

Faithful Endurance

The Joy of Shepherding People for a Lifetime

Edited by Collin Hansen
and Jeff Robinson Sr.

 CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Faithful Endurance: The Joy of Shepherding People for a Lifetime

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Peter Voth, @petervoth

First printing 2019

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6265-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6268-6

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6266-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6267-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hansen, Collin, 1981–editor.

Title: Faithful endurance : the joy of shepherding people for a lifetime / edited by Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson Sr.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2019. | Series: The gospel coalition | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018038860 (print) | LCCN 2018053993 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433562662 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433562679 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433562686 (epub) | ISBN 9781433562655 (tp)

Subjects: LCSH: Pastoral theology.

Classification: LCC BV4011.3 (ebook) | LCC BV4011.3 .F35 2019 (print) | DDC 253.2—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018038860>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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They've Left, and I'm Crushed!

Dave Harvey

Dear Pastor Dave,

They've left, and I'm crushed. They were faithful members—good friends I counted on. They were generous givers, committed volunteers, true servants. But now they're gone. These departures deliver blows that cut me deepest as a pastor. These wounds fester with pain.

I know leaving seemed right to them. And I know God is in control of these things. But emotionally, these experiences feel like "desertions" or "defections" or "treason." When they group up before hitting the exit, I hear incessant voices in my head reminding me of how I've failed. These voices trigger sharp pangs of grief. I know that my words are exaggerated and emotionally charged. But when a trusted friend or a long-standing member says goodbye, the news breaks over my soul like an unholy AWOL—a mission desertion. And with each parting, my heart grows more brittle.

Sure, I signed on for suffering. But I never imagined ministry would look like this. The person I poured so much time into has vanished. The relative I thought would always have my back is gone. The fellow pastor

who preached about relationships abandoned our church for a better-paying ministry job. How should I interpret unexpected departures from our church? How do I handle the spontaneous separations from our congregation, the inexplicable goodbyes from people we love, or the leader who goes rogue and leaves a trail of confusion?

If I can be honest, people can be pretty unthinking when they leave. They can be entirely unaware of the knife that pierces a leader's soul. They're unaware of the fact that I lie awake at night, seeking grace just to rise and meet the next day. How do I find grace to keep going in ministry when the departures come like waves?

To cut to the heart of the matter, where is God when people leave?

Faithfully yours,

Deserted Shepherd



Dear Deserted Shepherd,

Talk to any church leader in a vulnerable moment, and you'll discover that he has a desertion story—even the big guns. “Ten years of toil,” Charles Spurgeon lamented, “do not take so much life out of us as we lose in a few hours by Ahithophel, the traitor. Or Demas, the apostate.”¹

Traitors. Apostates. Defectors. Pretty bad stuff. In reality, certifiable betrayals represent only a small slice of people who leave. But each departure can leave a scar that lasts for years.

Ministry carries this paradox. People kindle our greatest joys, but they also become the cross on which we must consent to be impaled. It’s an irony of Christian leadership. We are called by God to love, nurture, and care for God’s people—to invest our lives in them—only to watch some reject our leadership and mash the eject

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 1:175.

button. To love truly makes one vulnerable, and when a sheep is drawn away by misunderstanding or offense, the pain is acute. This is particularly true when people leaving slam the door behind them and launch a campaign that appears to revise history and lay the responsibility for their problems at the feet of their bewildered shepherd. Perhaps you've been there.

Sometimes . . . We Are to Blame

Let's be honest. Sometimes we *are* the problem. Fallen leaders fail people. Our ignorance, inexperience, sinful responses, and broken leadership are often the shove that sends people stumbling out the door. We're dull too, so we often don't connect the dots until weeks or months later. But let's face it: God's call to Christlike leadership comes with no guarantee that we will see a reciprocal Christlike followership. Our mistakes will often reverberate louder than they should. The inevitable result? People we love will leave. And with them goes a small slice of our heart.

The question is, How does a leader stave off cynicism? How do we carry on without feeling like our relationships are rigged for disappointment, like we're holding a ticking time bomb? Some pastors don't. They just bail out. Others keep going, but they become "professionals," building an impenetrable firewall between God's church and their heart.

But are those the only options open for us? How does God sustain a pastor or pastor's family when people leave? And how can God furnish us with the tools needed to meet painful departures with the kind of faith that results in ministry longevity?

Remember Paul

In a dark moment of my life, while I wrestled with these questions, I picked up 2 Timothy. It's widely understood to be Paul's last will and testament. To begin, I was struck first by the number of people who abandoned Paul: "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Tim. 1:15).

