

# THE TROJAN HORSE OF LEADERSHIP



Battling  
The Enemy  
We All Face

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### **Dedication**

To all the leaders whose lives I hope this book will touch. May you gain insight into your strengths and how to guard them, not only for the sake of self-improvement, but for the sake of every soul you lead.

## Introduction

*Who asks whether the enemy was defeated by strategy or valor? Virgil*

*O' the mass of arms, the brilliant leadership, the courage and magnitude of the ancient armies of Greece, combined to conquer the city of Troy - all that, and ten years of perseverance. Hipponax The Satirist quotes*

The war had raged for ten years. Two enemies battled ferociously upon the plains before a fabled city. Each side immortalizing the names of warriors who fought a war that never seemed to end. Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Priam, heroes who had gathered to fight on the pretense of one man's honor, Menelaus, whose wife Helen was taken by the Trojan, Paris.

The Trojan War is one of history's most legendary and notable battles. Even now, it evokes images of a time when heroes rallied for a cause, even if it meant certain death. For the honor of one's name, to die in battle brought glory beyond a reclusive life lived in anonymity. Victory was therefore paramount, and each side had its own reasons for winning.

After ten years of warring, the promise of victory for the Greeks appeared to be increasingly out of reach. The walls of Troy stood firm, despite the years of onslaught. Many Greeks had perished, as had many Trojans, but the upper hand still lay with Troy, with its formidable walls.

It's almost surprising to look back and wonder why it took ten years for the Greeks to realize that if victory was to be theirs, they had to come up with a different strategy. A tactic they had yet to consider. That new strategy came in the form of a ploy, what history has recorded as the Trojan Horse. Historians differ as to who originally devised the idea but many credit Odysseus, that great and celebrated figure of the Odyssey.

It was Odysseus who recognized that without the assailing of the city walls, the war would continue in its current and fruitless path. And without victory, there would be no honor for the Greeks. It was this acknowledgment that caused him to devise a ruse, something that would hit at the heart of the Trojan fortress, as well as the one thing that gave the Trojans their greatest sense of security. *Those walls.* They had been the Greeks greatest barrier to victory.

The emblem of Troy was the horse. They were a horse-loving people. So that Trojan Horse served as a natural way of invoking the pride of the Trojans, while at the same time limiting their wariness. Under orders from Odysseus, the sculptor Epeius built a massive horse, which was left before the city as an offering to the gods, and as a memento to the Trojans for a war well fought. The hapless Trojans saw no signs of the Greek warships, for they had retreated just out of sight and were awaiting nightfall. Inside the great horse, thirty Greek warriors lay hidden, waiting for their plan to unfold.

This is where the story gets fascinating for me. Imagine the Trojans, peering from the safety of their walls, the sight of the battlefield before them. For the first time in a decade the plain lay empty. In the distance, a seascape finally free of enemy

warships. A calm resulted that they had not experienced in some time. Before them stood a lone wooden horse, massive and stately; an instantly recognizable gift. You can almost hear the excitement of those who first came upon the sight as they began to yell out to others. The news would have spread fast, reaching the ears of King Priam of Troy himself.

The ancient author Virgil describes the actual encounter of the Trojans with the Horse. A lone Greek soldier by the name of Sinon volunteered to stay behind and presented himself to the Trojan envoy. He convinces them that the Greeks have sailed off, leaving him behind and the Horse as well. The Horse, he tells them, is an offering to the goddess Athena, meant to atone for the Greeks' desecration of her temple at Troy, and to garner her favor as they sail again for home. Sinon even goes so far as to say that the Horse was built large enough to discourage the Trojans from taking it into the city, thus stealing the favor of Athena away from the Greeks.

But the scheme was not without its skeptics. There were two Trojans who saw through the ruse: a priest by the name of Laocoon, and Cassandra, the daughter of King Priam himself, who was considered the soothsayer of Troy. Both warned that the Horse was a trap and the fall of Troy would be imminent if they took it into the city. Even Helen of Troy is said to have raised concern over accepting this gift from the Greeks. One of the most quoted lines of the war comes from the warning by the priest Laocoon who said, "I fear Greeks, even those bearing gifts."

