



SEVEN DISILLUSIONED PASTORS

Why you should think twice
before giving up in ministry

John Benton

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Dr John Benton is Director of Pastoral Support
with the Pastors' Academy
at London Seminary

CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. Disillusioned with yourself - Peter	4
2. Disillusioned with Christ - Cleopas	7
3. Disillusioned by your church - Moses	10
4. Disillusioned by other leaders - Israel's kings	13
5. Disillusioned by your family - Samuel	16
6. Disillusioned by your ministry - Elijah	19
7. Disillusioned by difficulty - John Mark	22
Conclusion - walking by faith	24

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Introduction

I have never met a pastor who at some point has not felt like giving up the ministry. Not only do most pastors suffer from 'Blue Mondays' after strenuously preaching on the Lord's Day, they go through more serious periods of self-doubt and disappointment. They do not simply wish to move to another congregation. They want out.

If you are in that position, you have my sympathy. Some of the most wonderful men of Bible history have stood on the brink too. Both Moses and Elijah felt at times they would rather die than continue in their ministry, Numbers 11.14, 1 Kings 19.4. That is how hard it can be.

There is a reportedly high drop-out rate among pastors, especially in the first 10 years of ministry. It is difficult to find reliable statistics on this for the UK. Nevertheless many do fall by the wayside. And we can understand why.

Not easy

Being a shepherd of God's flock is not easy. We are in a spiritual battle, 1 Peter 5.8, and many men feel at the end of their tether at times.

Of course, there are good reasons sometimes for a pastor to go. Some situations mean he ought to step down. The most serious is if he has fallen into gross sin or doctrinal error. But also it is right to go when we get too old and our faculties fail. Grave illness or the illness of his wife who needs his constant care, might also lead a man to legitimately hand in his resignation.

But frequently it is simply disillusionment that pushes a man to give up. Often there are particular issues which seem to be 'the last straw'. This booklet tries to identify seven of the most common causes for becoming disillusioned and analyze what is going on.

A way through?

Generally speaking, if we know ourselves to be called to the ministry by the Lord Jesus Christ, then we should do our best to stay with it, Colossians 4.17. That is not to say we must never give up. If you really feel at breaking point, then you must go – or at least take a good period out of leadership. But seeing things in perspective might just enable and empower us to carry on.

That is what this booklet will try to do. It may just help you to think twice before quitting. Perhaps there is a way through all this?

1: Disillusioned with yourself - Peter

Each of us has an idea of who we think we are. We call it our self-image. In our minds, we have a story we are living.

But when that self-image and that self-story are exposed to us as being thoroughly false, it can be devastating. The revelation that we are not the man we thought we were can be a terrible shock which leaves us convicted of sin and spiritually disorientated.

Our mental self-portrait tends to magnify our good points while simultaneously minimizing or making huge allowances for our negative side. In his fantasies an average guitarist sees himself headlining at Glastonbury – if only he had his opportunity. It is also such hopes which cause many a spare-time writer to persevere with his novel – could it be the next *Harry Potter*?

And the ordinary church pastor may be kept going in ministry by similar aspirations and daydreams. But often they are pride-filled delusions.

In the courtyard of the high priest

It seems that Simon Peter saw himself as the best disciple of Christ. After all, hadn't he been chosen first by Jesus before the others, Mark 1.16, 17? Wasn't Jesus speaking to him when he talked about the rock on which he would build his church, Matthew 16.18?

But then came the shattering self-discovery of what he was really like. It took place in the courtyard of the high priest's house on the night Jesus was betrayed, Matthew 26.69-75; Mark 14.66-72; Luke 22.54-62; John 18.15-27.

Though Jesus had warned him that he would fall catastrophically, Peter took no notice. His hugely confident self-image brushed the warning aside. Though all others might fail Jesus, he would not, Mark 14.29. He would be prepared to die at Jesus' side, Luke 22.33. He gives the impression that he will be the Saviour of Jesus, not *vice versa*, John 13.37. But Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. Before the cock crowed, the sickening truth would be revealed.

Pastor, it is worth stopping and asking yourself how you see yourself. A little humble self-examination is always in order. Is there anything of Peter in you?

