LEADERSHIP PAIN

THE CLASSROOM FOR GROWTH

Samuel R. Chand

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RJ DE JANEIRO
I couldn’t possibly write a book on leadership pain without honoring Brenda, my wife and “pain partner” since 1979 and my best friend since 1973. Together we have been through the darkest times—leadership failures, poverty, deaths, marriage challenges, parenting, failed business ventures, people disappointment, betrayal, plans gone awry, and so many more.

Brenda is my bride, my best friend, the best mother and grandmother, and the wisest person I know.

All that I am has to be credited to the Lord and His gracious gift of Brenda. She has sat next to me every day in pain’s classroom for growth.
Leadership Network fosters innovation movements that activate the church to greater impact. We help shape the conversations and practices of pacesetter churches in North America and around the world. The Leadership Network mind-set identifies church leaders with forward-thinking ideas—and helps them to catalyze those ideas resulting in movements that shape the church.

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Over the years, I’ve had the distinct privilege of working with some of the finest leaders in our nation and around the world. Many of them contacted me when they were at their lowest level, their wit’s end, the end of their rope. I’ve watched these remarkable men and women encounter some of life’s most difficult problems, and I’ve seen them learn life’s most valuable lessons from their experiences with all kinds of pain.

I’ve asked a number of these people to write their stories, and I’ve included them at the beginning of each chapter. They offer a rare look inside the minds and hearts of some of the finest leaders on the planet. Don’t skip over these stories. Read them carefully. You’ll be amazed and inspired, and you might borrow some of their courage to face your painful situations.
Leadership Leprosy

We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey.
—Kenji Miyazawa

Craig Groeschel, Founder and Senior Pastor of LifeChurch.tv, Edmond, Oklahoma

Before we started LifeChurch.tv back in 1996, one of my ministry role models told me that he had one and only one promise for me. I remember thinking that he was going to promise something encouraging like, “God would do more through me than I thought possible.” Hanging on his every word, I waited eagerly for his promise of good news. Pausing, as if for dramatic effect, my mentor said slowly and soberly, “The only thing I can guarantee is that God is going to . . . break you.”

Great.

That’s not what I wanted to hear. But his words could not have been any more true.
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Over the course of the next dozen or so months, God started to do a deep work in my soul. It wasn’t a work resulting from time in his word or time in prayer. It was a work stemming from pain, heartache, disappointment, and betrayal.

So much of the pain we experienced as a church could have been spared if I had been a better leader. But at the young age of 28, I specialized in making easy things more difficult. For starters, I panicked and hired staff members I shouldn’t have hired. Within a year, I had to replace almost every staff member I brought on, along with most of our key volunteers. If you have ever fired anyone, you know the pain of looking into the eyes of someone you care about and telling them that they can no longer be employed. I can’t even remember how many tears I shed and how often I couldn’t hold my dinner down because of the agony involved with removing people I loved from their ministry roles.

Another great blow came right after we launched our new small group ministry. With just over 100 people coming to our church, we were thrilled to start some groups to help people grow spiritually and develop deeper relationships with one another. One particular group exploded with growth to 30 or more people each week. The leader was a close friend of mine, but our theology differed in one important area. I asked him not to teach on that subject, but he continued to teach on that very topic week after week. Because I believed what he was teaching was dangerous, I pleaded with him to stop. He shocked me by saying he’d just take his group and start his own church. We weren’t even one year old and experienced what resembled a church split. People chose sides. Many people got caught in the crossfire. And our small startup church hit an unexpected landmine that left me reeling. Losing the people
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that helped us start the church was a big blow. Losing the friendship was even more difficult.

But nothing compares to losing my mentor in ministry. To respect the family, I won’t go into the details. There are parts of this story that no one knows but my friend, my wife, and me. And we will keep it that way as long as we live. My mentor and best friend was one of the most amazing men of God I knew. Unfortunately he struggled with depression, and he was tormented by the sins from his past. When I had to confront my hero over something he needed to deal with, the encounter went sour. After exploding at me, he charged out of the room and said things I’m sure he wished he hadn’t said.

I assumed we’d have a chance to iron things out. But that chance never came. His wife called me days later in sheer panic explaining that she found her husband dead, hanging from a rope tied around a beam in his garage. A few days later, burdened by things I could never reveal about his struggles, I officiated the funeral of my best friend and mentor.

That event changed my life forever.

The promise that God would break me was true. I started out confident, bold, and full of faith. One year into our church plant I wondered how much longer I could continue. If leading a church was always going to be this difficult, I didn’t know if I had what it took to be a pastor.

Some time later, I was at a pastor’s conference, still spiritually bleeding from the recent wounds. Sitting on the second row, I cried all the way through a talk given by Dr. Sam Chand. He explained that the best leaders had to endure more pain. And many people could never have more influence because they didn’t have a big enough leadership pain threshold. Dr. Chand explained, “If you are not hurting, you are not leading.”
And that’s when I started to learn the lessons I believe God wanted to teach me.

Here are a few of the things I believe God has shown me about pain.

- The longer I avoid a problem, the bigger it generally becomes. If I summon the courage to endure small amounts of pain and do what’s right early, I will avoid larger doses of pain later.
- Pain is a part of progress. Anything that grows experiences some pain. If I avoid all pain, I’m avoiding growth.
- Often the difference between where I am and where God wants me to be is the pain I’m unwilling to endure. Doing what’s right, no matter how difficult, is a rare trait in ministry. Most choose easy. We must choose right over easy.
- God is always faithful. Even when life is hard, God is always working for our good. Pain teaches us to depend on Him. It purifies our motives. It keeps us humble and moves us to pray.

Looking back at all the hard decisions, misunderstandings, false accusations, relationships gone sour, and heartbreaking losses, I’d never want to endure any of it again. And I know there’s even more pain coming around the corner. But I’d never change what God does in me through these hard times. Because of what He’s done in me, He can now do more through me. Today, I find myself thanking God for breaking me. Even though it’s painful, the pain is worth the progress. And it’s an honor to suffer in a very small way for the One who suffered and gave it all for us.
Leadership Leprosy

It’s inevitable, inescapable. By its very nature, leadership produces change, and change—even wonderful growth and progress—always involves at least a measure of confusion, loss, and resistance. To put it the other way: leadership that doesn’t produce pain is either in a short season of unusual blessing or it isn’t really making a difference. So,

\[ \text{Growth} = \text{Change} \]
\[ \text{Change} = \text{Loss} \]
\[ \text{Loss} = \text{Pain} \]

Thus,

\[ \text{Growth} = \text{Pain} \]

When leaders in any field take the risk of moving individuals and organizations from one stage to another—from stagnation to effectiveness or from success to significance—they inevitably encounter confusion, passivity, and outright resistance from those they’re trying to lead. It’s entirely predictable. Any study of business leaders shows this pattern in the responses of team members. Pastors’ teams and congregations are no exception. The long history of the church shows that God’s people are, if anything, even more confused, more passive, and more resistant when their leaders point the way to fulfill God’s purposes. Organizational guru Peter Drucker observed that the four most difficult jobs in America are, in no particular order: president of the United States, university president, hospital CEO, and pastor. (I’ve been in two of these roles: pastor and university president.) If you’re a church leader and struggling in your role, you’re in good company!

The public image of church leaders may be of gentle people who read most of the time when they aren’t visiting people in the hospital. Certainly, reading and caring for the hurting and needy are important parts of spiritual leadership, but the public doesn’t see the incredible complexity and persistent strains happening behind the scenes.
It Shouldn’t Be a Surprise

The principles and practices in this book are addressed primarily to people who are in positions of leadership in ministries and nonprofit organizations. This includes pastors, staff members, and volunteer leaders. The stories and insights here, however, aren’t limited to the realm of ministry. They apply to leaders in businesses and every other kind of organization. Every leader feels pain.

In fact, leadership—all leadership—is a magnet for pain, which comes in many forms. We catch flak for bad decisions because people blame us, and we get criticism even for good decisions because we’ve changed the beloved status quo. When people suffer a crisis, we care deeply for them instead of giving them simplistic answers (or blowing them off). We “carry their burden,” which means at least some of the weight of their loss and heartache falls on us. We suffer when our plans don’t materialize or our efforts fail, and we face unexpected new challenges when our plans succeed and we experience a spurt of growth. Along the way, we aren’t immune to the ravages of betrayal by those we trusted, the envy of our friends, and burnout because we’re simply exhausted from all the struggles of leading people—especially God’s people.

I am not a theologian or a scholar, but I am very aware of the fact that pain is necessary to all of us. In my own life, I think I can honestly say that out of the deepest pain has come the strongest conviction of the presence of God and the love of God.

—Elisabeth Elliott

Some leaders feel shackled by past failures or past pains. Others look into an uncertain future and feel paralyzed. I’ve consulted with leaders whose
churches and nonprofits have grown from a few hundred to several thousand, but they feel overwhelmed because they have no idea how to manage an organization of that size. A few of these leaders have difficulty articulating the vision God has put on their hearts. They can almost taste the future, but all they get are blank stares when they try to explain the direction God has given them. For most, the crush of financial worries is an almost constant strain. Merging new staff and volunteers with an existing team can make everyone feel confused. And sometimes a leader has to dig deep to find the courage to fire a friend. Misunderstanding, conflict, and all other types of stress come into our personal lives from our families, our staff and leadership teams, our church, and our communities. Sometimes, like Moses, we want to scream, “God, why have you given me these obstinate people?”

