

Ministry Pain & Ministry Joy

Some people think that going into full-time ministry will shield them from pain. If only! Not only did I have to learn to let God reset my broken bones in everyday life; I had to let Him reset the breaks that came in the realm of ministry, which is its own special kind of battleground.

I love the story of Paul and Silas, who in response to a dream from God journeyed to a rough town called Philippi. These guys were doing all the right things, and they got totally burned anyway. That is such the story of ministry.

It started with a little slave girl possessed by a demon who seemed to tell the future through dark inspiration. The name of the demon that possessed her is literally translated “a spirit of python,” which is a chilling picture of the spirit that was at work through her. Paul and Silas did something righteous and compassionate: They cast that demon out of her. But suddenly she wasn’t making money for her owners anymore by telling fortunes, and the owners got mad.

Fast-forward, and you see Paul and Silas dragged before city leaders, accused of wrongdoing, stripped of their clothing and handed over to a violent mob to be beaten—at the encouragement of city leaders. Then they were imprisoned without having their wounds cleaned and placed in the darkest part of the prison with their feet in chains.

Ever felt like that?

You say, “God, I’m doing what You asked me to do in ministry, and people are coming after me. I’m being accused of things I didn’t do, and now I’m getting beat up and imprisoned.”

Some of us have shackle marks around our wrists and ankles, scabs and scars on our backs and shoulders, many of which came through obeying God in ministry. Every time we look at them,

we wonder, Why did that happen to me? It wasn't my fault. I was doing good, but still I got slammed.

I wish I were as holy as Paul and Silas were, so when I get beat up in ministry, I sing and pray at midnight. I'm just saying I need extra grace for that. Ministry will break your bones as much as or more than anything else.

But that's OK because God can reset them, too.

Let Them Go Out the Back Door

This may sound gross, but the Bible compares the church to a body. When you look at a human body, it has a back door where stuff exits, and we flush it away. Things that don't need to be in our bodies anymore leave. A church body functions in the same kind of way.

At first it felt like a personal loss to me whenever someone left our church. But there is a natural cycle in church bodies just as in our physical bodies.

When people exit your life, your church or your business, it is often God's protection. It's normal. In fact you can tell a lot about a church by who is leaving.

I had to learn that holding on to people or things that were not meant to be in my life was actually harmful. Now, instead of feeling loss and pain when any relationship adjusts itself, I accept God's guidance and timing for that person as he or she exits my life. I don't "flush" anyone, but I learned to let people go out the back door.

Man-of-God Syndrome

One of the bone breakers in ministry is what you might call the man-of-God syndrome. Ministry can attract people who love crowds rather than people. They want the focus, the adulation, the spotlight. I've seen some change as they step into the pulpit. They grab the mic a certain way, tip their pinkie and

say, "Ha!" as they walk across the stage. They know how to look at the camera in a certain way at the right time. It becomes a performance.

One minister actually told me, "You wouldn't like me when I'm not preaching."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because when I'm preaching, I'm under the anointing," he said.

I thought, "You mean you're only anointed on the platform? You're different everywhere else? What kind of consistency is that?"

We must be impressed by fruit, not flowers. Fruit indicates multiplication, legacy and sustenance. Gifts don't dazzle me anymore. I look for someone who is the same on the platform as in person. I look for shepherds who have the smell of sheep on their clothing. I watch how men and women of God treat people who can't do anything for them.

I look for those who don't isolate themselves in a green room all the time. I understand there are crazies and people who gobble up your time, but that's a tiny percentage and shouldn't keep you from everyone else.

Leaders should be among people, not apart from them.

We need to kill celebrity culture. At Freedom House we call our raised front area a platform, not a stage, because a stage is for performance; a platform is for influence. Signs on our doors declare, "This is not a stage; it is a platform. Thank You, God, for using me." Every person who goes on the platform sees that: band members, ushers and speakers. Everyone knows it is an honor never to be taken for granted.

Celebrities tend to burn out. They burn brightly and then fade. I don't want to be a shooting star but a North Star. I

don't want to fade out. I want to stand strong and be a light to help others navigate toward Christ for a long time.

Anti-Fake

On the other hand, we welcome into our lives people whom others might reject. For example, a new family came to church one time. I was speaking that day, and they were sitting toward the front. After the service they came up to me and said, "We want you to know, the only reason we stayed is because we were sitting toward the front and didn't want to walk out in front of everybody. We don't believe women should be preaching."

