

THREE WAYS TO OVERCOME A CRIPPLING MINISTRY LOSS

By Ken Sande

One of the most traumatic experiences in life is to be forced out of Christian ministry.

Although some of these painful experiences are triggered by theological differences, leadership deficits or moral failure, most of them are the result of **relational conflicts** that escalated to a crisis point and resulted in a forced exit.

I have worked with dozens of pastors and ministry leaders who suffered this kind of loss. Some of them learned from their mistakes and were eventually restored to fruitful ministry. But many others refused to face their mistakes and were so emotionally and spiritually crippled by their loss that they were unable to regain the same level of ministry they had previously enjoyed.

If you have experienced this type of loss, or know someone else who has, this post is for you. It will help you to honestly identify and learn from your past mistakes. More importantly, this post provides three gospel-grounded steps you can take today to overcome a crippling ministry loss and transform it into a story that exalts God's redeeming grace and takes your life to a whole new level of joy and fruitfulness.

Jacob's Spiritual Limp

The first step in overcoming a crippling ministry loss is to discern whether you are actually wrestling with God.

In Genesis 32:22-31, we read that Jacob wrestled with a divine being (either God or an angel) until the break of day. As the sun rose, the divine being dislocated Jacob's hip, giving him a lifelong limp. He then blessed Jacob with a new name: Israel. That limp and the new name were signs of Jacob's profound encounter with God, representing his transformation from **self-reliance** to **dependence on God**.

Jacob's physical injury signified a shift from his old life of deception to a new life as "Israel" ("he struggles with God"), and it served as a reminder of his weaknesses and God's power working through him. Although he limped the rest of his life, Jacob learned a vital lesson and went on to serve as one of the great patriarchs of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Are You Limping or Crippled?

A forced leadership exit always causes spiritual and emotional injury and pain. The question is, will that injury result in a limp that leads to renewed ministry, as it did with Jacob, or will it be so crippling that future ministry efforts are only a shadow of what they might have been. It all depends on how a leader responds to his injury and pain.

Here are fourteen ways to discern whether you or someone you know is limping or crippled.

A *limping leader* moves ahead with a deeper sense of **humility**, seeing his weaknesses more clearly and depending more than ever on the grace and strength of God (Matt. 23:12).

A *crippled leader* continues to live out of **pride**, depending on his own wisdom and strength and refusing to honestly face his past failures and ongoing weaknesses (James 4:6).

A *limping leader* sees himself as a **victor**, fully recognizing how his own choices contributed to his fall, and yet trusting that God is working through his failures to refine him for more fruitful service in the future.

A *crippled leader* sees himself as a **victim** and blames other people for his downfall rather than facing up to the way his own choices have contributed to his situation.

A *limping leader* has **godly sorrow** and feels more anguish for the way his choices have dishonored God and impacted others than he does for the ways he himself has suffered.

A *crippled leader* has **worldly sorrow** and focuses on the pain he is feeling far more than he does on the pain he has caused to others (2 Cor. 7:10).

A *limping leader* moves forward with a **rejoicing heart**, constantly thanking God and telling others how gracious and forgiving God has been to forgive all his sins.

A *crippled leader* is burdened with a **bitter heart**, constantly replaying his hurts in his own mind and telling others how he has been mistreated.

A *limping leader* **sees his wrongs as logs** that are so large and serious that others' wrongs are mere specks in comparison (Matt. 7:3-5).

A *crippled leader* **sees his wrongs as specks**, making token admissions of his mistakes but seeing them as small in comparison to the greater wrongs of others.

A *limping leader* sees himself as the "**chief of sinners**" (1 Tim. 1:15), sincerely believing that his sins are worse than those of others who contributed to his ministry meltdown.

A *crippled leader* sees himself as a "**normal sinner**," far from perfect but not as guilty as those who contributed to his downfall.

A *limping leader* seeks **face-to-face conversations** with those he wronged, **confesses his wrongs earnestly and in detail** and **invites candid feedback on wrongs and weaknesses** he has not yet recognized.

A crippled leader makes a few **general admissions** to give the appearance of godly confession but avoids candid conversations where his wrongs and their consequences can be illuminated in detail.

A limping leader admits and grieves deeply over the ways **he misused his position and power** to control or oppress others.

A crippled leader is **largely blind to the ways he misused his power** but can easily itemize the ways that he thinks others misused power towards him.

A limping leader **pursues trauma-informed counseling** to help him to identify the ways he contributed to his ministry failure, to recognize and counteract the impact of trauma and to plan ways he can change those patterns (Prov. 15:31; Ps. 141:5).

A crippled leader **shuns objective counseling**, minimizes the way trauma has impacted him and instead surrounds himself with supporters who praise his gifts, nurse his grievances and shy away from offering candid feedback (Prov. 12:1).

A limping leader **postpones starting a new ministry** until he has made every reasonable effort to identify and repent of his wrongs and to be so genuinely reconciled with those whom he has offended that they affirm he is ready for new ministry.

A crippled leader **seeks to start a new ministry as soon as possible**, typically drawing away members of his former church or ministry, to validate himself, prove that his forced exit was unjust and show that he is still qualified for ministry.

A limping leader **seeks greater spiritual accountability** for ministry, recognizing that his failure to submit to accountability contributed to his previous relational failures.