At a retreat for pastors who were considering leaving the ministry because they were burned out, the director asked, “Why did you enter the ministry years ago? What were your hopes, your aspirations, and your expectations?”

Of the dozen or so deeply discouraged pastors in the room, all but one remarked that they had an idealized view of ministry when they began. During the conversation it gradually dawned on one or two of them that their idealism had set them up for shattering disappointment. They had been surprised—shocked!—when they encountered difficulties in ministry and when God didn’t resolve them neatly and quickly. One commented, “I was sure ‘God’s blessings’ meant things would go smoothly and growth would happen naturally. Maybe if I’d realized difficulties are part of God’s curriculum, I wouldn’t have been so devastated.” His eyes widened as the insight hit him. “And the heartaches that have shattered me would have been God’s tools to shape me and my church. Oh, man, I missed it. I really missed it.”

At conferences, round tables, and consultations, I’ve talked to many Christian leaders who were not idealistic at the beginning of their ministries, but they certainly didn’t expect the level of conflict, discouragement, and struggle they endured as they were “doing God’s work in God’s way.” They were blindsided by the pain, and many of them assumed something was terribly wrong with God or with them because the pain didn’t quickly go away. Their solution was to do anything and everything to stop the pain.
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They didn’t realize this was exactly the wrong response. Numbness isn’t a viable answer. In fact, it always compounds the problems. It’s what I call “leadership leprosy.”

Nerve Endings

In her book *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observed the progression of dying patients as they faced the ravages of their disease. She noted they went through definable stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, grief (or sadness), and acceptance. Others observed that people pass through these stages in any kind of significant loss. Leaders experience them too.

When the reality of pain strikes, the first response is often, “This can’t be happening!” That’s denial.

Then, when the leader can’t ignore the painful truth, anger surfaces—at the cause, at himself, at God, or at anyone else who comes to mind.

A natural and normal reaction to blunt the pain is bargaining. The person instinctively tries to make a deal. “What can I do to get rid of the pain and go back to normal?” It seems like a perfectly valid question, but it is more of an escape than the courage to face the hard facts.

Slowly, gradually, the person gives up on making some kind of deal to get out of the pain. The loss takes shape. It’s almost palpable. And profound sadness fills the heart. This stage may look and feel a lot like depression, but there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.

Sooner or later the person experiences renewed hope. New insights—ones that couldn’t have been learned any other way—become treasures found in the darkness. The person now has more compassion, deeper joy, and more love to share with others.

The stages of grief aren’t linear. People can go forward and backward in deeper cycles of pain realization. It’s messy and ugly, but it’s essential if people are to make peace with their pain.

The normal human response to pain is to do anything except face it. We *minimize* the problem (“Oh, it’s not really that bad”), *excuse* those who have
hurt us ("She didn’t really mean it"), or deny it even happened ("What conflict? What betrayal? What hurt? I don’t know what you’re talking about!").

Pain is no evil, unless it conquers us.
—Charles Kingsley

But pain isn’t the enemy. The inability or unwillingness to face pain is a far greater danger. I grew up in India where I saw thousands of lepers. They are often missing noses, ears, fingers, and toes—but not because their flesh rots away. (That’s a common misconception.) Various body parts become severely damaged because they don’t sense the warning signs of pain to stay away from dangers. Dr. Paul Brand worked with lepers in India and the United States. In *The Gift of Pain*, coauthored by Philip Yancey, Brand tells the story of four-year-old Tanya. When her mother brought Tanya to the national leprosy hospital in Carville, Louisiana, Dr. Brand immediately noticed the little girl appeared totally calm as he removed her bloodstained bandages and examined her dislocated ankle. As the doctor gently moved her foot to assess the extent of the damage, Tanya appeared bored. She felt no pain at all.

Her mother explained that she first realized Tanya’s problem when she was only eighteen months old. She had left her daughter in a playpen for a few minutes. When she returned, she saw Tanya finger painting with large red swirls on the sheet. She hadn’t remembered giving her daughter any paint. When she got closer, she screamed in horror. Tanya had bitten off the end of her finger and was using her blood as paint! When her mother screamed, the little girl looked up with "streaks of blood on her teeth."

Tanya suffered from a rare genetic malady called congenital indifference to pain, a condition very similar to leprosy. In every other way, she was a healthy little girl, but she felt no pain at all. Seven years later, Tanya’s mother called Dr. Brand to tell him that the little girl had lost both legs to amputation as well as most of her fingers. Her elbows were constantly
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Tanya and millions of others without the capacity to feel pain endure a severe, involuntary handicap, but the rest of us often choose to be numb and suffer the consequences. Many leaders think they have to put on a happy face (or at least a stoic face) for the people in their organizations, so they refuse to admit their discouragement, disappointment, and disillusionment—even to themselves—or they try to delay their pain. They tell their worried (and maybe angry) spouse, “As soon as the building campaign is over, the new music program is in place, the new staff member is hired, or some
other benchmark is achieved, I can slow down and the stress will subside.” For pastors and all other leaders, ignoring pain is leadership leprosy. It may promise the short-term gain of avoiding discomfort, but it has devastating long-term consequences.

Pain is meant to wake us up. People try to hide their pain. But they’re wrong. Pain is something to carry, like a radio. You feel your strength in the experience of pain. It’s all in how you carry it. That’s what matters. Pain is a feeling. Your feelings are a part of you. Your own reality. If you feel ashamed of them, and hide them, you’re letting society destroy your reality. You should stand up for your right to feel your pain.

—Jim Morrison, Nobody Gets Out of Here Alive

Paradoxically, Christians often have more difficulty handling personal pain than unbelievers. They look at the promises of God and conclude that God should fill their lives with joy, love, support, and success. That’s reading the Bible selectively. The Scriptures state—clearly and often—that enduring pain is one of the ways, perhaps the main way, God works his grace deeply into our lives.

For church leaders, pain is pervasive and persistent. People who are involved in any form of church leadership, and especially pastors, see more of the underbelly of life than members of any other profession. Insurance agents see those who come to them for protection against loss; bankers and mortgage brokers see people who have financial needs; doctors treat physical problems; and mechanics look under the car hood—none of them look into people’s heart like a pastor does. None of these people see people at the apogee and perigee of their lives—times of greatest celebrations, like weddings and births, and times of deepest loss, like divorce, disease, and death.
Pastors are exposed to the highest hopes and the deepest wounds of those in their care. And it’s not temporary; it’s from the womb to the tomb.

One of my friends laughed as he told me that pastors are present in the three most critical events of a person’s life: hatch, match, and dispatch. The pastor is there when a baby is born and a mother dies. The pastor celebrates with a couple when they move into a new home, and he comforts them when the mortgage company forecloses on that home. The pastor rejoices when people are promoted at work, and he grieves with them when they’re unemployed. The pastor is thrilled with parents when their children win awards and scholarships, and he goes to jail with them when they have to post bail for wayward kids. He’s full of hope as people stand at the altar and say, “I do,” and he weeps with them when they growl, “I quit.” Pastors are exposed to the dreams and dreads of people at every stage of life. In the span of an hour, a pastor may receive several glowing reports and as many messages about tragedies. This role in the lives of families is an incredible honor, but it produces tremendous pressure and often excruciating vicarious pain. If they aren’t careful, the cumulative pain can crush the life out of them—figuratively and literally.

Making Friends with Pain

We need a fresh perspective. We need to make friends with our pain. In a recent op-ed article for the *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks offered a surprisingly biblical view of the power of pain. He observed that Americans are obsessed with the pursuit of happiness, but they often feel empty, alone, and without meaning. He noted, “People shoot for happiness but feel formed through suffering. . . . Happiness wants you to think about maximizing your benefits. Difficulty and suffering send you on a different course.” Brooks shares this insight: “The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure. It’s holiness . . . placing the hard experiences in a moral context and trying to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred.” In the process, we may not come out healed; we come out different.4
Church leaders can look to those outside the family of faith for good examples of those who have been transformed by the experience of pain. When Lou Gerstner became the chairman and CEO of IBM in 1993, the company was in trouble. During his first meeting, the leadership team discussed IBM’s strategy. When that eight-hour meeting was over, Gerstner said he didn’t understand a thing; it was as though the other leaders spoke a different language.

That meeting, as painful as it was, revealed to him exactly what he was up against in making the company profitable. Eventually, he had to transform IBM’s powerful culture, a culture that made it both famous and successful in the 1960s and ’70s. Imagine being a company outsider and having to transform an icon like IBM. How did he do it?

Gerstner made friends with his pain. He embraced the pain of transforming the entire IBM culture, the pain of centralizing what had become a very individualistic operation, and the pain of making hamburger out of the company’s sacred cows—operational processes that were considered standard operating procedure before he arrived. By embracing these pains, he turned IBM around.