Denying Jesus

I don't need to tell you Peter's story. You know it. Before minimal questioning he totally crumbled. He denied his Lord. And as Jesus, who was under far harsher threat at that very moment, turned his head and looked intensely at Peter across the courtyard, it was borne in on Peter what he had done and what he was really like. Luke writes, 'And he went outside and wept bitterly,' Luke 22.62. Peter, the apostle, was face to face with his true self. Disillusion with himself overwhelmed him.

The magnitude of what he had done and what he was like, hit him like a train.

- He had denied and disassociated himself from the one whom he himself had recognized as 'the Son of the living God,' Matthew 16.16. It was blasphemous.
- He had taken his seat among the servants of those about to murder the King of kings, Luke 22.55. It was cosmic treason.
- He had repudiated the privileged work to which Christ had called him, Mark 1.17. He was meant to be a primary witness for Christ but he had been the very opposite.
- He had done what he had repeatedly protested that he would never, ever do, through lack of courage, Luke 22.56.
- His denial of Jesus had been repeated three times, Luke 22.61. This could not be shrugged off as a 'one-off' aberration.
- He was a weak failure. His protests that he would never deny Jesus came from the heart. But his sincerity, perhaps his best quality, could not protect him.
- He had betrayed his truest friend. He had counted close friendship as nothing – even that of God's only-begotten Son.

The way Peter saw himself changed dramatically. His 'hero' status was shot. He was a hypocrite and he knew it. In old-fashioned English, he was 'a rotter'. In popular US slang, Peter was 'a jerk'. In Bible language, he rightly condemned himself as a great sinner – an utter failure, a bad person, a no hoper. So the tears flowed.

Perhaps, for whatever reason, pastor, that is where you are now. You thought you had what it takes to be a man of God, but now you see you don't. Is that going to be the end of the story?

It wasn't for Peter.

God has grace for pastors

How did Peter recover? It wasn't that he came to the conclusion he was being a bit too hard on himself and that he was okay really. He was conscience stricken. And God was not obligated to restore him. But, as he faced his searing failure, God had amazing grace for him. After the cross and the resurrection, the Lord made the first move.

- The angel at the tomb told the women that Peter was still wanted, still the Lord's man, Mark 16.7.
- The risen Christ himself appeared particularly and personally to Peter, Luke 24.34.
- Following the resurrection breakfast by Lake Galilee, Jesus conferred personally with Peter. After probing his repentance, Peter was forgiven and reinstated, John 21.16.
- Not only so, but God graciously used Peter's failure to make him a helpful and sympathetic apostle to persecuted Christians, Luke 22.32 (see 1 Peter).

In fact, with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, this broken disciple did bravely lead the disciples into the Church age to suffer for Christ, John 21.18,19. The truth is, Jesus chooses, loves and is prepared to stick with men who do not know their own weaknesses. Can you take hold of that, pastor, for yourself?

John Newton's (1725-1807) words seem appropriate for those of us disillusioned with ourselves. He says that the holiness of a regenerate person 'seems principally to consist of self-abasement, and in admiring views of Jesus as a complete Saviour.' Where that exists, fruit will follow but 'If you will look for a holiness that shall leave no room for the working of corruption and temptation; you will look for what God has nowhere promised.'¹

¹ *The Works of John Newton*, Banner of Truth, Volume 6, page 177

2: Disillusioned with Christ - Cleopas

We went into the ministry wanting to make a difference – to see the world changed for the better. But the result has not matched up to our aspirations.

Perhaps you are an older pastor. Evaluating what has been achieved over the years, you are very disappointed. The kingdom of God does not seem to have kept its promise. Maybe you were part of a whole generation of young men, friends who entered the ministry together. You gave it your all. But secularism remains as arrogant and undented as ever. You feel somehow that Christ has let you down. You were expecting so much more.

Downcast disciples

Such deep disappointment is mirrored by the two disciples with their shattered dreams, heading for Emmaus, Luke 24.13-35, who told the stranger they met of Jesus and said, ‘but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,’ Luke 24.21. They had come to a standstill, ‘their faces downcast,’ v17. Maybe you stand there too?

