

The Spiritual Antidote for These 10 Poison Berries

Let me list them. You know them already, but let me call their terrible names. Here are my choices for the top 10 causes of depression in the ministry.

1. Failure
2. The fear of failure
3. Rebellious opposition
4. Disappointment
5. Mental and physical fatigue
6. Loneliness
7. Stress: usually financial
8. Frustration
9. Accumulated hurt
10. Anger and unresolved inner issues

These are the big 10 as I have observed them, not in some distant, statistical study, but up close and personal. I know I am not unique or even rare in this experience. I have occasionally struggled with depression, more circumstantial than clinical though not altogether, throughout my 46 years of ministry. I have known dark moments and personal failures. I have been deeply disappointed in myself and struggled at times to stay in the ministry, or even to feel that I should stay in the ministry. In one truly terrible season, only the grace of God through my wife, two friends who refused to let me quit, and the wise and anointed help of a trained counselor kept me in the work.

Is this shocking you? Are you thinking, *Why should I listen to this guy? He shouldn't even be in the ministry.* Is that what you're thinking? Then I submit to you that I cannot think of but a handful of sturdy saints who should be in the ministry. The wrestling match within myself has at times been almost unbearable, but when the sun came up, I limped toward whatever shred of victory I could still find. The ministry is hard enough when all is well within and without. It is an awful place to sort out our own inner needs.

In addition, at some point, we all must finally face up to the naïveté with which we began. How many times have I said, "But they are church members"? Or—maybe—"But he is on my board." "He was my friend." "He prayed with me"? We all heard about church wars and demon deacons and staff betrayals, didn't we? We just thought we were exempt. Sure, those things happened to others. But this is us. This is me.

You know all the keys to spirituality. Prayer. The Word. Accountability. You can name them, you have preached on them and they are incredibly important. They are simply not the theme of this article. The question of this article is what do I do when I have done all those and deep-tissue, immobilizing, paralyzing discouragement settles like inky night upon the parsonage?

The opposite of discouragement is obviously encouragement. I hope the following thoughts are something of an antidote for the cluster of 10 poison berries listed above. I will not respond to each of the 10 individually. This is not that article. Instead, the following are merely some hopeful thoughts for blue Mondays and desperate times.

1. Remember, you are not the first ministry leader to feel this way. Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah all struggled. Theirs were not smooth rides. David battled back from moral failure at one point. At another time, his followers contemplated stoning him for a strategic disaster. Sound familiar? I hope

not. Paul wrote that all had forsaken him (see 2 Tim. 1:15). Jesus was deserted, denied, abandoned and betrayed. Furthermore, he pleaded to be excused from his very calling at the exact point where it was about to be put to the final test. I'm certain that sounds familiar.

Remind yourself that others, great leaders, giants have gone before you through this very valley. The fact that you are facing these realities and the way they make you feel does not mean you are weak or petty or anything but a leader who is facing what leaders have always faced.

Your youth pastor walks off with 30 percent of your congregation and starts a church around the corner because "God told him to." That is his failure, not yours. The members who went with him listened to you preach all those years, were comforted by you in grief, watched as you dedicated their babies and were ministered to by you in the altar. You ask yourself, where did I fail? This is not your failure. It is theirs. A colleague treats you unethically. That is how leaders get treated from time to time. It does not prove you are weak. It proves you are a human in leadership with other humans.

2. Second, talk to someone. Isolation, sensed or self-imposed, is a dangerous place to be. The challenge, of course, is that churches and ministers are notoriously gossipy, so it is often hard to open up to someone who could damage you. A professional, confidential Christian counselor can be helpful, especially if there are unresolved issues from your past or even childhood. Pentecostals tend to think that everything has to get sorted out in the altar, but I Corinthians speaks of "gifts of healing." Gifts. One of those gifts is wise, Spirit-anointed counseling.

3. Rest. I once let myself get into a destructive pattern of over-worked, over-stressed, over-everything. Toxic success is no less poisonous than toxic failure. Carve out time to rest

physically. Above and beyond that try to “rest” your current struggle, whatever it is, in the loving arms of Jesus. Remind yourself of some calming restful words. Such as:

“They can fire me but they can’t eat me.”

“This too shall pass away.”

“This church, this board, this organization is not my source.”

“God is not punishing me. He is not angry at me. He loves me and He cares about what I’m going through.”

4. Do not keep up with the Kardashians. Comparison in the ministry is deadening stuff. You are not responsible to be Joel Osteen. You are only responsible to run faithfully the race He puts before you. The “big” ministries, the TV guys, the “famous” preachers may not have their act together as much as it appears. You do not know what they are facing even as you read this. Performance is not the currency of the kingdom. Love is.

5. Finally, do not let failure or fear of failure eat your lunch. If you have not failed at anything lately, it’s time to try something new. Babe Ruth’s home run record is famous. Lesser known perhaps is the fact that he also set major league strike out records. Have you failed at something? That failure, if it even was one, is what you did, not who you are. Did a secret sin catch up to you? Was some brilliant plan of yours despised by those you lead? Did your most exciting vision flop? I mean flop?!? In spades? Welcome to the club.

Here’s the thing. You cannot even tell for sure when you have failed. I had gone through a particularly depressing failure when I received a note from a former student. He told me he had been dismissed from a position as associate pastor at a large church, and he was feeling like a failure. He said he even thought of suicide. Then a sermon I preached in a chapel service—a message on David at Ziklag—came to his mind, and he

claimed that sermon, one I barely even remember, had pulled him through, and he was excited to be moving on to new ministry.

I was wallowing in my own struggles. I feared my efforts had been useless and were certainly unappreciated. Then his letter arrived, and I felt healing in every word.

You have touched lives. You have been used of the Lord. You have borne lasting fruit. You may not see it all now, but it's still there. You have made a real and eternal impact on more lives than you think. This is not a moment for dismissing the gospel or for allowing yourself to feel dismissed from ministry. It is the dawn of a new day. The agonizing struggle has been shock to your entire system, hasn't it? Now let His mercies which are new every morning, fill you with hope in the knowledge that He is still God and He is still on His throne.
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