Athletes often play while they are hurting. They know they have to make friends with their pain. An NFL lineman says that playing football is like “being in a car wreck every day.” Why do they continue doing it? Because they love playing, and they understand that their aches and pains are the price they must pay to stay on a team and compete on the field.

Embracing your pain is never easy. All leaders must bear the pain of criticism. You can’t be a leader and avoid being criticized. Everything the president of the United States says and does is intensely scrutinized by Republicans and Democrats. Every Sunday morning talk show dissects the chief executive’s policies and actions. It takes thick skin to be the president.

A few years ago when Camilla Parker Bowles, the Duchess of Cornwall, visited America with Charles, the Prince of Wales, the media criticized her for what she wore and what she didn’t wear. They wrote about how many changes of clothes she brought for an eight-day visit. Imagine being Camilla and reading an article that said she looked “frumpy.” That’s painful. But if
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you want to be a princess or a president—or hold any kind of leadership office—that's what you have to handle.

Making friends with your pain is part of leadership. Our pains tell us we're moving in the right direction. New pains will always be a part of your life as you continue climbing the ladder to your destiny.

There are, of course, many sources of pain. Some of these are self-inflicted and should be avoided or resolved as quickly as possible. But other kinds of heartache can't be avoided if we're committed to being strong, caring, visionary leaders who make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities. Pain isn't an intrusion into the lives of spiritual leaders; it's an essential element in shaping the leader's life. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright observed that God accomplishes his purposes through pain. In his explanation of how the early church faced pain, he noted:

Early Christians understood their vocation as Jesus' followers to include... their own suffering, misunderstanding, and likely death... The suffering of Jesus' followers is... not just the inevitable accompaniment to the accomplishing of the divine purpose, but actually itself part of the means by which that purpose is fulfilled.⁶

In the early centuries of the Christian church, the church experienced explosive growth. But this wasn't an enlightened age for believers. They suffered incredible torture at the hands of the Roman Empire. Christians were drawn and quartered, put on stakes and set on fire, torn to pieces by wild animals, and tortured with holes bored into their heads in which hot lead was poured in—and then they experienced the devastating effects of two massive plagues. Through it all, people saw something they'd never seen before: hope, faith, and love. And millions were drawn to Christ.

In Reaching for the Invisible God, author Philip Yancey related his discovery that Basil of Caesarea's faith was called "ambidextrous" because he held God's blessings in his right hand and life's difficulties in his left, trusting God to use both to accomplish his divine purposes in and through him.⁷ All of us need ambidextrous faith.
Leadership Leprosy

Your Call

Do you want to be a better leader? Raise the threshold of your pain. Do you want your church to grow? Do you want your business to reach higher goals? Reluctance to face pain is your greatest limitation. There is no growth without change, no change without loss, and no loss without pain.

You’ll grow only to the threshold of your pain.

If you’re not hurting, you’re not leading. Your vision for the future has to be big enough to propel you to face the heartaches and struggles you’ll find along the way.

But this book is not a theological treatise on pain. There are several excellent books I recommend to give people a biblical analysis of pain. My purpose is to provide a concrete, practical understanding of the pain we experience so we interpret it more accurately and learn the lessons God has in it for us. If we see pain as only an unwelcome intruder, we’ll fail to ask the right questions, and our heartache will be wasted. In these pages, we’ll avoid (like the plague!) simplistic answers to life’s hardest questions. This is a ruthlessly honest and very practical book. We’ll examine the principles and practices that make our pain a means of fulfilling God’s divine purposes for us, our churches, and our communities.

My father was a pastor, and I’ve been a pastor. I consult with pastors and CEOs every day, and I speak at leadership conferences. If you’re a church leader, I’m one of you. I understand your hopes and hurts because I’ve been there, and I’m still there every day. When I began consulting with leaders, I asked God for two gifts: detached concern and favor. I get calls from some of the top leaders in the world. They are the CEOs/lead leaders/senior pastors of their churches. They don’t call me because they want to hear interesting stories or pass the time because they’re bored. They call me because they’re in pain and they want some answers. I have to convince them that the remedy will cause more pain before they sense any relief. To get stronger, they have to go deeper. Why? Because like a patient in surgery,
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you have to be willing to feel worse before you can feel better. This book is about what I’ve learned about the pain of leadership. And these lessons never come easily.

Occasionally we talk about our Christianity as something that solves problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of the problems. Even our intellectual questions are increased by the acceptance of a strong religious faith. . . . If a man wishes to avoid the disturbing effect of paradoxes, the best advice is for him to leave the Christian faith alone.

—Elton Trueblood, The Incendiary Fellowship

I came to the United States from India in 1973. I was twenty years old and looking for a better life. Bob and Vivian Steinbough lived in Pasadena, California, and they sponsored my college education at Beulah Heights Bible College in Atlanta. They sent a check every month to the college to pay for my expenses: tuition, lodging, food, books, and some incidental expenses. One year later, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) severely reduced gas supplies to the United States. Lines at gas stations circled blocks, interest rates skyrocketed, inflation climbed to double digits, and the nation suffered a severe financial recession. During this difficult time, Bob Steinbough lost his job, and I lost the checks he and Vivian had been sending to the college.

The nation was in crisis, and I was in crisis. I had to find a way to make some money, so I knocked on doors up and down Berne Street, near the college. I asked people if they would let me mow yards, rake leaves, or sweep sidewalks. I was willing to do anything. Time after time, the residents must
have thought a young man from India looked very out of place in southeast Atlanta. They shook their heads and told me to leave. But then I offered, “I’ll do it for free.”

This intrigued some of them. They invariably asked, “Then what do you want from me?”

I answered, “When I’m finished, you can make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. That’s all.”

A few of them took me up on my offer, but it wasn’t enough to stave off hunger. About a half mile from the college was Simpson’s Grocery Store. Desperate times call for creatively desperate measures. I went to the store and asked to speak to the manager. I asked him, “Do you ever throw food away?”

He looked a bit puzzled, but by then I was looking pretty thin, so my question wasn’t too hard to understand. He nodded, “Yes, of course, almost every day. We can’t sell any food past the expiration date.”

I asked, “Have you heard about all the hungry children in India?”

“Yes,” he looked at me with a curious smile.

“Well, a hungry Indian is here!”

For many months I went to the grocery store to see the manager. He couldn’t actually give me the food he was going to throw out, but he packed it and carefully dropped it into the six-foot-high commercial Dumpster in the back of the store. I had to wait until he went back inside the store, and then I jumped into the Dumpster, picked out the food, threw it out, and then climbed out. He discovered I could use frozen foods, especially pizzas and bags of vegetables, but he also let me know when there were fruits—bananas, apples, and oranges—that were too ripe to sell but not too spoiled to eat.

For about a year, this grocery store manager was my lifeline for survival. Then a position opened for a janitor at the college. I applied and got the job. Soon they also needed a breakfast cook and a dishwasher, and they gave me those jobs too. I was glad to have three part-time jobs—and now I had access to food every day. It was marvelous! Of course, I didn’t get a paycheck. It was a barter arrangement. For my campus work, the college gave me tuition, books, and room and board.
When I told this story to a group of people, someone asked, “Why didn’t you just go back to India?”

That’s easy to answer. If I didn’t have enough money for food, I certainly didn’t have enough for a plane ticket to the other side of the world! I was so poor I didn’t even have money to talk to my parents during those years. Long distance calls were very expensive.

Once, a friend asked, “When was the last time you talked to your parents?”

I thought for a few seconds and answered, “I’ve been here four years. I haven’t talked to them at all during that time.”

He gave me fifteen dollars so I could call my parents and talk for a few minutes.

When I called, my father answered. I said, “Hello, this is Sam!”

After a pause, he replied, “Sam who?” It had been so long he didn’t recognize my voice.

I told him, “Sam, your son.”

The rest of the family got on the phone, even though it was the middle of the night in India. We had a wonderful though very short conversation to catch up with each other.

Experiences shape perceptions. This period of poverty created a deep groove in my psyche that insisted, “Money gives people options, but I’m poor, so I don’t have any options. I’ll always be poor. It’s my lot in life.” I firmly believed I could only afford frozen pizzas. I could live only in the cheapest places. I can’t have friends because everybody is ashamed of my poverty. Who would listen if I tried to say anything?

The pain of being poor made a dent that seemed irreparable, but gradually I began to reinterpret those excruciating years. I began to see I had options—plenty of options. My past didn’t dictate my future. I had to learn to think more broadly, to imagine possibilities not limited by my experiences. Even in the darkest circumstances, we can uncover creative options. I called it *blue sky thinking*. It’s not idealistic and irrational. Instead, it’s infused with a powerful hope.
My Hope for You

In the chapters ahead we’ll identify the main causes of leadership pain—the people, situations, and processes that make us bleed—and I’ll offer some effective solutions to help you respond with wisdom, strength, and grace.

Let me give you a taste of the principles I want to impart to you. When you’re bleeding:

- Understand and interpret your pain.
- Clarify the lesson you’re learning.
- Spend time with leaders who have high pain thresholds.
- Take care of yourself—mentally, physically, spiritually, relationally.
- Always be aware of your internal temperature.
- Listen to your spouse (or best friend).
- Don’t ask God to raise your pain threshold. He might just answer that prayer!