Despite the cries of warning, the pride of Troy was elevated, and the voices of those who saw the dangers were drowned out. The Horse was taken into the city and the rest as they say, is history. That evening, safely within the walls of Troy, and with most of its inhabitants either asleep or passed out from celebrating, the Greeks opened the gates to their waiting countrymen.

The walls that held the enemy at bay for ten years were now consequential to the outcome. The city fell, ransacked and burned, and an era of warring came to an end. One simple ploy and the Greeks were victorious. Walls that had previously protected a legendary city now became its greatest weakness because they trapped its citizens, rendering them helpless before a merciless enemy.

## Chapter 1

### Trojan Horses and the Task of Leadership

*Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things. Peter Drucker*

*Hold yourself responsible for a higher standard than anybody expects of you. Never excuse yourself. Henry Ward Beecher*

You are probably wondering what this has to do with a book on leadership? What can a war from the distant past possibly teach us about leadership in a hyper-connected and MBA saturated world? I believe the story of the Trojan Horse teaches us one of the most fundamental truths about leadership, one that can go unnoticed and even ignored, but has always been one of the key ingredients in every defeat, every failure, every loss, and every derailment.

Consider the walls of Troy again. For ten years they stood as the single greatest strength for the Trojans. From the perspective of the war, it was the one advantage the Trojans had over the Greeks. Yes, Troy had Hector, but he fell to Achilles (who by the way fell to Paris). Yes, they had a strong army, disciplined and resilient. But so did the Greeks. Troy had King Priam, strong and determined, but the Greeks had Agamemnon, fearless and equally determined. Each side had its heroes and its strengths, and each side proved their worth in the many years of fighting that ended in a stalemate.

Until that Horse! And that Horse targeted one thing and one thing alone: those walls and getting inside them. The greatest physical asset for the Trojans became their undoing. Though some warned of the ploy, their voices were left unheeded due to the pride of the Trojans who believed that the war had been won. They let down their guard and allowed the enemy into the one place they were safe: behind those walls. And once inside, the Greeks used those walls to their advantage.

For centuries, the Trojan War has stood as an illustration of military and strategic inventiveness. The Trojan Horse has particularly been cast as the star of the Greeks ploy and the decisive factor for tipping the scales in favor of the Greeks. But The Trojan Horse was far more than a prop, and far more than a diversion for hiding Greek warriors. Its real power lay elsewhere. Something far more insidious than a ruse that was nothing more than a sleight of hand.

I've alluded to the real genius behind the Trojan Horse already, and without it, the Horse would never have been successful. It's a variable that has played out in scores of scenarios throughout the scope of human history. We have all fallen prey to it at one time or another, sometimes with devastating results. And as the Trojans can attest, it brought a ten-year war to a disastrous end.

What the Trojan Horse so cleverly tapped into was the pride of the Trojans. Yes, there were other parts of the ploy that worked alongside the ruse, like the retreating of the Greek army away and out of sight. But at the heart of the plan was the hope of the Trojans sabotaging themselves. Their pride would be evoked to such

degree that their cautiousness would dissolve, even to the point of disregarding the few voices that cried out in warning.

Until now, the enemy of Troy was easily identified. It had a name, a nationality, and a language of identity. It even had a geographic locale. For years, the label of Greek on the lips of a Trojan was synonymous with the term enemy. Now, that same enemy was using a more lethal tactic, one that comes in the shadows of the Trojans' very own hearts.

Up until that point, the leaders of Troy had been able to keep the Greeks at bay. Why would they not continue to trust their instincts? The great faith of the leaders is the faith they had in themselves. Why would their judgment fail, especially in light of the evidence before them? Did this not show the favor of the gods to the Trojans? Who could doubt the gods?

### **Strategic Captivity**

Whether it's on a battlefield or in a boardroom, the greatest enemy lies within ourselves. It is often where the real battles are won or lost. We invest so much time and energy doing strategic analysis or comparative studies or market research that we can sometimes forget that no amount of preparation externally will compensate for dysfunctional failures internally.

