

How Leaders Survive When Facing Demonic Discouragement

So many of my pastor friends have trudged through 2021 as if they were slogging through mud. This hasn't been an easy year. If we opened the church for meetings, we were accused of being uncaring. If we asked people to wear masks at church, we were criticized. If we didn't talk about politics, or if we did, we were attacked from both sides.

Pastors feel as if they can never do anything right, which is why almost one-third of church leaders in the United States admitted in surveys they thought about quitting recently. Caring for a congregation is stressful enough without today's new "wars" in the church, whether it's the war over worship styles, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, women in ministry, COVID-19 protocols, politics or racism.

Just this week I spoke with a pastor of a denominational church that is enjoying growth because of his openness to changing old traditions. He's making changes so he can reach more people for Christ, but he came under fire from traditionalists because they fear losing control.

My message to him was simple: "You can't quit. Don't even think about it."

If a dark cloud of heaviness has settled over you recently because of criticism, don't let it steal your joy or stop you from fulfilling your mission. Take these biblical steps:

1. Reenlist for the war. It was Winston Churchill who said: "You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life." Churchill knew what all seasoned leaders understand: If you are out in front, people will pick you apart like vultures eat a carcass. Opposition comes with the assignment. Accept it and move forward.

Where did we ever get the idea that leading a Christian movement would be easy? Jesus told His disciples: "You will be hated by all because of My name" (Mark 13:13).

Paul told Timothy: "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). This is what we signed up for, but some of us need to renew our commitment to embrace the battle.

2. Don't let your critics get in your head. It's disappointing when you realize that Satan's best instruments are actually Christians who thrive on drama and negativity. Like Lucifer, they invent lies, entertain suspicions, spread toxic gossip and tear other Christians apart with their words. Sometimes I honestly believe the devil could go on a long vacation, and Christians would be happy to sharpen their knives and do his work for him!

Always be open to loving correction, but tune out the irrelevant noise made by small-minded people who would rather tear down the work of God than build it up. Charles Spurgeon said: "Those Christian people who do nothing are usually troublesome, for they are at leisure to find fault with those who are doing their best."

We can't submit one minute to the psychological warfare of demonic criticism. Goliath's taunts didn't dampen David's zeal; Sanballat's threats didn't coax Nehemiah off the walls of Jerusalem; and the self-righteous Pharisees who criticized Jesus' every move didn't stop Him from showing compassion to sinners and outcasts.

3. Find your fellow warriors. This warfare we are engaged in is best not faced alone. I pity the lonely leader who has no friends in the day of battle. David had 37 "mighty men" (2 Sam. 23:8) who fought beside him, and they loved him so much they risked their lives to protect him. If you want to be a successful leader, you need "foxhole buddies" who are willing

to pray with you, carry your burdens and keep you encouraged. Don't wait until you're ready to quit to recruit these comrades.

4. Go to your secret place often. King David was constantly criticized by his enemies, but he also endured harsh words from God's people. He said: "For it is not an enemy who reproaches me, then I could bear it ...But it is you, a man my equal, my companion and my familiar friend" (Ps. 55:12-13).

What did David do when he felt betrayed and discouraged? He took refuge in God's presence. He says in verse 16: "As for me, I shall call upon God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur, and He will hear my voice."

Don't let Satan's constant assaults weaken you. Pray hard, and then pray harder. Pray until you hear a refreshing word from God that will override the lies of the enemy. When the breakthrough comes, the joy of the Lord will spring up from the wells of salvation. The heavy darkness of discouragement will dissipate. You will resist the devil and he will flee from you. {eoa}

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