



# Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership THE SUMMARY

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### Introduction

This book is about the soul—your soul, my soul, and the soul of our leadership. Jesus indicated that it is possible to gain the whole world but lose your own soul. If he were talking to us as Christian leaders today, he might point out that it is possible to gain the whole world of ministry success but lose your own soul in the midst of it all. He might remind us that it is possible to find your soul again after conducting an extensive search, only to lose it again. He might further emphasize that, when leaders lose their souls, the churches and organizations they lead lose their souls as well.

Strengthening the soul of your leadership is an invitation to enter more deeply into the spiritual transformation process and to lead from that place. It is an opportunity to forge a connection between our souls and our leadership rather than experience them as separate areas of our lives.

Many of us leader types are unaccustomed to the language of the soul and its quiet ways. Some reject it outright as too “soft” or are fundamentally opposed to living the life of an activist leader. The truth is that many of us have reached a place where we have acquired exhaustive knowledge and know-how and have accomplished much, but we realize that something is missing. We are desperate to rediscover an intimacy with God that feeds our own souls. We long to receive a word from God that speaks to our hearts alone rather than words meant for public consumption.

My one and only desire for this book is that it will lead you into encounters with God that will strengthen the soul of your leadership in areas where you need it most. Truly, the best quality that any of us can bring to leadership is our own transformed selves. This is the journey to which I commit myself, however feebly at times, and it is the journey to which you are also invited. If seeking God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is the journey you long to take, if you are willing to allow yourself to be transformed by what takes place there, if you are interested in forging a connection between your own journey of transformation and your leadership, let us walk the path together to see where God will lead.

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### **Chapter 1: When Leaders Lose Their Souls**

When the early Wesleyan bands of Christ-followers congregated in small group meetings, the first question they asked one another was, "How is it with your soul?" This is the best question for us to ask as Christian leaders in light of Jesus's warning and in consideration of what we witness in and around us. So how is it with your soul?

Some of us know that we are losing bits and pieces of our soul every day, and we are frightened by the possibility of going over the edge. Others of us are still hanging in there fairly well, but we are not sure how long we will last. All of us have watched ministry friends and colleagues endure heartbreak, failure, or betrayal so profoundly that they left the ministry and are now selling real estate.

These days (and perhaps every day) tension exists between what the human soul needs to be truly well and what the leadership life encourages and even requires. Tension mounts in our attempts to balance being and doing, community and cause, honesty and public relations. Tension surfaces between the time it takes to love people and the need for expediency. And tension is found between the need to have measurable goals and the difficulty of measuring that which is ultimately immeasurable by anyone but God.

The temptation is very great to compromise basic Christian values—love, community, truth telling, confession and reconciliation, silent listening, and waiting on God for discernment—for the sake of expedience. In a high-performance culture (both secular and religious), holding to deep spiritual values in the face of pressure to perform (whether performance is measured by numbers, new buildings, or the latest innovation) is one of the greatest challenges of spiritual leadership.

The only way to begin facing these challenges is to keep seeking tenaciously after God through spiritual disciplines that keep us grounded in the presence of God and the center of our being. Solitude and silence in particular enable us to experience a place of authenticity within and to invite God to meet us there. In solitude we are rescued from relentless human striving to solve the challenges of ministry through intellectual achievements and hard work so that we can experience the life of the Spirit guiding us toward the true path that lies between the two polarities. In silence we relinquish control and allow God to be God in

our life rather than a thought in our head or an illustration in a sermon. In that place we have sought, we listen for the still, small voice of God telling us who we really are and what is real from a spiritual viewpoint. Then we are not quite so enslaved by the demands and expectations of life in leadership.

### **Chapter 2: What Lies Beneath**

That which lies beneath the surface of the ocean of our lives matters. Whether or not I know something is there is irrelevant in some ways. My awareness or lack of awareness doesn't make it any less real. It doesn't matter much whether I have ever heard of what lurks beneath the surface or whether I believe such things exist. The point is that there are things lurking under the surface, and it could even be the case that others see these things even though I don't. If, by God's grace, we become aware of the dark creatures lurking below, the best action we can take is to get out of the water—fast!

It often takes something of magnitude for a leader to move beyond mere dabbling in solitude to a more substantive experience. Some behavioral pattern, something unresolved, out of control, and destructive enough must be present for us to say, "I must go into solitude with this." We thought we had kept it fairly well hidden. We thought we could manage it or at least keep its destructive nature fairly private, but now here it is, out there for all to see, and it is wreaking havoc on our attempts to accomplish something good. We must not ignore this moment when it comes. It is one way that the leader's journey into solitude and silence begins.