I have spent years in leadership roles, first in business and then in pastoral ministry. I love the subject of leadership and believe it to be one of the most important roles in making any process better, any cause more worthy, any principle more valuable. Whether you are in a small context or a large one, competent leadership is often the defining difference. I have known incredible leaders, some of whom I have counted as friends and mentors and who have modeled it well. Unfortunately, I have also been subjected to leaders who were defined as leaders by title only.

I have been a keen observer of leaders. I have studied leadership principles and watched as the varying definitions and philosophies permeated the culture at large, even into the sacred realm of the church, whose leadership model is probably one of the best defined and demonstrated of all.<sup>1</sup>

From these years of observing and interacting with leaders, some disturbing patterns emerge. Whenever a leader falls, we tend to instinctively look for culprits such as an addiction, an appetite, a lust, a character weakness, anything that can justify how a talented and gifted individual could be brought down. In some cases, the individual is so talented, is such a rising star, that we cannot imagine how a person with so much potential, so much talent, was not able to compensate for their weaknesses.

How often do we hear of CEOs who were geniuses in the boardroom but immoral in the bedroom. A gifted character actor on screen but a relational mess off screen. Or the gifted and inspiring communicator who could draw a crowd but lost their moral authority because of financial impropriety. I've noticed something else over the years. It doesn't matter what the arena is, whether business, government sector, non-profits, or church ministries, the pattern for derailment and self-sabotage are relatively consistent.

Most of us in hearing of these failures default to the common perception that it was a weakness that they could not control that ended up controlling them. We all struggle with appetites, and sometimes they do overwhelm and get the better of us. We certainly do not want to discount the role that our weaknesses play.

However, I believe that the way we treat these failures undermines a root cause of the failure in the first place. It isn't primarily our weaknesses that get us into trouble, but our strengths: the very character qualities that allow us to succeed, the very abilities that we become known for. The function that our strengths play as a culprit in self-sabotage has been neglected far too long. It's this point for which this book has been written. In sum:

Our greatest strength can become our greatest weakness.

Our greatest asset can become our greatest liability.

Our greatest virtue can become our greatest vice.

I contend that more often than not it's our strengths, when they become vulnerable, that become the portal to a major fall. When we fail to acknowledge this, it potentially leaves us exposed to failure. Why? Because our strengths can be the least guarded part of our character. They are often left exposed and unprotected because we tend to think we are okay in those areas, because we've done well by them. They've gotten us to where we are today. Your strengths are why you succeed or why you've been put into a prominent leadership role.

It's those very characteristics that cause you to be admired, followed, and even respected. Yet time after time, gifted people, with incredible strengths and intelligence, are making dumb mistakes that cost them dearly. And for many of these leaders, a lifetime of trust, integrity, and work becomes undermined.

In truth, our strengths can become the vehicle for self-sabotage; and the greater the capacity of our strengths, the greater the capacity for sabotaging those strengths. We can become blinded by the very characteristics that have made us a leader. Our strengths can become overblown or overused to such degree that their usefulness becomes nullified. This is one of the ways our strengths can become our weakness.

I believe there is a second way. We can allow a weakness or a character flaw to debilitate our strengths to the point that they are rendered useless. Either way, our effectiveness has been compromised. And what really stings is this. It only takes a minor weakness to topple a major strength.

These have grave implications for leaders. What makes us gifted to lead is in fact our greatest potential for failure. Though we have identified two possibilities concerning our strengths, it only takes one to bring us crashing down. It doesn't matter whether a strength we have has made us successful and thereby created in us a lack of humility that evokes pride, or that a particular fear debilitates us from making a decision at a key moment; our ability to lead effectively has been compromised.

When I looked up Trojan Horse on Wikipedia I was amused to read, "Metaphorically, a 'Trojan Horse' has come to mean any trick or stratagem that

causes a target to invite a foe into a securely protected bastion or space.” No wonder it’s a term that has been adopted by the computer industry.

Unlike the software definition above, our personal strengths are not necessarily protected space. Likely due to our lack of recognizing their vulnerability. Hence their potential as a target to be exploited. In the pages that follow we’re going to unveil the Trojan Horse of leadership and discover the one thing that can undermine us and cause us to fail; the one thing that allows us to lower our guard and invite an enemy in.

