

Renewed Commitment and Passion

LCJE 11th International Conference
August 11-16, 2019, Toronto Canada

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Introduction

Sustaining commitment and passion for the ministry God has called us to is one of the most challenging pursuits for leaders over the long haul of ministerial service. Most of us are well aware of the shocking statistics relating to those who enter full time ministry. To list just a few:

- Less than 50% of those who enter pastoral ministry continue beyond 5 years.
- 70% report having a lower self-image now than when they first started
- 90% report that the ministry is completely different than what they expected. (In a negative sense)
- 80% believe that the ministry has negatively affected their family.
- 80% of seminary and Bible school graduates who enter the ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years
- 50% are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living
- 70% claim they do not have someone they consider a close friend
- 84% desire to have a close fellowship with someone they can confide in
- 57% report being unable to pay all their bills
- Over 50% are unhealthy, overweight and do not exercise
- 48% feel that the demands of ministry are more than they can handle
- Only 1 out of 10 retire in ministry

And the list goes on.

Sources: *pastoralcareinc.com*, *leadershipresources.org*

Ministry is difficult, draining work. The hours are long, the pay is often insufficient and working with people, usually in volunteer roles is challenging and can be frustrating. On top of that, we must forge on through all the opposition and spiritual warfare directed against us which is frequently intense and unrelenting.

How do we retain our zeal, commitment and passion for what is often a thankless, even ridiculed vocation?

The Wear and Tear of Ministry

I think it is safe to say that all of us entered the ministry with great passion, vision, faith and commitment. I was 24 when I entered pastoral ministry in 1984. I was absolutely certain of the Lord's call on my life and the specific mission I was undertaking to plant a new Messianic Jewish Congregation in my hometown of Rochester, New York. Congregation Shema Yisrael was going to be big. Really big. Dozens initially and eventually hundreds of Jewish People were going to hear and respond to the Good News of their Messiah and join the congregation. We were going to make a huge impact not only in Rochester, but throughout the Messianic Jewish Movement in the United States.

Almost immediately, things took off. I was invited to join the staff of a large AG church in return for the use of daily office space and a meeting hall for our Shabbat Services. Within four years, we purchased our own facility and many volunteers banded together to renovate the building. We grew to almost 200 members and our services were packed. Yes, there were challenges. Many came and went. Some Christian leaders in the community accepted and supported us while others rejected our message and even opposed us. But my commitment and passion remained unwavering. I was young and full of energy and zeal to fulfill the vision God had entrusted to me.

As time went on however, things began to change. After about five strong years of fruitful ministry, discouragement and frustration began to take their toll. My grand vision of hundreds coming to faith was in reality maybe ten or twenty at best. And after pouring my lifeblood into these people, many just left. Some with no explanation and for no apparent reason. At least not reasons they openly shared with me.

The huge and influential congregation I had envisioned building stopped growing and actually began to shrink as divisive people began to cause splits. The sound was too loud for some, too soft for others. The service was too long for some, too short for others. Bad led to worse. It felt like I could do nothing right. I felt betrayed by people I trusted and poured my life into. My zeal and passion began to die. Maybe it was time to do something else?

The disappointment of unmet expectations is one of the primary reasons we lose our commitment and passion in ministry.

Hezekiah: A Case Study

The call to ministry we've said *hineini* to is not a short-term undertaking. It is a commitment to a lifetime of service. Like the Apostle Paul, we are bondservants of Messiah. Our life is no longer

our own. This race we are running is not a sprint, it is a marathon which requires endurance to make it through the disappointments, trials and tribulations of life. The story of Hezekiah provides great insight into the life of a leader that starts strong but sadly, finishes poorly.

I see three stages to Hezekiah's Life:

I. His Early Leadership Years: *2 Kings 18:1-7 & 2 Chron 29*

Hezekiah became king when he was 25 years of age following the death of his father, Ahaz. He ruled the Southern Kingdom of Judah for 29 years, from 716 to 687 BCE. The bible tells us he was a good king and did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He repaired the temple, tore down the Asherah poles erected to worship other gods, consecrated the priesthood and reinstated the observance of the Passover, previously lost to earlier generations gone astray under the rule of corrupt and wicked Kings, including his father. His early years were marked by passion, zeal, faith, vision and courage. Just imagine the courage it took to completely reverse the direction of father!

