

Losing Heart In The Ministry

by Fran Sciacca

Having responded in faith and obedience to the call of God, we give ourselves in ministry—yet we see few results. What then?

"FATIGUE MAKES cowards of us all." Vince Lombardi's words seemed to stand before me as the answer to my recent struggle. *You 're just burned out*, I decided. *It's been a year of continual stress and uncertainty. Don't take yourself too seriously. Now's a bad time to be doing any kind of self-inventory.*

These and a myriad other thoughts circled my mind, looking for a place to roost. They were helpful, even comforting, until I began my daily walk to school each morning my first year of teaching. As I approached the building, it was a vision of eight hundred Christian kids swarming into school like bees returning from a day in the field. The whole structure seemed to pulse and throb like a hammer-struck thumb. "Lord, hold me up, get me through another day," I pleaded. I wasn't asking for a miracle, only survival.

The American educational system's family scrapbook is page after page of casualties. The once honored profession of molding the lives of those who would shape the future is now struggling to keep

the best in its ranks. Teaching, like parenting, is hard—even more so, in some ways, in a Christian context. But I felt compelled, even called, to give myself to these kids, to attempt to spare them the legacy of heartache and pain that my own life of sin in high school had left me.

But back then, however, thoughts of quitting seemed to hunt and haunt me at every unguarded moment. *Why? What is wrong? Should I move on? Lord, please show me . . .*

Wanting to give up in the ministry is nothing new. One needs only to study men like Elijah, David, Asaph, and Timothy to realize how "losing heart" can cripple. But what causes it? How can I overcome and not simply "survive"?

One reason we lose heart is our failure to see results in our ministry. This is often compounded by feelings of guilt that seem to surface when we find ourselves thinking in terms of success. While it is true that God places a higher premium on fidelity than on fruitfulness, there is a legitimate place for looking at results as a verification of our faithfulness.

I believe Paul wrestled with such feelings with the Christians in Galatia:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose

*slaves you want to be once more?
. . . I am afraid I have labored over
you in vain. (Gal. 4:8-11)*

Satan probably roars with laughter as he weakens us with this two-sided approach. He introduces the question of doubt by getting us to ponder our ineffectiveness. While this consumes us on the forefront, he slips in the back door and accuses us of pride because we're looking for success. We are unaware that this two-sided war is Satan's doing, and we busy ourselves teetering between losing heart and feeling guilty. It's like being trapped in a revolving door, spinning in increasingly faster circles, all the while wanting to get out.

ONE SOWS AND ANOTHER REAPS

One way to free ourselves of this frustration is to keep in mind that most ministries are "sowing" and not "reaping" in nature. This is not easy in an era when who you are is determined by what you do, what you wear, and where you live. "Success" taunts us, belittling us from every billboard and magazine we read.

Yet in God's wisdom fewer believers are given the privilege of being in a reaping ministry—seeing the culmination of a great deal of labor—than are given a sowing ministry in which results are not as obvious or frequent. Jesus knew this well.

*He who reaps receives wages, and
gathers fruit for eternal life, so that
sower and reaper may rejoice*

*together. For here the saying holds
true, "One sows and another reaps."
I sent you to reap that for which you
did not labor; others have labored,
and you have entered into their labor.
(Jn. 4:36-38)*

Who were these "others" of whom Jesus spoke, the ones who so obviously had a "sowing" ministry? It is clear from the context that Jesus was referring to the Old Testament prophets. When the Jews turned their hearts to God at Pentecost in response to Peter's preaching, it was the culmination of an evangelistic process, *the bulk of which was done prior to that day!* The "sowers" in this case were long dead.

Peter and the others did indeed "reap that for which they did not labor." Peter seems to reflect on this principle when referring to the ministry of the prophets in his first epistle: *"It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you"* (1 Pet. 1:12).

This concept is also true in the area of Christian growth. Paul highlights it in his first letter to the Corinthians.

*What then is Apollos? What is Paul?
Ser vents through whom you
believed, as the Lord assigned to
each. I planted, Apollos watered, but
God gave the growth. So neither he
who plants nor he who waters is
anything, but only God who gives the
growth. He who plants and he who
waters are equal, and each shall
receive his wages according to his
labor. For we are fellow workers; you*

are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor. 3:5-9)

Many of us are planters, and many of us are waterers—but fewer of us are reapers. Realizing that one's ministry is a sowing ministry can bring healing to the wounds that are so often associated with it. It took me two painful years as a teacher in a Christian high school to come to grips with this truth. Oh, I've seen fruit; I've done some "reaping"; but I've also come to accept the fact that because of the *nature* of my ministry, the real reaping of my present labors will probably be done by someone else. I believe that leaders of campus ministries and churches sometime in the next five years will "reap that for which they did not labor."

