

FOREWORD BY WALTER SCOTT THOMAS

LEADING
THROUGH
STORMS



SUCCESSFULLY
NAVIGATING
MINISTRY WHILE
MAINTAINING
YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

—
GEOFFREY V. DUDLEY SR.



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Leading Through Storms* by Geoffrey V. Dudley Sr.

Copyright © 2025 by Geoffrey V. Dudley Sr.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

www.ivpress.com.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Walter Scott Thomas 1

Introduction 3

PART 1: BEFORE THE STORM

1 Calling: How We Got Here 11

2 Core: The Strength of Your Leaders 22

PART 2: WEATHER ALERT

3 Consecrated Courage: Prepare for the Storm 37

4 Construction: How to Build the Church 50

5 Canceled: When People Jump Ship 62

PART 3: IN THE STORM

6 Chaos: Multiple Things Can Go Wrong 79

7 Cash: When Money Is Not Enough 92

8 Community: From “Hosanna!” to “Crucify Him!” 107

PART 4: AFTER THE STORM

9 Counseling: It’s Okay to Ask for Help 117

10 Clarity: How We Made It Over 128

Acknowledgments 139

Appendix: Self-Assessment Tools 141

Notes 143

CALLING

HOW WE GOT HERE

*Calling always matches who you are. . . . Nothing in life
is as rewarding as fulfilling your calling—nothing.*

JOHN MAXWELL

OLD GLORY FLAPPED IN THE WIND as congratulations rang from the crowd. I saluted smartly for the last time and walked off the stage of a successful military ministry career as an Air Force chaplain lieutenant colonel retired. The applause grew louder and louder with each passing month as I stepped onto another ministry stage, this time as a civilian church planter. Before long the applause from the rapidly growing church plant was so loud I couldn't hear the oncoming windstorm that would soon become a firestorm.

The executive pastor resigned and started his own church. The worship pastor quit. The youth pastor resigned and started a home Bible study. But that was just the wind. As in the days of Elijah, the earthquake and fire were around the corner with no still quiet voice to be heard. It was the firestorm of the bank twice reneging on its loan commitment. The multimillion-dollar construction project was stopped with the red iron beams of the sanctuary still suspended in the air. The explosive growth of the church imploded, and parishioners left as fast as they had come, resulting in

an extremely tight church budget. On top of that, I was looking for a cave to go hide my life-threatening depression and anxiety so I could hear God's voice like Elijah. But there was no cave.

What kind of calling from God can give you the leadership skills to lead yourself and your core leadership team out of a situation like this? What do you do when you are nothing more than a shell of the sharp chaplain lieutenant colonel who once saluted smartly and is now struggling to hear God's voice while Elijah's words reverberate in your soul: "I have had enough"? When Elijah said this, he sat under a broom tree following a tremendous victory over Jezebel and Ahab at Mount Carmel.

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." (1 Kings 18:38-39 ESV)

Despite the victory Elijah said, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left" (v. 22). He ran in fear of his life and battled severe anxiety and depression. He couldn't bring himself to attempt suicide, so he chose death by God, "But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (1 Kings 19:4 ESV). What kind of calling equips you for the moments in ministry when your mental health has had enough? A calling similar to that of Elijah—a calling that answers fully within one's humanity.

Elijah was a human being just like us (James 5:17). Sure, he called down fire from heaven and rode into heaven on a chariot of fire, but even he succumbed to the storms of ministry leadership. There

are times when the isolation and demands of ministry can wear the strongest person down. A broom tree awaits every leader who dares to answer the call on their life to be used by God to the point that God empties them out. It is in those moments they must find a cave to go to, heavenly food to eat, and an acuity to hear God's voice in the midst of their pain.

Only when leadership skills move from theory to praxis can you hope to navigate the storms leadership will inevitably bring. My definition of a leader is someone with the ability to inspire people beyond their natural capabilities to accomplish a common goal or vision.¹ To execute one's leadership, you must withstand hurricane-level wind gusts.

You must also prioritize your mental health against the pressure to succeed and the pressure to serve. Elijah found a cave, but leaders are often unable to find a cave to go hear God's voice of consolation, strength, and direction. Additionally, many are reluctant to even admit they need a cave. The pressure to do God's will at all costs is immense. According to the Schaeffer Institute, 70 percent of pastors constantly fight depression, and 71 percent are burned out. Eighty percent of pastors say ministry has negatively impacted their family, and 70 percent say they don't have a close friend.² The data shows that it's not okay to say you're not okay when you are leading others in the body of Christ.