From the beginning, Hezekiah faced great opposition and challenges. Six years before he assumed leadership, he witnessed the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and for his entire rule, he faced the constant threat of invasion by the Assyrians. His response was a mixture of prayer and appeasement. We are told in 2 Kings 18:13 that he stripped the temple of gold to pay off the Assyrians to keep them from invading Jerusalem. He continually contended with backbiters and Sennacherib, the Assyrian King was always a thorn in his side. I am sure you can identify with this...we all have one 😊

There is not doubt that Hezekiah lived under unrelenting stress. I think we can all agree that ministry is exceedingly stressful. This is one of the most common reasons so many leave the ministry...it is just too stressful. So how did Hezekiah endure such stress? 2 Kings chapter 9 provides the answer. He endured because he was a prayer warrior. Like David before him, he prayed through challenges and failures until he experienced a breakthrough. As a result, he sees great things and God uses him mightily. And for the first 14 years of his rule, he remains faithful and diligent.

II. The Calamity: *2 Kings 20:1*

When Hezekiah turns 39, tragedy befalls him. He is stricken with an illness that almost takes his life. In fact, Isaiah comes to him and prophesies over him to put his house in order because he is going to die. Can you imagine receiving a word like this from a credible and respected man of God? Although we aren't told what his illness was, many speculate he has cancer. All we are told his that he had a boil (2 Kings 20:7).

You may be wondering why God would allow such a bad thing to happen to a good king? You wouldn't be alone. Why a good God allows bad things to happen to good people is perhaps the top question humans have asked throughout history. I certainly don't have the answer. What I

do know is that we live in a fallen world and from a biblical perspective, there is no one good. All have sinned and fall short of God's standard (see Romans 3:10-12). The Jewish Encyclopedia cites the conflict between him and Isaiah as the cause, but the bible does not really give us the answer.

Tragedy either drives us toward God or away from God. In Hezekiah's case, he cries out to God...and God shows him mercy. He is healed and granted another 15 years. But sadly, we learn in 2 Chronicles chapter 32, the parallel account to 2 Kings 20, that Hezekiah did not respond to the Lord's kindness. And we are told the reason. His heart was proud.

"But Hezekiah's heart was proud, and he did not respond to the kindness shown him, therefore the Lord's wrath was upon him and on Judah and Jerusalem". 2 Kings 32:25.

Although Hezekiah later repented as did the people and we are told the Lord's wrath did not come upon Jerusalem during his reign, something changed in Hezekiah's heart after this calamity he never recovered from. He lost his passion to please the Lord and commitment to serve his people. Pride took hold and the result was apathy and indifference.

The dictionary defines pride as: *a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, a becoming or dignified sense of what is due to oneself or one's position or character; self-respect; self-esteem. pleasure or satisfaction taken in something done by or belonging to oneself or believed to reflect credit upon oneself:*

Andrew Murray, in his classic book "Humility" wrote *"Humility, the place of entire dependence upon God, is, from the very nature of things, the first duty and highest virtue of the creature, and the root of every virtue. And so pride, or the loss of this humility, is the root of every sin and evil. Pride must die in you, or nothing of heaven can live in you."*

Pride is one of our greatest enemies as leaders. It steals our faith and dependence on God and blinds us to the truth of our need. Pride is insidious because it also blinds us from seeing it in ourselves. It will render us ineffective as leaders, something clearly seen in the final stage of Hezekiah's life.

III. His Final Years: 2 Kings 20:12-19, Isaiah 39

After Hezekiah's illness and divine healing, God extends his life for an additional 15 years. One would think that he would be determined to use those years in the most fruitful and productive way possible. But instead of devoting himself to serve the Lord to the fullest and make these final years the best years of his life, he becomes self-absorbed and apathetic to the needs of his people. This is clearly seen in Isaiah 39 when he receives emissaries from Babylon and boastfully shows off all the riches of his palace. He is later confronted by Isaiah:

The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?" "They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them." Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." Isaiah 39:5-7

Hezekiah's response to him is bone-chilling.

"The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime". Isaiah 39:8

It is almost unimaginable that upon hearing his own descendants would be taken in captivity he expresses such apathy. A life marked by such zeal and commitment in the early years of his life ends in utter callousness. This story should serve as a lesson to us all of the dangers of pride.

Dealing With the Pain Of Rejection

Over the years, another great challenge I've come to see can diminish my passion and commitment is rejection. Like many other Jewish Believers, my parents were deeply upset when I accepted Yeshua. They sent me to Jewish Family Services for counseling. When that failed to detour me, they tried the Rabbi. He listened patiently and with seeming interest as I shared my testimony and quoted Messianic prophecies like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. After I went through my list, He asked me if I was finished. I nodded my head that I was, he began to shower me with guilt. "Your grandfather would be rolling over in his grave if he knew what you believed" he declared with a stern voice. He then hit me right between the eyes with the next line. "Just as the Nazis tried to destroy us physically, by accepting Jesus Christ you are destroying our people spiritually".