If God has placed us in a sowing ministry we need to remind ourselves over and over that this sowing implies *future* results. Paul reassured the Galatians that the key to seeing these future results is *not losing heart in the present*, because reaping requires time. *"Let us not grow weary in well-doing [that is, sowing], for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart"* (Gal. 6:9).

Accepting this has freed me from the production treadmill. It has energized me to do my very best in the present to ensure that whoever is given the privilege of completing my labors in the future will get the best quality "fruit" possible.

It also has freed me from the trap of comparison. The Corinthians built little cliques around their favorite leader. The result was disunity (1 Cor. 3:3) and an eventual loss of the ability to think clearly (2 Cor. 10:12). Comparing myself to other apparently successful Christian workers seemed inescapable until I realized the nature of the ministry I had received. Discouragement still comes, but much less frequently. Now when I ask myself, *Is this really worth it?* the answer does not lie in what I see at hand, but in what I know now about proper expectations in a sowing ministry. Haddon Robinson, president of Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary, has said that "disillusion is the child of illusion." This is especially true in regard to misunderstanding the nature of our ministry.

One way, then, to keep from losing heart in the ministry is to determine whether you have been entrusted with a sowing ministry. If so, accept the fact that yours is a vital role in the overall program of God. Be patient, and be assured that others *will* reap the crop for which you have faithfully toiled.

NOT MY MINISTRY, BUT GOD'S

Another way to guard against losing heart is to contemplate the source of our ministry. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul spotlights the *source* of ministry as his defense against quitting: *"Therefore,*

having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

Paul's choice of Greek verb tenses in this verse is enlightening: "Having this ministry" and "losing heart" are both ongoing processes, whereas he says the mercy that he received occurred at a specific point in time. Paul is saying that he holds in his hands a ministry that is a direct consequence of his salvation, and this fact keeps him from continually losing heart. He makes a direct connection between the ministry he has and the mercy that was extended to him in Christ.

Paul recognizes that it is not *his* ministry, but rather *the* ministry, God's ministry; and Paul's participation is related to his redemption. A nonbeliever cannot have a ministry in this sense.

This truth is amplified by four statements Paul makes in the context of this verse.

1. Paul says *he was "commissioned" by God* (2 Cor. 2:17). The interesting feature of this verse is that there is no verb indicating a "commissioning" or "sending" (*NIV*). Rather, the Greek phrase that our English translations attempt to capture is *ek theou*, which means "out of the midst of God." This is the same prepositional construction Jesus uses in John 8:23—"You are from (*ek*) below, I am from (*ek*) above." Jesus was affirming the officiality of his mission. He was indeed sent from God; he wasn't simply another itinerant

Palestinian rabbi. Similarly, Paul realized the high calling of the ministry because it was based on his relatedness to God himself. This truth helped keep Paul from losing heart in the ministry.

2. Paul says that *God made him "competent" for the ministry* (2 Cor. 3:6). The Greek verb Paul chooses here occurs also in Colossians 1:12, where it is translated "qualified"—"*giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*" This refers to Paul's righteous standing in Jesus Christ, as he quickly explains in the verses that follow: "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" It's as though God designed the "job description" for the ministry around our qualifications—the very qualifications we received from him!

In fact, in the verse prior to Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6, he affirms, "*Not that we are **competent** of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our **competence** is from God.*"

Considering that Paul's main purpose for penning 2 Corinthians was to defend the authenticity of his apostleship, these verses are both encouraging and sobering. Paul is simultaneously confessing his own innate inadequacy and

his supreme authority. I am *God's man*, says Paul, not because I say so, but because God has made it so! Paul could keep from losing heart because he realized that he possessed the proper credentials for the ministry. He was "qualified."

Realizing that I am *God's man* has repeatedly rescued me from the jaws of discouragement. It not only brings a certain sense of holiness to my efforts, but also causes me to remind myself that Satan wants me out of the ministry. Thoughts of surrender can then be seen as the artillery of the enemy rather than simply my own "conclusions" as I evaluate my circumstances.

3. Paul says *he was enlightened by God* (2 Cor. 4:6). He is speaking here of his own salvation as a radiant illumination, the shining in his own heart of "the knowledge of the glory of God." Paul relates this to the awesome creative power of God on the first day of creation (Gen. 1:3). It's as if Paul is saying, "The omnipotent, infinite, personal God who spoke the created order into existence is the one who opened my mind to understand the truth of the gospel." It was not the years spent at the feet of the scholarly Gamaliel or his association with the Sanhedrin that caused the gospel to illumine Paul's heart and mind; it was *God*, the same God who spoke

darkness away at the beginning of time.

About ten years after he wrote to the Corinthians, Paul gave this assurance to the Philippian Christians: "*I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Phil. 1:6). Paul reminded them that it is *God* who saved them and it is *God* who will see to it that he completes the task. The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith. God's work in our lives is not like some half-finished project in a drawer. He began it, and he will finish it.

