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# ***Resilient Christian Leadership***

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# Introduction

*“Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest” (Psalm 55:6).*

Have you felt like giving up lately? We all feel like quitting from time to time. The strong feel weak, the wise feel at their wits end, the experienced believe they have nothing left to give, the optimistic lose heart, leaders feel alone and the greatest visionaries lose their buoyancy. Those who usually believe they can “run through a troop and leap over a wall” (Psalm 18:29) become tired. “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall” (Isaiah 40:30). Stress, time pressures, adversity, failed expectations, broken promises, unjust criticism, feeling of disconnectedness take their tolls. We have all been there.

For leaders who are Christians, there is an added dimension: knowing that the struggle is also in the spiritual realm and there are forces aimed at manipulating or destroying them, their families, their teams, the work to which they have committed their lives (often at enormous sacrifice) and their influence. It is distressing to watch friends lose their hope, their marriages, their sense of God’s call and give up in the face of added pressure to which they are exposed.

Leaders who are Christians (whether in church, business or social milieu) need spiritual, mental and physical resilience, so as not to be overwhelmed by opinion, circumstances, disappointment or opposition.

Over many years, in church life, volunteer groups, business and family life I have had to confront reverses, so what follows comes out of personal experience and observation. I am convinced that God is our (abiding) refuge and our source of strength (Psalm 46:1). He will give you wisdom and help you cope and choose the support you need. He will give you the capacity to lead yourself and your team well. Don’t give up. With His help, you can dig deep wells become more resilient and optimistic than ever.

# Acknowledging the Pressures

When you are in leadership and people know you are a Christian your wisdom and personal strengths *will* be tested (2 Corinthians 11:16-31). People will have high expectations that you will:

- be professional
- work long hours
- value them and recognise their capabilities
- keep them happy and treat them fairly
- look after (and improve) their wellbeing
- be a diplomat and ensure unity
- keep going, even when they give up
- be available for them
- model the ideal Christian (including in your family life)
- remain supremely confident and continue to inspire/motivate them in the face of adversity
- have a sense of humour, even when they are grumpy
- hold up in the face of any pressures or reverses
- take their sides/share their views about important issues
- be knowledgeable, credible and up-to-date (cf Jeremiah 3:15)
- be a listening ear, irrespective of what you may personally be facing
- have solutions that they like (and that leave them in their comfort zones)
- be able to navigate strategically the politics of each and every situation
- be ever forgiving and tolerant of their foibles
- cover off all the risks
- be strong enough to weather any storm
- deliver results that only God can give (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

Who is able??? Jesus led by serving; we do well to follow His example.

# Recognising the Limits

*“God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message.”* (19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne. He worked so hard that his health broke and he died at 29.)

Christian-motivated leadership (in any sphere, not just “professional ministry”) is tough. It involves the usual range of issues associated with leading people, but is complicated because

- (i) many of those led are resistant to leaders (“*you can’t tell me what to do*”)
- (ii) they do not want to change
- (iii) they have their own agendas
- (iv) there is a spiritual dimension, with real strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)
- self-talk can become defeatist
- negativity can become contagious (it is easier to pull people down than to lift them up)
- some people you depend on *will* fail you, even the best intentioned; don’t be shocked
- working with difficult people and their expectations/reactions can be an emotional roller-coaster
- lack of confidence in others can lead to leaders micro-managing, believing (often erroneously) that this is better than delegating tasks and relying on others to get the job done
- in times of difficulty leaders can be abandoned by those they rely on (Elijah, 1 Kings 19:10; Jesus, Mark 14:50, Paul, 2 Timothy 4:10), or be blamed/targeted by them (Moses, Numbers 14:10; David, 1 Samuel 30:6); knocks *will* come; it is easy to be sidetracked by issues, politics, peoples’ demands (cf Nehemiah 6:1-9)
- other challenges can include financial reverses, sickness, death of loved ones, sustained community opposition or lethargy
- many Christian leaders give up because of burn-out, discouragement, disappointment, unrealised visions, accumulated frustration, sense of rejection, loss of hope and focus and because they believe they have nothing left to give; many qualified and experienced men and women (some of whom I know) are out of Christian ministry today, even backslidden, in part because of situations they have gone through

“your labour in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

# Working Out Who Sustains You?

*Resilient:* “Able to recoil or spring back into shape after bending, stretching, or being compressed.”

What makes someone resilient? Many businesses employ psychologists to resilience test staff, to see if they will be able to cope in times of pressure. The models I have seen are flawed, but they are a reminder that all leaders have limitations and need to learn how to be resilient.