I went home confused and filled with guilt. Guilt turned to anger as I tried to deal with the deep sense of rejection I was experiencing. I remember thinking the rabbi may have the upper hand now, but he will know I was right when he is rotting in hell. I'm not proud of it, but I'm being honest. I was hurt.

I felt the same rejection again during my first Passover with my extended family as a new Believer. My grandmother, aunts and uncles were offended and angry that I had become "one of them". One by one they began to ridicule me. "My nephew the priest" my uncle Gil blurted out. I could feel all of them glaring at me, shaking their heads in disapproval. My head nearly sunk into my bowl of matzah ball soup under the weight of my guilt.

Over the years, I've repeatedly had to deal with my own heart toward my family and Jewish people who reject me. I have to remind myself that they are not rejecting me but Yeshua, the one whom I serve. Like His response on the cross "father forgive them for they know not what they do" we have to forgive and respond with compassion and love.

Paul's introduction to his teaching about the people Israel in Romans 9-11 has consistently been a source of great comfort and challenge to me personally when I've felt resentment toward those who have rejected me for my faith.

I tell the truth in Messiah—I do not lie, my conscience assuring me in the Ruach ha-Kodesh— that my sorrow is great and the anguish in my heart unending. For I would pray that I myself were cursed, banished from Messiah for the sake of my people—my own flesh and blood, who are Israelites. Romans 9:1-4a

This is an amazing statement on several levels.

First, Paul expresses his willingness to give up not just his life, but his eternal life for the sake of his people. Here is a man who had actually been to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-4), who had experienced its glory, who has devoted his life to helping people get there. He understood the riches of heaven in a deep way. He also grasped the horrors of hell. Yet he states he would be willing to give it all up and face an eternity in hell, separated from God for their salvation!

Now, I've had some wonderful times walking with the Lord and some amazing encounters. I know the absolutely exhilarating feeling that comes from being in the Lord's presence. On the other hand, I've never been to heaven, so I can only imagine what a wonderful experience it will be. What I can't imagine is loving someone enough to say, "I've been to heaven, and it's absolutely wonderful, but I'm willing not to ever see it again—for your sake." And while I may, by the grace of God, be willing to give up my life here on earth, it's because I know that as soon as I breathe my last, I would be present with the Lord. But to give up my eternity? As much as I love my family, I could not honestly tell you I would be willing to this.

Second, this is an amazing testimony of forgiveness. Remember, Paul had been beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and threatened by his fellow Jews. Yet he still declares He would give up his own salvation for the very ones who rejected and hurt him. What an incredible act of love and sacrifice. Sure, I've been hurt. I've been rejected. Jewish people, including my family and friends have spoken hurtful and mean words against me. But I've never been stoned (not in the same sense anyway), I've never been beaten with rods and left for dead. If Paul can forgive those that did that to him, we also can forgive. This lesson has repeatedly convicted me and renewed my commitment and passion in ministry.

Three Keys To Renewed Passion

As I have already mentioned, ministry is challenging. All of us have experienced the mountaintop moments as well as the valleys. I want to look at three keys to renewing our passion and commitment.

1) Divine Guidance-Confirmation of the Call

- El Roee- The God Who Sees: Genesis 16: 1-13
 - *Where have you come from and where are you going? (vs. 7-8)*
 - *For now I see the One who sees me (vs. 13) Things change when we see that God sees us.*
- *The Shoe Story*

2) Time with the Lord

- Fasting and Prayer

Two years ago, we started week-long times of fasting and prayer at our office. Participation is voluntary for staff, mandatory for our leadership. We now are committed to two each year, one the week before Rosh HaShana, the second in the spring leading into Passover. It has been transformational for our ministry.
- Devotional Time in the Scriptures

According to a Fuller Institute study, 72% of the leaders surveyed stated that they only studied the Bible when they were preparing for sermons or lessons. This left only 38% who read the Bible for devotions and personal study.

3) Renewed Vision

- Embracing Change
- Proverbs 29:18 “Where there is no vision, the people perish”

12-Step Program: How To Renew Your Commitment and Passion

Following are 12 practical suggestions on what you can do to alleviate burnout and renew your commitment and passion in ministry. These are taken from the results of surveys conducted among those in ministry leadership.

1. Spend more time in prayer and the Word
2. Regain lost vision for ministry
3. Stop comparing yourself to others
4. Develop relationships with non-Believers
5. Focus on the positive
6. Have fun
7. Cut off draining relationships
8. Express gratitude
9. Do activities that energize you
10. Get in better physical shape

11. Commit to have the spirit of a servant
12. Pray for your community