One of the primary functions of solitude is for us to settle into ourselves in God's presence. This is not easy, and it takes time. But it is the answer to the heart's cry that erupts when we have been distracted for too long by surface concerns. "I have lost myself!" we cry. Solitude is the only chance to find ourselves again. And the longer we have been lost to ourselves, caught up with external stimulation, the longer it takes to find our way home again.

At this point in the journey of solitude, we need to be cautious of our expectations and ourselves. Most of what happens in solitude happens under the surface, and God is making it happen. Just as most of what happens in the ocean happens under the surface and most of what happens to a seed in winter happens under the earth, the

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most important things that happen to the human soul in solitude happen under the surface, where only God knows about them.

When we are determined to do good deeds but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to what lies beneath the surface and opening up in God's presence, evil is always close at hand. The raw gift of leadership may be present along with a strong sense of what is right and what we think needs to be accomplished in this world. But our leadership cannot be a force for good if it is not refined by the rigors of true solitude, that place where God is at work beyond the limitations of what we are able to accomplish for ourselves or even know how to accomplish for ourselves.

This is a leader's invitation to enjoy freedom from the inner bondage that subjects us to the deeply patterned responses that may have been helpful to us at one time but could cripple us now in what we are called to accomplish. This is a call to liberation that we often hear only when we finally become desperate enough to consider a radical departure from life as we know it so that we can be made well. Only those whom God has freed at this level are prepared to lead others into the freedom they seek. Only those who have displayed enough bravery to ride their own monsters of anger and greed, jealousy, narcissism, fear, and violence all the way down to the bottom will find the true energy necessary to lead. Only those who have faced their own dark side can be trusted to lead others to the light.

This is where true spiritual leadership begins. Everything that has come before is something else.

### **Chapter 3: The Place of Our Own Conversion**

All of us need a homecoming at which we claim our experiences as our own and acknowledge the ways in which they have shaped us. Then we are positioned to take responsibility for ourselves rather than being driven by our unconscious patterns of manipulating and controlling reality. Taking responsibility for ourselves may be more demanding than taking responsibility for a congregation or an organization. Whether we embrace responsibility sooner or later, it is crucial to our capability to lead spiritually.

Solitude is the place of our own conversion. When in

solitude, we stop believing our own press. We discover that, although we are not as good as we thought we were, we are more than we thought we were. As we slowly come in contact with our own dysfunctions, we unveil our need for security and can examine all the ways we try to use God and others to attain it. We are alarmed to discover that, when the shepherd is starving, he or she may start devouring the sheep.

In solitude our illusions fall away, and we can see (sometimes with disturbing clarity) our competitiveness, jealousies, rage, and manipulations. We get in touch with our fears of loneliness and abandonment, of truly loving others and allowing others to love us, of our sexuality and its power in combination with our spirituality. When we are in the company of others, it is easy to project our fears and negative feelings onto them; when we are in solitude, we must claim these inner experiences as our own. We discover that we are not who we thought we were in all of our self-aggrandizement, neither are we who other people think we are in all of their idealized projections.

If we remain in solitude long enough, we feel safe enough with ourselves and with God to say, "Yes, this is who I am." We can surrender to who we are—to our limitations, clinginess, grasping, possessiveness, selfishness, and fear. This is not a yes that says, "I will remain the same." This is a yes that says to God, "I recognize who I am now, and I am none other than who I am. Whatever most needs to be accomplished in my life, you will have to direct."

When we fail to name reality accurately, we are left to wander around in the wilderness of our illusions because we are hiding from ourselves and from God. We remain in bondage to that which does not take us forward in the life of grace, which is the very thing we say we want. The good news is that when we name our situation correctly—even (and perhaps most importantly) the past that is so painful to acknowledge—we become more real. This is an awakening that leads to what is described by Christian tradition as the purgative way.

The purgative way is a commitment to self-knowledge, which is essential preparation for serious Good News. Purgation (or self-simplification) is a way to "clear the decks for action." The purgation of the soul provides an opportunity to grow and to integrate the warring elements inside us. Purgation leads to conversion, which is primarily about the "movement to a fully integrated and maturing

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life directed towards its true end and home.”