One can almost feel the distress behind his words. Paul carried the scars from these memories into the final days of his ministry.

Paul seemed to anticipate that Timothy might be skeptical: “*All Asia has left? Surely not Phygelus and Hermogenes?*” “*Yes, even Phygelus and Hermogenes. Even the oldest comrades walked away.*” Note this well: departures are never abstract. They have names and faces. Pastors limp when people leave. That’s the way it was for Paul, and it’s the way it is for us. And Paul was just getting started:

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.

Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. (2 Tim. 2:16–18)

Hymanaeus and Philetus—two leaders clearly known to Timothy as well. We don’t really know what memories were triggered by the mention of their names. Was it late nights sharing burdens around the fire? Was it ministry experiences where God moved in powerful ways? We don’t know what nostalgic levers those names pulled. But we do know that they departed from the truth; they were destroying the faith of some.

Do you have a Hymanaeus or Philetus in your ministry, revising doctrine to fit his or her desires, rallying saints to a vision grander and more glorious than your old and outmoded one? It’s not a new story. But in this dark night of my soul, that Paul shared this story sparked something in me. As I read and reread these chapters, an ember of hope kindled in my heart. Even Paul, arguably the most gifted and faithful leader in Christian history, endured the same rejection as I did. But there was more:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. . . . Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord

will repay him according to his deeds. . . . At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. (2 Tim. 4:9–11, 14, 16)

Tap the brakes for a moment—Paul had a few more names to add to the list of deserters. It's even more personal than we initially imagined. Paul loved people. Losing Demas to the world or becoming the target of Alexander's abuse wasn't just another day at the office for Paul. These were vexing relational burdens, a cross he had to consent to carry.

Paul still hadn't hit bottom. "No one came to stand by me, but all deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:16). Have you ever been in a situation where your credibility is under attack and your explanations prove useless? A season when insult follows injury and no one steps forward to support you? That's where Paul's story went. In one of the darkest and most desperate moments, when Paul's faith and ministry were under indescribable assault, he stood alone. Next time you wonder whether anyone can truly understand the crushing sense of loss you feel from the departure of a member, the betrayal of a leader, or an unexpected abandonment, remember Paul.

Illusion of Resolution

None of us signed up to have our ministry stories end like Paul's. It's all so unresolved, so humiliating, so, I don't know, open ended. No one taught me this in seminary or elder training. None of my teachers told me, "You'll experience radical conversions, restored marriages, the power of the gospel moving in the lives of people . . . and oh, by the way, there will be inexplicable departures that will rip your heart out!" I just figured if we were all gospel centered, sincere, and reasonably faithful, our churches would grow, people would dig us, and our ministry stories would end well. Ministry pain is supposed to resolve, isn't it?

When I looked honestly at Paul's last epistle, it blew these expectations apart. His final chapter is awash in complexity. Unresolved

relational grief. Departures. Desertions. Apostasies. Lots of people bailing out. No tidy bows. No closure.

Here's the hard truth every pastor must steel himself to face: The cross on which you must consent to be impaled is *people*. Serving them will inspire indescribable joy, but that service will also rend your heart and escort you into unimaginably dark nights of fear, grief, anxiety, and sorrow. Times when you long for resolution that you simply will not experience this side of eternity. When a leader's affliction remains open ended, where does he look to find meaning?

How Does a Leader Consent to Be Impaled?

The departures catalogued in 2 Timothy are no coincidence. They serve as a point of continuity—heartbreaking and soul-shaping continuity—between Paul's pain and your pastorate. Because under the lash of these defections, Paul points us back to the one whose earthly ministry included the anguish of abandonment and the agony of distressing departures. Paul lifts the head of the disappointed pastor and turns it toward Jesus's invitation to take up your cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24). The summons from the Savior is to lay down your defenses, pry open your heart, and consent to be impaled. Follow Jesus in his descent to the dead, not because we glory in anguish but because we know that this suffering and death are only the prelude to the beauty and miracle of resurrection life.

So when departures come and our world feels like “all Asia has deserted,” how do we give God our consent and follow the Savior in his sufferings?

Affirm That God Has Packed These Departures with Purpose

God is not sitting idly by in heaven, passively observing these separations. He's not up there fretting over the kingdom setback inflicted on his designs by this desertion from your flock. No, God is sovereign. He is behind the steering wheel on all partings.