Luke names one of those disciples as Cleopas. The early church historian Eusebius² identifies him as the brother of Joseph, Mary’s husband. If this tradition is true, it is one of the links the Emmaus Road has back to the Christmas story. It serves to explain and amplify that sense of disillusionment.

The birth of Jesus had stirred enormous expectations. Down the centuries, some had kept the faith, waiting for Messiah. The ‘redemption of Israel’ would have resonated deeply with all those involved in the events of the first the Christmas.

- Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, said of Jesus, ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people’, Luke 1.68.
- The angel had told the shepherds, ‘Today, in the city of David a Saviour has been born to you,’ Luke 2.11. And what those shepherds reported set the locality buzzing, 2.17,18.
- When Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple, they met old Simeon who was ‘waiting for the consolation of Israel,’ 2.25.

² See *Eusebius: The History of the Church*, Penguin Classics, 1965, page 124

- They also met Anna the prophetess, who ‘Coming towards them ...gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem,’ 2.38.

There was an enormous hope that something astonishing was about to happen in their lifetime. As Joseph’s brother, Cleopas would have been in on this. Later the ministry and miracles of Jesus fed the excitement. But now on the Emmaus Road, hope was gone. Jesus was dead and buried.

Perhaps pastor, you came to Christ and felt the call to the ministry on the crest of a gospel wave. A previous generation in the UK, speak of hundreds being saved at Billy Graham rallies and the London Tube trains being filled with people joyously singing, ‘Blessed assurance Jesus is Mine!’ But now the momentum is gone. Perhaps, you now feel somehow, you have wasted your life. ‘We had hoped....’

That’s the mood Cleopas and his companion were in when they met the stranger. Again, there’s no need for me to tell you the story. But what did the risen Jesus do?

1. He encouraged them to express their fears

That’s the point of him coming ‘in disguise’, v16. He could have just shown himself immediately, but then they would not have said what was troubling them. Jesus wanted this out in the open because he knew that what was troubling these two would parallel the fears of many believers down the centuries. ‘The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,’ v20-21.

2. He explained from Scripture

They had got hold of the wrong end of the stick. ‘He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and enter his glory?”’ v25-26.

Perhaps Jesus explained about OT Joseph, Jacob’s son, who suffered in Egypt before he was elevated to become Prime Minister and save Israel through the famine. Did he speak of David, Israel’s great king? Wasn’t he persecuted by Saul before his kingdom came? Perhaps he pointed them to Isaiah 53. Before he could see the will of the LORD prosper, he had to be led like a lamb to the

slaughter. They were so disappointed because they had not read the Scriptures or grasped the way God's kingdom works through suffering. Perhaps pastor, when you look at your ministry, you have forgotten this dynamic. Are you influenced too much by the world's idea of 'success'?

3. He revealed himself in risen life

'Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks and broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...' v28-31. And this leads to them regaining their faith. Referring to people like us, pastor, the Lord Jesus could have said to Cleopas and his friend what he said to Thomas, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,' John 20.29. They rushed back to Jerusalem to find the truth of the resurrection confirmed. It's a picture of them regaining their faith and rejoining God's people, the church. The disillusioned disciples are turned right around. It was not the end as they had thought.

Your disappointment, pastor, will not have the final say. Christ has a day when he will triumph openly and his people be vindicated. The resurrection guarantees it. But that day and other lesser days of his blessing are according to God's timetable not yours.

We are called to trusting patience. It's one of the difficulties of walking by faith with a God for whom a thousand years are as a day, 2 Peter 3.8. God's basic unit of time is so different from ours. But never doubt his faithfulness.

3: Disillusioned by your church - Moses

Maybe we didn't imagine we could turn the world upside down when we became pastors. Perhaps we had a more measured vision. We just wanted to be used by God to build a good church. We pictured a congregation of loving, worshipful, kind, assured, humble, evangelistic, Bible-loving Christians who rejoiced in Christ and were involved in the community.

We weren't even too worried about the size of the church. Numbers are not everything, 2 Samuel 24.10, as long as it is a happy and holy family in Christ. But it hasn't turned out like that at all. Your church is often more like a battleground. Though you have loved the church for years, now you feel very unloved. Is this the source of your disillusionment pastor?