These aspects of conversion along the purgative way are never meant to be harsh or punitive. Rather they are meant to facilitate a letting go process that allows us to receive what we are given. As we face who we are more honestly, we find we are finally ready for an encounter with God. Now is the time to relinquish the weapons of false security, to come out of hiding and make room for something new.

### **Chapter 4: The Practice of Paying Attention**

Many of us choose to live lives that do not position us to pay attention, to notice those places where God is at work, and to ask ourselves what these things mean. We long for a word from the Lord, but somehow we have been led to believe that the pace we keep is what leadership requires of us. We slide inexorably into a way of life that offers little or no opportunity to pay attention, and then we wonder why we are not hearing from God when we most need him.

The practice of “turning aside to look” is a spiritual discipline that by its very nature prepares us for an encounter with God. Today, a glut of information and stimulation abounds, which makes it difficult to know what we should pay attention to. When we do create space where we can exercise discretion about how to use our time, we may find ourselves spinning in circles from one attention-getting thing to another, not knowing which to choose.

Amid the welter of possible distractions, leaders need to spend time in solitude to notice things we would otherwise miss due to the fast pace and extreme complexity of our lives. We need moments to let the chaos settle a bit and invite God to show us evidence of his presence at work in both big and subtle ways and allow him to guide us in our understanding of what things mean. This practice alone can propel us into a very exciting part of the journey—a journey full of surprises, pronouncements, and messages from God.

Moments are there for all of us if we simply learn to notice them—moments when our awareness opens up, and we see things from a spiritual perspective, which somehow changes everything. If we take time to pay attention, we will see that God was with us all along, protecting, guiding, and blessing us, and we realize how thin the veil actually

is between the material and spiritual worlds. We learn to recognize and respond to the spiritual reality that is all around us.

It is especially important for leaders to cultivate the ability to “discern the spirits” or “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (see 1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 John 4:1). Leaders who are committed to paying attention at this level develop a mature capacity for discernment that helps them distinguish real from phony and true from false, not only in the outside world but also in the interior world of thoughts and motives. As we become more attuned to these subtle spiritual dynamics, we can distinguish between what is good (what moves us toward God and his calling in our life) and what is evil (what draws us away from God).

For a leader to take time to turn aside and look is no small feat. In the rush of normal life, we often blow right past the place where God is creating a stir to grab our attention. At the heart of spiritual leadership is the capacity to notice God’s activities so we can join him in them. Amid the welter of possible distractions, an essential discipline for leaders is to craft quiet times in which we allow God to show us those things that we might otherwise miss. We need time for the chaos in our soul to settle so that we can turn aside to look at the great sights in our own life and seek understanding about what they mean.

### **Chapter 5: The Conundrum of Calling**

Our calling is woven into the very fabric of our being as we have been created by God, and it encompasses everything that makes us who we are: our genetics, innate orientations, capacities, personality, heredity, life-shaping experiences, and the time and place into which we were born. “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original self-hood given to me at birth by God.”

The biblical idea of calling is not easily dismissed. Its meaning is richly layered. In its simplest and most straightforward meaning, “to call” refers to the capacity living creatures have to call out to one another, to stay connected, to communicate something of importance. Even at this most basic level, the dynamic of calling is profound because it reminds us that calling is first of all highly relational: It has to do with one being’s (God)



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reaching out and establishing connection with another (us). It is an interpersonal connection and communication that is initiated by God and thus demands our attention and response even as a basic courtesy.

It is not unusual to feel resistance or ambivalence in the face of God's call, even as our heart leaps with the awareness that God is at work in our life. Any kind of authentic calling usually takes us to a place where we express serious objections of some sort, places where we feel inadequate, where we confront our own willfulness and preconceived ideas about how we thought our life would proceed, where we think what God is asking us to do is downright impossible or where we just don't want to take the risk. One of the ways we recognize a calling is that it originates in ways that could not be humanly orchestrated, and so it cannot be easily dismissed. "Vocational calling involves more riskiness and uncertainty. While you won't be given 'more than you can bear,' you will be led by 'a way you do not know' to be a channel for grace in ways you cannot adequately predict."

Solitude, then, is that place where we fight it out with God if we need to—all the way down to the mat. Leadership, even at its best, is terribly demanding, and it is crucial that we argue with God about our ambivalence regarding our calling to leadership openly so that it doesn't leak out and create uncertainty in those we are serving.

This is not about making a brilliant career move. It is not about security. It is not about success or failure or anything else the ego desires for us. It is not about choosing among several attractive options. This is about the Spirit of God's setting us on our feet and telling us, "This is yours to do. Whether they hear or refuse to hear, whether it feels to you as if you are failing or succeeding, you are to speak my words."