I’ve known many leaders whose potential hit a ceiling and stopped when they refused to break through their pain threshold. Some completely bailed out, but most settled for something less—often far less—than the grand design God had for them. Their pain threshold became their ceiling. My hope for you is that you’ll acquire the heart, perspective, and skills to continually raise your pain threshold. In the principles and stories in this book I hope you’ll find the courage to do three things:

1. **See pain as your greatest teacher.** Don’t avoid it. Don’t minimize it. And don’t numb yourself to it. Pain never just goes away. When it’s not resolved, it sinks deep into our minds, creates anxiety in our hearts, causes resentment and depression, and creates tension in our relationships. As the old motor oil ad said, “Pay me now or pay me later.” Face pain sooner and you’ll learn important lessons about
Leadership Pain

God, about yourself, and how to help others grow as they encounter difficulties. Face it later with devastating results.

2. **Let your vision drive you.** Keep the vision fresh and strong. Don’t let your mind be consumed by your immediate pain and obvious limitations. When you interpret your pain as bigger—more important, more threatening, more comprehensive—than your vision, you’ll redefine your vision down to the threshold of your pain. Focus on the big picture and let your anticipated legacy give you the courage you need to face each day’s troubles. Your vision will continually renew your hope, restore your courage, and refresh your perspective. It will enable you to pay the price to face the pain and take the next step forward.

3. **Have a rigorous personal development plan.** If you have a plan to grow spiritually, relationally, and professionally, you’ll incorporate difficulties into the learning process. Don’t coast. Read the best authors, spend time with courageous leaders, and craft a plan to sharpen your skills. At many points you’ll bump up against various obstacles—internally and externally, real and perceived. As you face each of them with courage, you’ll raise your pain threshold and you’ll become a better leader. In the process, you’ll see pain as your friend, not your enemy.

Without a fresh perspective about pain, a compelling vision, and a clear plan, every heartache has the potential to stop you in your tracks. A driving sense of destiny opens your eyes to the lessons you can learn from betrayal, crises, and failure.

In his book *The Healing Path*, psychologist Dan Allender described the spiritual perception we can have about painful events in our lives. He wrote:

If we fail to anticipate thoughtfully how we will respond to the harm of living in a fallen world, the pain may be for naught. It will either numb or destroy us rather than refine and even bless us... Healing in this life
Leadership Leprosy

is not the resolution of our past; it is the use of our past to draw us into
deeper relationship with God and His purposes for our lives.10

To be a better leader, raise the pain threshold in your life. To accomplish this, you first need a firm grasp on the three kinds of difficulties you will encounter: external challenges, internal stresses, and growing pains. That’s where we’re going next.

At the end of each chapter, you’ll find insights and exercises to help you apply the principles you’ve just encountered. Don’t rush through these. There are no bonus points for speed. Take time to think, consider, remember, and pray. Trust God to speak to you and give you wisdom. If you use this book with a team or small group, use the questions for your discussions.

Know This

You’ll grow only to the threshold of your pain. To grow more, raise your threshold.

Do This

Make a commitment to be ruthlessly honest with yourself, with God, and with at least one other person as you read this book.

Think About This

1. How would you define and describe leadership leprosy? What effects does it have on the leader and those who are following?
2. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Leadership is a magnet for pain. Explain your answer.
3. What would it mean to you to have “ambidextrous faith”?
4. Can you think of a time when you let your pain reinterpret
Leadership Pain

(and lower) your vision? Describe the time when this happened? How do you wish you had responded?

5. Why are you reading this book? What do you hope to get out of it?

And remember: you’ll grow only to the threshold of your pain.
EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Success is not measured by what you accomplish but by the opposition you have encountered, and the courage with which you have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds.
—Orison Swett Marden

Benny Perez, Lead Pastor of The Church, Las Vegas, Nevada

Many cities in the country suffered a real estate crisis when the recession began in 2008. Las Vegas was hit especially hard. Six years before that time, we had begun our church with 27 people in the living room of our house, and it had grown to 2500 every weekend. We were so excited about what God was doing, and we bought some land so we could build our church. When the crisis hit and real estate valuations dropped, our bank asked for a meeting. I knew it wasn’t going to be a social call. The bank officer told us that we had to come up with $900,000 to bring
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our “loan to value” down to 75 percent. We took the money out of our savings for a new building, and we paid the bank. We were spared. At least, that’s what we thought.

A year later, the real estate crisis in Las Vegas became a catastrophe. Property values fell off a cliff. The land we had purchased for $4.5 million was now worth only $800 thousand. On the land and building, we owed $8 million, but they were valued at only $2.4 million. We wanted to build because we were on a fast tract of growth. We posted it on our website that we were going to raise enough cash to build the Wendell E. Smith Auditorium. The bank called us and told us any money we raised we had to pay toward the debt. The bank had us backed into a corner—we couldn’t grow the church. I was at a dead end.

I wondered how in the world all this could be happening. Such great things had happened at our church. God had poured out His blessings on us. Was it going to end here? I considered letting the bank have the land and the building, but I soon discovered they’d have a lien on any new facilities we might build. The bank turned our account over to a national “special assets division.” I got a call from a bank officer in Florida who tried to intimidate me. Things had already gone from bad to worse; now it was nasty.

At the time, I didn’t know anyone who could help me navigate these unknown waters. I felt helpless and alone, and to be honest, a wave of shame clouded my thinking. How could I have let this happen? I had trouble sleeping many nights, so I was exhausted during the day. My thoughts were preoccupied with our financial crisis 24/7. When I was at the church, I was thinking about it. When I was at home, I couldn’t get my mind off it. When our family was on vacation, I thought about
it constantly. I wanted to find someone to help me carry the burden, but there was no one. My staff, our church, and my family—as well as the bank—were looking to me for answers, but I had none.

We kept on worshipping and leading programs. That was our mission, and that was our joy, but behind the doors of our offices, I felt the crushing pressure of trying to hold the church together.

I often felt overwhelmed, but these heartaches turned into the most tender and intimate times with the Lord. The psalmists poured out their hearts to the Lord, and so did I. In the middle of the night when I couldn’t sleep, I wept and prayed, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:5).

Of course, all of this affected every part of my life, including my marriage. Wendy had always looked to me for answers, but now when she asked about the future, I had to admit, “I don’t know.” That was really hard. Wendy and I were already seeing a counselor. During this time, we started seeing her even more often. I may lose the land and the church, I concluded, but I wasn’t going to lose my marriage.

A good friend came to town and asked to have lunch with me. He told me he had heard about our problems with the bank, and he gave me some excellent advice: “Hire the best attorney you can find.” My friend referred me to a top law firm in his hometown, and after he made a couple of calls, I had a meeting with one of the best real estate lawyers in Las Vegas. When I explained our circumstances and the bank’s demands, this Jewish attorney leaned back in his chair and said, “Pastor Perez, I just took my synagogue through the same situation. I
Leadership Pain

know exactly what to do.” It was like an angel had spoken to me! I finally found someone who understood.

The next conversation wasn’t so positive. After he talked to the bank to try to come up with a solution, he called to tell me, “Pastor, I have bad news. They don’t want to work out a deal, and it’s worse: they’re coming after you personally.” I was heartbroken.

We had to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection because the bank gave us no options. We endured months of depositions, audits, and endless conversations with attorneys. The bank hoped they’d find irregularities in our books, but all our finances were perfectly in order.

One day the attorney came to me and explained that the bank refused to budge, and they planned to sue me for any balance not covered by the sale of the church and land. He represented the church. He advised me to get another attorney to represent me personally.

Months later, the church’s attorney came to meet with our executive team. He said, “It’s over. We’ve lost. You need to stop paying me, and you need to move on.”

I went home. I felt devastated. I couldn’t even talk to Wendy except to say, “We lost.” I cried and cried all night. The next morning, I told God, “Okay, God, I’m going to trust you. I don’t know what that means, but I’m going to trust you.”

Within 24 hours, the attorney called me again. He said, “Benny, you must believe in miracles, because it looks like you’re going to get one. The bank is offering the church a deal.” They offered to take an amount we would have gladly agreed to pay at any time during the long, grueling ordeal. We gladly accepted the deal.

We had 60 days to pay it off in full, but we only had about
a fourth of the money we needed. A few days later, I got a call from a total stranger in a foreign country. Somehow, he had heard about our situation. He asked for details, and I told him all about it. He said, “Let me talk to my wife. I’ll call back in a few minutes.” I could hardly wait for the phone to ring. When he called back, he offered to contribute a large sum of money and give an interest-free loan for the rest we needed to pay off the bank.

I shouted, screamed, and yelled praises to God. I was astonished, but the Lord whispered, “Son, I have people all over the world. I’m not limited by time, space, or culture.” I trusted God a little, and He came through a lot. Amazing grace.

The most important lesson I learned through all this is the necessity of utter abandonment to the faithfulness, love, and purposes of God. I had talked about trusting God for many years, but now I had a new understanding of what it means to put everything into His hands.

I also learned to hire the very best professionals we can afford when we need them. Hiring the right attorney was very important. His expertise gave me a sense of peace. He was a gift from God.