Before going any further I want to clarify what we consider to be the definition of a strength. It’s not necessarily what you are good at or even that thing at which you are most accomplished. There are many things in life that we can do well, but give us little satisfaction or sense of accomplishment. A true strength is whatever you are good at that gives you energy, a sense of purpose, and that naturally motivates and inspires you. It is something that others see in you and want to emulate or follow. It won’t always come easily but it will satisfy you in ways nothing else can.

I would contend a further point given as part of that definition. A true strength won’t just give you personal satisfaction, but others will recognize it as a true strength of yours as well. As a leader, they will see your strengths as inspiring and worth developing in you. Further, it would be one of the key reasons people follow you, and maybe even copy your values and strengths. At the very least, when asked what makes you a good leader, your strengths will be the first things that come to mind.

Those closest will know when you are operating in the area of your strengths. Most tend to light up, or give off a sense of urgency or excitement that is palpable to those around them. As we will see in the pages that follow, this can be both a good and wondrous thing, but can also become a potential for derailment if we are not careful. The very virtue that frames our good side can also lead us into a corresponding vice.

## **The Walls we Construct**

We’ve all heard people say, “I should have known better,” or, “I can’t believe I did that.” In my own life, my greatest failures have come by way of my greatest strengths. I knew at the time that I was allowing something into my life that could have serious repercussions. But even with the warnings going off inside, as well as members of my family stating their concern, I still went ahead. Why? Because I didn’t believe that I could fall in that one area. Because it had served me flawlessly for years. I knew what I was doing and I had navigated these waters before without any harm. Boy was I wrong! I thought the walls were strong enough, and indeed they were. I just didn’t see my Trojan Horse until it was too late, and the enemy was already inside.

I’ve become convinced of this from another source as well. Since 1996 I have had the privilege of teaching at a bible college and seminary, primarily in the books of the Old Testament. Over the years of teaching these courses, I noticed this same truth emerging from the pages of Scripture. Many of our most beloved biblical



characters suffered from this same problem. Many of them failed God with their strengths, the very characteristics that defined them and the very virtues we know them for.

I suppose the easiest route would have been to tackle a character study of the lives of a select group of CEOs or politicians who have fallen, which would have had some benefit to the topic at hand. However, the biblical characters are paragons of faith and virtue. They are saints, whose stories illuminate what happens when one entrusts themselves wholly into the hands of God.

Yet despite their venerated status, they were human. And that is the wonder of the Bible. It doesn't mask this humanness or attempt to downplay it. It portrays the people in its pages in all their rawness, both good and bad. It's an honest book revealing a gracious God who interacts with His creation, despite our tendency to stray.

The point is not to disparage the biblical characters that we will look at, but to learn valuable lessons about their struggles, especially in the context of leadership. Many of these men and women who grace the pages of Scripture stood above the crowd, often leading with great faith in uncertain times. Yet in many of their stories, there are those moments when things go wrong, even fail miserably.

For example, Moses was a man who talked face to face with God, a man known for his meekness and his faithful adherence to the laws entrusted to him by the Lord. A man who defied a Pharaoh and led a people from exile into the Promised Land. Yet, for all of Moses' accomplishments, he was prohibited from entering the land himself. Why? How could this happen to a giant of the faith? It essentially came down to one unfortunate incident. Moses, the man who was known for his reverence for God, is not allowed to enter the Land of Promise because of one momentary lapse of irreverence. Imagine that.

And what about a man like Solomon. He is noted for being one of the wisest men in the entire Bible. Yet despite this accolade, Solomon did some of the most foolish things conceivable. Especially in light of what God had warned him not to do. He acted in direct defiance of God. That doesn't strike me as very wise. What happened or what changed to cause Solomon, this wise man, to end up so badly?

There are great lessons to be learned from these stories, not just for leadership, but for life in general. Whether its peer to peer relationships, or a boss over employees, recognizing the potential for a Trojan Horse is a giant step towards guarding an area that can have serious consequences. We do this not just for ourselves, but for those who care about us too; those loved ones who are hurt by the very thing they in all likelihood admire and love us for.