A true leader is one who has heard the fatal question. This is a person who has seen a vision of what could be and who continues to take steps in that direction against all odds. We might argue with God a bit. We might put forth every excuse that comes to mind. But God always wins this argument because, every time we go deep inside to listen, we know that what God is calling us to do is ours to do and that the path before us is ours to walk. We know it is the meaning of our life. And so we say yes. For better or for worse, we say yes to meaning. We say yes to God.

### Chapter 6: Guiding Others on the Spiritual Journey

Understanding the stages that we have passed through on our own journey is excellent preparation for leading others on the journey with gentleness and skill. An understanding of stages can help us instill confidence and provide reassurance to others during those parts of the journey that are challenging and difficult.

**Pre-awareness:** The first stage in the spiritual journey is pre-awareness. This is the time when we are not even aware that we are in bondage or that we need God to lead us into something more. There may even be good things taking place, and we are lulled into believing that this is as good as it gets. At this stage, our way of life seems to be working pretty well, and we assume that this is the way everyone lives.

**Awareness:** Eventually something happens to heighten our awareness that our heart is longing for something more. We realize that we are not completely free, and we begin at least to open up to the possibility of moving in a new direction. This could be a single event or an accumulation of events that we can no longer dismiss or ignore.

**Turning Point:** The deterioration of our situation might seem like an unnecessary part of the journey, but it is actually an important part of the process because it brings us to a turning point where we are willing to do something about our situation. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back. This is that last thing that puts it over the edge for us, and, after this, nothing can be the same. Before this, we were waffling—tossed back and forth between an awareness of our bondage and the awareness of all we have to lose if we stand up and make the needed change. But all of this is the darkness before the dawn. This is God's moment to come through, and he does—with signs and wonders that will free us for the journey ahead.

**The Roundabout Way:** The roundabout way may not be the most direct route, but it represents a wonderful era in our spiritual life when God shows up in very tangible ways to assure us of his presence on the journey. During this time, we settle into a period of normalcy in which we learn what it means to live freely in the presence of God and to rely on his presence for our sustenance. The ability to rely on God that is being developed during this time is foundational to the spiritual life that will serve us well

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when the first challenge hits and we enter into “the great and terrible wilderness” (Deuteronomy 8:15).

**Times of Testing:** The challenges do come. Somewhere along the way, we are faced with our first real obstacle. It is usually quite unexpected, and we are not prepared.

**Learning to Keep Still:** We should not underestimate the raw human emotion and survival instincts that are at work in this moment. When a leader starts to feel this kind of dynamic takeover, it is alarming and great wisdom is required. Effectiveness at this moment has to do with the fact that, although we are fully aware of our emotions, we need to be even more attuned to the reality of God’s presence. We need to calm ourselves and learn to wait on God even when faced with our greatest fear.

What kind of leader is able to call people to wait on God in the face of a real threat when all of their survival instincts are raging? It is possible only for leaders who have waited on God in the darkest moments of their own deep need, leaders who have stood still and waited for God’s deliverance in the place where they feared for their very life, leaders who possess the inner spiritual authority that comes from their own waiting can ask others to do the same.

In solitude we learn to wait on God for our own life so that, when our leadership brings us to the place where our only option is to wait on God, we believe it all the way down to the bottom of our being. Because we have met God in the waiting place (rather than running away, succumbing to panic, or deceiving ourselves into thinking things are better than they are), we can stand firm and believe God in a way that makes it possible for others to follow suit.

### Chapter 7: Living Within Limits

Sometimes leaders go so fast for so long that they don’t know how close they are to their limits, or they are so convinced that this is what the leadership life requires that they believe they don’t have any other options. All true leaders must eventually face reality, or they will break themselves against an immovable wall. There are physical limits of time and space, strength and energy.

There are limits to our relational capacities, depending on our personality type. There are limits associated with this particular season of our life. There are limits within this particular community and this particular set of relationships. There are limits in this calling God has placed on my life, one of which is that I am not available for other callings.

I have spent much of my life bumping against limits, ignoring limits, and pretending that there are no limits. It is an embarrassing little secret that seems to be common among leaders, and we probably need to be more honest about it. Buried deep in the psyche of many leaders are Superman mentalities, the belief that a few of us can function beyond normal human limitations and save the world—or at least our little corner of the world. This is a grandiosity that we indulge at our own peril.