I replied, "Hey, that's great. A bunch of us are going out for pizza across the street. There's a great pizza shop there. Wanna come?"

They looked at me like I hadn't heard them properly. "We just insulted you, and you're inviting us to pizza?" they asked.

"Sure," I said. "I don't mind. I don't need your approval."

Bewildered, they came and I bought their pizza. For two hours we talked about the Bible. I said, "Whether you come back or not, I'm glad you came, and I hope you continue to dig into the Word."

They had warmed up substantially by this time.

"Actually we liked what you said," they said. "It's just that you're a woman. But you're not offended by us?"

"Why would I be offended when God called and equipped me?" I asked. "Why would I think twice about what you say?"

Believe it or not, they showed up the next weekend.

"What are y'all doing here?" I asked, not meaning to sound so surprised. Then they came back a third week and alerted us,

“We will be on vacation next weekend and won’t be at church.”

Not long after that the campus they were attending had a woman speaking, and I wrote to them beforehand, “Ha ha. Giving you a heads-up that a woman is speaking there this weekend.”

After church that day, they came up to our executive pastor and said, “We want to join this church.” This family’s three boys had told their parents, “Mom, Dad, she’s awesome. We like her.”

Why did we accept these folks so readily? They crossed none of our boundaries. They were ignorant but not weird, pushy or predatory. They just needed to be taught the Word of God. I’ll walk a thousand miles with sincere people but not with people who cross boundaries.

Messy but Real

There was a guy recently who didn’t realize Facebook was checking him in everywhere he went. It checked him into a strip club one Saturday night and checked him into our church the next morning.

As people saw this on his feed, they began to light him up with harsh comments—but I loved the way he responded. He said, “My life is still messy, and I’d rather go to a church that doesn’t reject me when I blow it.” Then he posted a picture of the empty seat next to him at Freedom House that morning and invited people to come to church!

Is it OK to go to strip clubs? No! Those are abused, trafficked women—but that man was also entrapped by lust he couldn’t control. There are losers on both sides of that equation. Would I rather he stayed home from church after he messed up? No way. I want him getting better, not worse.

One guy came into church one Sunday and afterward said, “That was the best [expletive] message I ever heard.” It was just

part of his vernacular. I'll take him over someone who comes here and acts perfectly, then goes home and uses that language. Bring your mess, but don't bring your hypocrisy.

Etched into our personalities is that we can't be fake. I have a visceral reaction to fakeness. Fake is counter to who we are. It rubs us completely wrong when we see people putting on an act.

We have worked on this extensively in our own church, and it helps that we are open about our pasts and our failings. I much prefer broken and real people to fake ones. I'd rather someone cuss me out truthfully than pretend to be my friend and talk behind my back. If you're real, I'm good with that. We can make that work.

Those are some of the ways we avoid broken bones in ministry and also allow God to reset them when breaks happen. I took God's counteroffer, and He's been good to His word every time.

Get a Team

One of the decisions that will determine the power and effectiveness in your life is who you surround yourself with. When we went into full-time ministry, we embraced the principle that "in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14b, NKJV). Up to that time we didn't have many accountability relationships.

We looked around and saw so many people going off track. They didn't have the kind of friends who called them on stuff, the kind who know you and "no" you.

A lot of accountability happens organically with the friends you happen to have. They weigh in and say, "You shouldn't be talking to that old flame on social media. You shouldn't be staying out late when your husband or wife is out of town."

But we wanted a firmer foundation. A lot of people don't

finish well. We wanted to. We wanted mentors who told us what we did and didn't want to hear. We wanted people who pushed us to check ourselves before we wrecked ourselves.

If you're in a visible position in the community, your mentoring accountability needs to be more formal. The taller the skyscraper, the deeper the foundation that has to be dug.

Those who are more visible make better targets for the enemy. If he can strike the shepherd, he can harm a lot of sheep. When terrorists look for targets, they don't look for one-bedroom homes. They look for tall buildings and go after them with a wrecking ball.

This goes for fathers and mothers as much as anybody. If anybody is looking at your example, you are a leader to that person.

Everybody needs accountability. It's not just for those in visible or public positions. Accountability is not there to rule you but to give you insight you may not have had.

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