Pastor of Israel

Moses was the 'pastor' of Israel. *Numbers* is the story of Israel's 40 year meandering march from Sinai to the Promised Land. It serves as a picture of the church on its way to heaven through the world's wilderness, 1 Corinthians 10.1-13. Sadly, it was not a comfortable journey for pastor Moses. We can identify at least 10 ways in which Satan plots and acts against the people of God of which we do well to take notice.³

- Discontent among the people, Numbers 11.1-9
- Love of the world, Numbers 11.4-6
- Division and jealousy among leaders, Number 12.1,2
- Discouragement of faith, Numbers 13.30; 14.7-9
- Opposition to and accusations against the leaders, Numbers 16.1-4
- The leader's own failures, Numbers 20.12; 27.13,14
- Congregational impatience with leaders, Numbers 21. 4,5
- Witchcraft and sorcery against the church, Numbers 22.1-7
- Sexual immorality among the people, Numbers 25.1-5
- Discouragement of people leaving the church, Numbers 32.6-15

It is a sobering list and we have not even mentioned the catastrophe of Israel worshipping the golden calf, Exodus 32. It would be untrue to think that church is bad all the time. But it is made up of sinful people, still walking through a sinful world and with the devil as its constant enemy.

³ See *The Message of Numbers*, by Raymond Brown, The Bible Speaks Today, IVP, 2002

Don't always blame yourself

It is very easy for pastors to blame themselves when the church is a mess. And often there are people in the church who delight to tell you that it *is* all your fault, Exodus 15.24; 16.3; 17.3.

All pastors should constantly be trying to up our game. But even Moses had his faults. He was impetuous, Exodus 2.11-15; initially reluctant to obey God, Exodus 4.13; sometimes angry and irritable, Exodus 32.19; occasionally faithless, Deuteronomy 32.51, 52. But the troubles and rebelliousness of Israel cannot all be laid at Moses' door. The power of the world, the flesh and the devil among his people was beyond Moses' control. And similarly, pastor, you cannot hold yourself responsible every time members of your church go wrong.

You can only challenge your flock from Scripture. You cannot force people to obey God. When you use threats and coercion, shepherding has become a form of heavy shepherding which the Good Shepherd cannot endorse. Leaders of NT churches are called to be 'not violent but gentle,' 1 Timothy 3.3. We can only teach, set an example, pray and leave it to the Holy Spirit to change hearts.

A bad Bible teacher?

Many pastors think that if only they were better Bible teachers then their church would not be such a shambles. We should, indeed, strive as pastors to 'do (our) best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who properly handles the word of truth,' 2 Timothy 2.15.

But it is not all down to your ability as a preacher. The tale of Israel under Moses is very distressing at times. And yet we have to say that, at the time, they had the best teacher of the word of God in the world. Not only did Moses preach to them, but he was, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the writer of the first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch. He gave them not only the Law but pointed forward both to Christ and God's restoration of all things, Deuteronomy 18.17-19; 30.1ff. Alec Motyer has written, 'To this man we owe not only the foundational principles of Biblical theology, and the unchanged, even if expanding river of revelation, but the programme in embryo of which the whole Bible is itself expanded text.'⁴ If Israel could give Moses such trouble, do not be surprised if the church where you minister has its difficulties, sometimes very serious.

⁴ *Roots: Let the Old Testament Speak*, by Alec Motyer, Christian Focus, 2009, page 89

Indeed, both the Scriptures and church history tend towards the conclusion that preachers who bring God's word with the greatest clarity and power are those who face the greatest troubles, even from those who profess to be God's people, Matthew 5.11,12.

Two things to bear in mind

If you feel disillusioned with your church, *first* of all, remember Moses' most frequent reaction to trouble. It was prayer and intercession, Exodus 32.30, 31; Numbers 14.10-25. Of course, we have in the ascended Lord Jesus, a great high priest who forever intercedes for his church in heaven, Romans 8.34. But, pastor, the best place for you when the church is in trouble is in the place of prayer. Because we have such a great high priest, we can and should approach the throne of grace to find mercy and help in time of need, Hebrews 4.14-16.

Secondly, bear in mind from the story of Moses, that despite the people's sins, God remained faithful and fulfilled his promise. That means that even if the church is heartbreaking at times, you have not wasted your time as a pastor. Rebellion and sin make no difference to divine sovereignty. Nothing can ultimately hinder God's almighty grace, Romans 8.38,39.