Narcissism is rampant among leaders (even Christian leaders); the truth is that we are driven by our grandiosity more often than we think. One of the ways to recognize narcissism within ourselves is to notice when we have not yet accepted the field or the sphere of action that God has given us—the opportunities and the limits of life in this body, this community, this set of relationships, this financial situation, this place where we have been called by God to serve. Narcissistic leaders always look longingly at someone else’s field as somehow more worthy or more indicative of success. They are always pushing the limits of their situation rather than lovingly working the field they have been given.

When we refuse to live within limits, we refuse to live with a basic reality of human existence. There is a finiteness to what we can do in our bodies, a finiteness to how many relationships we can meaningfully engage in at one time, a finiteness to time, to how many hours there are in a day or a week, and to how much can be accomplished in those blocks of time. There is finiteness to our energy. There are times when we are tired, sick, or injured. These are times when we are reminded that we are finite human beings living in the presence of an infinite God. God is the one who can be all things to all people, the one who can be in all places at once, the one who never sleeps. We are not.

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Our unwillingness to live within limits, both personally and in the community, is one of the deepest sources of depletion and eventual burnout. That's the bad news. The good news is that there is something deeply spiritual about living and working within our God-ordained limits, in other words, living fully and acceptingly within our own set of realities.

Living graciously within the boundaries of our life as it has been entrusted to us gives our life substance. Oddly enough, something of the will of God is contained in the very limits that we often try to sidestep or ignore. Living within limits is in no way an acquiescence that is despairing, passive, or fatalistic; rather, it honors the deepest realities of the life God has given us: life in this body at this age and stage, life in our family at its age and stage, life in this personality, life with this community, and life in the midst of this calling.

### **Chapter 8: Spiritual Rhythms in the Life of the Leader**

The sad truth is that life in and around the church today often leads people into a way of life that is becoming more and more layered with Christian busyness. If we are honest, we might admit that Christian leaders are just as driven to succeed as anyone else, except our success is measured in larger congregations, better church services, more innovations, and bigger buildings. There is nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves; what can be wrong is the kind of life we must live to make them happen. The operative word here is "driven."

When we continue to push forward without taking adequate time for rest and replenishment, our way of life may seem heroic, but there is a frenetic quality to our work that lacks true effectiveness because we have lost the ability to be present to God and to other people and to discern what is truly needed in our situation. The result can be "sloppy desperation": a mental and spiritual lethargy that prevents the quality of presence that would deliver true insight and spiritual leadership.

When we are depleted, we become overly reliant on voices outside ourselves to tell us what is happening. We react to symptoms rather than seek to understand and respond to underlying causes. We rely on other people's ministry models and outside consultants because we are too tired to listen in our setting and craft something uniquely suited

to meet present needs. When we are rested, however, we bring steady, alert attention characterized by true discernment about what is truly needed in our situation and the energy and creativity to carry it out.

Rhythms of work and rest are fundamental to our well-being. Keeping the Sabbath is the linchpin of a life lived in sync with the rhythms God himself built into our world, and yet it is the discipline that seems the most difficult for us to live. Keeping the Sabbath honors the body's need for rest, the spirit's need for replenishment, and the soul's need to delight itself in God for God's own sake. It begins with a willingness to acknowledge the limits of our humanness and then to take steps to live more graciously within the order of things.

There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our existence as human beings: physical and spiritual creatures in a world of time and space. Something can be said for establishing rhythms that are gracious and accepting of our human limits and that enable us to be gracious to and accepting of others. Energy that comes from being rested is different from energy that comes from being driven. Wisdom that comes from silent listening is different from whatever comes from talking things to death. A right action comes from waiting on God and is utterly different from reactivity. A renewed engagement occurs in difficult battles that require slogging through life with unremitting and stoic resolve. All of these rhythms create space for God and foster an ability to bring something truer to the world than all of our doing. All of these rhythms put us in touch with something more real in ourselves and others than what we all are able to produce. We touch our very being in God. Surely this is what the people around us need the most.

### **Chapter 9: Leadership as Intercession**

One of the most constant patterns of Moses's life in leadership was the regularity with which he prayed for the people he was leading and for whom he sought God's guidance. Rather than getting caught up in defending himself or arguing a point, he used his energy to carry the people into the presence of God, to cry out on their behalf, and to listen to God for their next steps. Over and over again the pattern was very consistent: "The people complained...and Moses cried out to the Lord."