During this painful season of testing, I reassured my staff and the people in our church that the mission of our church has never been about land or buildings, but about people. Hearts and souls matter more than any tangible thing. God was going to get us through it so that the people were protected and blessed—and He did.

My advice for pastors is to reach out to others who can help. The enemy tells you that you’re alone, and shame can make you feel worthless and helpless. Find a friend or mentor or counselor who can walk with you through dark times. That
person is worth more than gold. In fact, if your church is having financial troubles, call me. I’ll be glad to help.

Mike Kai, Pastor, Inspire Church, Waipahu, Hawaii

Ministry is full of joy and sorrow, triumphs and heartaches. We love to see lives changed—thousands giving their lives to Jesus, many discovering their calling and becoming disciples of Jesus, lives restored, marriages healed, addictions overcome, and deliverance—but a very real enemy is also trying to thwart the work of God. The enemy of our souls, the adversary, would like nothing more than to bring discouragement and defeat into our lives.

My wife Lisa and I have learned that how we handle tough moments can determine important outcomes: will I become tender and stay tender, or could stress turn me into a tyrant? One of the core values that we share is an appropriate transparency with our church and our staff. The closer people are to us, the more transparent we become. We also expect others to be equally transparent with us.

Staff transitions can either be painful or pleasant. But even when we have the best intentions, the pain can still be intense. One of the most painful experiences I’ve had in the ministry was when a staff member who was very close to me began to turn on me. I didn’t know it was happening at the time, but in retrospect, the signs were definitely there.

We were a smaller church then, about 500 to 700, and were still meeting in an elementary school cafeteria. We were making the big leap from the school to leasing something much larger and more expensive in a shopping center in Hawaii. We
were neck deep in church expansion, fund raising, building renovation, and all the meetings and stresses that come with growth. It was an extremely busy time for me and the entire staff. We were all being stretched beyond our capacity.

I had been told that not everyone on our staff team would be able to make the adjustment and “cross over the Jordan River” into our new destiny. It made sense. Not everyone will stay with you on the journey, but I didn’t know who would stay and who would go.

We had a very close staff team, but my responsibilities were changing. I couldn’t show up at every celebration, every potluck, and every other event I had attended when we had a smaller congregation. Not only was the church changing; I was changing too. With added pressure and responsibility, my role expanded. I had to rearrange my priorities. I couldn’t do all the things I’d done in the past, and this realization really hurt. It was the pain of increased capacity.

My new priorities really bothered a particular staff member. He began to share his frustration with three key members of my team. For months, I wasn’t aware that they were complaining to one another about me. They went on night diving trips (that’s big in Hawaii), but I was never invited. That hurt. I might have not been able to go, but I was never even asked. To make matters worse, these trips were the times when they complained about me. I was oblivious. They were going fishing, but they were having me for lunch!

Gradually, I noticed a change in demeanor by these three staff members. They were a little colder . . . a bit distant around me. I began to pick up on the changes. Then, after a staff hire I had made to help us manage the business side of things, one of the guys began to act in a peculiar way.
One day, I pulled him to the side to see what was going on with him. This conversation was the beginning of the Lord bringing things out into the light. It was a hard and frustrating conversation.

When our talk was over, I realized things were much worse than I could imagine. I dug a little deeper and realized that the ringleader of the discontented staff members had done all kinds of things (too many things to list) to sabotage my leadership. But the ringleader, the man I trusted most, was on vacation in California. I could’ve called him, confronted him, and fired him immediately, but I thought about his young kids. I didn’t mind ruining his vacation, but I didn’t want to ruin it for his children. The schedule, though, proved to be a problem. Before he was scheduled to come back, I was going to Australia for a conference. He would be back about four days before I returned. I decided to wait until I got back. In the meantime, I confronted the other two before I left for my trip.

My two weeks away in Australia were miserable. I hate to admit it, but I cried a few times, and Lisa consoled me. I had never experienced staff betrayal and a possible church split—the potential was there; he had won the hearts of a large part of the church.

I realized I had no option. I was going to fire him. That would be the first order of business when I got home. Toward the end of the trip, however, Lisa asked me a tough question: “Mike, have you done everything you could do to salvage him before you take the last step and fire him?”

I hated the question. I protested, “Of course there’s more I could do, but does he truly deserve it?” Another week in Australia went by, and then we returned home.
As soon as I got back to the church, I had a meeting with the guy. Of course, by then he had heard that I uncovered the plot to undermine my leadership. The advanced warning gave him a few days to prepare for our conversation—and I knew he would be sweating it out until I returned. 

Lisa’s question prompted me to rethink my approach. “Doing everything” meant that I offered him two months to get his head together. Full pay, no strings attached. He graciously accepted. But within a few days, just a week before our opening of the new church, he had already begun telling people, “I’m outa here and heading back to the mainland.” Some of the leaders had heard him say this, and they came to me to tell me what they knew. I met with him once more, this time with some key elders, and released him.

By God’s grace—and a lot of conversations to help everyone process the anatomy of what happened—we were able to save the relationship with the other two staff members.

This season was one of the hardest times I’ve ever experienced in ministry, but I learned to avoid reacting too quickly and to seek God’s best at all times. The high road is often the road less traveled, but it becomes the pavement of God’s grace and growth in our lives.

In the movie Gladiator, the noble Roman general Maximus Decimus Meridius leads his forces to victory over a barbaric Germanic tribe. Emperor Marcus Aurelius visits Maximus at the site of this victory and tells him that he plans to appoint the general as his successor and gives him
the mission to lead the empire and delegate power to the senate. Aurelius’s son, Commodus, discovers that his father plans to bypass him in the succession. In a fit of rage, he murders his father and declares himself emperor. Maximus becomes his adversary. To get rid of him, Commodus orders Maximus’s execution and crucifies the general’s family. Maximus, however, survives, but he becomes an outcast.

As a refugee, Maximus is captured by slave traders and sold to become a gladiator. Unlike any of the other fighters, he makes friends of those he may someday fight in the arena. Meanwhile, in Rome, Commodus sponsors gladiatorial games to, ironically, commemorate his father’s death and celebrate his ascension to the throne. On one of the days of games, a group of gladiators is herded to the center of the arena as soldiers in chariots enter and encircle them as a reenactment of a great battle. But in a stunning reversal of expectations, Maximus orders those who will follow him to form ranks and defeat the charioteers. Maximus becomes the darling of the crowd . . . and even more hated by Commodus.

To get rid of his rival, Commodus orchestrates a one-sided fight. He pits Maximus against the undefeated Tigris of Gaul in an arena filled with tigers whose chains put their jaws and claws in reach of any misstep. During the fight, Maximus is severely wounded, but he keeps fighting. After a grueling duel, Maximus defeats Tigris. He turns to the crowd and the emperor for their decision to kill or spare his adversary. It is, as always, the emperor’s decision. He turns his thumb down, but Maximus spares Tigris anyway. The crowds cheer and proclaim him to be Maximus the Merciful.

Commodus is infuriated. He decides to kill Maximus himself. The emperor lures him into personal combat, but before their public battle, he treacherously punctures the gladiator’s lung. Maximus is weakened, but he fights and kills the emperor—with the emperor’s own blade. Maximus the Merciful had to keep fighting even when he was wounded.
External Challenges

Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for.

—Bob Marley

Maximus is like many leaders I know: noble, misunderstood even when they have the best motives, attacked by those who should be applauding, deeply wounded, choosing mercy over revenge again and again, and staying in the fight until the end. Most of the leaders I know are regularly stabbed beneath their armor. They’re cut, bleeding, and sore, but they don’t give up.

As we lead organizations—businesses, nonprofits, and churches—size doesn’t matter as much as another crucial factor. The biggest difference between leaders of large organizations and small organizations isn’t their location, the size of their building, the scope of the vision, the number of staff members, or their talent. In fact, some of the best leaders I’ve ever met have small organizations. But in all my consulting and conferences, I’ve seen a single factor: leaders of larger organizations have proven they can handle more pain.

Devils All Around You!

There are many different external challenges for pastors, but resistance and personal animosity rank at the top. I was raised in a pastor’s home, I’ve been a pastor, and I talk with pastors every day. The greatest heartache I hear from them is the pain inflicted by their friends. It doesn’t take very many of these people to make our lives miserable. When I speak on this topic, I like to have a little fun. I tell the audience, “I know one thing about your church. I may have never set foot on your campus, but this one thing I know: at least 10 percent of your congregation are devils!”
It’s not about going around trying to stir up trouble. As long as you’re honest and you articulate what you believe to be true, somebody somewhere will become your enemy whether you like it or not.

—Criss Jami

They usually laugh at that point, but they understand exactly what I’m saying. Those 10 percent cause 90 percent of the headaches and heartaches. They not only resist change at all costs, they question the leader’s integrity, wisdom, and authority. If they can’t stop progress by open defiance, they go underground with vicious gossip campaigns. It doesn’t take many of these people to spread the poison of doubt to every corner of a church!

After a pause to let this sink in, I ask, “So, if you have a church of one hundred people, how many devils are in your congregation?”

They yell, “Ten!”

“If you have a church of a thousand, how many devils are there?”

