

strengthening the soul of your leadership

Ruth Haley Barton (InterVarsity Press, 2008)

Puzzled by the title, I was not sure what to expect from this book. But it had been highly commended in a brief review by LICC, so that encouraged me to read it. That, and the fact that it's one of those all-too-rare books still: a book on leadership that happens to be by a woman.



I soon found the clue to the title, in the Foreword by Leighton Ford. In it, he quotes some of the sentences and phrases that had particularly caught his attention, the first of which was: 'You can gain the whole world of leadership and lose your own soul'.

'Ouch!' writes Ford. And he commends the book by saying, 'Reading this book will not strengthen the soul of your leadership. Only God can do that. But it will surely help you to be attentive to the God who is the strength of your soul, and the heart of your leadership.'

The Introduction, quoting Matthew 16:26 ('And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?') soon makes the focus of the book clearer. As a teacher and consultant for church leaders, and also a spiritual director, Ruth Haley Barton aims to guide the reader into encountering God, using the story of Moses to illustrate different aspects of leadership. The book would best be read over a series of days, one chapter at a time, enabling the reader to use the 'Practice' sections at the end of each chapter.

This is a book for leaders. Through the chapters, and following the story of Moses, the author covers some of the traditional concerns of leadership: calling, guiding others, discerning direction, cultivating community, spiritual rhythms for sustenance. But instead of being about how to 'do' leadership, the book is about how to be more present to God, and how to clear out the things which will stop us from doing that. As she addresses the 'dark side' of leadership, the author maintains that 'only those who have faced their own dark side can be trusted to lead others toward the light'.

What struck me most about the book was the emphasis on the need for solitude and silence, and the tone of the book, the author's honesty and integrity. It feels as though it is a book written by someone who has 'been there', who has lived what she is helping others to discover.

As an activist, I used not to see solitude and stillness as an essential part of leadership. I know that many activist leaders see solitude as something for others, for those of a 'contemplative' disposition. But for Ruth Haley Barton, 'the discipline of solitude is a key discipline for all those who seek after God. It is the primary place where the leader's soul is strengthened.'

I liked the way the book was woven around the story of Moses, and I found insights into the story which I'd never noticed before: God's giving of the Spirit to the seventy elders in Numbers 11:16, for example, so that a group of leaders could share the load. I found this a fascinating insight into teamwork in the Old Testament, and it challenged my perception that Old Testament leaders tend to be solo performers, and that it's only in the New Testament that there is a clear emphasis on leadership as plural. In each chapter Ruth Haley Barton invites the reader to get inside the character of Moses, and occasionally I found this a little forced, but mostly it worked.

Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership is a readable book, full of great quotes and stories, and challenging and encouraging in equal measure. Most Christian leaders today are too busy, arguably too busy to read books. But busy Christian leaders need to read books like this!

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