

Episode 018

Dealing With Setbacks and Moving Forward

Introduction

In life and ministry, we will be confronted at various times with setbacks. Setbacks can be enormously discouraging, even disillusioning. At such times, many may be tempted to shrink back. But God is not pleased with people who shrink back in their faith. Hebrews 10:38 (NIV) But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” Leaders in particular ought to learn to deal with setbacks and continue to move the group or organisation forward.

Setbacks are not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it can be very helpful for our learning and growing! Loren Cunningham tells the story of YWAM’s first purchase of a ship for their missions. Having received prophetic vision of a ship they stepped out in faith to raise funds and deposited a down-payment for an old ship. With great enthusiasm they began to restore the ship and everything seem to be going well.

One night Loren Cunningham had a dream where they had completed restoring the old ship and commissioned it. Yet as it set sail, there was a lone figure left behind on the docks. Turns out it was Jesus. It appears that in all their excitement, they became focussed on the ship more than Jesus. Since that day, everything unravelled, and they could not raise enough finance to pay for the ship. Consequently, they lost the ship. Cunningham had to call a key sponsor of the ship to inform him that the huge sum he invested has been lost. The sponsor was very gracious. He said, “The most important thing is that your organisation has learnt the lesson God intended.”

So how should we approach setbacks? I recommend the following 5 actions.



1. Time to go back to God for strength.

In 1 Sam 30, the Amalekites raided Ziklag while David and his men were away. They took all their families and possession. The men were so bitter they even wanted to stone David. 1 Samuel 30:6 (NIV) David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.

When setbacks occur, it is important not to remain discouraged, but we have to pick ourselves up with God's strength. Discouragement robs us of strength. Don't give in to it. Because when we are feeling negative, feeling weak, feeling defeated – we will never be able to make objective decisions nor decisions of faith. Have you seen balloons that have lost some of their air? Deflated balloons cannot float far. They sink to the ground. Similarly, discouragement drags us down and stifle faith.

There have been occasions, when I got deflated. Only a few times. But I always get to God and His Presence quickly. There I find strength.

Where I allow the wind of the Holy Spirit to fill my heart and spirit anew. It is there that our minds can re-align with God's. Where we can get back to God's perspective. There is a deep joy and freshness in the Lord that we can find nowhere else.

Many years ago, a mentee of mine, a young leader fell into sexual sin. I cried with him when he confessed to me. I was discouraged after having sowed so much into his life. But I went to the Lord and drew strength from God. God helped me resolve to restore this young man. Fortunately, I was able to help him be restored in God and today he is still serving the Lord faithfully. As leaders, we must find strength in God so that we do not give up.



2. Time to learn the lessons.

When The Israelites were defeated at Ai, Joshua sought God for the reason. Joshua 7:10 - 11 (NIV) 10 The LORD said to Joshua, “Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? 11 Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions.

Just as the Israelites had to learn the hard lessons, we need to ask ourselves what lessons do we need to learn from the setbacks we encounter? It is critical to learn the lessons that God wants us to learn. If we are not learning them, we will only repeat the same mistakes and face the same setbacks again.

We have to ask ourselves; did we do anything wrongly? Sometimes we may even need external help to realise what we did wrong. That is why church consultants are sometimes hired. That is why our regional or national leaders would sit down with some of our pastors and talk through some of their setbacks. In hope that they would learn from it and be able to navigate through it.

At one stage, some leaders in my church complained that we were too rigid in some areas. But when I analysed it, they were the one who implemented things too rigidly or they were under leaders who were too rigid. Indeed, I had advised some of those leader to be more flexible. I came to realise that different leaders have certain slants and leaders tend to implement things according to their own slant, which may be different from what we originally intended. We have to be aware of that. It revealed the importance of adequate supervision. This is part of an important process of self-analysis we need to become better at.



We have to ask ourselves, are we lacking certain knowledge or skills that contributed to the setback? Without adequate knowledge, we may have under-estimated the situation or misread the context. Consequently, we made it worse. I saw a cartoon once. It depicted a wife sending a plumber to the basement of her house which was totally flooded neck high. She told the plumber, “My husband said he could fix anything, including this leak. So if you find him in there, tell him he should stop now.” Without adequate knowledge, we fail to adequately understand how to deal with situations that arise.

We have to ask ourselves, did we make adequate preparations to deal with potential challenges? The Boy Scouts have a famous motto: Be Prepared! It is unwise to jump into projects, especially bigger ones without adequate preparations for potential challenges and setbacks. Jesus taught in Luke 14:28-33 the importance of counting the cost before making a commitment. Part of counting the cost includes identifying the potential challenges.

