



BETTER AFTER **BURNOUT**

One Leader's Story

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Chapter 1

Have You Lost Confidence in Your Calling?

Have you ever heard of a DVD? It's a modern descendant of the papyrus scroll and cave paintings. Much like their predecessors, DVDs were traditionally used to record historical happenings for posterity's sake. A few years ago, while I was in the throes of recovering from pastoral burnout, my wife decided to do a little decluttering around the house. At the time, we had four children and had been married for fourteen years, so there was lots of clutter to choose from.

As she was digging through the bottom of one of our storage drawers, I heard something along the lines of "eureka" and thought she'd just found an imaginary stash of hundred dollar bills. Instead, she'd found something much more valuable. A DVD worth about two pennies.

She turned with a big smile, held up the mother lode and said, "Movie night!" It was a recording of the last service at our home church before we had struck out to go plant a church some eleven

years earlier. We managed to find an ancient playback device and settled in to reminisce about the goings on of yesteryear.

We had saved this DVD in the first place because departing our home church was a major life event for us. On the one hand, we were thrilled to go start a church on our own in a harvest field that was wide open. On the other hand, it sure hurt to leave the church we had grown up in and cared so much about.

For my entire life the Pentecostals of Lee Road had been pastored by my father and grandfather. Furthermore, my wife and I had met one another there, received our call to ministry there, and I had worked on staff for a number of years as student pastor, administrator, and assistant pastor.

Spiritually, it was all we had both known. And now we were leaving.

Therefore, when our last Sunday rolled around, I was asked to give a departing address. It was a very emotional day and for some reason, some eleven years later, my wife was wanting to relive it.

We fiddled with the archaic device, hit play, and finally got a picture to appear. As the film started rolling, I began to get uncomfortable. My wife, on the other hand, was relishing every minute of it. She was afforded this luxury because, after all, it wasn't her up there behind the pulpit making a mess of things.

As we watched the service, true to form, I over-critiqued myself, "I never knew a person could fit so many 'and-ums' into a single sentence." "What on earth does that dumb story have to do with my main point?" "Do I even have a main point?" And it went downhill from there.

Free of such humiliation, my wife was able to enjoy things such as picking out familiar faces in the audience and actually laughing at a few of my better jokes. As the film continued, one

thing we both agreed on is how dramatically life can change in eleven short years.

We noticed people in the crowd who had died untimely deaths, couples who had since gotten divorced, and far too many who no longer were of the faith.

Then there was me, the tall, skinny, comedian-preacher. And he was almost unrecognizable.

For example, my wife observed that my southern drawl wasn't as thick as it was back then. Perhaps those two years in Chicago increased the number of syllables that I now take a stab at enunciating. Plus there was my hair. There was just so much more of it. And it was so much darker.

As I observed my former self that night, more than a little wistfulness crept up on me as I longed for a return of some of the things I'd lost. But I wasn't thinking of my size 30 waist, darker locks, or offhanded wit I so blithely wielded. Sure, those things would have been nice to have back, but the thing I missed the most about my twenty-eight-year-old self was my confidence in my calling.

That day, although I was clearly emotional about leaving my spiritual birthplace, I was also clearly confident in God's divine calling upon my life. When I spoke of it, I did so with absolute certainty. The tremor in my voice, tripping over my words, and the "and-ums" all but disappeared when I spoke of the great harvest of souls God had commissioned us to reach. It was never a matter of if, only when.

I absolutely *knew* what God called me to do. I absolutely knew God was going to do it.

There was not a doubt in my mind.

That was then. This is now.

Now, as I sit beside my wife on the couch in our home back in southeast Louisiana, we are no longer church planters. In fact, I'm not even a pastor at this point.

Now, we are no longer "out there" laboring on the mission field, but we are back at my home church out of full-time ministry, licking our wounds, searching for answers, wondering if God ever actually called me to be a pastor.

Now marks a year since resigning the church we planted nine years earlier. We didn't leave Ruston because God called us to a new field or a "higher" calling. Instead, we left with the hope of putting back together what was left of our broken lives. We came back home because I was burned out, battling depression, and completely lost in who I was in Jesus Christ.

I sat there on the couch wondering how I fell so fast, hit the ground so hard, and how anything good could come of all the broken pieces around me.

Five Years Later

It's been five years since my wife dug out that old DVD, and I find myself sitting beside her watching yet another ministry video clip of me. There I am, in living color again, horrendous white suit and all. I'm looking at a short throwback shot of me as youth pastor from twenty-five years ago. There's a song with the lyrics, "It's not over yet," overlaid in the background. The next shot flashes forward to a modern-day action shot of me preaching. I'm occupying the pulpit of my same home church, but not as youth pastor, not as guest evangelist, not as departing church planter, but as senior pastor. For two years now, at the Pentecostals of Lee Road, I have been the senior pastor.

In light of the fact that being a senior pastor is something I never imagined I would do, or could do again, the whole experience is more than a little surreal. But it's also gratifying as I am so grateful that God didn't give up on me when I'd given up on myself.

The video ends but the presentation continues as one of our ministers honors me for my pastoral ministry. One of his refrains stands out to me. It's his reference to my strength. And although it's a little uncomfortable to sit through this presentation, it's also edifying because he's right.

Strength is what I lost in Ruston. I left there a beaten and broken man, doubting I would ever be the same. But during the pastoral transition these past three years, all doubt has been laid to rest. I'd love to tell you that the process of becoming pastor at Lee Road was smooth, yet it was anything but. In fact, the past three years have, hands down, been the most harrowing in ministry I've ever experienced.

Yet we never wavered.

In fact, as I listen to the speaker, the biggest smile creeps across my face. Because, in spite of all the adversity, I've never been more fulfilled in ministry.

As the presentation ends, I mount the platform, look out over the congregation and say a silent prayer of thanks. I thank God that His gifts and callings are without repentance, even when we feel we've blown it. I thank God for the people He sends to believe in us when we no longer believe in ourselves. I thank God for my DVD-scrounging wife whose support for me never wavered, even in the worst of times. But above all, I thank God for turning my darkest ministry season into my greatest ministry asset. I thank Him for making me better after burnout.

As the applause dies down, I look to the front row, give honor to my father, and remember that it is because of him that I am here in the first place.