4: Disillusioned by other leaders - Israel's kings

From time to time, high profile preachers who have led the charge nationally for the gospel, fall publicly and calamitously. It's usually a sexual or financial scandal. It is all over the media. Secularism licks its lips. The name of Jesus has been brought into terrible disrepute.

When such spectacular disasters happen, it can depress us as pastors and make us contemplate giving up on Christian ministry altogether. We feel totally disillusioned. And it's not just us. The fall of prominent men also discourages our people. They are tempted to think that maybe this Christianity they have pursued is a fool's errand and perhaps the world has been right all along in saying the church is full of hypocrites. This adds to our burden.

There are many examples in Scripture of leaders who fall, either finally like Judas and Demas, 2 Timothy 4.10 or temporarily like Peter.

Spiritual abuse

Some misuse their leadership position to exploit other people in various ways. We think of King Saul who began as a humble man, chosen by God, 1 Samuel 10.21, 22. But having a victory over the Ammonites and a taste of glory, he could not get enough of it, even if it meant disobeying God. He was desperate to keep his public profile, 1 Samuel 15.30, 31 and jealous of all rivals, famously persecuting David. He was a leader who abused his position. Eventually God removed him.

Immorality and idolatry

Following Saul, great King David, a man after God's own heart, fell into adultery and murder through his desire for Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, 2 Samuel 11. This was despite God blessing David as no other, 1 Samuel 12.7-10. How discouraging this must have been for God's people?

After David, of course, came King Solomon, wiser and richer than anyone else on earth. But with the prosperity that God gave him, he failed. Towards the end of his life he turned to idolatry, 1 Kings 11.1-13. Instead of peace, his kingdom became marked by oppression. And after Solomon and the division of the kingdom, worse kings followed.

Heresy

It is immoral Christian leaders who make the news headlines. But heresy, though given less profile, is arguably more damaging to the church and more discouraging to us as pastors.

Not only did Peter deny the Lord on the night Jesus was arrested, but long after his restoration he caved in to peer group pressure at Antioch in a way which undermined the gospel itself. Barnabas was sucked in too. This was so distressing to the apostle Paul that there had to be a show down in order to safeguard the freeness of God's grace in Christ. 'When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong,' Galatians 2.11.

The unreliability of leaders is not something alien to the Bible's storyline.

Three things to remember

But with all this in mind, how are we to personally handle our discouragement when we hear of the fall of prominent leaders? Here are three suggestions.

First, keep things in perspective. Bad news has an ability to fill our horizons. But not every prominent leader is an abuser. There are good churches with good pastors. We can over-react. After Mount Carmel Elijah thought that everything was a disaster, that he was the last man standing for God. He felt like giving up, 1 Kings 19.4. But, as we will see in a later chapter, he had got things out of proportion. There were 7,000 other faithful souls. Always reckon on the fact that Jesus said, 'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it,' Matthew 16.18.

Second, beyond the sinful circumstances, our God in his utter sovereignty may be allowing big names to fall precisely because the contemporary church has become far too dependent on its 'celebrity' leaders. It is not great preachers but the Lord Jesus Christ alone to whom we must continually look. We foolishly get drawn into idolizing those who look good, talk smart and make things happen, rather than trust in the invisible God. The Bible's honesty about merely human leaders should have inoculated us against this.

Third, although leaders fall, God is still on the throne. The Lord is sovereign even over terrible sins among his people. As we have already noted, David fell in his adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah. As he eventually repented there was forgiveness, but still chastisement to break

upon the royal household. It all began with Amnon's rampant lust for Tamar which came to fruition in the innocent girl's rape and abandonment. Unaddressed by David, this eventually led to the horror of civil war. It was an 'omnishambles'. Yet out of this mess, God brought Solomon to kingship, the nation prospered as never before despite Solomon's failings, and the temple was built. Our God is greater than we think. He is Lord over every tragic mess. He is sovereign. We may be shaken by terrible news but the throne of God is unshakeable.

Some times are painful times. Dark days come for evangelicals. But we are not to despair.