And the concern for leadership is warranted in another significant way. The current leadership climate advocates for focusing on our strengths and ignoring our weaknesses. In other words, play to your strengths and your natural God-given abilities. After all, isn't that how God wired you? Isn't that the path to success and fulfilling what God put you on this earth for? I actually endorse these principles wholeheartedly, but with one caveat: Make a commitment to guard yourself from the potential your strengths have to derail you.

I'm not stating for a minute that every strength we have is going to undermine us, or that a failure in this regard will permanently disqualify us from

leadership altogether. In fact, many great leaders have rebounded from terrible failures. But the reality is this: The very strengths we depend upon, left unguarded and unprotected, can lead us into harm's way.

As we learned in the story of the Trojan War, the horse was simply a means of gaining entrance into the stronghold of Troy. It was the delivery system for getting Greek warriors behind the city walls. The Trojans, believing that the war was over, allowed their defenses to be compromised by their own pride. To borrow another metaphor from the war, it became their Achilles heel.

Whether we are aware of it or not, our strengths can become undermined in a similar way. Our Trojan Horse could be a fear, a moral compulsion, or any number of character flaws. Because we are human, we are composed of abilities and frailties as part of our natural make-up. Yet rarely do we succeed at anything because of our weaknesses, even though they are what keep counselors and psychotherapists in business. Our strengths are what make us successful, marketable, and even admired.

Doesn't it make sense that we should not just celebrate and maximize our strengths, but guard them as well? Or at least make an attempt to understand how our strengths can contribute to the potential of self-sabotage? Regardless of the size or nature of the organization or people you lead, your ability to accomplish what has been entrusted to you lies solely in the investment you make in developing your character. It is without a doubt the single greatest investment you can make to guard yourself from the potential of self-destructing.

In his book, *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins researched how even great companies can fall and makes this observation:

Every institution is vulnerable, no matter how great. No matter how much you've achieved, no matter how far you've gone; no matter how much power you've garnered, you are vulnerable to decline. There is no law of nature that the most powerful will inevitably remain on top. Anyone can fall and most eventually do.<sup>2</sup>

What is true of the corporate world can also be true of the individual. We all have a potential vulnerability that can leave us exposed to derailment, but rarely do we see our strengths as a vulnerability. We feel immune to the probability of self-sabotage because the warning signs are rarely loud enough to be heard. They often come from somewhere outside of ourselves and may even come from a place that we would consider unimportant, irrelevant, or non-threatening.

No leader ever fails just himself or herself. There is always collateral damage. Those who are affected in the wake of a fall are often the closest to the leader; the ones who have the most invested and the ones who have the most to lose.

As an advocate for leadership, I believe God has gifted certain individuals to carry the leadership mantle. Due my burden for leaders, and the important role they play in the world around us, I hope this book will help you guard what is likely your greatest asset so it doesn't become your greatest liability. Its aim is to protect you from a potential Trojan Horse in your life and leadership and in the pages that follow, we will unpack the lives of biblical characters who failed at their strengths

and what we can learn from them. Not only as an academic exercise, but also as a means by which we can grow in our own awareness and leadership.

A leader's lack of self-awareness can become the leader's greatest barrier. What is true about a Trojan Horse is that they are often self-inflicted; and anytime you allow something to diminish your capacity to lead from your strengths it undermines your ability to lead well, or to lead at all.

The more we understand our strengths and the more we comprehend the delicate balance of leading from those strengths, the more aware we become of the possibility for self-sabotage. So many great leaders who have gone before have fallen, so what would make us think we are impervious to the same plight? What has been demonstrated time and again is that an unguarded strength is potentially more dangerous than a guarded weakness.

The matter of a leader's self-awareness is important, not only in acknowledging the potential character risks but also how context plays a vital role as well. A topic we will be looking at in a later chapter. For now I want to state this: The primary strengths that are intrinsic in a leader usually apply to certain contexts. Those same strengths, when utilized outside of them, typically lead to some kind of dysfunction, or even disaster.

If you are a conscientious leader, wouldn't you appreciate knowing the potential hazards? The hope is that this book will assist you in guarding your greatest assets-your strengths-and by doing so, make you a more productive and effective leader. Because for every leader that brings their best, the world becomes a better place.