

STALLED



Hope and Help for Pastors Who
Thought They'd Be There by Now

DALE SELLERS

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Thought They'd Be There by Now

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DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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UNABLE

Don't compare your beginning to someone else's middle, or your middle to someone else's end. Don't compare the start of your second quarter of life to someone else's third quarter.

—Tim Hiller, *Strive*

“I thought I’d be there by now,” I confessed to my friend Tony Morgan several minutes into our conversation about leadership issues. I had never had the courage to express this thought out loud before. But it was true ... wherever *there* was. I felt as though I hadn’t accomplished enough. But after blurting out my thoughts with such gut-level honesty, my life started to change.

Unintentionally I had subscribed to the false belief that success was directly related to building something huge and meaningful for the masses. *Why don't I have a large church yet?* I wondered. *There must be something wrong with me as a person and a leader.*

Many people from all walks of life begin to sense increasing pressure as we get older. By then it’s clear that life is not going to turn out as we hoped. It happens in our marriages, our parenting, and our vocations. It happens with our homes, our travel (or lack thereof), our bank accounts, and our hobbies. I’m amazed by the number of twenty- and thirtysome-things I meet who already feel disappointment about not having reached

the milestones they think they should have reached, even with so much life still ahead of them.

THE LOOK

Maybe your current experience in ministry could best be described as *stalled*. Has the stress from thinking you would be there by now caused you to adopt the look of the leader who doesn't know what to do next? Maybe you've tried what the "experts" have offered as guarantees for growth only to discover that you become more stalled with each new attempt to get moving.

In most instances, the pressure we feel is coming from the inside. But we keep pressing on, and the very joy of living gets sucked right out of us. We develop a certain *look* over the years. I see it in people's eyes on a daily basis. I notice it on the faces of people from all age groups, backgrounds, cultures, and walks of life. It is so common for me to see it in the eyes of the pastors I work with across the United States. I imagine you have probably seen it too—maybe when you looked in the mirror this morning.

Sadly, I had this look for most of my life, but I didn't reach out for help. I simply suffered in silence while outwardly maintaining a positive approach to life. Eventually, the weight of it brought about so much stress that I ended up having open-heart surgery. Friend, that is no way to live.

What is the look, and how do we get it?

The look comes from having a sense that we have failed and that failure defines us. It comes from the feeling of being unable to fulfill our calling. It's the undeniable evidence that we thought we'd be there by now. But the real problem is unrealistic expectations and a wrong definition of success.

As you reflect for a moment, are you aware that you have the look? If so, I want to help you by unpacking how we get it—and how we get free

from it. I want to take you on a confidence-gaining journey, and my hope is that you will develop a healthy self-image filled with great assurance that you will fulfill your purpose.

The objective is not to create the illusion of confidence. Instead, the goal is to equip you with the tools to define real success, discover the secret of setbacks, and ultimately discern how to become a source of blessing to others.

Admitting I thought I'd be there by now dislodged something that had been holding me back for a long time. It became the defining moment when I began experiencing true freedom. Yes, it was terrifying and embarrassing. But it was also liberating.

Confessing my feelings of failure out loud to Tony caused a breakthrough inside me that felt like a thousand-pound weight lifting off my chest. Simultaneously it became the point at which Jesus began a deep healing process in my heart. Revealing my belief allowed my heart to begin releasing a negative self-image buried deep inside for decades. If the countenance is a mirror of the soul, then there is no doubt that my constant disappointment and self-doubt caused me to develop the look.

I wonder whether you have the look too. Can we be honest with each other? Really honest? How would you respond if we were having coffee face to face today and I mentioned that you have the look? Would you be embarrassed or defensive? Maybe you would try to steer the conversation in a different direction. You could begin to point out my flaws, of which there are many, by the way. Or you might agree with my assessment but have no real intention of dealing with it.

Acknowledging that we have a problem is the first step to becoming free of it. I'm sure you have probably heard that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."⁵ The good news is that there is a life of fulfilling ministry available to you on the other side of confronting your disappointment. I know firsthand the freedom that comes through honest confession.

Please don't misunderstand my motive. I'm not judging you. As I have already mentioned, I had that look for most of my ministry life, so I can easily relate to you. That look isn't unique to those in ministry, by the way. In fact, it's on the faces of thousands—maybe millions—of people from all walks of life.

Seasons of setbacks can destroy dreams, cause callousness, burn bridges, harden our hearts, fuel cynicism, and lead to self-doubt. When this happens, we usually build cocoons of protection around ourselves in order to help us hide in plain sight. The cocoons make it possible to carry out our daily responsibilities while our problem goes undetected by those we lead. At least, we hope it does.