5: Disillusioned by your family - Samuel

The devil knows our most vulnerable points and where he can hit us hardest.

For many men in ministry, their Achilles' heel is their family. The pastor rightly loves his wife and children. But he sees ministry life as having a detrimental effect on those he loves the most. This is the cause of his disillusionment. He feels like giving up.

Call and care

There are some preliminaries which we need to state.

First, a pastor's call to the ministry should include an endorsement from his wife. Biblically, your wife is your 'suitable helper,' Genesis 2.18. If she is not prepared to help you as you pursue ministry then your ministry will be hindered. The role of a pastor's wife is not an easy one.⁵ If you were called to the ministry before marriage, then she needs to be happily on board. If you are called to ministry after marriage, then your wife married you not knowing what was coming. Either way there needs to be some frank discussion and a wife's affirmation. If that is lacking, the ministry is not for you.

Second, some ministry families do not flourish because the pastor does not look after them properly. Once in ministry, the church takes priority over all else for some men. This is wrong. Your family is your first congregation. A pastor, 'must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family how can he take care of God's church?'), 1 Timothy 3.4,5. An unruly, unloving family is a deal breaker for ministry.

Wayward children

But for some men, the situation is that when they begin as a young pastor their family is going well. His wife enjoys ministry life and the children flourish. But then, perhaps with the teenaged years, things go wrong. The children reject Christ and the church and go off into the world. The pastor and his wife find this absolutely heart-breaking.

⁵ See *The Minister's Wife: Privileges, Pressures and Pitfalls*, by Ann Benton and friends, IVP, 2011

The prophet Samuel was well acquainted with this scenario. He was given to the Lord's service at the tabernacle as a young boy, 1 Samuel 1.11, 22. Part of the reason behind this lay in the fact that the sons of Eli, the incumbent priest, were ungodly men. The very first vision which God gave Samuel was a message of judgment on Eli's house because Eli had failed to restrain his sons, 1 Samuel 3.12,13.

But then, later in the story, we find that despite this background and despite Samuel being an exemplary prophet and man of prayer, his own sons were a disaster. 'When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel. The name of the firstborn was Joel and the name of the second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice,' 1 Samuel 8.1-3. The failure of Samuel's sons, contributed to Israel's request for a king, 1 Samuel 8.5.

It is such situations that leave some pastors disillusioned. Their greatest desire was for their family to be Christians, but it hasn't happened. Deep in their hearts pastors question themselves. They may even have a bitterness against God, 'Lord, couldn't you have done this one thing for me as I have served you?'

Two comforts

I cannot emphasize enough that pastors must work hard to care for their families, especially spiritually. But parents can only be responsible for the behaviour of their children when they are young. How they react to the word of God as they grow is their own responsibility. It is between them and the Lord. So pastor, you must not beat yourself about this.

First, as we have noted, the family of a faithful prophet like Samuel did not turn out well. We should also remind ourselves that, although it is slightly different, even the brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ scorned him. James did not turn to the Lord until after the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15.7. Though your children do not believe, you may have done nothing wrong. Salvation is ultimately a sovereign work of God.

Second, as things stand it is not the end of the story for your children. Sometimes everything changes for them later in life. The son of godly king Hezekiah was Manasseh, one of Judah's most wicked kings. He 'led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations had

destroyed before the Israelites,' 2 Chronicles 33.9. But later, after God's chastisement and a spell in Babylon, he came to his senses and returned to the Lord, 2 Chronicles 33.13. Pastor, you don't know the end of your children's story.

One faithful UK pastor, much used by the Lord, had a wayward son who would come to church on Sunday evenings, sit in the front pew with his feet up on the communion rail, and read a novel all through the service. It was a flagrant rejection of all his dad stood for. Yet later, after that pastor died, that son came gloriously to the Lord.

6: Disillusioned by your ministry - Elijah

Most pastors are men who want their lives to count for God. Some Christian lives never seem to make much impact. A Christian is a soldier on the front line, but their part of the line never advances. They never cause the devil a problem.

But your greatest ambition, pastor, was perhaps for God to use you. It was not simply that you wanted to see God's kingdom take a stride forward (like Cleopas), but that you should be in the thick of the action. Since your youth, you had your hand up with Isaiah, saying to the Lord, 'Here am I. Send me!' Isaiah 6.8. And you rejoiced when the Lord called you into the ministry.