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Placing this much reliance on God for the actual outcome is a very edgy way to lead. We are much more accustomed to relying partially on God and partially on our own plans and thoughts if the issues at hand are important. What is the use of praying if, at the very moment we pray, we have so little confidence in God that we are busy planning our own answer to our prayer?

However, a leader's own journey into solitude and silence can have a profound effect on the way we pray for others—or at least it has for me. As I have deepened my capacity to be with God by acknowledging what is true about me and have learned more about how to wait for God's deliverance in my own life, it has not only changed my approach to praying for others but has also changed my understanding of intercessory prayer. I realize now that intercessory prayer is not thinking that I know what someone else needs and trying to wrestle it from God. Rather, it is presenting myself to God on another's behalf, listening for the prayer that the Holy Spirit is already praying for that person before the throne of grace, and my willingness to join God in that prayer.

Intercessory prayer is more about not knowing than it is about knowing. It is about growing increasingly more comfortable with the truth of Romans 8, which suggests that I do not know how to pray as I ought, for myself or anyone else, and must accept the fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who really knows how to pray and is already interceding for that person or situation before the throne of grace. As I enter into the stillness of true prayer, it is enough to experience my own groaning about the situations or person I am concerned about and to sense the Spirit's groaning on their behalf.

Who would we be if the practice of intercessory prayer shaped our leadership? How might it change the dynamic between us and those we are leading if they knew that we are regularly and routinely entering into God's presence with the intent to speak and lead from what transpires there?

### **Chapter 10: The Loneliness of Leadership**

It is one thing to place yourself in the service of someone else's vision; it is quite another to have seen a vision yourself and to understand throughout your being that you will go on, and you must go on regardless of the choices other people make. The loneliness of leadership is

knowing that the buck stops here, that God has given you something to do, and to renege would be similar to Jonah's hiding in the bottom of the boat, trying to pretend that he had not received a call from God. You could do it, but it wouldn't leave you with much of a life.

When we begin to experience this kind of existential loneliness, no trite answers or superficial responses will suffice. One more accomplishment, achievement, title, or degree following our name will not satisfy our need, and the only reason we know that is because we have tried it all. Something is missing, and it is the experience of the presence of God that we felt so strongly when we began our Christian journey and that has now become a distant memory.

This kind of loneliness must drive us first and foremost to God because there is no one else and nothing else that can answer such a deep heart cry. Recognizing and accepting this kind of aloneness for what it is prevents us from being seduced into believing that our restlessness can be satiated "out there" in the realm of activity, success, notoriety, and social connections. This in itself is no small thing, for allowing ourselves to face our ultimate aloneness compels us to "travel inward to meet ourselves and to meet the infinite love and riches of God dwelling inside our beings." Then, and only then, can our loneliness be transformed into a fruitful solitude in which the fullness of God's presence fills all emptiness.

This kind of loneliness is an absolute truth of leadership, as we are placed in a position where we must take total responsibility for ourselves and for what God is calling us to do regardless of what others are doing. None of us escapes it. Of course, this presents us with a real dilemma when we realize that, no matter what the people around us are saying, no matter how much they wish to go back, the vision we have seen is so real that it is impossible for us to go back and live as we once did. Even though the Promised Land is still far off, we have tasted enough of the dream to know that to go back would make us crazier than continuing to move forward. And even if we did go back, we probably would not receive a very warm welcome.

Have you ever experienced a moment when you knew that you could not continue to face the challenges of leadership alone without some knowledge and certainty of God's goodness? Have you ever experienced a moment when you realized that all that had gone before—past successes,



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past achievements, past experiences of God—meant nothing? How about a moment when loneliness and disillusionment were so deep that nothing in the future—no carrot dangling on the end of a stick—could make the sacrifice seem worth it? Or a moment when you realized that none of the trappings of leadership—no role, no title, no accomplishment, no vision for some future reality—could touch the emptiness you felt on the inside, making you want to stop if you did not know for certain that God was with you? Are you there now?

If your answer is yes, thank God because this may be the moment in which you experience your greatest freedom—freedom from being so driven by visions of future possibilities that you are distracted from seeking God in the here and now. Thank God because this is the moment when you know that the nearness of God is ultimately good, and you are not willing to go on without it. Thank God because now you know that you are no longer willing to sacrifice intimacy with God for anything, even for the Promised Land you have envisioned. Thank God because the goodness of the Lord, which fills all emptiness, is about to surround you.