“A hundred!”

Sometimes I add, “If you have a church of ten thousand, how many devils are deeply committed to sabotaging everything you do?”

“A thousand!”

Now I can make my point:

If you can’t handle ten devils, why would God trust you with a hundred or a thousand of them? If you and your church will grow only if you raise the threshold of your pain, the question is simple: How many devils can you handle? In other words, how many naysayers does it take to steal your joy, erode your enthusiasm, and consume your time so that you lose focus on your God-inspired vision? That number is the limit of your growth. Through Jeremiah the prophet, God asked his people, “If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete
**External Challenges**

“with horses?” (Jeremiah 12:5) Learn to run with the devils in your midst today, and God will reward you with many more to deal with!

I then tell them, “Remember: growth equals change; change equals loss; loss equals pain; so inevitably, growth equals pain. That’s why leadership is both brutal and beautiful. It’s bleedership! It’s brutiful!”

If you’re leading, you’re bleeding.

**Financial Strains**

Some of the challenges pastors face come from public perceptions of their role. The vast majority of parishioners consider their pastors and staff members to be “on call” all day every day. This means pastors can never completely relax. One pastor was at a college football game with his wife and another couple when his cell phone rang. It was the wife of a man in his church. She explained that her husband had just died, and she expected the pastor to come to the hospital immediately. The stress of always being “on” puts pastors in the high-risk category for life insurance, similar to loggers but ahead of munitions workers.

Many people assume pastors spend most of their time playing golf and drinking coffee with friends in the church and the community. They don’t have an accurate perception of the demanding administrative burdens coupled with the open-ended responsibilities to care for a troubled and needy group of people. According to a recent survey by the National Association of Church Business Administration, the average pastor in 2012 makes an annual salary of $28,000. One in five has to work a second job to support his family. The average teacher’s salary is $42,000. These two professions, pastors and teachers, are the two lowest paid degreed professions in the country.

Of course the pastors who make the news are often megachurch pastors who make far more than this meager amount. In fact many church leaders struggle to make ends meet. Like teachers who bring home tests to grade
and lessons to prepare, pastors spend untold time after hours preparing for meetings and messages, answering calls, and making visits. Many took out student loans to go to seminary, which is often one of the most expensive academic pursuits. After graduation, as a trained and degreed professional, they work long hours for meager pay. When the salary and actual hours are taken into account, many pastors make less per hour than those who work for lawn crews or at fast food restaurants.

We might assume the people who receive God’s blessings from the pastor’s teaching and compassionate care would want to provide adequate compensation, but that’s often not the case. Many lay leaders, especially those from the older generations, assume the role of pastor necessarily involves suffering and sacrifice, including financial suffering and sacrifice.

Financial pressures don’t always happen to the other guy. I know. I’ve been there. Not long after I took a position as pastor of a country church in Michigan, Brenda gave birth to Rachel, our firstborn. Soon, we discovered Rachel had a severe allergy to milk, so we had to buy a soy substitute—a very expensive substitute. My salary at the church in 1980 was $125 a week. (So don’t complain about how little you make!) We were already living on the edge before Rachel was born. Now, the added expenses of a new baby and soy formula shot us over the cliff. We needed help. We decided to go to social services to apply for food stamps.

We lived in a small town. Distances weren’t far, and everyone knew everyone else’s business. The social services office was about three hundred yards from the church. We filled out the forms and soon we were called back for a meeting with a caseworker. When she walked in, she recognized me, smiled, and said, “How are you today, pastor?”

Suddenly she was embarrassed, and we were embarrassed. She looked at the forms we had filled out, and she asked a few more questions. Finally, she put the papers on the table and told us, “Pastor, you’re making a little too much money to qualify for food stamps. I’m sorry.”

I asked, “How much is too much?”

She winced, “Twenty-two dollars a month.”
**External Challenges**

In those days, I didn’t have a wise mentor to call. I could have asked the church to cut my pay by twenty-two dollars a month, and we could have gotten the soy formula, bread, cheese, and other groceries to live on.

I don’t know how the word got out, but our little family’s financial stress soon was combined with public humiliation as people whispered that the new pastor had applied for food stamps. Brenda and I had to buy the soy formula out of our meager income, which meant we had to decide if we would eat each meal daily, not what we would eat. A private and urgent need made us a public spectacle. The two were a one-two punch to the gut.

**From the Outside Looking In**

The Fuller, Barna, and Pastoral Care research groups published these conclusions about the external challenges for pastors:

- 40% report serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 66% of church members expect a minister and family to live at a higher moral standard than themselves.
- The profession of “Pastor” is near the bottom of a survey of the most-respected professions, just above “car salesman.”

Their research also showed that many pastors lived looking over their shoulders because they realize their jobs are tenuous:

- Over 4,000 churches closed in America last year.
- Over 1,700 pastors left the ministry every month last year.
- Over 1,300 pastors were terminated by the local church each month during the past year, many without cause.
- Over 3,500 people a day left the church last year.

In another study of pastors, Richard Krejcir reported:
Leadership Pain

• 78% were forced to resign from a church at least once.
• 63% had been fired from their pastoral position at least twice.

In a more detailed analysis of the causes of termination, Krejcir found:

• 52% identified the primary reason was organizational and control issues, for example, conflict with an elder, a key lay person, or a faction in the church.
• 24% said the primary reason for dismissal was that the church was suffering from a significant degree of conflict when they arrived, and the pastor’s approach failed to resolve it.
• 14% identified the primary reason was resistance to their leadership, vision, teaching, or to change, or their leadership was “too strong” or expected change “too fast.”
• 8% said they failed to make a personal connection with the leaders and people of the church, sometimes because they were very loyal to the previous pastor and refused to accept anyone as a replacement.²

Common Causes

Some Christians can be sneaky, some might say devious. Everybody is smiling when they walk through the doors on Sunday morning, but behind the smiles occasionally lurk lethargy, suspicion, distrust, and sometimes devious plots to undermine the pastor’s authority and destroy his reputation. In addition to personal conflicts, leaders face a wide range of organizational and cultural obstacles. Let’s look at the most common ones.

Criticism

Jesus said, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). But it’s also true that where two or three are gathered in his name, someone is finding fault with the others. It’s human nature for people to try to build themselves up by putting others down, and
**External Challenges**

ministry leaders are very visible, accessible, vulnerable targets. If they’re visionaries, they’re criticized for not being patient or valuing traditions or not caring for those who are hurting. If they’re devoted to the sick and make many hospital calls, they’re criticized for not being in the office enough to manage projects or failing to chart a bold path to the future. If their gifts are administrative, they’re criticized for not being a great speaker.

The point is clear: no matter what your gifts and style may be, no matter how much you pour your heart into people, and no matter how much time you devote to your ministry, you’ll face criticism.

**Betrayal**

If you lead long enough, you’ll inevitably endure the deep wounds of betrayal. It’s a paradox of leadership: our efforts to help people experience the love and power of Christ create envy in the hearts of some who are watching (and receiving our love). Most people are grateful, but a few—and it only takes a few—undermine us with open opposition, lies, and gossip. In *Leading with a Limp*, Dan Allender defined this wound and described how it further isolates the victim:

Betrayal is a deep psychic wound that hardens the heart against grief and deadens its hunger for intimacy. Grief is meant to open our hearts and eventually move us to care for others. But what if we feel profound shame with our grief? Shame distances us from people and the comfort they could offer us in our grief; shame also causes a person to hate the innate desire to be connected to others.³

Allender observes that betrayal occurs primarily in two forms: abandonment or abuse. When those we trust turn their backs on us, refuse to support us in a time of need, and withhold love when we need it most, the impact is like a knife in the heart. Undoubtedly, that’s how Jesus felt when all his closest followers (except John and the women) left him as he suffered torture and death on the cross. The other form of betrayal, abuse, is an active, brutal, direct wound. In this case, the hurt isn’t caused by the
absence of a kind smile when we need one; it’s the presence of a scowling, bitter face when we need support.

To be fair, betrayal isn’t always a one-sided affair. Certainly, Jesus was completely innocent, and his betrayal was completely unfair, but none of us is as pure. Leaders who are insecure often demand a level of loyalty that isn’t healthy for the leader or the followers. When anyone questions him (too often or too loudly), he may react with feelings of betrayal that aren’t based in reality. In times of intense criticism, factions, and betrayal, leaders need an objective, wise friend, coach, or consultant to help them navigate the turbulent and murky waters. They need to admit their part in the conflict, even if it’s a small part. Assigning appropriate responsibility is important in any disagreement, and especially as the conflict threatens to escalate.