Striking a blow for God

Elijah the prophet was a bold man on whom the Lord laid his hand in a most remarkable way. He was called to challenge Ahab, one of the wickedest kings of Israel, to repent of worshipping Baal and return the nation to walking in God's covenant ways.

There was an initial confrontation with Ahab and the declaration there would be a drought on the land until Elijah gave the word, 1 Kings 17.1. The prophet spent months in seclusion while the drought did its worst in line with God's covenant warning to the nation, Deuteronomy 28.24. But everything came to a head at Mount Carmel as, in the presence of the people and their king, Elijah challenged prophets of Baal. The true God would send fire from heaven on the sacrifice.

This man of God exemplified how to have a powerful ministry and strike a blow against the kingdom of darkness.

- He was *courageous*. Alone he took on the 450 false prophets, 1 Kings 18.17-20.
- He was *clear*. 'How long will you waver between two opinions. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him,' 1 Kings 18.21.
- He was *confident* in God. He let the false prophets act first, knowing their god was a lie, and he ridiculed them when their cries brought no answer, 1 Kings 18.27.

- He *called* upon the LORD. He knew that everything depends on God acting. So, 'he stepped forward and prayed,' 1 Kings 18.36.
- He was *concerned*. He had a great burden for God's glory and for the good of the people. 'O LORD, answer me, so that these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again,' 1 Kings 18.37.

And you know the story. The LORD answered with fire from heaven. Perhaps those words courageous, clear, confident, calling, concerned, have characterized your own ministry. I hope so.

The sequel

It was a 'day of days'. God showed up. Fire fell. The people shouted 'The LORD – he is God!' which is basically the meaning of the name 'Elijah.' The false prophets were put down. Then at his prayer a great rainstorm came upon the parched land for the first time in over three years.

Surely here was the victory. And yet this astonishing ministry of Elijah had little effect overall. Queen Jezebel turned on the prophet. We next find Elijah in the desert totally disillusioned. 'He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors,"' 1 Kings 19.4.

Understandably, the lack of any deep change in the nation was a terrible disappointment. But it appears that it hit Elijah harder than it should have done. Is that how it is with you pastor? You have had many set-backs in your work for the Lord, but this time something seems to have snapped.⁶

God loved Elijah for his spiritual zeal. But that doesn't mean that the prophet got everything right. What factors might have added to Elijah's disappointment? There are two things which stand out.

First, was Elijah guilty of living for his ministry rather than for God himself? That may be the case. Pastors can live for the excitement of preaching and the joy of conversions, rather than for the Lord himself. Certainly as God meets with the

⁶ I ought to say at this point that in some circumstances it is not wrong for pastors to seek advice from a professional counselor. Some men who have given their all can fall into clinical depression and need help from a doctor.

prophet at Mount Horeb that was part of what Elijah learned. The Lord was not in the drama of earthquake, wind and fire. He was in the 'gentle whisper,' the 'still small voice.' Jesus said to his disciples, recently returned from deliverance ministry, 'Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven,' Luke 10.20. Live on your relationship with God in Christ not the 'buzz' or reputation you might get from ministry.

Second, Elijah was not a team player. He was a lone athlete. Do you see yourself like that pastor? Obadiah had hidden a hundred prophets from Jezebel's hatred, 1 Kings 18.13. The LORD had reserved 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, 1 Kings 19.18. But Elijah saw himself as standing alone for God, 'I am the only one left,' 1 Kings 19.14. It wasn't true. Sometimes we damage ourselves and make ourselves more vulnerable than we should when we cut ourselves off from the fellowship of God's people. It is interesting that God's command at Mount Horeb for Elijah's future ministry was to take Elisha as his servant and companion, 1 Kings 19.16.

The Lord brought Elijah through his disillusion. He still had work for him to do.

7: Disillusioned by difficulty - John Mark

Some pastors fall at the first hurdle. They did not truly understand what they were taking on when they said 'Yes' to the ministry. Not long at the church, they wish to walk away - disillusioned. The work seems simply too tough.

