

When the Good Swimmer is Drowning

By: David Burruss

There is a quote that has been circling around lately, and it stopped me in my tracks the first time I read it. It says that when you are a good swimmer, people do not notice you are drowning. I have thought about that line for days now, because it describes so many of the folks sitting in our pews every single Sunday. They smile, they sing the songs, they shake your hand at the door, and they say they are doing just fine when you ask. But underneath the surface their arms are getting tired and the water keeps pulling them down, and nobody around them has any idea, because they swim so well.

I think about Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Here was a man who had just called down fire from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal in front of the whole nation of Israel, so by every outward measure he was a strong swimmer. Yet right after that mountaintop victory he ran into the wilderness, sat under a tree, and asked the Lord to take his life, because he told God it was too much for him to carry alone. Notice what God did not do. God did not scold him for being weak or tell him to toughen up. He sent an angel to feed him, let him sleep, fed him again, and then gently asked him what was troubling him. Even a man who had just seen fire fall from the sky needed someone to notice that he was drowning, and I think that says something to every one of us who assumes the strong people in our lives never need checking on.

That is why the Lord keeps calling His people back to each other instead of leaving us to sink or swim alone. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 tells us that two are better than one, for if they fall, one will lift up his companion, but woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Solomon was not just describing marriage or business partnerships there. He was describing the kind of fellowship God designed His people to walk in together, and especially the kind we are called to inside the body of Christ.

Paul says something just as direct in Galatians 6:2, where he tells us to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Bearing a burden means getting close enough to actually feel the weight of what someone else is carrying, and it is hard to bear a burden you never hear about. It is just as hard for someone to tell you about it if you have never built the kind of friendship where honesty feels safe. So much of the hurting in our churches stays hidden simply because we never made room for someone to say out loud that they are not okay.

Then there is Job. Before his three friends ever said a foolish word to him, they did something beautiful. Job 2 tells us that when they saw him from a distance, they lifted their voices and wept, and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward the sky, and they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great. They noticed him before they tried to fix him. Sometimes that is exactly what a drowning brother or sister needs from us, someone willing to sit down in the water with them instead of shouting instructions from the shore.

Paul tells the church in Romans 12:15 to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, and that command only works if we actually know what is happening in one another's lives. That takes more than a passing how are you doing on a Sunday morning. It takes real relationship, the kind that keeps asking and keeps paying attention even when someone insists they are fine.

But part of this responsibility falls on each of us personally too, and I say that with love and not with judgment. If you are the one drowning right now, the Lord still expects something of you. Proverbs 18:1 warns that a man who isolates himself seeks his own desire, and rages against all wise judgment. Isolation feels safer sometimes, but it is not safer, it is only quieter. The writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 10, verses 24 and 25, not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, and part of the reason is so that we can consider one another in order to stir up love and good works. You cannot be stirred up by brothers and sisters who do not know you are struggling, and they cannot lift you if you never let go of the smile long enough to reach for a hand.

So maybe the answer is not only learning to spot the drowning swimmers around us, though the Lord certainly calls us to slow down and look closer at the people we love. Maybe it is also learning to admit when the water has come up over our own heads. Galatians 6:9-10 tells us not to grow weary while doing good, and to do good especially to those who are of the household of faith. That household only works the way God intended it to when we are honest enough to be helped and humble enough to help.

The next time you are tempted to say you are fine when you are not, remember that even Elijah needed someone to notice. And the next time a brother or sister tells you they are fine a little too quickly, remember that a good swimmer can be drowning right in front of you, and love means looking twice.