A LIFETIME IN THE MAKING

The setting in which I confessed that I thought I'd be there by now was a casual conversation. However, the thought became ingrained in me many years earlier as I was pastoring a small church. I soon learned that each level of growth requires different strategies and structures. That was when I realized that having the leadership ability to reach three hundred people does not automatically mean you have what it takes to reach six hundred or even one thousand. My problem surfaced at some point during that time.

The problem was comparison, and it tormented me. I had allowed myself to view the success of others as a measure of whether I believed I was a success or a failure. In hindsight, it's easy to see where I got offtrack.

ISSUES WE DON'T DEAL WITH DON'T DISSOLVE;

THEY DESTROY.

Comparison, no matter in what arena of life, is always destructive. We see its discouraging effects in such things as how teenage girls relate

to one another, the way athletes measure themselves against their competition, the intense stress created by academic achievement, and even our focus on economic status as we try to keep up with the Joneses. It seems all of us are constantly comparing ourselves with ... well, everybody else.

Comparison had an even greater negative impact on me because of whom I was comparing myself with. Although our church fit squarely in the 95 percent of all churches, I compared myself with the 5 percent of larger-church pastors. I unintentionally locked myself in a maximum-security prison of comparison as I measured my ministry success against the churches that drew thousands of worshippers each week. No wonder I felt like a failure. Who wouldn't?

By admitting I thought I'd be there by now, I allowed Jesus to unveil the false beliefs behind the shame I had lived under continuously. My shame manifested itself in a sense of failure because the results I had produced in life did not meet the standard I believed He had set for me. It's a hard cross to bear when you believe that Jesus is disappointed with you. Can you relate? Maybe your story is similar. If so, I understand.

I grew up in a traditional church that taught we are saved by grace through faith. However, I observed that most of the people attending our church were often works oriented. To make matters worse, their conversations seemed to say that God was always keeping score of our performance to determine if He was pleased with us.

I would attend youth events where the speaker taught that a big video screen in heaven would show the story of my life to everyone. The video would display my failures for all to see. I was especially troubled to learn that God had called me to reach certain people with the gospel. The big video screen would display everyone in hell that I had failed to reach. It's not hard to understand how I began to think Jesus was disappointed with me when I failed to convert the many lost people I interacted with each day.

At the same time that this performance-based thinking was becoming a part of me, another aspect of my personality was taking shape. I began to notice I had leadership abilities. Peers would often come to me for advice and counsel during high school. Teachers even acknowledged I had the potential to become a person of influence. Although I didn't know it at the time, a perfect storm was brewing that would become the source of tremendous stress in the coming years.

Even though I struggled with making a commitment for a few months, I eventually committed my life to serve in full-time ministry. Attending a Christian college immediately provided an outlet to serve through while I was in school. I toured with a music group from the school, and after graduation, my wife, Gina, and I formed our own music group called Mainstream. The touring experience allowed us to meet hundreds of pastors and church staffers over a ten-year period.

**THE CRACKS IN MY LIFE THAT BROUGHT ME SHAME ARE
ACTUALLY THE PLACES WHERE HE SHINES THROUGH THE
BRIGHTEST.**

Like anyone in church leadership, I experienced highs and lows in my formative years of ministry. A pattern emerged that I describe as having the rug pulled out from under me whenever a great opportunity appeared. I often felt that Jesus was dangling a carrot in front of me only to jerk it back because He was disappointed by what my life had produced. I felt deeply unsatisfied at every turn. I didn't know how to define what success looked like in ministry. Even though I couldn't define it, I knew I wasn't achieving it. I just couldn't seem to get there.

Performance-based people like me eventually wear themselves out. Every bad decision I have made throughout my adult life can be attributed

to exhaustion. In addition, when I was working with my dad in construction, he would say, “Do something, even if it’s wrong.” His point was to stay busy and not stand around on the jobsite. Sadly, those words influenced me greatly, and I allowed this thinking to contribute to some bad leadership decisions that resulted in devastating situations.

The most traumatic situation was the church split I mentioned earlier. The first few years of serving as a lead pastor had gone quite smoothly. However, I made some poor decisions that developed out of my unwillingness to deal with my leadership shortcomings. I decided that they would somehow work themselves out if I gave them enough time. But I soon discovered that issues we don’t deal with don’t dissolve; they destroy.

The ramifications of failed leadership in ministry often can be too difficult to overcome. It had a profound effect on my confidence to lead as well as on my physical well-being. I don’t like reliving painful memories, but they are part of my story. I had to come to grips with the fact that I had some wrong views about my relationship with Jesus. I became a Christian at seven years old and had faithfully attended church all my life. But it wasn’t until I was stripped of all confidence that God began to do a deep work in me. I now realize I didn’t understand what it meant to be in ministry or even what intimacy with Jesus was all about.