### **Chapter 11: From Isolation to Leadership Community**

Oftentimes our feelings of isolation increase right along with our success. Many reasons can account for this, some which have to do with the dynamics that others bring and some that have to do with ourselves. We might feel that our need for others is a sign of weakness that is incongruent with our need to be in control or with the I've-got-it-all-figured-out kind of person we think a leader is supposed to represent. As the stakes get higher, we might find ourselves operating more and more from the belief that, if we want anything to be done right, we have to do it ourselves. We may have received enough hard knocks in relationships that we are no longer willing to trust ourselves in a deep relationship with anyone. To make matters worse, we might be so emotionally depleted that we don't cultivate community with other leaders because doing so takes more energy than maintaining a purely professional relationship. And it's a lot less risky.

Whatever the reasons, this kind of isolation is a dangerous place for a leader. One day we wake up and realize that we are so empty inside that we want to die, or at least quit.

When we get to the place where our loneliness becomes destructive, it is usually so deep that we cannot find our way out by ourselves. No trite answers or superficial

responses will do. No mere organizational tweak will address this kind of isolation. We might have tried to assuage our loneliness or distract ourselves from it in various ways, but now we have no other option except to pour out our loneliness in God's presence and cast our very human self on his mercy.

During this time it is vital to resist the urge to cling to or grasp unwisely at those who may or may not have the spirit to walk with us. This is a grave temptation that we indulge to our own peril. But by carrying our loneliness into the solitary place first, we encounter the caring presence of God, who hears our cry, and we open ourselves to receive those who God is giving to bear the burden with us. These we watch for and welcome as a gift from God so that together we can be open to God's life-giving Spirit among us.

When God brings these partners, it is good to have some idea of what to do with them. This is more than an invitation to be part of a winning team. This is an invitation to engage in spiritual community at the leadership level. A team gathers around a task, and when that task is over, the team disbands. Spiritual community, on the other hand, is much more permanent, because spiritual community gathers around a person, Jesus Christ, who is present to us through the Holy Spirit.

If we are confused on this point and think that it is somehow our responsibility to create community, the burden will surely be more than we can bear. However, if we understand that we are invited to participate, to find ways to live in this great reality called spiritual community, we can embrace the values that under-grid community. We can choose to establish practices that transform us in community. Spiritual community at the leadership level then becomes the context for discerning and doing the will of God, which is the heart of spiritual leadership.

How interesting it is to find that, when we open up our loneliness in God's presence, we are eventually led to a commitment to certain persons, certain values, and a certain journey and are then called to remain faithful to those commitments. An answer to cure the loneliness of isolation is to find a new home inside the community of faith.

### **Chapter 12: Finding God's Will Together**

At the heart of spiritual leadership and spiritual journeying is discernment, which is the capacity to recognize

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and respond to the presence and activity of God both personally and in the community. Spiritual leaders are distinguished by their commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so the community can affirm a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward on that basis. The practice of leadership discernment, similar to any other Christian discipline, is a means to create space for God's activities in our lives. It is one way we can make ourselves available so that he can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Through the practice of discernment in community, we open ourselves to the wisdom of God, which is beyond human wisdom but is available to us when we ask for it.

Community discernment at the leadership level is not mechanical, neither is it always linear. As we become more comfortable with the process, we experience it less as a step-by-step procedure and more as a creative mix of the following dynamic elements. Although the first several moves need to take place in order as a group practices together over time, different elements of discernment will happen quite naturally in ways and at times that are unique to you.

**Preparing for community discernment:** The first step toward entering into a discernment process is to clarify the question for discernment. Not all questions warrant a full discernment process. Some questions might be answered with a fifteen-minute fact-based discussion. However, other questions require a different level of attention and prayerfulness from the entire leadership group, particularly those that shape our identity, policies, values, and direction.

It is also important to involve the right people. A prerequisite for community discernment is that the individuals involved are committed to the process of personal transformation. It is essential that these individuals are experienced in personal discernment as both habit and practice in their own decision making. We also need to establish guiding values and principles for the discernment process. There are certain values for which we might want to consider agreeing together not to violate for any reason, no matter how expedient it might seem.

**Entering into the discernment process:** A true discernment process begins with a commitment to pray without ceasing. This requires much more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. It involves several

kinds of praying throughout the entire process. We need to also pray for indifference. This is not the kind of indifference that we associate with apathy; rather, it is to pray that we would become indifferent to everything but the will of God. Indifference in the discernment process means we are indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even our pet project. When we have reached a point of indifference, we are finally ready to pray for wisdom, which God promises to bestow on us generously when we ask (James 1:5).