If that doesn't comfort you, I understand. In leading a church, I noticed that the closer I was to the person leaving, the less this

doctrine consoled me and the harder it was to trust God's providence—at least initially. The more that individual service, influence, or gifting drove the church's vision, the more difficult it was to trust the Lord. *Why?* became an elusive, unanswered question that enticed me with distraction and disappointment.

Paul got it, though he seemed to share our ignorance. There's no indication that Paul knew why "all Asia left him" or why at his first defense "no one came to stand by him, but all deserted him." People fled Paul like he was radioactive, and yet there were no enlightened lessons to be found as he surveyed the wreckage of these desertions, no "aha" moment to surprise him (or us!) with satisfying clarity.

I recently met with a pastor who was going through a really difficult time. Good folks were leaving, his church was being shaken, and he was shuddering under that low-grade anxiety that accompanies constant criticism. As a way to humbly learn and care for those who were leaving, he conducted exit interviews, inviting folks to share their reasons. The exercise, he reported, was both illuminating and perplexing—illuminating because he heard some valid concerns, perplexing because the issues, at least to him, didn't seem significant enough to warrant a mass exodus.

In time, clarity may come. A day may arrive, in fact, when you are able to see a direct connection between your leadership and your members' farewell. But for now, allow God to meet you in the mystery. See it as an opportunity to know Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings and to commune with him (Phil. 3:10). Trust him with your loss. I know you don't see it, but this departure is brimming with purpose.

Paul saw God's purpose. It was the ground on which he finally set his feet in 2 Timothy. After his long list of departures, he writes,

But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord

will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. (2 Tim. 4:17–18).

Paul was deserted, but he was not alone. He was forsaken by men, only to be rescued by God. The Lord was there, standing by him.

Jesus went to the grave, but he didn't remain there. He rose, and he stands today alongside lonely leaders. Maybe that seems like hollow hope to you right now. “Great, the Lord is with me. My divine silent partner—dragging me along in my worst times in some spooky ‘footsteps in the sand’ fashion.” Hold on, look closely at what Paul says. The Lord strengthened him so that he could carry on the mission with power. The Lord didn't just arrive—he came in like a divine Delta Force to rescue Paul with overwhelming firepower. The evil deeds of errant leaders would not prevail. The painful grief from lost friendship would not dominate his mind when he stood to give his defense, because Jesus was standing by and would one day take Paul safely home.

The abandoned moment became a rescue story, an experience of power for mission, a promise of grace to sustain, a commitment to deliver Paul safely. That's a whole lot of wonder packed into one experience of desolation.

Remember That Leading Faithfully Is More Important Than Being Right

The local church gets the best of who we are as pastors and church leaders. We signed up knowing that. Our sense of calling carried an expectation of sacrifices. In Paul's own words, we would “spend and be spent” (2 Cor. 12:15) for our people. This was never just a job. It was a sacred assignment.

But when folks leave casually, cruelly, or sinfully, leaders face a unique danger in the wake of their exit. We can lose perspective, take it personally, or even equate leaving our church with leaving God's will. From there it's only a hop, skip, and jump to defending ourselves and demonizing those who depart.

Sometimes they make it easy. People can sin grievously in their conduct toward the church or in the way they decide to leave. The flesh catches fire and burns with slander, quarreling, and divisiveness. There's no hurt like "church hurt," and there's no ugly like "church ugly." Folks can say goodbye with fiery words that torch the bridge, hoping the blaze reaches your reputation. "Alexander the coppersmith," Paul lamented, "did me great harm" (2 Tim. 4:14). Alexanders come to us all. When they punch, we want to counter. When they rant, we want to retort. When they accuse, we want vindication.

Paul could relate, but he chose another way: "The Lord will repay him (Alexander) according to his deeds" (2 Tim. 4:14). When it came to leadership, Paul played the long game. He didn't hold God hostage to vindicating him or assume God had to prove his divine goodness by clearing Paul's name. Instead, Paul followed the path of Jesus: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). Despite what he had walked through, Paul trusted his vindication to the Lord and let Alexander be a cross on which he consented to be impaled.

In thirty-three years of pastoring, I've had some Alexanders. Each time they disappear, my heart response is unswervingly predictable. Being right can be way too important to me. I want to be seen as the righteous party. I want to fight for the correct narrative—to be vindicated from harmful slander. Justice, after all, should be served. This self-righteous attitude can lead me to say really unhelpful things. There have been times I've forgotten that once someone decides to leave, the opportunity to convince them of my "take" has evaporated. I've burned a few bridges unnecessarily, bridges that if left intact might have helped the person cross more easily back into our church.