The heartache of leadership affects more than pastors. It affects anyone who stands in front of someone and asks them to do anything. The parking lot attendant directing parishioners to park. The usher at the door showing people where they can sit. The minister who will deliver the sermon. Leaders include business owners and parents who work in the home. Lifeway research shows that ministry leaders in all positions are negatively impacted—from

personality skirmishes to squall lines of ministry, including full-blown hurricanes of denominational politics and church splits.³

No one is immune from the storms of leadership and the brokenness the storms leave in their wake. Church hurt is real, and many no longer volunteer or leave organized religion altogether.⁴ The number of ministry leaders considering quitting as of March 2022 is 42 percent, up 13 percent from January 2021. They cite the tremendous stress of the job, isolation, current political divide, the affects the job has on the family, and their lack of optimism about the future.⁵ What may be a simple drizzle of rain to one leader may feel like a life-altering gully washer to another.

Everyone experiences ministry leadership differently. Who would have thought the simple words of Jezebel would cause Elijah to have a mental and emotional breakdown?

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. (1 Kings 19:1-3 ESV)

The Bible is good at bringing its readers behind the scenes to see, feel, and vicariously experience what the bigger-than-life biblical characters were going through. Too often, we read about their lives through rose-colored glasses because we already know the end of their story. When we pause and slowly read about their lives through the lens of their moment in context, we have a greater appreciation for the storms they came out of. Paul’s shipwrecks are more real when we are floating in the water with him until he gets to the dry land. We can feel the snake bite when we know the island

was slithering with snakes. And we can run from Jezebel like Elijah when we go behind the scenes with him.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF A BACKSTORY

It's behind the scenes when you see the test of ministry. When things are not going well is precisely when leadership is needed. The Bible is littered with the backstory of victory being wrestled from the jaws of defeat. The timber of a leader is seen during the winter storms that will assuredly come your way. When I was in the military, we called these storms backstories or lessons learned. Leadership would always want to go over those lessons learned immediately after war games. We called those briefings "hotwash." The need to discuss the good, the bad, and the ugly so soon after the war games was so that leadership could get to the backstory, which is where the learning took place and to understand what not to do next time.

So it is in ministry leadership. Behind every battle story of success is a backstory more breathtaking than the headlines. Leadership has its Mount Carmel moments. Leadership has its ten plagues, Red Sea miracles, daily manna, quail from heaven, water from a rock, and Jordan River crossing moments. It also has golden calf moments. The rewards and fulfillment of leading others to a closer walk with God and the manifestation of God's work in the earth are the lifeblood of ministry.

But the highs of ministry leadership can only be matched by its lows. Elijah had multiple ups and downs and even had to live within the famine he prophetically proclaimed: when the brook dried up, he had to eat from a dirty bird. Even Jesus was up one day and down the next: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased," was followed by Jesus being driven into the desert wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Luke makes sure we know that Jesus' victory was short lived. "When the

devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13).

That was not all of Jesus’ un-equilibrium with respect to his leadership development. In one moment, Jesus was self-assured and confident when John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask whether Jesus was the Messiah, “And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them’” (Matthew 11:4-5 ESV). In many ways Jesus “flexed” on his cousin John the Baptist by citing his accomplishments.

But in another moment, Jesus seemed less self-assured when he asked Peter and his disciples what was the word on the street about him:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-15 ESV)

In his infinite wisdom, God has permitted us the record of the Holy Writ to leave us these leadership backstories of highs and lows of Jesus, Elijah, and others for a reason. If they had their ups and downs, victories and defeats, times of popularity and unpopularity, so will we.

MY BACKSTORY: TALK OF THE TOWN

As Elijah was the popular leader of the school of prophets, I was the very popular leader of New Life Church, which led to me pastoring one of the leading churches in the community. Its rapid growth

made New Life the talk of the town. From barber shops to hair salons, gyms to the mall food court, seemingly everybody was talking about this chaplain on Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, who had retired and started a church in a hotel ballroom. More than 850 people showed up for the launch service. More than 250 joined on the first Sunday, and the membership quickly grew to more than 2,000. There were so many people, we had to ask the brand-new hotel to give us more chairs as the ballroom was overflowing.

For a while it seemed like I had a Midas touch. Every ministry initiative I touched turned to gold. Souls were saved, lives were changed, and more LifeChangers (as we call ourselves) joined the church. Our ministry success drew the ire of many, but at the same time the highest form of flattery is when others begin to imitate your ministry model. My influence and that of the church grew rapidly like the corn in the fields all around us in our Midwestern community.

