

Underneath Are The Everlasting Arms

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“You have pursued God hard for many years. Now that is not possible and you will have to experience first-hand, the truth that ‘underneath are the everlasting arms.’ ” These were the words of a very skilled and compassionate helper who guided me in the fall of 2006 through burnout and compassion fatigue, as I helplessly watched my church ministry implode, my eldest teenage son’s life derail, and my wife struggle through a battle with terminal cancer.

For four years, our church had been growing - doubling in attendance, tripling in staff size - engaged in winning many people to faith in Christ and reaching out to assist those in our greater community who were in need. For much of that season, I felt like I was on the top of my game. So I pushed harder, embracing every opportunity to grow ministries, impact people for Christ, and give myself to the work of the Gospel. I felt like I was moving through a season of great blessing, but I later learned that this season came at great personal cost. I was neglecting the care of my own soul in the process.

Never before had I battled with depression, but now, five years into ministry in this local church, I had gradually begun to push on, in spite of my decreasing capacities. I struggled to focus, to pray, to worship, and to engage people face to face. My memory failed me increasingly. Important and difficult conversations which had come easily just months earlier became increasingly difficult and I began to avoid making hard leadership decisions. Having been a strong “people person” for my whole life, I could now barely preach, pronounce the benediction, and I would make my way quickly off of the platform, exit through the closest door to the office, clean up my laptop, and head home, while the rest of the church carried on in fellowship. Eventually, I spent several restless weeks, sleeping only one or two hours a night, as I wrestled alone with little awareness of my disintegrating state of health. My Masters Degree studies in counselling from years earlier, seemed distant and aloof at this juncture in my journey.

I remembered a man who had spoken at a Denominational retreat a few years earlier and made an appointment to see him. The good doctor listened carefully as I listed my 12 symptoms, my 6 stressors, and then almost as an afterthought, I informed him that three years ago my wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Upon hearing this, he dropped his pen on his desk, looked at me with shock in his eyes and simply said, “How have you done this? How is it possible that you have gone on for so long this way?” I simply responded by affirming that “God is my sustainer, even when I don’t feel Him.”

Moments later, he carefully reviewed my situation and with a firm gentleness, insisted that I was very ill and that I was not likely to be well again for a very long time. He indicated that I needed to stop. Everything! Completely! And he then insisted that I contact my District Superintendent that day, talk with my spouse and children that night, and then my Board, and make a plan to be completely and

absolutely out of ministry and any life/work responsibility within the following three weeks. He informed me that I may in fact never return to pastoral ministry, and if I did it would likely not be at the current church where I served.

It was the first time in my adult life that I began to understand just how desperately I needed to hear the words that “underneath are the everlasting arms.” (Deut. 33:27)

Over the next 5 months, that skilled and anointed helper walked me through a new awareness of my own state of health: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He coached me as I began to sleep again, learning to find rest in God alone. He taught me to take daily inventory of my emotional, physical and mental health levels. He mentored me to learn to trust God in the midst of my own helplessness.

This was the single most difficult season of my journey with God. It required me to hand over complete control of my life - my family, my calling to ministry, my health and the health and well-being of those I loved - to God and to Him alone. Life verses like “*I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*” (Phil 4:13) began to make room for other verses like, “*I am crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but the life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave his life for me.*” (Gal 2:20,21)

Psalm 42/43 became my theme song for those months... *Why are you so downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Saviour and my God.*” (Ps. 43:5)

Five long months later, I returned to my pastorate, at a 50% work load. The transition back was very difficult, with what felt like weekly visits from yet another parishioner meeting me in my office to inform me that they had hung on as long as they could, but that they were now leaving our fellowship.

It took another 2 and a half years to discover who the “new me” was, post burnout and compassion fatigue. Both I and my church have made the adjustments necessary to move forward together.

As I reflect on this journey, my recovery would not have been possible without a Board of Elders who trusted me, loved me and believed in me. We had just transitioned from two incomes to one, and the Board decided to continue to pay me a full salary all through my medical leave, so that my family would not suffer further hardship. The Board supported me, believed in me, prayed for me and ministered to my family in my absence.

Ten years later, I am still learning to be at peace with some of my limitations, but I am also increasingly engaging in the invitation to ‘Abide in Christ’ as he offers in John 15. He continues to renew me day by day and fill me with hope as I celebrate 17 years of ministry with our local church and a healthy well-rounded son who is now married and learning himself how to be a loving father to his own son. We

continue to bask in the grace of God in sustaining my wife Pam through these past 15 years of life after being diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma which, at that time, carried a 3-5 year life sentence.

In this season, God is renewing me, and through me, renewing our church. Indeed, "underneath are the everlasting arms."