When our movement went through a major crisis years ago, I had to ask myself some serious questions. What lessons do we need to learn? This is the critical step. Because we can make the mistake of throwing the baby out with the bath water and reject everything when only certain areas needed to be addressed. For the Israelites, in Joshua 7 it was to deal with Achan’s sin. Attacking and conquering Ai was not the problem, nor was taking the Promised Land. It would be a great mistake to quit the Promised Land simply because of their failure in Ai. But they had to learn from it and set it right before God.

I came to the conclusion that the essence of what we were doing is right before God. In fact, I believe that God wants our movement to continue to press on to fulfil the Great Commission. But we have to get our house in order and improve the foundations that needed repair. So that we can rise up to be stronger and be able to multiply even stronger than before. I believe we can do that. There will be challenges. Not everyone will want those necessary changes and may drop off. That lesson has helped me tremendously over these years as we strengthened our movement.



3. Time to reassess our priorities.

To step beyond a setback, we must reassess our priorities. Perhaps we have some unnecessary or inappropriate priorities. Perhaps we need to recalibrate our priorities.

Some people make the mistake of thinking that since they should not shrink back, they should never reduce their commitments. There is a difference between shrinking back in faith as compared to reducing over-commitments. With the Apollo flights to send astronauts to the moon, they used 3-stage rockets. At the completion of each stage, the spent rocket stages were jettisoned to avoid carrying the excess weight. Too much weight would prevent them from reaching the moon. There is a place to reduce commitments or activities appropriately in order to proceed further in our ministry or calling. Sometimes we need to shed the old wine skin in order to face fresh new challenges. Sometimes we need to reassess our priorities anew at different stations of our life, recognising that different energy levels and context demands an evolution of focusses.

Perhaps God wants us to press forward in some areas and we should identify activities that we ought to drop as it may be holding us back. Why? To consolidate our energy and focus. I have had to face both types and have had to make decisions. Over 2 decades ago, God asked me to take on greater responsibilities in our family of churches. But I realised this was only possible if I let go of certain other commitments. Such as my work as a research scientist at CSIRO. So I resigned and went full-time in ministry.

We are all face these challenges, but the most importantly, we need clarity. What does God want me to do? Honour God with our priorities and He will honour you. Fine tune your priorities with God and the blessings of God can flow more effectively.



4. Time to renew commitments

Sometimes after setbacks, our commitments are shaken. It may become fragile or diluted. Nehemiah was confronted with sagging commitments after continual threats sapped the worker's energy. So Nehemiah went into action. Nehemiah 4:14 - 15 (NIV) 14 After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." 15 When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work.

Nehemiah refocused the people unto God and upon the critical importance of their task. This lifted their commitment once again. At times, it is necessary to renew commitments to God, to one another, to the task ahead, etc. It is good to restate why we are doing what we are doing. Over a decade ago when our movement faced a major crisis, we realised that we had to refocus and renew our commitment to our mission and values. Our leadership restated and reinforced our core values to give clarity about who we are and what we are about. I personally sought God and renewed my personal commitment to God and His church and His Kingdom. Even to our mission and core values. That helped us tremendously.



5. Time to step forth in faith

In 1 Sam 30, David and the men at Ziklag went after the Amalekites to save their families after consulting God. They stepped out in faith. As a result, they were able to overcome the setback and rescued all their families and goods. More than that, they also plundered the Amalekites and gained more than they had at the beginning. As a result, David was able to send portions of the plunder to the elders of Judah, who were his friends and others. The setback became a gain to reinforce David's leadership and strengthen his links with elders in Judah and beyond.

The Devil wants to crush our faith with setbacks. But we should regroup and step out even stronger. David stepped out and returned even stronger. In God, setback may become the door to greater success. If we look to God and step forth in faith!

Conclusion

Setbacks happens to all of us. Yet godly leaders should view setbacks as an opportunity for us to regroup and find deeper strength in God. To learn the critical lessons. To become leaner and more focussed. To get our priorities better aligned with God's. To renew our commitments. To step out in faith as the Lord leads. We can bounce back from setbacks and move forward stronger!



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. Could you think of a setback you faced that you really struggled to overcome or get past? Why was it so difficult?
2. Why do you think it is so important to learn the lessons God wants us to learn, through such setbacks?
3. How crucial do you think it is to reassess our priorities as part of dealing with setbacks? Why?

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. Setbacks can create psychological fears in our hearts. Such fears may further hinder us from moving forward. Are there any possible fears that had developed in our hearts? Take some time to ponder about this.
 - Are there some specific steps you can take to deal with some of these fears?
2. Select 1 of the recommended steps which may be most helpful to you to overcome setbacks.
 - Rehearse in your mind a previous setback. How could taking that step improve the situation? It might give you further insights on how to implement it.
 - Identify some actionable steps you can take to improve in that area.



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