We started receiving awards for our work in the community along with grants for community initiatives. I was asked to serve on the local school board, the first African American to do so, as well as many of the boards that were recognizing our work. Civic leaders came calling for our support and endorsement even though we refrain from letting politicians speak to the congregation. We started a chapter of the NAACP and openly pushed being a racially diverse church. Our capacity seemed limitless.

This was not the first time my ministry seemed to have limitless capacity. At the tender age of thirteen, I preached my first sermon. Pentecostal United Holy Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, was packed. There was no room for any more chairs, not even standing room. I heard the voice of God at the age of twelve when I gave my life to Christ. I was with a group of newly saved kids under an oak tree at the Southern District headquarters of my denomination. While debating the Scriptures, I distinctly heard God say, “Do you

see how they listen to you? Lead them!” So, I told my pastor what I heard, and he scheduled my “trial sermon.”

People had come from what seemed like every corner of eastern North Carolina to hear what an eighth grader would say about living holy. I mounted the pulpit with an overconfident air that only a young teenager could have, ignorant of the call on my life and what lay ahead. I read my text with the bravery of David going to fight Goliath.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”
(Matthew 4:1-4)

I announced my sermon topic like I was John the Baptist in the wilderness. With fire in my belly, I preached like Paul and said, “What you want is down here (I gestured to the floor like it was hell). What you need is up here (I gestured to the ceiling like it was heaven).” The announcement of the text and topic alone brought the house down with a thunderous “Hallelujah!” “Amen!” “Preach, boy, preach!” The moment felt like it was over before it started, a blur lost in the euphoria of accolades, and just like that my leadership journey was off to a roaring start.

My calling started early in life and gained steam every year as I actively pursued opportunities to lead whether as co-captain of a high school basketball team with a 24-1 record, becoming president of the Black Student Union, being voted one of the outstanding seniors of my graduating class of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, or wearing the cloth of my country for over twenty-one

years. The Air Force took my desires to lead and developed me into a sharp, self-assured chaplain lieutenant colonel. I hungrily devoured anything that smelled like leadership development—the continuing education of squadron officer school, academic instructor school, air command and staff college, the Air Force Institute of Technology special assignment, the many Air Force chaplain school short courses, the three master’s degrees, and one doctoral degree

After the military I continued to learn more about leadership by earning my PhD in organizational leadership and being mentored by some of the foremost leaders in the body of Christ, including my spiritual mentor, my church consultant, Dr. Sam Chand, and my executive coach, Bishop Walter Scott Thomas. I became even more of a sponge, trying to absorb as much knowledge as I possibly could by going to every leadership conference I could find. Twenty-one-and-a-half years of the military culture of intense leadership, more formal education, an ever-deepening devotion to God, and commitment to the call on my life prepared me for the storms I would face, so I thought.

The military inculcated me into a world of routine, excellence, planning, and carrying out strict orders, and my call molded me. When I retired, I conducted myself in military fashion to plant New Life Church like Joshua’s Israelite brigade when they marched around the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-27). The church plant was a regiment of routine success in almost everything we attempted to do. Launching the successful church had me planning and executing like in Nehemiah 4:6-15. “So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart” (Nehemiah 4:6).

It took us a little longer than fifty days to build the church. With the winds of success filling our sails, in eighteen months we went

from having church services in a hotel ballroom to marching into the first phase of a multimillion-dollar church with a sanctuary, classrooms, administrative offices, gym, and preschool. The building went up so quick, people couldn't believe it. Nothing like that had ever been done in this community before. "Who is this preacher? How did they do it?" was the constant refrain. Doing my best to lead like Joshua, Elijah, Nehemiah, and Jesus was paying dividends. I also led like David—with heart, transparency, creativity, and youthful vigor. "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Psalm 78:72). But none of that could help me lead through the gathering storms and life challenges I was about to face.

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The leadership theory that best reflects chapter one is authentic leader, which is characterized by the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and developmental leader.⁶ The leader is reflective within and responsive without and strives to grow through self-discovery and applying those evolving developments to leading their followers. In growing and developing my calling to lead, I discovered areas that desperately needed attention and areas that were intuitive and innate to my personality and being. I used both to become a better leader.

A leader must be brutally honest. The transparency of the leader starts with oneself, and that authentic self-awareness can transform you into the leader God needs when the moment arrives. Take self-evaluation inventories, learn your values by doing values exercises, and journal (see the Appendix for recommended self-assessments). Habakkuk said write the vision and make it plain; I say write your story and make it plain. Find yourself so you can be yourself. People follow authentic leaders.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. As you reflect on your calling, what are some of the milestones in your journey that prepared you for leadership?
2. List at least five challenges you are facing right now.
3. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the demands of leadership?
What did you do in response?
4. What are some of your coping skills?

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/leading-through-storms