

Engraved on His Palms

Dear Harry,

Recently a fifty-year old pastor told me: *When I started in ministry, I was called aside by an older pastor. He showed me his Bible with my name and several others written in the flyleaf. He mentioned his commitment to pray daily for my life and ministry. I was so taken by his initiative that when I turned forty, I likewise picked out ten young pastors and did the same. But now a decade later, there are only 4 names left in my Bible: the others have resigned, or been forced out of ministry by financial pressures, bad health, sexual misconduct or failing marriages. When I shared this situation with my mentor (now retired), he showed me his Bible, and mine was the only name left.* Yes, Harry, ministry is filled with casualties, spectacular and quiet.

Pastoral ministry has always been hard. Perhaps today it's even harder: unending phone calls, unimaginative elders, fear-filled co-workers, either not enough parking spots or too many empty spots. Add to this my own sinfulness, frailties and shortcomings as a leader in a hostile environment. Sometimes pastors fall by the wayside because we lose our battle against the battles common to us all—the world, the flesh or the devil. Long before being publicly exposed, these brothers and sisters have been spiritually neutralized by sensuality, money, failing family relationships or any of the myriad pitfalls of the day.

But just as often, more subtly and harder to detect, so many pastors gradually lose their sense of calling. Slowly, the compelling urgency that brought us to ministry seeps away in the face of phone calls, appointments, arguments, study, and the struggle for balance in the busy-ness of modern life. As the wag admonishes, “It doesn’t matter if you burn out, rust out or drop out, you’re still out.”

But I don’t want *out*! I want to finish strong. I want to be a healthier person at retirement than when I entered the pastorate. I’m saddened when I hear of yet another talented pastor who has become a casualty of the stress of ministry. And I admit that *but by the grace of God go I*. With all that’s within me, Harry, I want to keep boundaries with family and church, work hard to stay fresh, and seek godly counsel.

Yet perhaps, even more importantly, in times of stress, it’s imperative to remember why we got involved in ministry in the first place. Nothing strengthens the servant of God better than a good reminder of the deep love of God and of His gracious calling. Let me share such a reminder with you.

In 1984, I led a group of high school students to Haiti on a water project mission. On the preparatory trip, we flew into the islet of La Gonav, just outside the harbor of Port O’ Prince. It is within two hours of Miami, and is the site of the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere. The plane dusted the beach where we were to land, drawing in hundreds of children, all barefoot and many naked.

The Haitian missionaries who ran the local clinic were our hosts and ended the tour with a visit to the cinderblock clinic. Native nurses showed us the

facility with pride, though it was crude even by Third World standards. Lining the halls and reception area were families with their children, waiting patiently for hours.

In the last room was a little boy, about the size of my four-year-old daughter. His arms and legs were covered with newspaper: the disease that had ravaged his body left him with sores that he picked constantly, and the clinic couldn't afford to change bandages hourly to prevent infection.

His name is Jean, said one of the nurses, and we almost lost him. Sometimes they just bring the little ones out of the hills too late to be saved. Then she asked me to lift up the boy so they could change the sheets. He felt tiny and frail. Like children everywhere, he slumped into my chest, where he felt like a little furnace, soaking us both with sweat. After what seemed an eternity, I put him down, ruffled his head, and left the clinic.

Out in the Jeep, I wiped my hands off on my thighs, looked down and saw that the ink from his newspapers had smeared all over my hands (and now my pants as well). Hard as I rubbed and cleaned for the next day, the ink had stained too deeply to remove: a powerful reminder of my little friend, Jean. And then I was also reminded of Isaiah's words: *Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands, you are ever before me* (Isaiah 49:16).

When I came to Christ, it was with the sure conviction that I would be held safe in the hand of God, sealed on the palms of God's hands. When I felt called into ministry, it was with the sure conviction that the lostness of others had stained my hands with that same love of God.

So, Harry, when you're tempted to forget why God has brought you into ministry, look down at your hands. Remember what you are holding, and pray that the ink of the pain of others never rubs off of your heart and your hands.

Your brother in Christ,

John Crosby,

Christ Presbyterian Church, Edina, Minnesota

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Isaiah 49:15-16