**Completing the discernment process:** After all the listening has taken place, it is time to select an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you. Discernment does not always come with as much clarity as it did for the New Testament elders in Acts 15. When it's not clear, you might select an option or two, seek to improve those options so that they are the best they can possibly be, and then weigh each one to see which seems more consistent with what God is doing among you.

**Agree together:** Once the leadership group has thoroughly explored the different options and dealt with questions and resistances that the group has raised, hopefully clarity emerges and points to one of the options or a combination of them as particularly graced by God with wisdom and truth.

When the gift of discernment has been given, those responsible for providing leadership can look at each other and say, "To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God's will for us, so this is the direction we will go." Then we rest in God, thanking him for his presence with us and for the gift of discernment as it has been given.

However, discernment is not the endgame. The endgame is actually to do the will of God as we have come to understand it. Now is the time to bring in the strategic planners and consultants if you need them. Now it is time to move forward with confidence because, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do this" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

### Chapter 13: Re-envisioning the Promised Land

There is one more season of leadership when we can feel things starting to shift and we realize that maybe we will not see all our dreams come true. Some of the things we

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had hoped for have come about, but many others have not. God starts to talk to us in subtle or not-so-subtle ways about the fact that change is coming and he is drawing us more completely to himself. As the old hymn states, “The things of earth will grow strangely dim” as the presence of God becomes more and more real.

The Promised Land is something leaders see and know that it can't be beaten out of them even when other people don't see it yet, even when they say it is impossible, unrealistic, and idealistic. It is the phoenix that keeps rising out of the ashes of every failure. It can never fully die. But, paradoxically, by the time a leader gets to this Promised Land, it has usually been stripped down to its barest essence. By the time he or she arrives there, maybe it is still visible, but it doesn't matter nearly as much. What matters is the presence of God right there on the mountainside and being able to say yes to God in the deepest way without clinging to or grasping at anything. When that happens inside you, it makes you a leader who is free indeed. It makes you a leader with strength of soul.

This kind of leader is not perfect, but this kind of leadership is achieved by people who have been met by God, and that is where their authority comes from. These are leaders with strength of soul who continually seek God in the crucible of ministry and for that reason can stay faithful to the call of God upon their life to do their small part until God calls that leader home.

### The Pastor's Perspective

*Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* presents a very different side of leadership from learning new techniques or developing our skills. But it gets at something much deeper. Although I believe it applies to every leader and to any situation, the application for church leaders is especially critical.

Unfortunately, there are probably few things more common in church leadership than pastors with dry souls. The nature of the ministry is such that the work is never finished and the demands are unceasing. It's difficult, to say the least, to take time consistently for your own personal spiritual growth.

Yet, as Barton points out, it is essential for spiritual leaders to care for their own soul. Otherwise, our leadership impact is limited, and our ability to stay in the game is compromised.

Two things really stuck out to me as I was reading. The first was the importance of living within our limits. All of us have all kinds of limits, but somehow we often avoid facing them. We misapply statements such as “I can do all things through Christ” and violate our physical, emotional, and spiritual limits, often resulting in burnout, depression, or some other trauma. Although we can coat it in spiritual-sounding language, I suspect an unhealthy driven-ness often lies beneath it. We feel the need to prove ourselves or to compete with the guy down the road.

One of the best things we can do is examine our lives to determine if we have any margins in our lives or if we are pushing ourselves to the limit. If we are constantly stressed, become short with people, or begin to feel resentful toward those around us, it is a tip-off that we may be violating some limits.

As I have progressed in my ministry, now pushing thirty years, I've come to believe that limits are actually a gift from God—often a gift no one seems to want, but a gift nonetheless. Without that gift, many of us would never stop. We would burn the candle continuously at both ends. Limits force us to slow down, to stop, and to rest, which is a good thing.

The second thing that struck me was the emphasis on intercession. The question, “Who would we be if the practice of intercessory prayer shaped our leadership?” is a powerful one. I suspect that, if we took it seriously, it would significantly change how we lead.

I suspect that we would have a better ability to live within our limits, because we are consciously depending on God rather than on our own abilities. I also suspect that we would see more of God's power active in our ministries. Finally, I suspect that we would reproduce leaders who were men and women of prayer—spiritual leaders, which is what the church longs for.

So how are you doing with accepting your limits? Or was it something else that struck you? Either way—what are you going to do with it? Share your next steps by clicking [here](#) and joining the conversation.