**The Complexity of the Job**

A major challenge for modern pastors is the sheer complexity of the job. A generation or two ago, the pastor’s role was to prepare sermons each week, shepherd the flock, and keep things running smoothly. That wasn’t too hard when there were only a few cogs in the machine. Today, even in small churches, the machine is very complicated. Every magazine, every conference, and every blog has new, innovative ideas. It’s impossible to keep up. In an article called “Eight Reasons Why Pastors Fail,” Joseph Mattera’s first reason is that “churches are becoming complex enterprises which pastors are not equipped to lead.” Some of the responsibilities that have added to the complexity include:

- Keeping up with real estate zoning laws, bank financing for new buildings and expansion, and relating to business leaders in the community about facility needs. Location is a key to growth, so pastors have to stay on top of the demography of their communities.
- As churches grow, pastors have to hire the right architect, decide on complex building plans, and conduct the always popular capital campaign. During particular seasons, fund-raising can easily become the pastor’s obsession.
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- Financial accounting becomes exponentially complex as the church grows and new staff and facilities are added.
- All of these skills aren’t taught in seminary or college, and they aren’t in the core competencies of most ministry leaders. Until they can hire an executive administrator, they have to juggle all these organizational balls themselves.
- In urban and some suburban communities, the needs of the poor quickly outstrip the church’s resources, so pastors need to spend time building relationships and coordinating resources with local service organizations.
- Leaders who are over forty years old need to learn a new language and culture: postmodernity. Old-style apologetics don’t connect with the minds and hearts of the younger audience. If these ministry leaders don’t learn how to speak their language, they’ll seem (or actually be) irrelevant. A part of this shift in culture resurfaces issues of gender identity, racism, ecology, and a host of other issues.
- With only a click or two, every person in the congregation can listen via the Internet to the best Bible teachers in the world. It was hard enough to be effective when pastors competed with the guy down the street at the other church, but now he competes with the very best anywhere. This puts added pressure on his ability to deliver outstanding sermons—and to use all his spare time to prepare.
- As churches grow, the selection of staff members becomes a critical element for the culture of the team, the effectiveness of each department, and the continued growth of the church. Good selections are crucial; poor ones will exact a heavy price.
- In addition, pastors also need to devote themselves to shepherding the flock, developing leaders, caring for the sick and grieving, and attending countless meetings.¹

**Inheriting a Toxic Culture**

Jeremy had been a youth pastor for only a few months when the pastor was fired over a moral failure. For a couple of years before the pastor’s sin...
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was discovered, tension had built within the church. A number of people had suspected his dalliance, but they didn’t have any hard evidence. The pastor’s repeated denials kept him in his position. When the evidence was confirmed, a volcano of pent up anger blew! After the firing, the residue of resentment and betrayal didn’t fade. The executive team asked Jeremy to be the new pastor, but now they had a deep-seated suspicion of pastors—including Jeremy. They may have chosen him because he was young and idealistic or maybe because they thought they could control him. Whatever the reason, Jeremy didn’t realize he had stepped into a boiling cauldron of anger.

Whether it’s wise or not to take a position like the one Jeremy took when his pastor was fired is a complicated question. In the decision-making process, we need to be ruthlessly realistic about the challenges of stepping into a position when the previous leader leaves under a cloud.

But the opposite situation may prove to be equally problematic. I’ve known churches that were so loyal to the previous, beloved pastor that they couldn’t accept anyone taking his place. The football coaches who are hired to follow legends at the best programs seldom succeed. Expectations are simply too high. They try their best, but the culture is untenable.

Toxicity may come from a different source: the pews. Some people love the feeling of power, and they think the church is a good place to exercise it because they may assume the pastor, the staff, and other members are naive. These power-hungry people haven’t learned the upside-down kingdom principles: to gain power, we have to give it away; to be honored, we give honor first to God and others; and true riches come from lavish generosity.

Masks, Lies, and Deceit

"Who can you trust?” a pastor asked when he learned one of his executive team members had been indicted for tax fraud. “I’ve worked with him for over a decade,” he lamented. “I never imagined anything like this could happen.” The pastor was immediately concerned for the man’s wife and teenage children. He didn’t anticipate the local news van pulling up to
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Interview him about the arrest and impending trial. Suddenly the cause of Christ had a black eye in the community. It was another huge rock on the load the pastor had to carry, at least for a while. It would have been enough stress to care for the family.

Sometimes the sins of deception aren’t directed toward the pastor, but he has to bear the load of helping people understand what happened, soothe fears, and restore the reputation of the church.

The Conflict Between Vision and Tradition

The debate between long-held, treasured traditions and new ideas isn’t new. Every generation has to fight this battle and learn the skills of diplomacy. When change is suggested, some people feel their history and, in fact, their identity are threatened, so they resist even the most reasonable steps forward. Church members are notorious for fighting with each other over the most trivial things, but to them the style of music, the pastor’s clothes, the times of the worship services, and a hundred other things are more important than peace and unity in the family of God.

Heartaches at Home

And speaking of family, stressed pastors can’t leave their problems at the office. They take them home. They may try to shield their spouse and kids from the trouble they face at the church, but they can’t. The hurt, anger, and sadness leak out into their lives too. All of the painful statistics we’ve identified under internal stress and external challenges affect the family too, maybe indirectly, but deeply. Over half of all pastors surveyed (58%) report that a spouse has to work outside the home to supplement the income earned from the church. Similarly, more than half of pastors’ wives (56%) say they have no close friends. And like the rest of the population, half of all pastors’ marriages end in divorce, but that painful number doesn’t address the many others who choose to remain married but suffer under the constant strain and occasional crises of financial difficulties, misunderstandings, conflicting priorities, and resistant people.
Leading the Lethargic

Several surveys of church attendance show that fewer people are attending church, giving generously, and volunteering to serve. Not long ago, people were considered to be regular attenders if they attended church twice a month. Now that figure may be less than two times a month.

Today, there are far more distractions than ever before that draw people away from church. Kids’ soccer games are scheduled on Sunday mornings. Families have more disposable income, so they travel more. Cable television has great movies on Sunday morning. People can worship by tuning in to their favorite pastor on television or online.

In addition to immediate distractions, powerful forces in the culture have eroded the credibility of churches. In Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics, Ross Douthat identified a number of ways Christianity positively influenced America up to the last decades of the twentieth century. Then five social catalysts combined to dampen the positive impact of the church:

• Political polarization drove mainline Christians to the left and evangelicals to the right, making the church look like a political pawn of one side or the other.
• The sexual revolution often made the biblical ethic of sex appear unrealistic and out of touch to many, mostly young, people.
• Globalization and modern communication has made it appear that Christianity is a Western religion and supportive of Europe’s dark record of racism, colonialism, and anti-Semitism.
• Rising prosperity in the West has effectively insulated people from a sense of need for rescue and hope for the future.
• Finally, all of these factors have significantly influenced the educated and affluent people in each community, the ones who are the gatekeepers of communication and culture.

What does all this have to do with the challenges of being a pastor today? Everything! It means many of the people Christian leaders are trying
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to reach in the community begin with a negative bias against God, against the church, and against the pastor. And those who come to church are often so distracted by other things that they do little more than show up a time or two a month to check “spirituality” or “church attendance” off their list of good things to do. Richard Krejcir’s research shows that in the most conservative, Bible-believing churches, less than 25 percent of those attending are involved in any groups or studies beyond the Sunday morning services, and he suspects the numbers are actually lower.7

Today, pastors are speaking to people who attend less regularly, and when they show up, they aren’t paying attention. It’s very difficult to base a bold vision of the future on men and women who really aren’t interested. They’re glad to watch from a distance, but they don’t want anything to get in the way of their comfort, pleasure, and ease.

Of course, there are some wonderful people who are radically committed to Christ and his cause. We celebrate them and value them as trusted partners in the adventure of restoring a broken world. But everyone isn’t like them, not by a long shot.

Limited by Team Members

For years I’ve used the metaphor of a ladder to help leaders understand the influence of team members. In my book Who’s Holding Your Ladder? I explain that the leader’s vision is his ladder. As he tries to climb it, he doesn’t need any help to go a few rungs up a twenty-foot extension ladder. It’s stable and secure if he’s only a few feet off the ground. But if he wants to go higher, he needs someone to hold the bottom so it doesn’t come loose from its moorings. If the helper isn’t paying attention, the ladder could slip and the pastor could fall and be injured. So even to climb a short distance farther up the ladder, the pastor needs someone attentive and sturdy.

If he wants to climb to the top of his ladder, the pastor will need two or three people who are just as strong and attentive as the first ladder holder. What if his vision reaches fifty feet? Or a hundred feet? The people holding his ladder determine how high he can go.
It doesn’t matter how high the vision is; what matters is the quality of his ladder holders.

Many pastors have wonderful visions of how God can use the church to accomplish great things, but they haven’t selected the right people to hold their ladder. They may have found someone who could hold it if they went up to twenty feet, but no farther. If they’re unwilling to make changes in the people holding the ladder, they’ll never climb higher. Never. Leaders can do one of three things with those who hold their ladders: retain them because they’re effective, release them because they aren’t, or reassign and retrain them to hold someone else’s ladder.

Most ministry leaders are more committed to keep from hurting anyone’s feelings than accomplishing the vision God has given them. I’ve never been to a church where someone didn’t need to be fired. I’m not suggesting pastors and other leaders become brutal taskmasters. Far from it. They have to hold two goals in tension: vision and shepherding. They can’t afford to let go of either one if they want to be the leaders God has called them to be. The reluctance to fire or reassign a friend has limited the ministry of countless pastors, and it has added immeasurably to their levels of stress because they’re trying to get staff members to do something they can’t or won’t do.