- lack of knowledge can undermine you (Hosea 4:6)
- feelings can betray you; all leaders have feelings of self-doubt (Jeremiah 20:9)
- if you have not gained victories in your personal life you will find it difficult to confront those that inevitably emerge in leadership
- so take confidence from the fact that God put you in your role (Psalm 138:8a; Acts 26:19)
  - “David found strength in the Lord his God.” (1 Samuel 30:6)
- don’t try to do it alone – seek to develop good friendships with trustworthy people in good times, so that they can help support you in adversity
  - Moses needed his friends to hold up his arms in the thick of battle (Exodus 17:11, 12)
- actively seek out those who will pray for you. I have often found this reassuring.

Not all leaders who are Christians have the “hide of a rhinoceros”. Not all are impervious to criticism, disappointment, pressures. Yet, some of the least likely become strong leaders. Their confidence is not in their personal strengths or past experiences, but in God’s call and enabling.

Leaders who are Christians have the added advantage that God can be their strength in spite of their weaknesses

- “Let the weak say, ‘I am strong’ “, Joel 3:10, Joshua 1:7)
- “When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who know my way (Psalm 142:3

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“I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.” (Psalm 3:5; Psalm 55:22)

# Digging Deeper Wells

*“... we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”  
(Romans 5:3-5)*

- do not despair – God has a purpose for what you are experiencing; He may even use it to teach and develop you (Psalm 143:10)
- allow God to use what you have in your hand at present (cf Exodus 4:2)
- keep digging deeper wells – you can’t give what you don’t have
- develop relationships with other Christians, whom you trust
- don’t try to do everyone else’s jobs; do what you are called and equipped to do (Romans 12:6-8)
- protect your loved ones
- ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to see the whole situation (cf “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”, 2 Kings 6:16)
- try to avoid the “blame game” when things get tough or go wrong
- be careful about what you hear, think about and speak; words have power
- be flexible, or you may break
- remember that there is a “rest” that belongs to God’s people (Psalm 116:7, Psalm 56; Psalm 62:5)
- practice the presence of God and “handing over” the burden to Him (Psalm 37:5)
- God will be your restorer (; Psalm 70:21, 21; Jeremiah 31:25):
  - He will give you a new attitude – “Grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” (Psalm 51:12)
  - renewed strength (Isaiah 40:31, 46:4; Psalm 54:4; Ephesians 6:10)
  - Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be with us, and in us (John 14:21, cf Romans 8:11)

“... at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (Galatians 6:9)

# Tips

- look after yourself physically, emotionally (self-care is critical; if the leader crashes others will also be affected)
- take heed to your most important relationships, starting with your marriage and family
  - never compromise your moral life or standards (no job/ministry is worth your family)
- have mental, physical breaks (no job/ministry is worth your health)
- talk to others who are in similar situations – find out what works for them
- don't over-extend yourself financially
- meet regularly with your team, to share the load, get feedback and ensure mutual support
- set standards for yourself and others (people are watching you, probably more than you think)
- actively build up your immediate reports
- practice delegation and trust of those charged with undertaking certain obligations
- set standards, keep good records
- watch your self-talk
- practice active forgiveness
- plan your work, prioritise, then work your plan (don't allow the urgent to overtake the important)
- maintain regular personal devotions (Bible reading and prayer)
- remain alert, vigilant (1 Corinthians 8:9; Colossians 4:17)
- cultivate an attitude of appreciation for every new day, celebrate every victory, appreciate and affirm every good friend
- don't lose sight of your "humanness" and your limitations

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“He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.” (Psalm 112:7)

# Resilience and Positive Leadership

Resilience does not imply defensiveness in the face of all the pressures of leadership. Men and women who are bent, stretched, compressed and tested, then bounce back, are better able to provide authentic, transformative and positive leadership. Those who follow them are permitted to trust them. This is reassuring. Christian leaders can be optimistic because :

- they have been proven and developed by what they have gone through
- they are able to encourage, comfort and strengthen others just as God has done in their own lives (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4)
- they are able to stick to their values and model integrity – stress, pressure and problems do not have to become quicksand; they can draw us closer to God (even in the shadow of the cross Jesus was able to say to his disciples, “take heart! I have overcome the world.” - John 16:33)
- they are not damaged or made cynical by their experiences, but find hope, humour and the richness of the relevance of Christian faith and grace in their lives (in the most pressured period of his life Moses was able to maintain his humility, confidently trusting in God, Numbers 12:3)
- their circumstances have proven the presence, faithfulness and power of the Holy Spirit
- they are confident life has significance and that God has a purpose for them; they are therefore able to maintain focus
- they know God is faithful, that He will provide everything they need and give them success in their work (Psalm 90:17)
- they remain *enthusiastic* because they are *en-theos* = lit. “in God”; what an advantage!

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“They go from strength to strength till each appears before God” (Psalm 84:7)