

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *Surviving a Setback*

Everyone experiences setbacks. A setback is simply *a result you didn't want*. Setbacks occur for any number of reasons and sometimes for no discernible reason at all. Minor setbacks happen regularly. We can usually get over them quickly and move on.

However, major setbacks – ones that are public and follow much effort – have the potential to derail a ministry leader. Here is a plan for not being derailed, but emerging from the setback stronger and healthier.

1. *Control your reactions.* The early moments of a setback will set the tone for what happens later. Loss of temper, excuse-making, blame-casting, lashing out at those who disappointed you – these will compound the problem, turning a setback into a compromise of character. Since all ministry leadership is ultimately based on character, the way you respond to a setback will have a lot to do with your ability to lead in the future. The first thing you must do when you get a result you didn't want is to control the emotions that will lead you to say or do something that will undermine your future ministry.

2. *Give yourself some time and space for reflection.* A setback may actually bring an emergency in which you must take quick action to stabilize the situation. Do what is necessary, but do not launch a grand new strategy in the immediate wake of a setback. Put some emotional distance between yourself and the setback. Center yourself in the Lord. Take time to pray and think and discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As you do this, two positive results will happen. First, you will be able to put the setback in perspective. Second, you will be able to receive wisdom and think prudently about the future.

3. *Refute bad theology.* There is a certain strain of heresy that we seem to have a hard time killing. Like mutated bacteria that develop resistance to antibiotics, this old heresy keeps infecting us. It is the idea that *if I am doing the Lord's will, then the results will be to my liking*. He will “bless” me in that sense. Ergo, if I do not get the results I want, then I must have misunderstood God's will or somehow tainted the work with my own sin. This is a really old heresy. It is the same one Job's friends beat him up with. I am reminded that these “friends” would have been toast had Job not intervened for them before the Lord (Job 42:7-9). Apparently God is quite offended by this heresy.

Truth is, you and I are sinful enough to mess up most anything. And, yes, sometimes our shortcomings contribute to setbacks. But you may have understood the Lord's will

perfectly and carried it out faithfully and still got a result you didn't want. The Devil wants to use bad theology to stoke your pride when things go as you desire and trap you in discouragement when they don't. He wants you to base your self-worth on heresy so he can make you his tool. Don't fall for it. There is always a lot more going on in the universe than you and I are privy to, as in Job's case. God is sovereign and good and full of blessing when things go our way and when they don't. In fact, *the Lord himself is our blessing*, not the results of any given moment. Don't compound a setback with bad theology.

4. *Return to a "faithfulness" definition of success.* In the long run, what will make you a success as a ministry leader? What is your ultimate and lasting blessing? If it is anything other than *doing what the Lord has called you to do in a way that honors him*, then you are asking for trouble. On the other hand, if you are a faithful servant of Jesus, then you will be honored by the Father. It sounds crazy, I know, that the Almighty and Everlasting God would give us honor, but you can look it up for yourself at John 12:26. Your faithful service will indeed bear much fruit in the long run, though it may very well be fruit you had not expected and don't even know about until heaven. So do not define success as the results of the moment or as looking good compared to someone else. Define success as faithfulness. Faithfulness is the only meaningful success you can ever have, and if you have it, it can never be taken from you.

5. *Seek wise counsel.* Pride makes us hard of hearing. One benefit of setbacks is that they make us teachable. They can open our hearts and ears. This is a great time to get some coaching. It's a great time to change your thinking and practice, to increase in wisdom and skill, to cooperate in the Lord's deepening of your soul and expanding of your mind. So learn. Seek wise counsel and listen. Let the Potter shape you for his future use. Let the setback be a catalyst for growth.

6. *Take the opportunity to think long-term.* As you recover from the setback and experience personal growth, start dreaming again. With prayer and counsel and the Holy Spirit, identify key objectives you want to accomplish over the long haul. Define the big things that are most important and begin aligning your thinking and practice around those things. Clearly defining the large desired outcomes will then help you set the incremental steps and goals needed to move in that direction. This time you will be a little stronger, a little wiser, and a little better grounded in your calling. You will emerge from the setback stronger and healthier.

And better prepared for the next one.