John Mark was a young man who began, but quickly dropped out of ministry. He was initially given the high privilege of being alongside that great duo, Paul the apostle and Barnabas the encourager. Barnabas was John Mark's cousin, Colossians 4.10. They met John Mark on a trip to Jerusalem and brought him back with them to Antioch, their home-base church, Acts 12.25.

Ministry failure

When the Holy Spirit spoke to the leaders in Antioch and called Paul and Barnabas to mission overseas, Acts 13.2, John Mark went with them. But following ministry in Cyprus and having arrived at Perga in Pamphylia (SW Turkey), we read, 'John Mark left them to return to Jerusalem,' Acts 13.13. The word 'left' used here means 'turned back'. Something had happened.

The seriousness of John Mark's decision does not become apparent until a second missionary journey for Paul and Barnabas is proposed. 'Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches,' Acts 15.37-41.

Paul had come to the conclusion that John Mark was unreliable.

Causes?

Paul and Barnabas must have seen something in Mark otherwise they would never have taken him with them in the first place. But the challenges of ministry had proved too much for Mark.

Too young? Mark was a young man. It is his mother's house that is mentioned as his home in Jerusalem, Acts 12.12, not his own. In accompanying Paul and Barnabas Acts 13.5 describes him as their 'junior helper,' or 'attendant.'

Sometimes first term failure comes because men are pressed into the ministry too early.

Too privileged? His mother's home was clearly quite large as many of the church gathered there to pray, Acts 12.12. It was a house with servants, Acts 12.13. This indicates Mark was from quite a privileged background. He has been referred to as 'the spoilt son of a wealthy widow.'⁷ Perhaps at the point of failure he was simply not resilient enough for the rigors of ministry.

Too well-connected? He had an enthusiastic Christian mother and an older Christian cousin who was full of zeal for Christ. Sometimes Christian relatives can be too keen to get the next generation of their family into Christian ministry. They go before they are ready. Sometimes Bible Colleges and churches can accept men on the strength of their father's or family's reputation rather than making a more balanced assessment.

Too self-confident? Coming from Jerusalem, the place where Jesus had died and risen again, and being part of a Christian home which was a hub of Christian activity and had seen miraculous answers to prayer, perhaps Mark had concluded that somehow ministry was easy. There is a confidence of youth which says, 'I can do this.'

Sometimes, young men, straight from seminary, who are thrown in to the deep end of pastoring a church find, for whatever reason, that they cannot hack it.

But although he failed, it was not the end for John Mark.

The Barnabas touch

Paul had concluded John Mark was finished, but Barnabas had not. God had not shut the book on Mark's ministry.

The break between Paul and Barnabas happened in around AD 49. A dozen or so years later, as Paul writes to the Colossians, Mark is back on Paul's team, Colossians 4.10; also Philemon v24.

As Paul writes to Timothy from prison, he refers to Mark. 'Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry,' 2 Timothy 4.11.

⁷ *Little People in Paul's Letters*, by Brian Edwards, DayOne, 2005, page 22

We also find Mark alongside the apostle Peter, 1 Peter 5.13. And around 140 AD the early church leader, Papias of Hierapolis, explains how Mark came to write his Gospel. He was, 'the interpreter of Peter, (who) wrote down accurately all that he remembered, whether the sayings or doings, of Christ,' (see 2 Peter 1.12-15).

To what can we attribute Mark's rehabilitation? Whatever spiritual algebra God used, Barnabas must have been a big part of the equation. He didn't give up on Mark and Mark felt able to accept his advice and learn from him.

It is an older, encouraging mentor and friend who will help many young pastors to recover their ministry after a bad start. Do you know such a man?

Conclusion - walking by faith

Pastors are called to a ministry which can sometimes make them feel that they are at the end of their tether. They can go no further. If you really cannot face going on, then understand that what you have done in your ministry is not nothing. What you have accomplished is worthwhile. See it by faith. Jesus said, 'Anyone who gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward,' Matthew 10.42.

But, just maybe, reading this booklet, you have been able to see that what has happened to you is not unusual and that, with God's help, you can keep going in the ministry. May God bless you in that decision. But the future will have to be a walk of faith. The mountain of discouragement and disillusionment can be moved. 'Have faith in God,' Jesus said, Mark 11.22.