Paul could draw great strength to keep from losing heart when he recaptured this proper perspective on the source of the ministry. There have been numerous times in my own life when I have had to remind myself, in the face of losing heart, that thirteen years ago I was a renegade college student on a collision course with self-destruction. Then the God of creation caused the light of his glory to shine in my heart. My present performance in the ministry pales in comparison to the wonder of that event.

4. Paul says that *he is being "renewed every day"* (2 Cor. 4:16). The Greek word translated here as "renewed" occurs only twice in the New Testament: here and in Colossians 3:10—"...and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." In both cases the word is

passive, indicating that the renewal process is coming from outside of ourselves. It is interesting to note as well that the noun form of this Greek word does not occur anywhere outside Christian literature. The process of renewal in the "inner man" is unique to Christianity!

In elaborating on this principle of renewal, Paul asserts later in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 that the very things that seem to crush him are in reality making him more of a transparent vessel through which the life of Jesus may shine. For us as well, the people, circumstances, and difficulties that work to drive us *from* the ministry are apparently the very things God uses to make us more fit *for* the ministry.

Losing this perspective will almost certainly cause us to lose heart. It is when I forget that the ministry is nothing more than the person of Jesus Christ using my unique being to accomplish his special tasks that I am most tempted to give up.

Failing to recognize the nature and source of the ministry can cause us to lose heart. But there is another culprit. A third reason people lose heart in the ministry is their lack of support from those they serve.

STARVED FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

Although those of us who are in the ministry cannot ask for or demand

affirmation, Scripture insists that it should occur. God tells his people to encourage one another (Heb. 3:13), to open their homes to one another (1 Pet. 4:9), to serve one another (Gal. 5:13), to be tender toward one another (Eph. 4:32), and a host of other similar commands.

People in ministry may need this type of support more than those to whom they minister. Their continual output, their responsibility for the spiritual lives of others, constant demands for their personal integrity, the emotional pressure of balancing their personal, family, and ministry priorities, and the fatigue associated with all of these, regularly render God's servants "needy" indeed. Yet too often they receive criticism rather than comfort, resentment rather than sympathy. Why?

We live in a consumer oriented culture. You pay for what you get. Cost implies certain rights for the purchaser. If you pay your pastor, aren't there certain responsibilities that are just "givens" for his job? If you pay twelve hundred dollars annually to have your child in a Christian school, aren't there certain expectations that must be met?

I suppose the obvious answer to these questions is yes, but does that alter the responsibility of the people of God to care for the needs of those who care for them? Providing a salary will meet the physical needs of those in ministry, but it will leave them strangely empty without

support on the emotional and interpersonal level.

I recently spoke with a dear friend who is a pastor. He is expected to be a pillar of spiritual strength to his people, yet cannot find a single man in his congregation who will meet weekly with him for prayer!

A phone call, a note in the mail, a surprise dinner party—these small responses to someone you know could be the affirmation that keeps him or her in the ministry, whether a pastor or a church nursery worker. Your words and affirmative actions have the potential for affecting whole lives. Paul himself made it an obvious personal habit to privately and publicly recognize and affirm people for their service to him (see Philippians 2:25-30, for example). Actress Celeste Holm said, *"We live by encouragement, and we die without it—sadly, slowly, and angrily."*

Those in the ministry must work hard to understand the nature and source of that ministry, but if you're under their ministry don't neglect your responsibility to encourage them as they work.

Paul instructed the believers in Thessalonica, *"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other"* (1 Thess, 5:12-13, *NIV*). It is startling to see that the word translated "respect" is actually

the word "to know," implying a certainty based on prior experience. The love and respect Paul asks the Thessalonians to give to those ministering to them was to be rooted in a thorough acquaintance with them. How well do you know those who are ministering to you or to your children?

GOD IS FOR US

The very fact that God addresses in his word the issue of losing heart assures us that we are not alone in facing it. In fact, when we look at the depth of commitment of the men and women in Scripture who at one time or another were tempted to lose heart, we realize that the issue is not *whether* we will face this problem, but *how*.

Take time to evaluate the nature of your involvement for God. Is it a "sowing" or a "reaping" ministry?

Take time to reflect on the fact that you have a ministry "by the mercy of God." *He* has commissioned, qualified, and enlightened you, and is renewing you daily. It is *his* ministry. *He* has called you to it. *He* has equipped you for it. *He* will never forsake you in it.

Paul's assurance to the Christians at Rome, though in reference to their justification, seems appropriate here: *"What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?"* (Rom. 8:31).

Being tempted to lose heart is normal, but

to give in to that temptation need not happen.

If we can capture these truths and remind each other of them, and if those of us being ministered to will faithfully encourage those ministering to us, "losing heart" will be nothing more than a temptation that blossoms for a season but then withers on the vine, fruitless and futile in the enemy's strategy against the servants of God.

Taken from: *Discipleship Journal*, Issue #18
November/December 1983. Scripture quotations
are from the Revised Standard Version.