

Episode 007

The Fiery Furnace of Leadership

Introduction

Part of the journey of leadership involves criticisms, resistance and even opposition. The leader has to tackle obstacles, problems and even crises. All of this can put the leader under huge stress. It can feel like a fiery furnace. What can happen when leaders are placed in such fiery furnaces?

Every Leader Gets Burnt

I do not have to prophesy this because it will happen. Any leader who is genuinely leading will get burnt. Make no mistake about this. In fact, I would say that generally the more influential the leadership the greater the furnace. Why is this so? With the same step that we take on leadership responsibility, we paint a large target on our backs.

The Devil, our chief Enemy, will delegate his minions to undermine us. The higher our level of spiritual authority or influence, the greater rank or power is set to oppose us. Fiery arrows are the order of the day (Eph 6:16).

Ephesians 6:16 (NIV84)

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

Since all leaders are only human, we will make mistakes. This will be compounded by our weaknesses, inadequacies, etc. The greater our role, potentially the greater the impact of our mistakes. Thus, potentially the greater the furnace we face.



In the early days of our church, we were faced with buying some musical equipment costing a few hundred dollars. If we made a bad choice, only a few hundred dollars was at stake. But over the years as the church grew substantially, we had to purchase property and build our church facility. We are now confronted with million-dollar decisions. The magnitude of decision-making has increased vastly. As a young church planter, any bad decisions I make will impact only a couple of dozen people. Today, as HIM President, bad decisions I make could potentially impact thousands of church members.

So, the question is not whether we get burnt but how much, how badly. At this point, it is important to realise that the hotter the furnace does not necessarily correlate with the how much more we get burnt. Nor does it always mean that the heat of the furnace will damage us. In fact, it may do us good.

The Furnace Can Burn

Put paper into a furnace and it is very quickly burnt to crisp. Put wood into a furnace and it takes longer to burn. Put in steel and it does not burn unless the furnace is very much hotter. So, part of the answer lies in how resistant we are to the heat. Some leaders may turn to ashes easily. They are easily offended. They crumble emotionally when the pressure mounts. They get overwhelmed and struggles to function effectively.

Some may come forth with varying degrees of burn marks. Some leaders can cope with greater pressure and stress. Some can better survive harsh experiences.

The resilience of a leader is a major factor in how well we cope. How tough are you to handle the pressures of leadership? Emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually? And to bounce back up? Part of the critical growth of a leader is to grow in resilience. Then we can have longevity in leadership.



The Furnace Can Refine

While furnaces can burn, it can also refine. Scriptures speak of a refining of our faith.

1 Peter 1:7 (NIV84)

These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

I do not wish to simply avoid being burned. I wish to be refined. It is possible that the same furnace that burns us, could also refine us. The same problem can hurt us or grow us.

Many years ago, I was given responsibility to lead a group of pastors nationally. In many ways I was inexperienced. There were many issues stemming from strong personalities with different ideas, lack of pastoral care in those days compounded by a number of leaders and churches with some significant issues. It was a rather challenging period for me as my children were all very young at that time. It was taking the joy that I felt pastoring a thriving church in Brisbane. It could have burnt me badly. But I decided to tough it out because I knew God put me there. I also decided that I needed to learn the lessons, improve and grow. As a result, over the years I learnt and matured a lot in my leadership. The furnace refined me.

The key to turn the furnace from a burning experience to a refining experience is our attitude and perspective. If our perspective is that of a victim, then we get offended, hurt, perhaps even bitter and disillusioned. If our perspective is that of an overcomer, then we tend to steel ourselves for a fight and deal with the circumstances and come on top as much as possible.

The most critical perspective in all this is that God is sovereign. He is in control, despite the immensity of the situation. A Scripture I hold dear to my heart is,

Romans 8:28 (NIV84)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.



When we trust that God allowed the furnace situation, then we will find comfort and hope. Comfort that God is with us. Hope that God has a purpose behind it all to work good. It is the latter that provides me the incentive to learn and grow from the furnace experience.

This can motivate us to have a perspective of a learner. To take the effort to learn. We can learn from our mistakes, why and how they occurred. The situation, why and how it developed to that point. The solution, if we found one or at least game out possible solutions for future reference. I often ask myself what lessons I can learn from tough situations. Lessons in relation to my heart, whether it be character weaknesses or attitudes that need to be improved as God's servant. Lessons in relation to my competence, whether it be skills or implementations. Lessons spiritually, whether there were spiritual elements in the situation that I needed to be more aware of and handle appropriately.

When we learn and grow as a leader, then the heat of the furnace has served to refined us.

Rising From the Ashes

At times it feels like the furnace has just burnt us to crisp. Yet not all is lost. After all, God is the God of resurrections. God can help us rise from the ashes. Once David and his men were away from their camp at Ziklag. The Amalekites attacked their camp and stole everything including their women and children. David's men were so distraught and angry, they took out their anger against David.

1 Samuel 30:6 (NIV84)

David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters.

Just imagine your own men who had trusted you for years turning against you. How painful it must have felt. In David's case, it was even life-threatening. David was being burnt to ashes in his leadership. Yet David rose from the ashes. How did he do so? "But David found strength in the Lord his God."



A few quick tips to rise from the ashes:

- The key is to turn to God and find strength in Him. Bring our disappointments and disillusionments to God. Bring our hurts to Him to heal. God can change our perspectives and help us forgive and release the wounds in our hearts.
- God can provide us the inner strength to rise above the pain and pressure of the situation. Ask God for fresh motivations, fresh purposes to grab our hearts again. David rose up with a new determination to recapture all their families from the Amalekites. Which by God's grace, they did and recovered everything (1 Sam 30).
- It is also helpful to have leaders that we can talk to and seek advice and prayer. Their experience and wisdom can be of great comfort and help to us.

How Can We Better Prepare to Face the furnace?

The Boy Scouts have a motto: Be Prepared. The essential idea is that a scout must prepare himself by prior thinking out and practicing how to act on any accident or emergency so that he is never taken by surprise.

As leaders, we should take the same approach. We can be better prepared when we take some of the following steps:

- Recognise that all leadership will have furnace experiences. Rather than moan and complain about it, we should prepare our mindset to face it and be refined. Years ago, I prayed. God help me stay in the fire and be refined as you intend. Give me the courage not to run away.



- Consider a number of key scenarios that we may face in a furnace experience. Think about how we should approach it in a biblical and godly way. Many frontline professionals like emergency doctors and nurses, paramedics, firefighters, soldiers and so on undertake a lot of practice in different common scenarios so that they can be thoroughly prepared for intense moments of pressure. Practise and prior foresight help us be better prepared and not overwhelmed.
- Read and learn about crisis leadership through some good books. This will provide us some insights and frameworks to approach intense difficult times.
- Have a team around us that can help us bear the furnace experience together. A supportive team can help take spread the load off the most intense challenges.

Conclusion

Leaders will face the fiery furnace. But we need not get burnt to ashes. But if we are properly prepared, we could in fact benefit from the furnace to be refined.



Discussion Questions

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

1. Have you been burnt in a fiery furnace of leadership? What was it like? How did you deal with it?
2. Have you experienced a fiery furnace situation, but it served to refine you instead? What made the difference?
3. How can we have a team that can support us through fiery furnace experiences? What can we do to develop such a team?

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. Can you identify 2 or 3 key attitudes that can help you not quit in the midst of a fiery furnace situation? Make these some of your key convictions when facing future fires.
2. What specific perspectives would you need to have in order to be refined by fiery furnaces? What steps can you take to develop those perspectives now?
3. Identify and rehearse a few potential scenarios that can help you better deal with fiery furnaces.





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