

## LEADING THROUGH PERSONAL ADVERSITY

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**Realistic Expectations.** We follow a saviour who faced enormous stresses – people questioning his identity, authority to act, teachings, healings, relationships and even his suffering. Plots on his life started early in his years of public ministry and his closest companions often completely misunderstood him, doubted him and eventually deserted and betrayed him. The early church likewise knew real hardships and today there are Christian leaders around the world who face similar hostility every day of their lives. Very few of us in this country have to face such things but Job 5:6 nevertheless reminds us that trouble is the lot of humankind. If anything the stresses are often amplified for Christian leaders because of the tension between our front of stage and backstage roles. Given this backdrop, simply setting right expectations can, in itself, be helpful.

**We are all different.** We need to acknowledge the impossibility of generalisation and the risk of being trite; the death of a child and a short-term health issue are clearly different order of crises. We all respond differently to adversity and much depends on our context at the time; is this a single event or an accumulation of difficulties over a period of time? Moreover, any response predicated wholly on our preparedness misses the mark. Adversity can – tsunami like – overwhelm our best laid defences and its only by God's grace we stand. But with these implicit caveats there are themes which can facilitate resilience and enable us to draw on God's strength when trouble strikes.

### GUARD OUR HEARTS

Perhaps the main battlefield in adversity is the heart. The outward circumstances will take their course but it's our inner response that matters most. Paul faced trials on a scale and severity that many of us will never know – and was open about these – but could still say: 'Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' An attitude of praise and thankfulness, however faltering, is in itself, an expression of faith and love in the One who is the source of healing, renewal and restoration. As the Spirit redirects our gaze on Jesus rather than the difficulties, we are enabled to pray with faith and conviction and our courage rises as we draw on His strength; cynicism, fear, confusion and anger are kept at bay. For me, this discipline has been, by a long measure, the most helpful of all when tough times have come and one that has easily repaid its nurture and embrace during calmer seasons.

### FOSTER HOPE

Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 expedition to Antarctica is a story of superb leadership in the face of almost unimaginable hardship. For around 10 months, after the loss of their ship, the 28 strong crew battled for survival against sickness, cold and constant danger. However, the one thing they feared more than anything else was the loss of hope. Most instinctively knew that once this had dissipated, their demise was inevitable. They played various mind games with themselves and each other to sustain hope and ward off despair. For the Christian leader hope finds expression in many ways. Our faith redefines our perspective. It was why Paul was able to say 'we do not lose heart' because, set

against eternal consequences, he judged his afflictions as 'light and momentary'. But faith also points to God's redemptive nature. Again, as Paul puts it '...all things work together for good for those who love God'. Henri Nouwen describes just one expression of this redemptive hope when he acknowledges we all are wounded people and the main question is not 'how can we hide our wounds' but rather 'how can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our struggles and difficulties help others to understand theirs, then we become a source of healing. Over time – and through God's grace – the rough edges of our character are smoothed and our compassion and empathy for others in difficulty are deepened.

### BE WISELY VULNERABLE

Vulnerability is an important attribute in Christian leadership because those we oversee need at some level to be able to identify with us and us with them if we are not to be seen as 'unreal'. Jesus and other leaders in the Bible made themselves vulnerable. Being appropriately vulnerable allows us to receive ministry and support from others in tough times and can be part of nurturing a culture of greater interdependence, care and prayer; the body functioning as it should. Inappropriate vulnerability however, can do more harm than good, both to us and the hearer(s). There are good resources available to help us think through how much to share, when and to whom. One good question to ask ourselves may be: 'For what purpose am I sharing this and is it explicit in what I say?'

### INVEST AND PREPARE

**Build Support.** Fruitful leaders actively invest in a strong support network. And yet many Christian leaders seem to have a precariously fragile support base; the energy required to build and maintain this is trumped by other priorities. It's a profoundly false economy. Leaders need godly people around who they trust and are relentlessly on their side. Who do we have around us who energise, pray, weep, laugh with and understand us; and who have the courage to speak 'speak truth to power'? A spiritual director, work mentor or prayer partner may be part of such a network. It's so much more than just a safety net or support when tough time happen; it's life giving and key to giving us energy, focus and perspective in our leadership.

**Life Blend.** How does the blend of our life look? Is there a life-giving mix of hobbies, friendships, exercise, time with family, rhythms of prayer and spiritual disciplines; whatever it is that gives us life, strength, renewal and ultimately resilience for the tough times?

**Call.** Over the years I have often heard Christian leaders say something like: 'when things became tough the only thing that kept me going was my sense of call'. Keeping alive and fresh our sense of calling – as disciples but also to a particular role – can be the one thing that give us the will to persevere through the dark times.

**Share the load.** Fruitful Leadership always seeks to empower, enable and release. Context may limit the pace and scope of shared leadership but not the direction of travel. Authentic collaboration in our leadership style hugely facilitates our flexibility to take a step back and find space to recover when trouble strikes, not least because trusted others are there to step in.

**Nurture character.** Trouble can ruthlessly expose – or have its origin in – character flaws some of which have their root in pride or unhealthy control and can lead us to delay seeking help; clear, personal dark-side issues or more nuanced traits. For example a breezy 'I'm fine' style that *never* admits vulnerability can be as unhelpful as one of relentless pessimism. Addressing these cannot prevent life's misfortunes but it can mitigate their impact.

**Know ourselves.** What are our tell-tale signs that all is not right? Perhaps when humour has evaporated, sleep is fitful, people stress us, we eat and drink excessively, destructive habits exert an unhealthy pull and prayer is impossible? Naming these things can serve as a personal alarm that the strain is becoming too much and we need to take action.



### FOR REFLECTION

1. Think of leaders you know who have handled the challenge of a personal crisis *and* leadership well. What can you learn from them?
2. As you reflect on your own tough times, what has had most impact – for good and ill - on your leadership and what may this be saying about your next step in personal development?
3. What would nurturing further your capacity to give thanks and praise in all situations, look like for you?