

LEAD ON

LEADING WHEN YOUR PERSONAL LIFE IS FALLING APART

BY GRAHAM ARCHER

A while ago I heard a discussion between two people who were members of a church in my area. Their minister, Pastor X, had lost a son in sad circumstances, but was back in the pulpit the following Sunday. You can imagine what was being discussed – it was a mixture of amazement and bewilderment.

Was he so close to God that he had special grace (and good preparation) to be able to preach so soon? Was he so numb that the impact of the event had not yet hit him? Or was he just really good at hiding his feelings?

It struck me that they would have understood him more if he had taken some time off, because they imagined that in the same situation, that is what they would have needed.

An extreme example, but all Christian leaders will at some time be involved in active ministry and find

themselves hiding away some area of desolation or brokenness in order to do what their job demands. At one end of the sliding scale we have Pastor X making no reference to what everyone knew and carrying on regardless; at the other end we might have the Reverend Y who has been totally paralysed by something that no one knows about.

DEFINING TERMS

Let's define some terms here. Falling apart is crisis reaction when some aspect of life is unravelling and, as yet, we don't know how it will end. This might be due to something within our control or something outside.

If we are intending to thrive through, say 40 years of public ministry, there will be a number of times when we experience a kind of brokenness or desolation, times when we need to decide whether we carry on or take a break.



What kind of things are we talking about?

1. A sudden loss or sickness of someone close to us. Maybe a cancer, road traffic accident, stroke or heart attack. Along with the fear of losing this precious person, the other concern may be how I adjust my life to be helpful to that person along the journey.
2. A challenge to our own life. We suffer a form of bereavement when we lose the ability to do things that we have taken for granted. The loss of sight, a broken leg that won't heal or a stomach condition that isn't yet diagnosed but undermines our confidence. The menopause. It could be a relationship breakdown. Until we know what we are dealing with and how to manage it, we are at a loss.
3. Mental fragility affecting us, or those that we care for. A cloud of depression that as a side effect is 'ruining' our prayer life. An eating disorder that is creating unruly tension in the family. Paralysing anxiety that clouds our judgement.
4. Something in the church that is proving difficult to address. A pastoral breakdown. A threatening schism. A practical or financial threat on the horizon that we can't see a way of negotiating. A complex safeguarding issue.
5. Something professional that feels like it is twisting the knife. Threatened changes to our contract, a disciplinary investigation or a conflict that for some reason causes something inside us to crumble.

Every single one of the above I have known to happen to good and godly leaders, and along with trying to figure out what is going on, there has often been an associated impact on their walk with God, both positive and negative. So, what can we do?

SIX OBSERVATIONS

Let me offer six general observations and include one or two more personal things on the way.

1. A Theology of Suffering

We need a theology of suffering. You, like me, may have encountered a kind of perspective on healing that says that since fullness of life is of God, anything less is evil. Yet we are told that it is only in the new heaven and earth that there will be no more death and pain. Jesus said, 'in this world you will have trouble' (John 16:33). The New Testament is clear that suffering can be something used to refine our faith, and hope isn't the absence of trouble, but the power to be those who will overcome.

When glandular fever wiped me out of ordained ministry for nearly a year, I discovered authors who have made sense of suffering, and also discovered that God meets us in a different way when we face problems. Suffering

can be redemptive. Before Tim Keller died, he wrote about how cancer had brought him closer to God.

2. Spiritual Disciplines

'Falling apart' implies that the inner life is flailing around for some anchor points. It is here that consistency in the use of spiritual disciplines can be really helpful. Whether that is a Psalm being read at Morning Prayer, some fixed liturgy being accessed through a daily devotions app or simply the saying of the Lord's Prayer.

This was illustrated for me by a man who was in the later stages of a terminal illness. He had taken the phrase from 2 Corinthians 12:9, 'my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness', and asked every visitor who called to pray it over him, and read it himself four times a day.

3. The Right Kind of Practical Support

It is important to be clear what this is and then look for it. Charities with expertise in the thing you are trying to manage are one source and will normally have resources for both sufferers and carers. It might be that you need legal help or HR advice. It might be practical help around the home.

You might even find at a later stage that having been helped by a charity, you will want to work with them. When eating disorders affected our family, the lack of support for carers prompted us at a later stage to set up **'tastelifeUK'** to fill the gap.



For a number of years I led an annual service for an asthma charity. They had amazing people passing on the help that they had received. CAP is run mainly by people who have escaped from debt through their practical advice.

4. Model Appropriate Vulnerability

Promote a vision of the church where brokenness is spoken about and appropriate vulnerability is modelled. When a leader is facing something challenging, they won't want everyone knowing all the details, but it is OK to say that you are walking a steep path and would appreciate prayerful support for a time. If you need to take on lighter duties or take a break, then you will need to be honest with your fellow officers or staff about that.

The only time I came close to a burn out experience, it was a lay leader who came to me and said, 'if you were on my team at work, I'd tell you take two weeks off'. I'm glad he felt able to say it and I'm glad I felt able to take his advice. Sometimes others see us better than we think.

5. Blend Professionalism and Kindness

Model professionalism while being kind to yourself. Christian leaders are professional people. If we are not taking compassionate leave when we are falling apart internally, the job still needs to be done. Having a professional persona is important for those who are calling on our resources. The cost, however, might be higher and allowance needs to be made.

I remember taking a funeral of an eight year old girl just after my father had died. I knew it would be tough. A few tears escaped in the crematorium, but when I got home, I needed the space for my own grief. That was the appropriate place to weep.

6. Prepare for Difficulties

Difficult things happen to good and godly people. I think it was Chuck Colson who said life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond. Our response to difficult things could well define some of the best things that God does in our life into the future, **but it won't feel like it at the time...**

In the same way that we don't buy a spare wheel when we break down, we have one (or a repair kit) in the car before it happens, plan how you will deal with that sense of falling apart before it happens. Carry some resources with you. A 'falling apart' kit will probably include some of the following:

- a. People with whom we can be vulnerable and real (friends, family, spiritual director, mentor).

- b. A pattern of prayer that is a habit.
- c. An 'overseer' figure that you are honest with.
- d. A list of things you do to fill your emotional tank.
- e. A resourceful booklist or podcast library on suffering.
- f. A journal where you can process difficult thoughts.
- g. A painting that anchors scattered emotions.
- h. A piece of music that calms the soul.

BE READY

There are no guarantees, but thinking about how to resource ourselves through difficult times ahead of them occurring means we are more likely to get through than if we don't prepare for such times. Above all else, may we know God's grace and provision in those seasons.

SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Do you believe that difficult things can happen to good people and that God can use them for good? Do you have some unresolved difficult times that you never processed?
- What do you have in place that you will make use of when life threatens to unravel?
- What are you going through right now, and what actions might make space for you to deal with it more effectively?