A crippled leader **fears rigorous accountability** more than ever and creates a new leadership team that looks authentic but is comprised of people who he can easily control.

A limping leader is **resilient**, able to genuinely recover from his failures and pursue the difficult conversations needed to learn from past failures and restore broken relationships.

A crippled leader is **fragile**, unable to engage in challenging conversations that might illuminate the ways that he failed in his former ministry and needs to change.

Like Jacob, a *limping leader* learns from his mistakes and can eventually become a **model of humility, transparency and God's redeeming grace** that inspires others to face their weaknesses and failures and turn more fully to Christ.

All too often, a *crippled leader* becomes a **model of pride, self-deception and self-reliance** (the very sins Jacob had to renounce) as he launches a new ministry and the failures and weaknesses he has refused to face resurface, leading to a replay of the relational tensions that hurt so many people in the past.

In short, a *limping leader* **makes his failure his story**. He turns his “limp” into the foundation of his new ministry, humbly describing his many failures, just as the Apostle Paul did, passing over the failures (specks) of others and praising God for his mercy, kindness and forgiveness.

In contrast, a *crippled leader* **makes other people’s failures his story**, constantly retelling a tale of how other people’s sinful, unreasonable and unjust behavior drove him from his position, while failing to see the grace, mercy and forgiveness that could be his if only he walked a path of sincere repentance.

Is There Is Hope for the Crippled?

If these contrasts help you realize that you have been crippled by a past loss, God has good news for you.

Proverbs 28:13 holds forth a marvelous promise for every believer, including leaders who have been forced out of ministry and people who lost important relationships: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

The Apostle John echoes this promise in one of his letters: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

This promise is echoed in even greater detail in Psalm 32, which was written by David, possibly after he finally confessed his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. The first five verses describe a path forward for every sinner:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

² Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."

God established and secured these promises through the gospel of Christ. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to pay for all our sins on the cross and to be resurrected to give each of us an opportunity for a new life, no matter how many sins we have committed in the past (Col. 1:21-22; 2 Cor. 5:17; Titus 2:11-12).

When we sin, God lovingly disciplines us (Heb. 12:6; Prov. 3:11-12), often by allowing us to experience the natural consequences of our wrongs, such as broken relationships, lost jobs, isolation, sadness, loneliness and grief. But all the while, his arms are open wide, waiting for the moment when we repent of our wrongs, change course and cast ourselves on his grace, mercy and forgiveness.

How About You?

Have you experienced a major ministry, career or relational loss? Are you wrestling with so much sadness, grief and hopelessness that you feel fragile and crippled as you think of the future?

If so, there are three things you can do today to begin rebuilding your relationships and ministry.

First, reread the Scripture passages provided above and all of Psalm 32 to reclaim the hope and forgiveness that God promises through the gospel to all who repent of their sins and turn to him.

Second, print out a copy of this post, read it again from top to bottom and be honest with yourself and with God about any ways that you are walking a "crippled" path instead of a "limping" path. Confess your errant ways to God and then cross out every "crippled" characteristic you are now renouncing. To get an even better evaluation of yourself, ask your spouse to read the post and give you an objective perspective on your recent behavior.

Then place a star beside every "limping" characteristic you want God to help you develop in the days ahead. These stars mark your path of repentance.

Third, find at least one advisor (two or three advisors acting together can be even better) who will walk beside you on the path of repentance and restoration. This could be a spiritually mature friend, church leader, counselor or conciliator who will love you enough to speak the truth to you and hold you accountable as you seek to embrace these truths and grow in the days ahead.

A godly advisor can be especially by walking along side you as you go through trauma-aware counseling and accompanying you as you go to people you have offended to confess your wrongs, invite candid feedback and ask for forgiveness. Your advisor can

support you through these challenging conversations and hold you accountable as you pursue needed change.

If you know of others who have been forced out of ministry or experienced a major relational loss, please share this post with them. God could use you to help them put their feet back onto a path of healing, reconciliation and ministry that is more fruitful than anything they experienced in the past ... just as Jacob experienced when he became Israel.

For it is in our weakness and failures that God's amazing grace is exalted and magnified. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9,

[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses [and my limping!], so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

~ Ken Sande

Reflection questions:

- Why are so many people who have experienced a major career or relational loss inclined to walk a "crippled path" instead of a "limping path"? (see Prov. 11:2; 18:12; Prov. 29:23)
- Are you walking a "crippled path" today? If so, where is that path likely to lead in the months and years ahead? How is that path likely to affect your spouse and children? What kind of ministry will that path probably lead to?
- How can focusing on the gospel of Christ help you to turn away from a crippled path and walk a limping path?
- If you ask God to help you pursue the fourteen limping characteristics listed above, how might your life be different months from now? How would your family benefit from you rejecting a crippled path and walking a limping path? What kind of ministry might God give to you if you make your limp your story?
- Do you know someone who seems to have been crippled by a major ministry or relational loss? How is their life and ministry going at this point? What is more loving on your part: simply watching that person remain crippled or loving the person enough to share this post with him and offering to walk with him toward healing, reconciliation and restoration? (see Gal. 6:1; Prov. 27:6; Ps. 141:5)

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