The goal of most pastors is the same. We want to hear Jesus say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23 NKJV). Yet I felt as if that were no longer an option. In my mind, my performance had produced results of wood, hay, and stubble that would be burned up at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:12–15). He would then begrudgingly allow me to enter heaven by the skin of my teeth to take up residence in the far corners of heaven reserved for those who had wasted their calling. I would probably end up being a street sweeper.

The Bible tells us, “We have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7 NIV). I spent a great deal of time while in ministry trying to cover the cracks and scars of my life. However, I am beginning to

understand that the cracks in my life that brought me shame are actually the places where He shines through the brightest. Maybe it's time for you to realize that your greatest season of fruitfulness is about to begin as well.

HE MUST FIRST DO A WORK IN HIS PASTORS IN ORDER TO DO A WORK IN HIS CHURCH.

Friend, are you willing to muster the courage necessary to deal with the source of your problem? I believe we are on the brink of revival that could be the greatest move of God the world has ever experienced. If Jesus is getting His church ready for the great wedding day, doesn't it make sense that He must first do a work in His pastors in order to do a work in His church?

EXPOSED

I remember lying in my bed at night during the season of our church split, wondering if my heart was going to stop because of the stress I was experiencing. This was actually the beginning of some health issues that culminated in quadruple bypass surgery fifteen years later. My heart surgeon considered the stress of ministry to be a major contributor to my condition, which he termed a "widow-maker."

I felt so exposed at the time, as if the whole world could see my leadership shortcomings. I can't stand to be exposed. I know my resistance to exposure is rooted in pride. Maybe some insecurity too. Whatever my real issue is, nothing in life makes me to want to run and hide more. A few times, I wanted to leave town and never go back due to the embarrassment of exposure.

Feelings of inadequacy can wear you down when life doesn't turn out as you hoped. It is obvious when a ministry is stalled. Everyone can see it. Your inability to do anything about the situation eventually causes you to conclude that nothing can be done.

In reality, a lot of us are in the same place. As I mentioned earlier, research continues to reveal that the vast majority of American churches are small. This reality can't be merely coincidental. There must be some common factors that contribute to it.

Here are a few that come to mind:

- the politics of congregational government
- a lack of leadership training
- the widening generational gap
- no clear mission or vision
- programs versus a defined discipleship pathway

Any—or all—of these may be contributing to why your ministry hasn't grown as you had hoped. However, the issue you must confront isn't *how* you arrived at this point. The issue is that you *are* at this point. The lack of growth can't be ignored or explained away. It's just there as a daily reminder that you have been unable to carry out your plans. The results are in at this point, and the picture being painted isn't pretty. So you do your best each day, all the while knowing you are exposed.

Remember my story of being stalled in the mud? The solution came when I reached out for help even though it was the last thing I wanted to do. Honestly, it took a while for me to call my friend. However, the exposure of sitting on a forklift that is going nowhere fast has a way of wearing down your pride. I finally had to admit I was unable to solve my problem on my own.

I also discovered that comparing myself with others when I'm stalled is a waste of time. They can see that I'm stalled. It's embarrassing to try to convince those around me that I'm not stalled while I just sit there. But I resisted making that call with everything in me. Isn't that crazy?

**FRIEND, PLEASE STOP GIVING UP ON YOURSELF. DON'T
QUIT. I PROMISE THERE IS HOPE, HEALING, AND RESTORA-
TION WAITING FOR YOU.**

Thankfully, my pride wore out and my willingness to acknowledge my need for help got me moving again. In so many ways, the same thing happened as I shared my heart with Tony. Healing began to take root in my heart when I accepted that I can't do ministry alone.

Friend, please stop giving up on yourself. Don't quit. I promise there is hope, healing, and restoration waiting for you. The pages ahead are filled with honest examples and proven methods for experiencing a great life after being stalled. Now that you are willing to confront your situation, let's work together to get you moving forward along the path that Jesus has for you. You have so much fruitfulness waiting for you in the days ahead.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. When have you felt exposed in ministry?
2. What results in your ministry so far make you feel unsuccessful?
3. What excuses do you find yourself using for why your church is small?
4. Do you avoid colleagues with larger ministries when you see them? If so, why?

5. Do you feel unsuccessful because you thought surely you would be there by now? Where did you envision being?

If you don't know where to turn or whom to reach out to, please contact 95Network.org and allow us to help. If we don't know the answer to your need, we will do our best to connect you with one of our Strategic Partners who can help.

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