

WHEN LEADERS FALL

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I was in a service station when I found out my former pastor had run off with a man he was mentoring. I was just building up to a big outreach event when I heard that my boss had resigned with immediate effect. Both were Christian high flyers. Both had a family. Both had a lot of pressure. Both had a lot of ambition. Both were seen as a success. Both left a trail of devastation in their wake. A decade and more on I still feel the pain.

AN ODE TO THE ORDINARY

I want to write an Ode to the Ordinary. To the unsung Christian pastoral heroes who march out their ministry in sync with the Spirit, but are jarringly discordant to the spirit of this age. Theirs is not the conference platform, the publicist nor the performance. Theirs is the relentless routine, the faithful fervour, the disciplined days. Theirs is the living for the audience of one.

Except there's no such thing as someone immune to falling. Away from the heady temptations of fame and

prestige, parallel temptations rise up in even the most ordinary situations and leave us wanting to escape. A pensioner playing the organ in a small church context may still face the same temptations as the megachurch pastor repenting into a media microphone a little too late.

GIDEON – FAITHFUL AND FAILING

But 'success' rarely helps you stay on an even keel. I think of Gideon at the end of his life. You'll remember the story: the scared young man, hiding in a winepress. The insecurity as he repeatedly questioned the angel thinking he was the 'least of the least'. The tests he laid before God even after God had sent him fire to devour his sacrifice. The timid way he carried out his commission to tear down his father's Baal. Then the astounding success: routing the enemy with just 300 men, after God had reduced his army to almost nothing.

But do you remember what happened then?

The people see God's great victory, achieved through a nobody leading almost no-one. Yet they glorify the nobody rather than worshipping the Divine Somebody. It was always the way. We put on conferences where ordinary pastors can ask the superstars 'how did you grow your church'. Back in Gideon's day they ask him and his sons to be king. And he almost resists. He almost manages to avoid the extreme temptation. He says 'no'. But he doesn't just say 'no'. He says 'no, but...'

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I wonder how he felt at that stage. Probably very good. He was a successful God-worshipper, resisting the temptation to make himself King. He knew what was right, even if these people did not, and he was going to stick to his guns. He knew it was God's victory. He knew that God should be king... 'but...!'

- But... didn't he deserve a little credit?
- But... didn't he and his sons deserve a little security?
- But... didn't the people need a leader who symbolised success and prosperity and power to make them secure?

So he asked for 20kg of gold from them in the form of earrings (that's £506,000 in today's currency). He also took ornaments, pendants, purple garments and gold chains from the plunder. Then he made the gold into a religious pilgrimage icon called an ephod and persuaded the whole of Israel to keep coming to his hometown to worship there. And as they worshipped the ephod 'they prostituted themselves'. The ephod 'became a snare to Gideon and his family' (Judges 8:27) and, despite peace in his lifetime, after his death there was no legacy at all, no honour for his family, and Israel reverted to worshipping the Baals.

BEWARE THE EPHOD

The ephod thing seems to be such a massive trap for us today. How many conference centre churches have unwittingly become ephods to a pastor's ego? Drawing vast financial resources in from the surrounding regions and selling books with frankly incredulous comments on the cover from people who then expect the same comments in return when they self-publish their own reflections.

Power and finance were Gideon's undoing. Escapist sex and unresolved emotional deficits will bring others down. I tell all our new staff that my main ambition for myself and for them is for us to still be in the game when we are in our fifties and sixties. But even as we see car crashes played out in generation after generation of ministers, is there any hope?

The answer is a definite yes – and perhaps we need to get better at celebrating that!

FAITHFUL FOLLOWING

Recently I was on retreat in Sussex listening to two outstanding leaders in their sixties.

One listed a litany of all the difficulties that had affected his 20+ years in parish ministry. Dealing with early bereavements, financial headaches, family suffering, problematic church structures, crippling parish share, personal moral failings of congregation members (for example, alcohol addiction or an affair), leadership impasses (for example, a wall of silence between a vicar and a staff member), the PCC passing a vote of no confidence – it was a sobering list that looking in from the outside it would have been hard to guess.

The other, who has been blessed to see things flourish, put his hand up and said, 'I've got this key part of how we've done church wrong – so I'm going to change'.

It was so helpful to have examples of humble, wise leadership from those older and more experienced than me. We can keep learning, we can avoid the crashes, we can lead well.

So what will stop a series of difficulties triggering a meltdown? It requires the ability to have 'fierce conversations', to push back hard against being isolated or elevated, to refuse to have areas of your life that are secret from everyone else, to avoid both fanaticism and faithlessness, to humbly make decisions as a group but not succumb to flattery or yes-sayers, to admit when you have got it wrong (for years) and be prepared to change and start again.

Senior leaders like these in the church will rightly draw others to them. They will draw us not to worship at their ephod, but to receive shelter under their wings. As a younger leader I need these people around me to encourage me to glorify only God. If you are a leader anywhere near a melt-down please, please back peddle now... there is a legacy that you can only leave if you stay in the game.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Where might our greatest temptation lie that could scupper us if we are not very careful?
2. Who knows us well, our deepest fears, our besetting sins, our greatest temptations?
3. How do we support those who are senior in leadership without putting unrealistic expectations on them?