I hope you'll receive this piece of council from a grizzled veteran pastor. Don't confuse leaving your church with leaving the gospel. And never let the fervor that rightfully belongs to the gospel be

transferred over to your church or to your version of the narrative. I can fairly assume that my own rightness was the very thing that once separated me from God: “All [my] righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isa. 64:6). When I’m clinging to self-vindication, I need to flee to the righteousness that comes from another (Rom. 3:26).

One important qualifying remark here. Paul wasn’t personally polluted by Alexander, but his sense of responsibility for Timothy and his readers obliged him to convey a warning: “Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message” (2 Tim. 4:15). He gave a clear caution with a simple explanation. For Paul, leading faithfully meant, when necessary, tagging the wolf.

To follow Jesus is to accept the burden of suffering at the hands of people. Paul prepared Timothy for this inevitability when he wrote, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:12–13). When under personal attack, the gospel outlines a distinct path of response: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27–28).

We’re able to do this because we are “sons of the Most High, [who] is kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35). But there are times when the evil behavior of a defector like Alexander transcends the borders of personal assault and begins to obscure the gospel or divide the church. In those times, denying or accommodating evil behavior only perpetuates the problem and endangers the flock. Faithful leadership requires immediate first aid. Leaders must follow Paul’s example of clear caution and simple explanation to stop the bleeding and keep infection from spreading to others.

Know That Closure Is Overrated

No one cares to admit it, but in a broken world, closure is hard to achieve. Paul certainly didn’t die with it. It’s hard to read 2 Timothy and believe that all these relationships wrapped up neatly before his

death. God did not tie a bow on the pain, the complexity, the ministry absurdities. Do you think faith guarantees delivery on closure? Well, Paul had faith. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 had faith. But Hebrews 11:13 still says, “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised.” These faithful leaders died with unfulfilled promises, unsatisfied dreams, and unanswered questions. They didn’t die with resolution. They stood in faith without it.

Pastor, do you have complicated, unresolved, open-ended relationships in ministry? King David did:

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
 then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—
 then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal,
 my companion, my familiar friend.
We used to take sweet counsel together;
 within God’s house we walked in the throng. (Ps. 55:12–14)

Paul did too. Ministry is messy. Sometimes your best efforts at peace don’t deliver the resolution you desire.

Real faith doesn’t need to trace everything out. Faith doesn’t demand the psychological satisfaction of resolution in our stories. Faith trusts in what God has revealed. And the most important thing God has revealed provides the answer for the closure we so desperately desire.

The gospel represents God’s closure on the most important open-ended matters of the universe. In Christ, we have resolution on the crisis of sin and hope in the great and coming day when all will be made right. When a lack of resolution pollutes the present, we go back to what Christ accomplished on Golgotha and look forward to the promises of a new heaven and new earth. So when I’m trying to settle the turbulence that swells within as people leave, I must flee to the risen Savior. In Christ, I am reminded that because of his remarkable love, there is an end to my journey of pastoral desertion,

a place awaiting me where “I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Yes, closure will come. But not today.

Hope for Pastoral Pain

Pastor, that pain you feel, that stinging pang in your stomach that wells up each time you remember the friend who left—convert that aching moment into a reminder that there is a day coming when you will be reconciled. There’s a day coming when closure will happen.

Paul expresses this confidence in his final words. He closes 2 Timothy with a doxology. From his prison cell, amid a mass desertion, Paul worships: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:18). Despite what he’s walked through, Paul is able to entrust his unresolved pain to the Lord in confidence that there’s something better ahead.

I don’t understand why one of your team members bailed on you. I don’t know why that close friend left your church. I don’t know why that leader you poured so much time into deserted you. I don’t know why the faithful members who pledged their undying support and loyalty no longer attend your church.

But I can say this: when you feel that stab of betrayal slice deep into your heart and yet still trust the goodness of God; when you stand up to preach knowing some people are gone for good; when you wipe tears from your eyes before the next meeting but still carry on the living, the loving, and the leading—the pain that you are bearing then, that very cross on which you consent to be impaled, will have a mysterious, supernatural benefit for you and for all those to whom you are called to serve. It’s why Paul was able to confess with full assurance, “But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed” (2 Tim. 4:17).

God’s presence and power are yours, even when—and especially when—people have left and you’re crushed. It’s all you’re promised for the day of desertion. But it is enough.