have actually observed about the person, what you genuinely appreciate about how they are navigating their difficulty, what specific quality or act of faithfulness you have witnessed -- is a completely different gift. It communicates: I see you. I have been paying attention. Your specific life matters enough for me to notice it specifically.

Barnabas, whose very name means "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36), is remembered in the New Testament not for theological brilliance or spectacular miracles but for specific, costly acts of encouragement: selling property and giving the proceeds to the community; defending the newly converted Paul when no one would trust him; standing by John Mark when Paul had written him off. His encouragement was always specific, relational, and costly. It is the model.



# Long-Term Support for the Chronically Struggling

Some people in your congregation are not going through a difficult season -- they are living with a chronic condition: chronic depression, chronic illness, chronic pain, a disability that shapes every dimension of their lives. The pastoral tendency is to care intensively in the acute phase and then gradually reduce attention as the person becomes "part of the normal landscape." This gradual withdrawal is one of the most common and most harmful pastoral failures for chronically struggling people.

The person with chronic depression or chronic pain does not need the pastor less after six months -- they often need him more, because the congregation's active care has typically diminished by then. They are navigating their ongoing difficulty with fewer social resources, greater fatigue, and the added weight of feeling that their struggle has outlasted the community's patience. The pastor who structures long-term, consistent care for chronically struggling people -- through regular personal contact, through the congregation's pastoral care team, through connection to appropriate therapeutic and medical resources -- is doing some of the most Christlike and least celebrated work in his entire ministry.

## When Encouragement Isn't Enough: Recognizing Serious Crisis

The pastor who is regularly present with struggling people will eventually encounter someone in genuine psychiatric crisis: suicidal ideation, psychosis, a severe depressive episode that has crossed from pastoral to clinical territory, or acute trauma that requires immediate professional intervention. The ability to recognize these situations and respond appropriately -- with pastoral presence and professional referral, not one or the other -- is a critical pastoral competency.

Signs that a pastoral situation has become a clinical one: the person is expressing thoughts of self-harm or suicide; there is a break from reality (hearing voices, paranoid ideation, disconnection from what is real); the person is unable to care for themselves (not eating, not sleeping, not functioning in basic daily activities); there is active substance abuse that is destabilizing the person's safety; or the person's distress is increasing rather than stabilizing despite pastoral support. In these situations, the pastoral response is not to withdraw but to add: bring in professional support while maintaining the pastoral relationship.

## Building a Congregation Where the Weak Are Not Invisible

The individual pastoral responses described in this volume will be most effective within a congregation culture that normalizes struggle, values honesty, and structures care for the vulnerable into its community life. The isolated pastoral visit is powerful; the pastoral visit embedded in a congregation-wide culture of care is transformational.

Key cultural markers of a congregation where the weak are visible and cared for: sermons that regularly name the reality of suffering, doubt, and struggle without minimizing or spiritualizing them away; testimonies from ordinary community members about seasons of darkness and the faithfulness of God through them; a care team trained in basic pastoral listening and crisis recognition; small groups where genuine mutual care is the norm rather than the exception; and a pastor who is visibly, consistently present with the struggling people in the community.

## Caring for Yourself as You Care for Others

The ministry of encouragement requires an encouraged minister. The pastor who is carrying unaddressed burnout, unprocessed grief, or untreated depression cannot bring genuine encouragement to others -- he can only generate a professional facsimile that costs him what little he has and leaves both parties depleted. The most important thing a pastor can do for the weak and struggling in his congregation is to ensure that his own inner life is being genuinely cared for -- through his own therapeutic and spiritual resources, through honest community with peers, through Sabbath rhythms that provide actual rest, and through the pastoral care of his own soul with the same seriousness he brings to the souls of others.

## Reflection Questions

1. Who are the "bruised reeds" and "smoldering wicks" in your congregation right now? Can you name them specifically? What kind of pastoral contact have you had with each of them in the past month?
2. How does your congregation culture receive expressions of weakness, doubt, or struggle? Is it a safe place to be genuinely honest, or is there an unspoken expectation of positive presentation?
3. What is your own relationship with weakness? Can you acknowledge your own fragility and limits honestly, or do you maintain a posture of pastoral strength that actually distances you from the people who most need genuine pastoral presence?
4. Have you provided specific, personal encouragement to a struggling person in your congregation this week -- not generic pastoral care, but the naming of something specific you observed and valued? If not, who needs that from you?

*The person who is barely holding on does not need you to fix them, to inspire them, or to produce a measurable pastoral outcome from their crisis. They need a pastor who can look at a bruised reed and not break it -- who knows how to hold fragile things with the extraordinary gentleness that is the pastoral form of love.*

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