Unreasonable Rules

Sometimes our culture is backward, stunted, and repressive. Prejudice inflicts enormous pain. In the early 1970s, when I was a janitor at Beulah Heights Bible College, one of my duties was to pick up the trash in every office. During my first week, when I went to the dean’s office, I saw a lovely young lady who was his executive assistant. Oh, she looked nice. I introduced myself. She replied sweetly, “My name is Brenda.” Like any other love-struck young man, I began to strategize how I could get to know her and take her out. But there was a problem: Brenda was Caucasian and I was Indian. Brenda and I met about ten years after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, but it appeared that some people in Georgia had never heard of racial equality.
I didn’t have enough money to date Brenda, but the mere fact that I obviously liked her sent ripples of tension throughout the campus. In response, the college’s board met in an urgent session and passed a policy to forbid people dating outside their ethnicity. But they soon realized that wasn’t clear enough. They needed to define dating. So they defined it as having a conversation longer than five minutes, sitting at the same cafeteria table, riding in the same car, sitting next to each other in class, or sitting in the same church pew. In effect, the board members tried to establish an exclusion zone expressly designed to keep me away from Brenda.

Brenda and I respected the leadership of the college, but we also wanted to see each other. On three occasions, the dean, acting on behalf of the college board, called us into his office and threatened to expel us if we continued to talk to each other. Expulsion would be uncomfortable for Brenda but catastrophic for me. She could attend any other school in the country. The move would require some dislocation and interruption, but her life wouldn’t be upset for very long. On the other hand, if I were expelled, I would lose my student visa and be deported. Under the immigration terms of the time, I would never be allowed to enter the United States again for the rest of my life.

Another dean on campus was the designated counselor for the students, and he occasionally called Brenda to see him. He told her that if she kept seeing me, she would go to hell. (I’m not kidding or exaggerating.) Brenda has great respect for authority, so she left these meetings crushed with guilt and confusion. After each one, she told me she had to break up with me because she didn’t want to go to hell. After a while, she realized the dean was using these threats to manipulate her, and we got back together. That happened several times.

Brenda and I have boxes of notes we wrote to each other during our time at Beulah Heights Bible College. When we couldn’t see each other, we wrote or called. The phones in our two dorms were only about twenty yards apart, but using them was safer than meeting face to face. Our dance of love and secrecy lasted for three years. We both took risks, but they were worth it.
One year on Secretary’s Day, I was sure no one would acknowledge Brenda and thank her for her faithful and excellent service, so I used the little money I’d saved to buy a bouquet of flowers and have them delivered to her desk. Someone noticed the pretty flowers and asked her, “Who gave these to you? They’re beautiful!”

Without thinking, she answered, “Sam did!” When word spread, we were both summoned by the dean.

I was brought up in a culture that deeply respects those who are in authority. India is a gracious land that gives the highest honor to parents, teachers, and other leaders. In every threatening conversation with the dean, I never barked back or stormed out. I sat quietly and listened, and when he was finished, I said, “Thank you, sir.” Even as a young man in college, I understood that the fear and racism evident on the board didn’t appear out of a vacuum. To a great degree, those men were the products of their culture. They had lived for decades under Jim Crow laws that allowed racial discrimination in the South for nearly a century after the Civil War; I hadn’t. They had recently seen marches and police brutality; I hadn’t. They had watched as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated; I had come to an America that was suffering enormous pain and fear.

During those awful years when I was a student, I believed the leadership and the school board were ignorant, not prejudiced. Somehow I sensed that the reaction of the board and the dean wasn’t the true content of their hearts. I don’t think the dean believed what he was doing was good, right, and fair. He was given the task to enforce the board’s policy, and he tried to do it the best he knew how. I don’t think the board was acting out of spite but out of fear. They didn’t know any better. The board was filled with people from rural areas and small towns where racial equality was perceived as a grave threat to their way of life. They were suffering from the pressures of a repressive, racist culture, and they simply didn’t know how to reconcile their faith in a gracious, welcoming God with the rampant racism found in their nation.

I went back to India in 1977, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Brenda. Thankfully, pleasant thoughts about me filled her mind and heart. I came back two years later and asked her to marry me. She said, “Yes!” We planned
to get married in the church next to the campus where both of us had been very involved. Brenda had tithed faithfully and led the nursing home ministry, among many other ways she had served the church. Before returning to India, I had been the worship leader and choir coordinator as well as occasional preacher whenever the pastor was away.

Brenda and I made an appointment to see the pastor. When we asked him to marry us, he flatly said, “No.” I asked why, and he explained, “Because I don’t think your marriage can work. She’s white, and you’re Indian.” (As if we hadn’t noticed.) I asked if we could rent the church for our wedding. He agreed to my suggestion, and we found another clergyman to perform the ceremony.

In this emotionally charged environment, we unwittingly put everyone we invited to the wedding on the horns of a dilemma. Should they come or not? Were they being faithful to their leaders by staying away, or did they have freedom of conscience to come and celebrate with us? Our friends made an array of different choices: some came to the wedding but not the reception, some came to the reception but not the wedding, some came to both, some didn’t come to either. Our wedding intensified the divisions and suspicions in the Beulah Heights community. For Brenda and me, excruciating pain clouded our joyful moment.

We had to get away from there. A friend in Oregon had invited me to be his youth pastor. He said, “I can’t pay you anything, but I can give you a place to live.” Three days after Brenda and I were married, we packed our car and drove across the country to make a new start.

I served as youth pastor for over a year and then became a pastor in Michigan for about nine years. During that time, our church began supporting Beulah Heights Bible College, and we sent students there. We were happy to help them grow in their faith and learn the skills they’d need for a lifetime of success. The faculty asked me to come back to speak at workshops and symposiums at the school. After many trips back to Atlanta and a lot of time working with faculty, the board invited me to be a member of the board. Suddenly, I was sitting at the same table with those who had passed a policy to prevent me from spending time with Brenda.

To build bridges, I invited several board members to come to Michigan.
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to speak at our church. Some of them stayed at our home. In their own way, all of them apologized for how they had treated us. Old wounds were healing. New understanding was developing. When the president took a role at another university, the board asked me to become president of Beulah Heights Bible College.

Ten years after Brenda and I left Beulah Heights with deep feelings of hurt and confusion, we returned, but this time, I was the college president. Amazingly, a radical healing transformation had occurred. Board members now welcomed me as the new leader of the institution.

The darkest chapters of my history occurred at Beulah Heights, but in God’s amazing, redemptive grace, he used the same people and the same institution to bring new hope, creativity, and fruitfulness into my life. But, first, we needed to clear up a few things.

Soon after I took the new role, I went to the dean’s office and said, “Years ago I sat in this chair in this office across from you, and you threatened to expel me. I was your janitor. Now I’m your president. I’m okay with you. The question is whether you’re okay with me.”

He assured me that the past was, indeed, past, and we would move together into the future. In my fifteen years as president at Beulah Heights, the dean became one of my most trusted and valued partners.

When I arrived as president of Beulah Heights in 1989, we had eighty-seven students; when I left fifteen years later, we had almost eight hundred. When I arrived, we weren’t accredited; when I left, we had dual accreditation. No one cheered louder or was more helpful than the dean. His constant refrain was, “Sam, the best is yet to be. We haven’t yet seen all that God is going to do here!”

Still . . .

Yes, being a leader is an incredibly stressful role. The hours are usually long, the pay is often short, and the people are sometimes contentious, but a study by the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center
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reports that pastors are the happiest people on the planet, outranking even well-paid and highly respected professions like doctors and lawyers.

Yes, being a leader is an incredibly stressful role. The hours are usually long, the pay is often short, and the people are sometimes contentious. Even with these difficulties, many pastors and other church leaders find enormous fulfillment in their roles. They see lives changed, and they have the joy of knowing God has used them to communicate His tenderness and strength.

Being a Christian leader in any organization is one of the most difficult jobs in the world—full of risks, strains, and challenges for the leader and his family—but it’s also the one that offers the greatest hope to make a difference both now and for eternity.

Know This

You’ll only climb as high as the quality and capacity of those who hold your ladder.

Do This

On a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (maxed out), rate your current level of angst that comes from the external challenges of:

- Criticism
- Betrayal
- The complexity of the job
- Inheriting a toxic culture
- Masks, lies, and deceit
- The conflict between vision and tradition
- Heartaches at home
- Leading the lethargic
- Limited by team members
- Unreasonable rules
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What does this quick evaluation tell you about the source of your external challenges?

Think About This

1. At this point, what is your capacity to deal with devils around you? How is this limiting the growth of your leadership and your church?
2. In the brief evaluation of challenges above, which two or three give you the most trouble? Who knows how much you struggle with these things? Who can help you find a way forward?
3. How would you advise someone who suffered from a recent betrayal? Have you taken your own advice to deal with yours? Why or why not?
4. Who’s holding your ladder? How high can you climb with them holding it? Do you need to make any changes? If so, when and how will you make them?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the findings of the study about job satisfaction for ministry leaders? What is your level of satisfaction with your role? Explain your answer.
6. What lessons (about God, about you, and about your role) does God want to teach you from your external challenges?

And remember: you’ll grow only to the threshold of your pain.